

ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls through the Public Health Priorities



Elected Members Briefing 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 are directly produced by IS staff but we also make available material from a wide range of public bodies, commentators and observers of public services.

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 on the IS website.

About this briefing note

This briefing is intended to assist elected members to progress plans aimed at eradicating violence against women and girls (VAWG) in their respective communities. Public Health Scotland have explored and summarised the links between violence against women and girls and Scotland's six public health priorities.¹ This briefing suggests ways elected members may consider these issues in their work and supports gender equality as an ongoing priority area.

The six public health priorities, agreed by Scottish Government and COSLA, are intended to support national and local partners across Scotland to work together to improve healthy life expectancy and reduce health inequalities in our communities.² The priorities are:

1. A Scotland where we live in vibrant and safe places and communities.
2. A Scotland where we flourish in our early years.
3. A Scotland where we have good mental wellbeing.
4. A Scotland where we reduce the use of and harm from alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.
5. A Scotland where we have a sustainable, inclusive economy with equality of outcomes for all.
6. A Scotland where we eat well, have a healthy weight and are physically active.

The full reports from Public Health Scotland are available at: www.publichealthscotland.scot/publications/scotland-s-public-health-priorities-and-violence-against-women-and-girls

1 www.publichealthscotland.scot/publications/scotland-s-public-health-priorities-and-violence-against-women-and-girls

2 <https://publichealthreform.scot/publications/scotland-s-public-health-priorities>

What is the issue and why does it matter?

Impact of gender

Violence against women and girls is recognised as a function of sex and gender inequality and an abuse of male power and privilege. Our challenge is to consider the social norms, structures and gender roles which influence women and girls' vulnerability to violence.³

The public health priorities highlight some of the impacts gender has on women and girls in society. For example:

PHP1

Public transport was traditionally designed to meet the needs of workers based on standard working hours, however women often have different transport needs due to balancing part-time or shift work combined with caring responsibilities.



PHP2

Gender stereotypes formed in the early years and reinforced in adolescence can influence attitudes to education, subject choices and future career paths.



PHP3

The risk factors for depression (such as experiences of violence, childhood sexual abuse, gender inequality and discrimination) are more prevalent in women.



PHP4

Both men and women suffer victimisation as a result of men's alcohol-related violence. However, women experience violence from men known to them at higher rates than men.



3 www.improvementservice.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0022/24862/EMBriefing-WhatAboutTheMen.pdf

PHP5

Women are more likely to be living in poverty than men and more likely to experience persistent poverty.



PHP6

The gap between male and females participating in physical activity is narrowing however women and girls still report barriers to exercising in the local community such as safety concerns at venues, issues around body image and the male-dominated culture of sport.



Key issues and facts

PHP1

In 2020/21
Police Scotland
recorded



62,251

incidents of domestic abuse



80% of incidents involved a female victim and male accused

91% of incidents occurred in the home



Women are the most likely victims of stalking and often experience severe and lasting effects

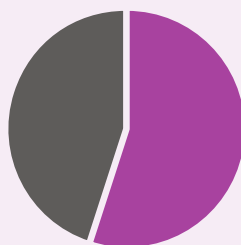
PHP2



Two-thirds

of children exposed to domestic abuse at home also experience physical or emotional abuse or neglect

Women involved in prostitution have often experienced multiple forms of abuse as a child



Over half

of girls in secure/residential care or in the criminal justice system have experienced sexual exploitation.

PHP3



Women who have experienced domestic abuse are **more likely to experience poor mental health** including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.



Around half

of all mental health service users have been physically and/or sexually abused as children.

Exposure to domestic abuse has a significant impact on **children's mental health**. There are strong links between poorer educational outcomes and higher levels of mental health issues.



PHP4

Alcohol and drugs may be used as a **means of control** and can increase the incidence and severity of violence and abuse. Victims may also use alcohol or drugs as a **coping mechanism**.



Children who witness abuse are at **greater risk of alcohol-related harm** as adults.



Areas where alcohol is readily available may be more likely to record **higher rates of domestic abuse and sexual violence**.

PHP5

Poverty is both a **cause** and a **consequence** of VAWG.

Poverty increases women and girls' vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.



Most women

experiencing domestic abuse experience financial abuse.



Welfare reforms have a **disproportionate impact** on women and children, particularly those with complex needs.

PHP6



Financial abuse and coercive control impacts on women and girls' ability to **access healthy food and participate** in physical activity and community events.



There are links between experience of domestic abuse or sexual violence and eating disorders.

Around half

of women and girls have experienced unwanted staring, sexually inappropriate language, touching and other forms of sexual harassment whilst attending fitness centres.





What does this mean for elected members?

Recognising VAWG as a public health issue means that collective action takes place across the whole system.


Elected members' key roles of providing leadership, scrutinising policy, and championing initiatives across a range of areas including education, public protection and social care, can support the prevention of VAWG and early intervention. Elected members can:

Apply a gendered lens to strategy and policy development aligned to public health priority areas, recognising that VAWG can prevent women from achieving their full health potential. For example, supporting strategy and policy development that provides an [understanding of the mental health needs of women and girls](#), building awareness of the impacts of VAWG whilst recognising that partners may need support to ensure staff are aware of their role in identification and referral to appropriate support services.

Work with partners to influence and support decision-making to ensure gender considerations are mainstreamed, leading to a greater shared understanding of VAWG and improved health and wellbeing of women. Additionally, through partnership working, elected members could contribute to a shared vision for progressing gender equality with a focus on action to address inequalities and intersectional barriers experienced by ethnic minority women, older women, and lone parents.

Scrutinise policy and practice that tackles economic inequality and drivers of poverty. Recognising the important role of gender and equalities budgeting when influencing spending decisions is a key contribution and will shape the local authority's [Gender Responsive Budgeting](#) capabilities. Additionally, influencing decision-making and sustainable investment to address the economic barriers experienced by women to access financial independence could support survivors to leave an abusive partner.

Scrutinise policy and practice decisions that impact on early identification and treatment for victims and survivors, including how data is being captured to build local intelligence and influence service provision. It may be possible for elected members, through partnership working, to explore funding decision making to ensure services are joined up whilst also scrutinising service delivery to support equality of service access and good outcomes for women experiencing VAWG.



Opportunities for elected members to influence change

Using gender-sensitive policies and programmes in the planning and design of communities will support women in accessing work, learning, leisure and to balance these with caring responsibilities. Gender-sensitive policies and programmes recognise the diverse needs and experiences of women/girls and men/boys and consider the impact on gender equality at every stage. For example; promoting community-based interventions that support women and children to recover from experiences of VAWG such as [Cedar \(Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse Recovery\)](#) or ensuring that upstream prevention approaches such as [gender-friendly nurseries](#) are prioritised.

Improved understanding of the impact of gender and encouraging leaders and decision makers to acknowledge the specific needs of women in areas such as planning, community safety and community justice will increase women's likelihood of living in vibrant, healthy and safe communities.

Leadership and advocacy for development of workforce skills and knowledge, appropriate to staff and service areas, is required to increase identification of violence and staff capability to provide a trauma informed response to parents and children who have experienced VAWG.

Collaborative work across key partnerships, for example between Alcohol and Drugs Partnerships and Violence Against Women Partnerships, could support the establishment of links between service areas and support the needs of individual women and families. Identifying local needs and developing specific strategic planning outcomes for VAWG across partnerships could be championed at a leadership level.

Leadership and advocacy for development of information collection amongst partners to inform policy and share good practice. Robust and meaningful national and local data from service areas such as alcohol and drug services, mental health services, money advice services and the links with VAWG is limited but necessary to support understanding of the links between violence, trauma, and mental health. Health and social care services could work together to ensure data is captured and translated into local learning to support early identification of VAWG with appropriate treatment reaching victims and survivors.

Ensuring that service planners and commissioners consider the complex needs of women experiencing violence, trauma and mental health issues, local authorities can support an effective response that includes not only treatment but opportunities for earlier intervention and prevention.

Supporting government-led initiatives such as increased support for a living wage and adequate financial assistance for carers as well as any local initiatives that contribute to a cultural shift on economic inequality would be useful. For example, strengthening opportunities to maximise income, particularly in public settings that support women, such as early learning and childcare settings.

Similarly with initiatives relating to accessing safe places, there may be opportunities to ensure that women can safely access community sports and social facilities without fear of harassment/personal safety. For example, ensuring that local authority sports and recreation facilities challenge gender stereotypes and encourage initiatives that support women to safely access and use community spaces and equipment.



Key questions to consider

- ▶ How diverse are the council's decision-making, planning and community engagement processes? Do they unintentionally exclude women and other groups such as disabled women and minority ethnic women?
- ▶ As a leader and a person of influence, do you challenge norms that perpetuate male dominance or female subordination, stigmatisation of survivors of violence?
- ▶ Can you advocate for approaches that embed gender equality practice as the norm in all public policy making, commissioning and leadership, starting with the early years and throughout life stages? For example, advocating for a VAWG and trauma-informed workforce across related sectors such as early years, alcohol and drug services, mental health services.
- ▶ Can you promote an understanding of VAWG that reduces the cycle of intergenerational harm? Which services would benefit from an improved focus and understanding of the support required to meet the needs of women and children with lived experience of violence? Can you consider developing a local understanding of the co-dependant existence of issues around VAWG and advocating for appropriate responses from public services.
- ▶ Are there opportunities for you to consider child poverty through a gendered lens, thinking of how gender inequality impacts on standards of living and holding key services to account to maximise family income and protect children? For example, via local child poverty action reporting, and at a national level, promoting and increasing the uptake of benefits aimed at women and children like Best Start Grant/Foods, Child Benefit, and Scottish Child Payment.



Summary

By adopting a gendered approach, promoting gender equality and promoting an understanding of VAWG under each of Scotland's Public Health Priorities elected members can make a significant contribution in challenging attitudes, behaviours and beliefs and identifying the local and national system change required to eliminate VAWG.

By recognising that VAWG is a public health issue, a public health approach can be adopted that strengthens collaboration across all sectors and focusses on early intervention and the prevention of VAWG.

Elected members can encourage and support multi-agency working across a range of local partners including VAW Partnerships, Health and Social Care Partnerships, Community Planning Partnerships and other key strategic partnerships that have a role in achieving shared outcomes to improve the health and wellbeing of women and children.

By supporting the work of local Violence Against Women Partnerships and encouraging strategic links and shared outcomes with other local partnerships such as Health and Social Care, Community Safety, Community Justice, Alcohol and Drugs, elected members can contribute to a public health approach to eliminating violence against women.

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.

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

For more information on Public Health Scotland support for local government, please see our [Induction Briefing for Elected Members](#).

iHub
Quarrywood Court
Livingston
EH54 6AX

Tel: 01506 282012
Email: info@improvementservice.org.uk
www.improvementservice.org.uk

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*The 'go to' organisation for Local
Government improvement in Scotland*

The logo for Improvement Service, featuring the letters 'is' in a bold, sans-serif font. The 'i' has a red dot above it, and the 's' has a red dot at the bottom right. Below the 'is' is the word 'improvement' in a smaller, dark blue font, and the word 'service' in a bold, red font.
improvement **service**