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ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

Strengthening the Role of Elected Members in Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls in Rural Areas





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 the Improvement Service

The Improvement Service (IS) is the go-to organisation for local government improvement in Scotland. Established in 2005, the IS supports councils and their partners to deliver better outcomes for communities, reduce inequalities, and achieve efficiencies.

We do this through leading transformation, building capacity and capability for improvement across the sector, supporting collaboration to tackle shared challenges, providing data and intelligence to inform policy and decision-making, and delivering national shared service applications and technology platforms.

Our expertise covers a wide range of areas including digital public services, performance measurement and benchmarking, transformation and change management, workforce and skills development, planning and place-based approaches, economy and employability, poverty and inequalities, and climate change.

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About this briefing note

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) has no place in our vision for a safe, strong, successful Scotland. The Scottish Government, COSLA, and key partners remain steadfast in their commitment to preventing and eradicating this violence and addressing the underlying attitudes and systems that perpetuate it. The purpose of this briefing is to help inform and equip elected members to tackle the unique challenges and obstacles that victims and survivors in rural and island communities face and ensure that local systems and services are robustly equipped to offer support.



Key messages

Victims and survivors in rural and island communities face unique challenges in accessing support systems and services, challenges that differ to urban areas. These include limited public transport options that prevent victims and survivors from travelling to support systems and services, the added cost of delivering services in rural communities, isolation, inadequate training for universal services and a lack of staff specialised in VAWG, limited mobile connectivity, and higher levels of gun ownership. Moreover, tightknit networks, limited anonymity and traditional gender expectations can make harmful attitudes harder to challenge.

As highlighted by Equally Safe, elected members have a responsibility to prevent and eradicate all forms of VAWG in their local communities, including rural and island communities.

Improving public transport and actively partnering with the specialist and universal services that make up local multi-agency VAW Partnerships will ensure significant progress in fulfilling this ambition, as well as improve overall circumstances for those residing in rural and island communities.

Championing gender equality will help to remove systemic barriers that women in rural and island communities face in seeking support for and reporting VAWG.



What is the issue?

‘Rural communities, compared to urban communities, face distinct challenges which makes the provision of, and access to, services difficult, if they are provided at all.’- [Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Violence Against Women and Girls, 2023](#)

[Equally Safe](#), the Scottish Government and COSLA’s national strategy for tackling VAWG in Scotland, emphasises the unique challenges that victims and survivors face where geographical distance from wider community and facilities creates barriers to accessing systems and services:

‘...the distance between houses in rural settings are often greater than in urban areas meaning that victims/survivors of abuse may be extremely (or further) isolated with abuse and its harms more hidden. Help-seeking and service interventions can be more challenging as services may be located many miles away, with distances exacerbated

by limited public transport and sporadic and limited access to the internet or mobile phone signal.’

With systems and services located further away, victims and survivors rely heavily on [telephone](#) and internet resources to access services. However, this presents another barrier, with rural and island communities suffering restricted digital access and limited phone coverage in comparison to more urban areas, making it more difficult for frontline workers to offer support.

Limited public transport options in rural and island communities are another barrier for victims and survivors in getting the support they need, particularly in island communities where many would be reliant on ferries to travel to the mainland. The National Transport Strategy concluded that:

‘[Evidence](#) shows that a greater share of people in remote rural and accessible rural areas find accessing services less convenient. There are urban and rural locations within Scotland where the current level of public transport provision, including accessible transport, and connectivity issues can act as barriers to accessing healthcare, employment, education or training opportunities. Satisfaction with public transport in large urban areas was 77%, compared to only 44% in accessible rural areas’- National Transport Strategy, 2020.

There is also a high incidence of gun ownership in rural and island communities, particularly northern Scotland. In [2022](#), there were 18,960 active gun certificates issued in Inverness, encompassing Skye, Highlands, Orkney and Shetland. This equates to 1 in 16 people owning guns in these areas. In comparison, the Glasgow office issued gun certificates equating to 1 in 116 people in West-Central Scotland owning a gun.

Alongside these structural challenges, technology enabled abuse can take on distinct and often more severe forms in rural and island settings. Isolation, limited services and the visibility of everyday life can increase risk. Perpetrators may use tools such as smart home systems or control over internet access to monitor and restrict partners, with serious consequences where distances are long and help is not close by. Women who have moved into these areas may be cut off from support networks, making digital contact their main link to others and easier to control. Patchy connectivity, limited housing and visible travel routes can make it harder to seek help or leave safely, while everyday observation within small communities can also be used to track movements and reinforce control.

Police in rural and island communities face [particular challenges](#) that differ from those in urban areas, including issues around transport and mobility, potential role conflicts for officers, and resourcing and backup. Policing teams in rural areas may be very small, however the geographical area they are expected to cover spans over hundreds of miles, meaning that offering support can be more constrained. Officers in rural areas also have very limited backup from other officers as well as specialist services, such as VAWG support organisations.

As an elected member, your role can be used to support the need for gender and VAWG

aware professional development and ensure local workforces are aware that for many women in rural and island areas, access to safe places to seek support for themselves and their families in respect to VAWG, can be limited due to lack of anonymity in public places and the heightened capacity for surveillance that this can allow abusers.

Victims and survivors in rural islands and communities often experience a 'cloak of silence' regarding domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG due to the remoteness of support systems and services, conservative views of gender roles, and a culture of surveillance. The small, tight-knit communities common in rural areas may result in women and girls experiencing challenges to report instances of abuse due to a lack of anonymity and confidentiality.

'The size of some rural communities where everyone knows each other may result in women being reluctant to access local VAWG services as those working in these services may also be members of the same communities giving rise to concerns about lack of anonymity (see also Sandberg, 2013). Accessing support for victims in this context is rarely discussed or researched.'- Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Violence Against Women and Girls

A changing demographic context further challenges the assumption that rural communities are places where everyone knows each other in ways that prevent harm. Inward migration, driven by remote working, repopulation policies and lifestyle moves, can create conditions where perpetrators exploit both anonymity and visibility. Women who relocate may be cut off from support networks and positioned as outsiders, making it harder to seek help or be believed, while perpetrators can build local credibility or use technology to monitor and control. Greater digital skills among some newcomers can intensify coercive control, particularly in areas with limited infrastructure and services. These combined dynamics can create environments where isolation, surveillance and digital abuse intersect, increasing risks for women and girls.

The [2025/2026 Voices of Women in Shetland report](#) gathered accounts from 116 women living in Shetland to gauge their lived experiences. 66 women reported being affected by VAWG, and 38 women reported receiving support. Of those that reported being affected by VAWG, 16 people chose to report to the police. This means that over 75% of the women in the research who were affected by gender-based violence in Shetland chose not to report to the police.

Challenges have been documented in relation to providing support for victims and survivors of VAWG in island communities. Domestic abuse shelters are less likely to remain hidden in smaller islands. The lack of specialist facilities and limited resources mean that survivors of sexual offences have to travel to the mainland for examination, which can add to victims' trauma.

Another unique issue faced by people in rural and island communities is poverty. Nearly three quarters of low-income families include at least one working person, compared to [6 in 10](#) in other areas, reflecting the rise of in-work poverty from 2015 to 2023. [Part-time hours](#) can contribute to in-work poverty and the highest rate of part time workers can be found in remote rural areas (28%). Women are considerably more

likely than men to work part-time in all areas of Scotland, however, the highest rate is again in remote rural Scotland (46%).

These high rates of poverty, unique to rural areas, provides another barrier for women hoping to escape abusive relationships, with these problems exacerbated when the victim or survivor is a parent.

When the Scottish Parliament [Social Justice and Security Committee](#) called for views on financial considerations for women leaving abusive relationships, Scottish Women's Aid claimed:

'Due to funding cuts across the third sector, specialist support organisations such as grass-roots Women's Aid services, which provide financial advice, information and support for victim-survivors, are minimal. Victim-survivors in remote and rural communities are often without access to support.'- Scottish Women's Aid



What does this mean for elected members?

It is crucial that solutions are shaped by local circumstances, not urban assumptions. [Mitigating the risks and harms](#) experienced in rural and island communities requires thoughtful planning and strong collaboration across our public services.

At a local community level, elected members have a responsibility to ensure that the barriers women in rural areas face in reporting instances of gender-based violence are recognised and addressed.

Elected members play a key role in championing gender equality within their local communities to embed preventative action in tackling VAWG and ensuring systems and services in rural areas are equipped to offer coordinated support to victims and survivors.

[17% of the Scottish population](#) are located on 98% of the land mass that is categorised as rural across the country. The issues highlighted above, such as limited public transport, a culture of surveillance, and lack of training, act as additional barriers for women experiencing VAWG.

The Independent Strategic Review of Funding emphasises this point:

‘The size of some rural communities where everyone knows each other may result in women being reluctant to access local VAWG services as those working in these services may also be members of the same communities giving rise to concerns about lack of anonymity. Accessing support for victims in this context is rarely discussed or researched’- The Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Violence Against Women and Girls

The Scottish Government has made commitments to tackling gender inequality within agricultural sectors (often crucial in rural economies) and continue to make progress:

‘The Scottish Government is committed to giving gender equality in agriculture the continued attention it deserves and needs for the overall wellbeing of the industry.’- [Final Report of the Women in Agriculture Taskforce](#)

Elected members in rural and island communities can actively drive councils towards assuring that gender and VAWG competent planning, decision making and scrutiny of outcomes for women and girls is embedded within council governance and accountability framework, and informs local public protection and community planning processes.

Examples of 'Good Practice'

Orkney Tak a Stand Initiative

Orkney's '[Tak a Stand](#)' initiative is a highly effective example of good practice in raising awareness of the existence of domestic abuse in rural communities. In collaboration with service providers, local media, and the police, a local university student led on creating a social media campaign that offered an anonymous space to share lived experience of violence, sexual assault, and rape, with the aim of highlighting that domestic abuse occurs in Orkney. The Instagram account received 300 submissions in the six months after its creation in December 2020. The campaign expanded, with a temporary exhibition in the centre of Kirkwall which encouraged more than 230 people to sign a pledge promising to call out sexual abuse if they saw it.

Following the campaign, there has been a notable rise in reporting of domestic abuse to the police in Orkney. In 2020, there were [40 reports](#) of sexual crime made. This number increased to 54 in 2021, then 98 in 2022. Orkney Rape and Sexual Assault Service reported that they have supported 82 people in 2022/2023, which is an increase of about 10% from the previous year, and the highest figure in the decade that it has been in operation. This challenges the idea that domestic abuse does not occur in rural and remote areas, whilst providing victims and survivors with a safe space to discuss their struggles and maintain their anonymity.

As an elected member, your role can be used to raise awareness of VAWG and highlight the needs of women and support services and systems that support them and assure their safety, within council committee processes. Evidence of increased prevalence of VAWG in rural and island areas can be used to inform local planning, and budgeting priorities.

Offering More Trauma-Aware Surroundings

Informed by an understanding of the dynamics and risks to women experiencing domestic abuse and coercive control, police in rural and remote areas have, in some cases, arranged interviews with victims and survivors by using flexible and safety enhancing approaches. [One example](#) in a particularly rural area in an island setting features a female police officer dressed in plain clothing arranging to meet with a victim in a private woodland. The perpetrator of abuse worked on the island's ferry services, and neighbours were also observing her activity, so it was not possible for the victim to leave her home or the island and access support services without the risk of making her abuser aware of her movements. Under these conditions it was not possible for the officer to meet with the victim safely in more formal circumstances. Therefore, the officer travelled to meet with her using a more unconventional approach. The meeting was made possible due to the officer collaborating with a third sector support organisation that was supporting the victim.

As an elected member you can scrutinise how planning, policy and service design in your area is considering victim survivor experience and using the expertise of specialist

services to inform how responses to victim survivors of domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG can be adapted when required.

Scottish Borders

While partnership working between specialist and universal services is critical to meeting the needs of all victims and survivors across Scotland, this is particularly true in rural and island communities where specialist services may not be physically available in the communities that victims and survivors live.

In one rural area in the Scottish Borders, the specialist Independent Domestic Abuse Advocate (IDAA) service worked collaboratively with the only service provider in a small rural village, the GP surgery. This was the only service a survivor was permitted to access as all her movements were controlled. Staff in the GP surgery were briefed on the risks of unintentional information sharing, the implementation of code words to ensure any cancelled appointments were made by the client and staff were part of a planned exit strategy for the client following a GP appointment. Services in rural areas need to work closely together to provide more points of entry to specialist support and safety, this often requires quick responses based on good, solid partnerships. Often in rural areas, it is unsafe for victims to approach services in the more traditional way.

In this case the client was able to access support and exit the GP surgery safely following an agreed safety plan generated by her and the IDAA.



Key actions for Elected Member to consider

Elected members play a crucial role in representing their communities, shaping local policy and priorities, scrutinising decisions and services, and working collaboratively with partners to improve outcomes. The actions below reflect this leadership, advocacy, and scrutiny role within the local response to tackling VAWG in rural areas:

- Champion efforts with local and national media outlets to progress the prevention and tackling of VAWG and highlight available support services, while encouraging victims and survivors to report instances of VAWG.
- Advocate for and scrutinise domestic-abuse informed training within local workforces including housing, social work and education services and including policing, supporting efforts to ensure officers from across key services receive appropriate and trauma-informed guidance, online or offline.
- Promote and highlight the impact of transport, housing and digital access on safety and support for victim-survivors.
- Engage with bus, train, and ferry operators to explore the frequency and improve the reliability of services across local areas, emphasising how accessible transport contributes to safety and service access in rural communities.
- Encourage consideration of the implementation of Community Bus Hubs, to enable community operated services to connect with commercial bus routes.
- Promote the consideration of safe travel planning for victims and survivors escaping abuse, such as [Travel to Refuge](#).
- Heighten strategic awareness of the need to plan for and ensure there are methods for victims and survivors to report their experiences anonymously, particularly online.
- Work with local community planning partners, including the police, to promote the adoption of domestic abuse and trauma informed approaches, scrutinising progress and advocating for continuous improvement.
- Encourage rigorous, locally appropriate vetting of gun ownership, working with police services to ensure the 'good reason' requirement is applied effectively in rural contexts.
- Champion the creation and sustainability of an industry-led Equality, Diversity and Inclusion network for agriculture. Activities could include supporting

opportunities for sharing examples of good practice initiatives and resources, raising awareness of online hubs and participation in engagement activities.

- [Work with schools](#), colleges, universities, careers services and agriculturally face youth services to tackle gender stereotypical attitudes and to highlight diverse career opportunities in agriculture and promote the visibility and contributions of women within the industry.
- Engage and collaborate with campaigns such as White Ribbon to encourage positive male involvement in challenging harmful attitudes and holding perpetrators to account.
- Ensure constructive collaboration between local authorities, VAW Partnerships and specialist organisations, to deepen understanding of local progress on Equally Safe, and championing improvements that strengthen effective, joined up local responses to VAWG.
- Promote and advocate for person-centred approaches in policy and service design, ensuring that victim-survivor voices and lived experience meaningfully inform decisions, services, and outcomes.
- Champion the benefits of flexible working to employers across your local authority area, recognising the importance of local authorities in rural and island areas in the context of women's employment. By doing so, this will offer greater financial stability and protections for women that can assist with leaving abusive relationships.
- Consider implementing the [No Wrong Door](#) approach across systems and services, tailored to the needs of VAWG victims and survivors. In doing so, this will improve access to person-centred support through a collaborative network of services.



Further support

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 on the work of local VAW Partnerships.

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