

The Improvement Service

ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

Violence against women is a public health issue



What is the purpose of the briefing note series?

The Improvement Service (IS) has developed an Elected Members Briefing Series to help elected members keep pace with key issues affecting local government.

Some briefing notes will be directly produced by IS staff but we will also make available material from as wide a range of public bodies, commentators and observers of public services as possible.

We will use the IS website and elected member e-bulletin to publicise and provide access to the briefing notes. All briefing notes in the series can be accessed at www.improvementservice.org.uk/elected-member-guidance-and-briefings.html

About this briefing note

This briefing is one in a series raising awareness of the causes and consequences of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and highlighting some of the good practice around Scotland in tackling VAWG and gender inequality.

Specifically, this briefing aims to highlight the need to tackle violence against women and girls in order to achieve Scotland's public health priorities. This briefing shows that all forms of VAWG are linked to Scotland's new Public Health priorities, and suggests how elected members can consider these links in their work in their local communities.

What is the issue and why does it matter?

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) damages health and wellbeing, and is a key public health issue. The World Health Organisation recognises VAWG as a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights.¹

Women and children who experience VAWG are at increased risk of experiencing inequality of outcomes throughout their life, including lower levels of physical and mental wellbeing and increased risk of harm. VAWG includes domestic abuse, rape, sexual assault, stalking, commercial sexual exploitation (including prostitution), and so called 'honour based' violence, including female genital mutilation and forced marriage. The physical, emotional and psychological consequences of violence and abuse are significant predictors of poor health and strong risk factors for poor health outcomes.²

The priorities in [*Equally Safe: Scotland's Strategy for Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls*](#) directly contribute to a number of priorities set out in the [*Public Health Priorities for Scotland*](#). Both strategies also promote a strong focus on prevention, early intervention, innovation, and accountability. Equally Safe recognises that VAWG is rooted in structural gender inequalities, and therefore requires a whole-population approach to address it. If we are to achieve Scotland's public health priorities, we need to recognise VAWG as a public health issue. Some examples to consider under each public health priority are:

A Scotland where we live in vibrant, healthy and safe places and communities



VAWG negatively impacts on the health and safety of people and communities.

- In 2017-18 there were 59,541 domestic abuse incidents recorded by Police Scotland.³
- In 81% of all cases a woman was abused by a man.
- Women are also the most likely victims of stalking and tend to experience severe and lasting effects.⁴

In order to create vibrant, healthy and safe places and communities we need to tackle VAWG in all its forms and understand the greater risks to safety that women face as a result.

A Scotland where we flourish in our early years



- Being a victim of physical, sexual and/ or emotional abuse and growing up in a household where abuse takes place are recognised as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that increase people's likelihood of experiencing poor health and other negative outcomes in adulthood.
- Almost two thirds of children who experience domestic abuse also experience physical or emotional abuse or are neglected.⁵
- Around 1 in 20 children in the UK have been sexually abused.⁶

Ensuring that early and trauma-informed support is in place to identify and respond to children affected by VAWG is key to ensuring they flourish in their early years and are supported to achieve their full potential later in life.

A Scotland where we have good mental wellbeing



All forms of VAWG are repeatedly shown to have a damaging impact on women and children's mental wellbeing.

- Around half of all mental health service users have been physically and/or sexually abused as children.⁷
- Women subjected to domestic abuse are at almost twice the risk of experiencing poor mental health than women not exposed to domestic abuse.⁸

A whole systems approach to mental wellbeing must therefore include recognition of the adverse effects of VAWG.

A Scotland where we have a sustainable, inclusive economy with equality of outcomes for all



We know that gender inequality and VAWG have a negative impact on women's social, economic and political equality.

- Women are paid on average 15% less per hour than men.
- Women are also four times more likely to give up work due to caring responsibilities, and are more likely to be in low paid, part-time employment to men, putting them at greater risk of poverty.
- 89% of women experience financial abuse, as an aspect of coercive control, when experiencing domestic abuse.¹⁰
- Welfare reforms have a disproportionate impact on women and children, particularly those with complex needs and barriers.
- Welfare reforms have also been cited as an exacerbating issue for involvement in prostitution in the absence of alternative options.¹¹

A Scotland where we reduce the use of and harm from alcohol, tobacco and other drugs



While we know that alcohol and drug use doesn't cause VAWG, it can increase the incidence and severity of violence and abuse.

- Alcohol and drugs can also be used as a coping mechanism for women affected by VAWG, which in turn puts them at increased risk of further harm.
- Alcohol use is shown to be present in many cases where women report experiences of violence, particularly intimate partner violence.⁹
- Women who experience commercial sexual exploitation as a form of VAWG, and particularly those engaged in prostitution, are shown to be more vulnerable to drug addiction.

A Scotland where we eat well, have a healthy weight and are physically active



VAWG can impact the ability of women and children to live healthy and active lifestyles. Public Health Scotland's priorities recognise that negative health outcomes are inextricably linked to social inequalities and that addressing health inequalities is a social justice issue.¹²

- We know that women and children are more at risk of poverty, particularly if they have experienced VAWG, and that forms of financial abuse and coercive control can make it difficult for women to be physically healthy.¹³
- Women and girls who experience violence and abuse are also far more likely to develop eating disorders.

Given the scale and impact of VAWG, we cannot achieve Scotland's Public Health priorities unless we work to eradicate and prevent VAWG.

What does this mean for elected members?

Public Health is “what we as a society do, collectively, to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy.”¹⁴ The development of Scotland’s public health strategy brings an increased focus on the need to improve the health and wellbeing of women and children across Scotland.

Elected members have a key role to play in ensuring your local area develops a joined-up approach to tackling VAWG and achieving Scotland’s public health priorities.

- Elected members represent communities where women and children’s wellbeing is negatively impacted by their experiences or risk of VAWG. Local communities cannot experience progression in any of the public health priorities whilst VAWG is prevalent in Scottish society. The Public Sector Equality Duty (2011) and Children and Young People Act (Scotland) 2014 require that local authorities protect and promote the wellbeing of citizens by holding organisations and individuals to account to address inequality.
- As the definition above suggests, a Public Health approach requires collective action and a whole systems approach. Recognising VAWG as a public health issue means that joined up working between all thematic community planning partnerships is essential. Elected members have a key role to play in supporting this joined-up approach.
- Elected members can also play a key role in ensuring that a gendered approach is taken to progressing public health priorities at both a local and national level. This approach should be underpinned by the understanding that women experience inequalities because of their gender and that taking forward actions to improve gender equality and reduce VAWG will make a real and positive impact on improving public health. Under the Fairer Scotland Duty (2018), public bodies must actively consider how they can reduce inequalities of outcome, caused by socio-economic disadvantage, when making strategic decisions.
- VAWG is estimated to cost the Scottish public purse £4 billion, but since VAWG is often hidden and undisclosed, the statistics available represent a significant underestimate.¹⁵ This includes costs associated with medical care, mental health, substance misuse and social care needs caused by VAWG and gender inequalities embedded across society. These costs will impact elected members’ local economy.

What does good practice look like in the area?

Encouraging collaborative working

Elected members can encourage and support joined-up working among local VAW Partnerships, Health and Social Care Partnerships and other key strategic partnerships to help achieve shared outcomes around improving the health and wellbeing of women and children. Public Health Scotland will champion a whole systems approach to tackling health inequalities, and to support the work of VAW Partnerships this approach should also include collaboration with partnerships across Community Safety, Community Justice, Alcohol and Drugs, and Children and Young People. Elected members can play a key strategic role in ensuring that this new body represents these key local partnerships and supports their work.

Adopting a gendered approach to public health priorities

A gendered approach to public health is essential for recognising VAWG as a priority. Elected Members can use their strategic influence to encourage a gendered approach to all public health priorities, particularly highlighting how VAWG is connected to each priority. Elected Members can also highlight the need for sustainable and trauma-informed early intervention services for those who have experienced VAWG as a means of addressing health inequalities resulting from VAWG. By understanding the gendered nature of health inequalities, elected members can support work in their local area which addresses public health priorities. This could mean emphasising all forms of VAWG as key ACE factors which impact children and young people's health, and encouraging collaborative work between Alcohol and Drugs Partnerships and Violence Against Women Partnerships in highlighting the links between substance misuse and abuse. Elected Members can use Scotland's national strategy on VAWG, *Equally Safe*, to champion a whole-systems approach which identifies and responds to VAWG, and holds perpetrators to account by challenging gender inequalities which perpetuate men's violence against women.

Championing effective prevention and early intervention for women and children affected by VAWG to divert them away from negative health outcomes

It is important that all local strategic partners recognise the impact that VAWG has on health and wellbeing, and that this is considered a key public health issue. Elected members can support the work of prevention and early intervention of those affected by VAWG. There are several initiatives which aim to address women's risk and experiences of VAWG such as the [Equally Safe in Higher Education Toolkit](#), a free resource for Scottish universities working to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) on their campuses. Close The Gap's [Equally Safe at Work](#) accreditation programme addresses workplace gender inequality as a fundamental step to preventing violence against women. Community-based early interventions that support women and children to recover from their experiences of VAWG, such as Cedar ([Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse Recovery](#)), are key to improving outcomes for children. Elected members can use key learning from this work and, where possible, champion such programmes as a way to promote safe and healthy communities by tackling VAWG and mitigating its impact. Tackling the inequalities that women and children experience will improve the health and wellbeing of people and communities more widely.

Key actions for elected members to consider

Elected members can:

- Recognise the need to address VAWG as a public health issue and support a public health approach to be adopted to tackling VAWG in local communities.
- Support the work of local Violence Against Women Partnerships by encouraging strategic links and shared outcomes on public health with other local partnerships such as Health and Social Care, Community Safety, Community Justice, Alcohol and Drugs, and Children and Young People.
- Adopt a gendered approach to public health and promote an understanding of VAWG under each of Scotland's Public Health Priorities.
- Support and champion early intervention and prevention services which address the impact of VAWG on women and children's health and wellbeing.
- Champion the need to identify and change systems that perpetuate VAWG and hold perpetrators of VAWG to account for their behaviours
- Champion approaches that ensure men and boys are encouraged and supported to understand the gendered nature of VAWG, promote gender equality, and challenge the attitudes, behaviours and beliefs that underpin the continuing prevalence of VAWG across all its forms.

Further support and contacts

The Improvement Service coordinates the National Violence Against Women Network, which provides support to multi-agency VAW Partnerships across Scotland. Please contact vaw@improvementservice.org.uk for more details, or follow us [@VAWNetwork](https://twitter.com/VAWNetwork).

For more VAWG briefings in this series, please visit the [Improvement Service website](#).

This briefing was produced in partnership with NHS Health Scotland, and with further support from COSLA.

References

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