

# The Improvement Service

ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

## Why is Violence Against Women and Girls a Community Justice 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](http://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 this issue.

The purpose of this briefing is to raise awareness of the strategic links between violence against women and community justice in Scotland, and provide suggestions of the ways that elected members can help support local VAW Partnerships and Community Justice Partnerships to work collaboratively to address shared priorities.

## Why is recognising violence against women as a community justice issue important?

*“Community justice outcomes cannot be improved by one stakeholder alone. We must work in partnership to address these complex issues... High quality, person centred, and collaborative services should be available to address the needs of those who have committed offences, their families and victims of crime.”<sup>1</sup>*

(National Strategy for Community Justice)

*Equally Safe: Scotland’s Strategy for Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls*<sup>2</sup> sets out the Scottish Government and COSLA’s joint vision for a strong and flourishing Scotland where all individuals are equally safe and respected, and where women and girls live free from all forms of violence and abuse.

In order to achieve this vision, *Equally Safe* identifies four key priorities, including:

- “Interventions are early and effective, preventing violence and maximising the safety and wellbeing of women, children and young people; and
- Men desist from all forms of violence against women and girls and perpetrators of such violence receive a robust and effective response”.

The priorities in *Equally Safe* directly contribute to the outcomes and vision set out in the Scottish Government’s *National Strategy for Community Justice*, which is principally focussed on preventing offending before it occurs, by working with people who are at risk of offending and supporting those who have been through the justice system. Both strategies promote a focus on prevention and early intervention to minimise both future demand for services and future costs to the public sector.

Specifically, the *National Strategy for Community Justice* identifies the need for interventions that maximise opportunities for preventing and reducing offending as early as possible.

Studies repeatedly show that women in the criminal justice system are likely to have complex needs and have higher lifetime incidences of trauma than either male prisoners or women in the general population, including severe and repeated physical, sexual and emotional abuse and victimisation.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, studies suggest that a significant number of men in the criminal justice system

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1 Scottish Government (2016), *National Strategy for Community Justice*, available at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-strategy-community-justice/>

2 Scottish Government and COSLA (2016), *Equally Safe: Scotland’s Strategy for Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls*, available at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/equally-safe-scotlands-strategy-prevent-eradicate-violence-against-women-girls/>

3 Angiolini et al. (2012), *Commission on Women Offenders*, available at <https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0039/00391828.pdf>

experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse during childhood or grew up in households where domestic abuse took place.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, an effective approach to community justice planning will recognise the connections between VAWG and offending and ensure effective, trauma-informed interventions are in place that address the risks of women and children affected by VAWG becoming involved in the criminal justice system, and reduce the likelihood of reoffending in the future.

The *National Strategy for Community Justice* also notes the need for people to be held to account for their offences, in a way that recognises the impact on victims of crime and is mindful of risks to the public while being proportionate and effective in preventing and reducing further offending. Studies repeatedly show low conviction rates for domestic abuse,<sup>5</sup> rape and sexual assault and other VAWG offences in Scotland, with only a small proportion of people who are convicted of perpetrating these offences then going on to access specialist interventions to hold them account for, and support them to change, their harmful behaviours.

Consequently, an effective approach to community justice planning will ensure effective systems are in place to identify and hold perpetrators of VAWG to account for their offending behaviours, and ensure they have access to high-quality, evidence-based interventions to reduce their likelihood of reoffending in the future.

Importantly, both *Equally Safe* and the *National Strategy for Community Justice* recognise that people's lives are complex and they often experience multiple challenges and inequalities which cannot be solved by partners working in isolation. Strong partnership working between VAWG and community justice planning systems at a local level is therefore essential to ensuring that outcomes for women, girls and children affected by VAWG are improved, and that people who perpetrate VAWG are held to account for, and supported to change, their harmful behaviours.

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4 The Prison Reform Trust, *Bromley Briefings Prison Fact File Autumn 2018* available at <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publications/factfile>

5 Scottish Government (2019), *Criminal proceedings in Scotland 2017-2018*, available at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/criminal-proceedings-scotland-2017-18/>

## What can elected members do to ensure VAWG is recognised as a community justice issue?

At a strategic level, elected members have an important role to play in helping to ensure that local Violence Against Women Partnerships and Community Justice Partnerships work collaboratively to improve outcomes for women and children affected by VAWG.

Your role in leading, supporting and advocating for the people and communities you represent means it is important that you have a strong understanding of how VAWG outcomes contribute to community justice outcomes and the benefits of relevant stakeholders adopting a joined-up approach to reducing the social and financial harm that VAWG causes to people and communities. The Community Justice (Scotland) Act 2016 places a duty on local authorities to work in partnership with other public sector agencies to deliver improved outcomes for those who have committed offences, their families, and victims of crime.

Specifically, the Act requires partners to prepare a plan that includes the views of other stakeholders with an interest in community justice, including the third sector, victims and their families and people who offend.

As an elected member, you can help to ensure that members of local Violence Against Women Partnerships and people with lived experiences of VAWG have an opportunity to shape the development and delivery of community justice plans.

Strong local leadership is also critical to ensure that best use is made of all available resources. As Equally Safe highlights, dealing with the consequences of violence against women places a significant burden on public services, with the cost of failing to address the prevalence and impact of violence against women and girls in Scotland amounting to an estimated £4 billion. Given the pressures that local government is currently exposed to, it is essential that elected members support local Community Justice Partnerships and VAW Partnerships to identify opportunities to work collaboratively. Where appropriate, this may include pooling their budgets and other resources to maximise the impact of their respective investments in interventions to improve outcomes for women and children affected by violence and abuse.

## What does good practice look like in supporting a joined-up approach to tackling violence against women and promoting community justice?

Some local community justice plans already reflect a strong focus on tackling violence against women and girls and have a gendered analysis that recognises the connections between women and children's experiences of VAWG and their experiences in the justice system.

The following examples of good practice have been identified in supporting a joined-up approach to improving outcomes for both women and children affected by VAWG, and the people that perpetrate that harmful behaviour.

### Supporting effective partnership working between Community Justice Partnerships and Violence Against Women Partnerships

A strategic approach to community justice planning requires that Community Justice Partnerships and VAW Partnerships co-ordinate their activities and collaborate effectively towards common goals. Wherever possible the two Partnerships should explore opportunities to pool their collective resources (e.g. budgets, staff, training) in order to maximise the positive impact of their respective investments in interventions for women and children affected by VAWG, and people who perpetrate these harmful behaviours. There may also be other benefits in working collaboratively such as opportunities to share knowledge and good practice about effective interventions and jointly undertake consultation, needs assessment or progress reporting activity to satisfy requirements for both planning systems.

### Delivering effective prevention and early intervention for women and children affected by VAWG to divert them away from the criminal justice system and other negative outcomes

Community justice approaches must recognise the impact that VAWG has on women and children and how this may affect their experiences of the criminal justice system, either as a victim or as someone who engages in offending behaviour in later life. In order to divert women and children affected by VAWG away from the criminal justice system and other negative outcomes, it is vital that early and effective interventions are in place locally that prevent violence and maximise the safety and wellbeing of women and children. Criminal justice services should take account of women's previous histories of abuse and neglect, and adopt a trauma-informed approach, that ensures women and children's voices are heard and their rights are respected.

### Investing in support and services that hold people who perpetrate VAWG to account for their offending behaviours, and support them not to re-offend

Robust systems should be put in place locally to identify people who perpetrate VAWG and

ensure they are held to account by the justice system. Public sector staff who come into contact with members of the public should have appropriate training in how to identify and respond to the manipulative tactics used by people who perpetrate VAWG. High quality, evidence-based interventions should also be in place at a local level that work with people who perpetrate VAWG to hold them to account for, and support them to change, their harmful behaviours.

## Key actions for elected members to consider

- Promote a preventative approach to tackling VAWG by raising awareness of the links between gender inequality and VAWG and encouraging activities to take place to ensure women and girls in your local community are safe, respected and equal.
- Ensure there are strong strategic links between VAW Partnerships and Community Justice Partnerships at a local level, and that partners understand their respective roles and responsibilities. Links with other relevant strategic partnerships such as Health and Social Care Partnerships and Community Safety Partnerships should also be supported where possible.
- Ensure your local Community Justice Outcome Improvement Plan recognises VAWG as a Community Justice issue and identifies clear actions that partners can take to improve outcomes for women and children affected by VAWG.
- Ensure local partners are using relevant reporting frameworks such as the [Equally Safe Quality Standards and Performance Framework](#) and the [Community Justice Outcome, Performance and Improvement Framework](#) to measure the progress being made to improve outcomes for victims of VAWG and the people who perpetrate these harmful behaviours, and using this learning to drive forward improvements.
- Ensure early and effective interventions are available for women and children affected by VAWG within the local community. These interventions should be underpinned by a gendered-analysis of violence and abuse.
- Ensure high quality, evidence-based interventions are in place to identify people who perpetrate VAWG at the earliest point and hold them to account for, and support them to change, their offending behaviours.



## Summary

- VAWG is a community justice issue. To improve outcomes for women and children affected by VAWG there is a need to ensure that the community justice system takes a gendered approach to identifying and responding to people and communities affected by violence and abuse.
- A high proportion of women in the criminal justice system have experienced domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG in their lifetime. Investing in high quality early intervention support services to identify and meet the needs of women and children affected by VAWG will help improve their future outcomes and divert them away from the criminal justice system.
- In order to reduce reoffending amongst people who perpetrate VAWG, there is a need to ensure that effective processes are in place to identify and hold them to account for their offending behaviours. This may include investing in high quality, evidence-based perpetrator interventions.
- It is essential that Community Justice Partnerships and VAW Partnerships take a joined-up approach to improving the safety and wellbeing of women and children affected by VAWG and reducing reoffending amongst people who perpetrate these harmful behaviours. Elected members have a key role to play in helping to ensure this happens at a local level through support, scrutiny and direct involvement with Community Justice Partnerships, VAW Partnerships and other relevant strategic groups.

## 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](mailto:vaw@improvementservice.org.uk) for more details on the work of local VAW Partnerships or visit the [Improvement Service website](#), join the [Network's KHub Group](#), or follow us [@VAWNetwork](#).

**Community Justice Scotland** is responsible for promoting world-leading standards of community justice across Scotland.

Please contact [info@communityjustice.scot](mailto:info@communityjustice.scot) for more details about community justice or visit the [Community Justice Scotland website](#).

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