

# Strengthening Partnership Working Between Violence Against Women Partnerships (VAWPs) and Alcohol and Drug Partnerships (ADPs)

2020 Partnership Event Learning Report



In March 2020, the Scottish Government and the Improvement Service brought together members of local Violence Against Women Partnerships (VAWPs) and Alcohol & Drug Partnerships (ADPs) to explore opportunities to help improve outcomes for women and children affected by both gender-based violence and problem alcohol and drug use by strengthening partnership working.

Chaired by Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol & Drugs and with inputs from a range of third sector and public sector partners across Scotland, the event aimed to:

- Raise awareness of the shared outcomes that ADPs and VAW Partnerships are working to at a local strategic level;
- Identify the benefits of adopting a whole systems approach to improving outcomes for women and children affected by both gender-based violence and problem alcohol and drug use;
- Agree the key actions needed at a local and national level to ensure a joined-up, person-centred approach is taken to meeting the needs of women and children affected by both issues.

This short learning report outlines the key issues and actions identified by participants in relation to each of the following priority areas:

- Ensuring Policy and Practice is shaped by the Lived Experiences of Women and Children;
- Adopting a Child-Centred Approach to Working with Families affected by Domestic Abuse and Problem Alcohol and Drug Use;
- Adopting a Gendered Lens to understanding links between Violence Against Women and Drug Deaths; and
- Challenges and Opportunities in adopting a whole systems approach to reducing alcohol and drug related harm for women and children affected by violence and abuse.

It is important to note that the event took place before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland. However, recent studies have highlighted that while anyone can be at risk of catching COVID-19, the virus and the measures put in place to control its spread have disproportionately impacted on and compounded existing risks and inequalities for people with multiple and/ or complex needs. It is therefore anticipated that the actions and recommendations identified in this learning report will be even more important for stakeholders to consider as we begin to look towards COVID-19 recovery, renewal and transformation.



## Ensuring policy and practice is shaped by the lived experiences of women and children

Attendees noted that while Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) policy in Scotland is somewhat informed by the lived experience of survivors of such abuse, this is often not the case in relation to problem alcohol and drug use. Specifically, it was highlighted that the role of gender and the impact of VAWG is largely ignored within current policy and practice around problem alcohol and drug use and, as a result, recovery pathways and interventions generally focus on recognising and responding to men's needs rather than women's needs.

Attendees highlighted this could be attributed to the fact that women are statistically less likely to present to non-gendered services for a variety of reasons, so the data that is captured from service users tends to disproportionately focus on the needs and experiences of men. Moreover, where data is collected on the needs of women with problem alcohol and drugs needs, this often does not ask about experiences of VAWG so there is little opportunity for policy makers and practitioners to adequately explore the correlation between these two issues. Similarly, VAWG rarely features in local strategic needs assessments undertaken by community planning partnerships, in the same way that problem alcohol and drug use features. A notable exception to this is Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs), where information is regularly captured locally about the experiences of women who are affected by both domestic abuse and problem alcohol and drug use. However, it was noted that MARAC data is not currently collated and analysed centrally by the Scottish Government, limiting its wider consideration in national policy and practice.

Attendees agreed that stigma is still a barrier to support for women affected by both VAWG and alcohol and drug harm, meaning an investment in change across culture is needed. As an example of good practice, it was noted that some local authority areas currently have women-only alcohol and drug services which work to address stigma and safety concerns but that these are not currently available in all parts of Scotland. Attendees also highlighted good practice examples of local drug and alcohol harm prevention strategies being shaped using feedback from women and children in refuges and organisations such as the Scottish Recovery Consortium placing the lived experience of recovery from addiction at the heart of the organisation.

Some local authority area leads noted that they have had feedback from women regarding their worries about using intervention services for alcohol and drug use because they fear it may lead to their children being taken into care if they are then considered not to be a fit parent. It was noted that work has been done in recent years to help address these fears but there is still more effort required to ensure both women with and without children feel able to access support when they need it. Integrated, trauma-informed services were noted as a key gap in terms of improving responses and also collecting data and gathering lived experience.

### Key actions and recommendations

Attendees highlighted that:

- In order to adopt a whole-systems approach to improving outcomes for people affected

by problem alcohol and drug use, there is a need to adopt a gendered lens to designing policy and practice. In particular:

- gender inequality and women’s experiences of VAWG should be woven through recovery services and pathways at an operational level and at a strategic level; and
  - decision-makers should be encouraged to consider how different taskforces can be brought together to ensure there is policy coherence in recognising and improving outcomes for people with multiple support needs.
- There are opportunities for the VAWG sector to share its learning and experiences of working with women with lived experience of VAWG with colleagues from the alcohol and drug sector, and vice versa. At a local level, recovery communities can offer a useful model to capture and share lived experience.
  - There should be a more joined up approach to meeting the needs of women affected by both VAWG and problem alcohol and drug use at a national level. This could include national partners bringing together stakeholders to discuss shared issues and setting out a clear expectation that ADPs, VAWPs and other relevant thematic partnerships such as Community Justice Partnerships (CJPs)) should work more closely together at a local strategic level to ensure their work is aligned and informed by the voices and experiences of women. National funding to help facilitate and strengthen multi-agency collaboration is required to enable this to happen in a meaningful way.
  - There should be an expectation that the links between gender, VAWG and problem alcohol and drug use should be recognised in key strategic plans at a local level, including Local Outcome Improvement Plans (LOIPs) and the specific delivery plans that sit underneath these.
  - Guidance and good practice guidelines should be produced to support VAWPs and ADPs to engage with women and children with lived experience of both VAW and problem alcohol and drug use in a meaningful, rights-informed way and use the learning captured to shape policy and practice.



## Adopting a child-centred approach to working with families affected by domestic abuse and problem alcohol and drug use

Attendees highlighted that children's voices in particular are often missing from work in both the VAWG and alcohol and drug sectors. Some attendees noted that a child-centred approach is often considered at the point of crisis where child protection becomes involved, rather than being at the centre of all policies, processes and pathways when supporting families affected by both VAWG and problem alcohol and drug use. There is little evidence of routine screening regularly being undertaken at a local level to enable practitioners to intervene sooner when VAWG and problem alcohol and drug use are identified and prevent escalation and harm.

It was noted that few, if any, alcohol/drug treatment/recovery services currently have a focus on parenting and as a result, men are rarely held to account for the impact that their alcohol and drug use can be having on their children in the same way that mothers are. Outside of specific domestic abuse perpetrator interventions, fathers who commit domestic abuse are not routinely held to account for the full impact that their abuse has on their child or their partners. This may include, how the perpetrating parent's abuse has led to the non-perpetrating parent's use of alcohol and drugs.

While the use of the Safe & Together model in some local authority areas across Scotland is starting to help ensure that domestic abuse is recognised as a parenting choice, it was highlighted that there is still a double standard in the expectations and blame placed on mothers compared to men. It was also noted that it is particularly difficult for local authority areas that do not currently have any domestic abuse perpetrator interventions in place, to ensure that fathers are held to account for, and supported to change, the damaging impact of their behaviours on both the mother and the child.

Attendees also highlighted challenges around training and workforce development. Specifically, it was noted that many substance abuse or addiction workers won't have received adequate training in the dynamics of domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG and as a result, may lack confidence in participating fully at relevant case conferences, child protection meetings etc. It was also noted that at a local level, responsibility for commissioning addiction services often sits with Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs) rather than ADPs, meaning that ADPs are often limited in their ability to ensure services meet the needs of children which can lead to a disconnect between policy and practice.

### Key actions and recommendations

Attendees highlighted that:

- A national position should be taken on the adoption of the Safe & Together principles across Scotland. It was noted that despite support for the model in the 2019 Programme for Government, local authority areas have been left to decide themselves whether or not to adopt the Safe & Together principles and those that have done so have had to find a way to fund training and implementation through their own local budgets. It was

noted that there needs to be a clear expectation set out by the Scottish Government that all local authority areas should be working to the Safe & Together principles and national resources should be made available to enable them to address gaps in child-led approach and to challenge the behaviour of perpetrators. To support this work, it was noted that a national set of outcomes should be developed that local authority areas should be required to work to and report progress against. Key learning should also be drawn from other models/ interventions being rolled out locally and nationally, including Caledonian's work, multi-agency risk assessment models such as MARAC and Signs of Safety.

- At a local strategic level, Public Protection Committees (PPCs) have a key role to play in ensuring that all relevant stakeholders adopt a joined-up, child-centred approach when working with families affected by both domestic abuse and problem alcohol and drug use. It was noted that PPCs should be supported to review how effective their local policy and practice currently is in this area, drawing on third sector expertise wherever possible, to identify current strengths and areas for improvement. It was noted that national drivers such as legislation, guidance and strategies could help to strengthen work in this area going forward.
- While shared membership across VAWPs and ADPs at a local level is positive, attendees noted that collaborative working across the two policy areas needs to be much stronger and that other key strategic partners (including members of Child Protection Committees, Adult Protection Committees and Community Justice Partnerships) also need to ensure a joined-up, child-centred approach is being promoted when working with families affected by both VAWG and problem alcohol and drug use.
- Practitioners working within alcohol and drug services should be upskilled in identifying both women affected by VAWG and men who are perpetrators of domestic abuse, and should be supported to deliver interventions that recognise the links between domestic abuse and problem alcohol and drug abuse and ensure all men, women and children receive appropriate responses. It was noted that upskilling the workforce on these issues would also help ensure there is meaningful participation in conversations at child protection conferences etc.
- A national refresh of policies and procedures around Routine Enquiry would be timely, to build in coercive control and the Domestic Abuse Act (Scotland).
- Both ADPs and VAWPs need to engage with services working with children locally, as well as local organisations such as youth clubs, to ensure that all relevant professionals have the knowledge and skills they need to identify children living in households where both domestic abuse and VAW are taking place, and ensure they are supported in an effective way.



## Violence against women and alcohol/drug deaths: adopting a gendered lens

A number of attendees noted concerns that recent responses to alcohol and drug deaths, have not made women a strong enough priority in their analysis of risk, with policy and practice in this area largely being geared towards improving outcomes for men.

Specific concern was noted about the lack of focus and analysis there has been at both a local and national level in understanding the links between gender, VAWG and drug and alcohol deaths. It was noted that a gendered approach is rarely adopted when considering these issues, with a number of local authority areas highlighting that no engagement is made with specialist VAWG agencies when reviewing drug and alcohol related deaths, meaning that the impact that domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG may have had is not considered.

Attendees highlighted that not all drug and alcohol services currently capture data on domestic abuse and even where this data is captured, it is not clear how this is used. Specifically, it was noted that data collection analysis and use varies from local area to local area, with no data collected nationally on VAWG and alcohol/Drug Deaths which limits national policy responses and investment. Attendees suggested that all alcohol and drug policy and practice is equality impact assessed to capture what is missing in responses to women.

It was highlighted that Staying Alive in Scotland has good practice indicators which mention the increase in drug deaths amongst women and this report suggested women-only services, awareness of women's experiences of abuse, trauma, stress, etc., and working with sexual health services. More data is needed to understand the extent to which local ADPs have adopted these recommendations.

### Key actions and recommendations

Attendees noted that:

- There is a need to look at existing mechanisms/ groups that have been setup, including the Scottish Government's Drugs Taskforce, to ensure that they are considering links between gender, VAWG and drug and alcohol deaths as part of their work. Specifically, it was suggested that it would be useful if a representative from a local authority area that has adopted a gendered approach to reviewing drug and alcohol related deaths, could meet with the Taskforce to share their learning on the benefits of doing this. It was noted that there needs to be a much stronger gendered analysis of issues such as injecting drug use and criminality linked to drug use than there currently is, and relevant taskforces should be encouraged to think through what any changes in policy and practice will have on improving outcomes for women.
- It would be useful to review the guidance that agencies are working to locally and nationally in relation to drug and alcohol deaths, to ensure it recognises the role that VAW may play in problem alcohol and drug use and encourage engagement with local VAW specialist services where appropriate. It was suggested that it may be useful for professionals to have a checklist of questions to work through when reviewing a drug

and alcohol related death, to help increase understanding of whether VAW was also a factor. However, in practice it was noted that it can be very challenging to know whether someone is affected by VAW due to its hidden nature and the fact that many women will never engage with support services or report instances of abuse to the police.

- There is an opportunity for joined-up workforce development and training to strengthen response to these issues. Specifically, attendees highlighted that both the VAW and Alcohol and Drug sectors should offer joint training to help each sector strengthen their understanding of the model that underpins their sector's approach. Attendees highlighted that training-in and increased awareness of naloxone would be useful.
- There could also be an opportunity around performance management of services which includes taking a gendered approach to drug and alcohol harm, commissioned by ADPs. Another commissioning suggestion was that ADPs develop an audit on tendered services to look at gendered approach and VAWG, identifying gaps and producing data to evidence the need for this approach.
- Opportunities for ADPs and VAWPs to adopt shared outcomes/ performance indicators/ quality standards should be explored, to help ensure that progress is being measured at a strategic level by both groups and shared priorities are identified at an early stage.
- Opportunities for ADPs, Sexual Health services, and Blood Born Virus services to work together at a local level should be explored. A number of attendees from ADPs noted that they would welcome opportunities to engage further with third sector VAW services to ensure that they are informed of the processes/ pathways available for women affected by problem drug use.
- Consider similar scheme to Equally Safe at Work to ensure that same drive and impetus for change in each Local Authority area.





## Adopting a whole systems approach to reducing alcohol and drug related harm for women and children affected by violence and abuse: challenges and opportunities at a strategic and operational level

Attendees highlighted that a strategic approach is needed at both a local and national level to build connections across the VAW and Alcohol and Drugs sectors and ensure a whole systems, gendered approach is taken to improving outcomes for women and children affected by both VAWG and problem alcohol and drug use.

It was noted that promoting a rights-based approach to supporting women and children to recover from both VAWG and problem alcohol and drug use would help empower women and drive forward improved responses across both sectors. It was suggested that improved use of Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) could help support this shift, with policy-makers and practitioners being encouraged to think through what impact any policies and practices that are implemented locally or nationally will have on women and how the systems that women come into contact with can be improved to help ensure a more positive response.

It was noted that limited resources, competing priorities and different outcomes/ frameworks can be a barrier for partners to work together and that professionals working in different sectors may need support to identify the connections between their agendas and the mutual benefits of working more collaboratively. It was also noted that changing working practices and systems will take time and investment in workforce development, and support will be required to carry this out effectively.

However, a number of attendees highlighted examples of how a how a whole systems approach has already began to be developed in their areas to meet the recovery needs of people affected by problem alcohol and drug use, with the next step being to ensure these meet the specific needs of women affected by VAWG. It was acknowledged that for many stakeholders, today marked the start of a useful conversation about opportunities to work together to improve outcomes for women and children affected by both VAW and problem alcohol and drug use and that further discussions would be needed both locally and nationally to ensure this happens.

### Key actions/opportunities

Attendees highlighted that:

- There is a need for improved data/ learning around women's experiences of problem alcohol and drug use generally (and the experiences of women affected by VAWG in particular) as well as learning about how local recovery services and pathways can better meet their needs. Attendees highlighted that in order to engage with women who are not currently accessing support/ services, practitioners need to consider how support can be destigmatised, demystified and adapted to better respond to women's needs.

- There is a need for VAWG and Alcohol and Drug agendas to be promoted and prioritised equally at a strategic level locally and nationally, underpinned by a shared commitment by all partners to develop person-centred responses (rather than service-centred responses) that have focus on promoting wellbeing and recovery. To support this to happen, attendees suggested it would be useful:
  - i. to develop a set of shared messages/ principles for policy-makers and practitioners working across both sectors, with corresponding shared outcomes against which progress can be measured locally and nationally; and
  - ii. for VAWPs to have a standing agenda item at their partnership meetings to review how they're meeting the needs of women affected with problem alcohol and drug use, and vice versa. Where appropriate, it was noted that ADPs and VAWPs may wish to explore opportunities to co-locate and/ or pool resources.
- There is a role for Public Health Scotland in ensuring there is strong leadership at both a local and national level, for adopting a whole system, gendered approach to improving outcomes for women and children affected by both VAW and problem alcohol and drug use.
- In order to support a move to a whole-systems approach, attendees noted that it would be useful to include partners working in other key strategic areas such as community justice, community safety and child poverty in future discussions taking place locally and nationally.



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