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

ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

Strengthening the Role of Elected Members in Ending Violence Against Women and Girls: Building Momentum for Gender-Competent, Trauma-Informed Workforce Development

COSLA

improvement service

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 in ensuring local authority workforces have the knowledge, skills and support they need to identify violence against women and girls and respond in a trauma-informed and responsive way, as well as supporting workforces who may themselves have lived experiences of or are currently experiencing VAWG.

Key messages

Violence Against Women and Girls is a form of gender-based violence, specifically targeting women and girls due to the unequal ways in which men and women experience the world. It is a direct and enduring consequence of gender inequality. The impact of VAWG can be devastating, causing great harm to individuals, communities and across society. Impacts are wide-ranging and have a significant impact on public services.

As highlighted in Equally Safe, it is crucial that members of the Local Government workforce are equipped with the knowledge and skills appropriate for their roles in identifying and responding to VAWG, as well as holding those that perpetrate the harms of VAWG to account.

By ensuring that VAWG informed training and trauma-informed practice is embedded across their local area, elected members can make use of existing frameworks and tools such as the Equally Safe in Practice Knowledge and Skills Framework, and Safe and Together Model and the Equally Safe at Work accreditation.

What is the challenge?

Scotland's VAWG strategy, Equally Safe, is underpinned by the understanding that VAWG stems from the inequality between men and women. To address VAWG in Scotland, it is critical that a gendered analysis is adopted that recognises the need to address attitudes and structures that underpin this violence and abuse. A gendered analysis recognises that gender inequality and imbalance of power is at the root of all forms of violence against women, and that this can also impact on people of any genders-including non-binary people - who aren't seen to conform to society's stereotypes. The impacts of VAWG are wide-ranging and have serious and, in some cases, lifelong consequences.

Women and children who have experienced harm and exploitation are far more likely to face inequality of outcomes across various aspects of their lives, including mental health problems, drug and alcohol addiction, homelessness, reduced education and employment opportunities.

In addition, VAWG can have a significant cost to society and public services. This includes direct costs relating to women, children, and young people accessing

protective services and criminal justice proceedings, housing, healthcare, and social care services, along with indirect costs such as the impact on mental health services, drug and alcohol support, and loss of economic productivity.

Public services have identified VAWG as a cross-cutting issue, with children and families who come into contact with VAWG support services often being the same individuals who access child protection and adult support and protection systems, alcohol and drug support services, mental health services, community justice services, and housing and homelessness services.

Police Scotland reports that dealing with incidences of domestic abuse is the greatest single demand on its time, with an incident of domestic abuse being reported every nine minutes, on average.

Preventing and tackling VAWG will significantly reduce the burden being placed on these services to provide support to women and children experiencing violence and exploitation. In doing so, resources can be released and redirected towards improving outcomes in your local community.

Workforce pressures

Due to the widespread prevalence of VAWG and large numbers of women and children being subject to associated harms also potentially coming into contact with multiple protection services, it is likely that a significant portion of the workforce will be interacting frequently with women and children who have been subjected to violence. Workers will also come into contact with perpetrators of VAWG, so it is crucial that they are trained to identify and understand perpetrators behaviours and, in holding them to account, to ensure services respond appropriately to those who use abuse, with a focus on safety and accountability.

One in five women in Scotland experience domestic abuse in their lifetime and three quarters of these women are targeted by their abuser at work, using it as a site of control, intimidation, or disruption. Therefore, members of the workforce may have lived or living experiences of VAWG, so it is crucial that organisational policies recognise this, and that line managers and leaders are equipped with the knowledge and skills to offer support. While it is not expected that all members of a local authority workforce should be an expert in VAWG, they should have the skills to respond to a degree that is appropriate for their role and to ensure signposting advice and information to specialist VAWG organisations is available, accessible, and offered.

What does this mean for Elected Members?

Councillors act as both advocates for local needs and conduits for broader council strategy. Their role is diverse, encompassing the shaping of local decision-making, contributing to policy development, and providing oversight and scrutiny to ensure accountability and effective governance.

Elected Members have duties to ensure that promoting gender equality and preventing and tackling VAWG is understood as a priority, as outlined in equalities legislation, The Equally Safe Strategy, and as embedded in Scotland's 6 Public Health Priorities.

While there are currently no mandatory requirements around workforces receiving VAWG training, there is a recognition that there is a need for greater consistency in workforce competencies to ensure safe, VAWG and trauma-informed practice in every local authority area in Scotland.

The Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention requires signatory states to put in place laws, policies, and services to prevent and respond to violence against women and domestic abuse, with progress monitored by GREVIO. Following GREVIO's 2025 baseline evaluation report on the UK, the Scottish Government and COSLA's national 16 Days of Activism event on 27 November 2025 brought together leaders from across the sector to consider Scotland's response. A key focus was how to meet the Convention's standard for systematic, high-quality training for professionals who support victim-survivors.

Delegates highlighted both the breadth of training currently available and the need for greater consistency, stronger reflective practice, and improved alignment with GREVIO's recommendations. Central to future progress is the development of the Equally Safe in Practice framework, alongside actions such as strengthening Police Scotland training, embedding routine enquiry in the NHS Accountability Framework, enhancing teacher understanding of VAWG, and improving learning pathways for social workers. Participants also emphasised the importance of culturally competent, anti-racist, trauma-informed practice and better outreach to marginalised groups, ensuring Scotland's services fully reflect the needs and rights of all women affected by violence.

This was recognised in the Scottish Government commissioned Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Violence Against Women and Girls Services, which highlights that:

"It is vital that mainstream and other community based services are able to provide suitable support and that their staff are trained in, and practice, trauma-informed, rights-based, risk aware, strengths-based (including children and young people),

VAWCYP (violence against women, children and young people) competent, approaches.'

This will be achieved by equipping the Scottish workforce with knowledge, understanding and the tools necessary to improve responses to VAWG and ensure victims and survivors of VAWG receive safe support that deliver positive outcomes.

Key Tools and approaches for Elected Members' consideration

Elected members can input and inform Council decisions that can drive how the local authority workforce will be equipped to respond to VAWG in a gendered and trauma-informed way.

Gender competence is the combination of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that people need to promote gender equality and treat people equitably. It involves applying these skills in everyday decision making and interactions to create more equal and inclusive outcomes for all people using our services.

A gender competent workforce would have increased knowledge and awareness of the structural inequalities that create differences in men and women's experiences, and an understanding of the need to develop gender-responsive policy, planning and practice. In a local government context, local government officers would be equipped to apply a gender lens to their everyday work. This means to reduce inequality by asking 'how might this affect women, men, non-binary people, girls and boys differently, and why?' and then adapting local policy and practice accordingly. This is essential for achieving the aims of Equally Safe.

The Equally Safe in Practice Knowledge and Skills Framework is a four-tiered workforce development framework that spans all workforce levels and sectors - ranging from basic awareness for the wider workforce through to enhanced frontline training, specialist knowledge and skills, through to management and leadership.

The framework drives both practice and culture change within the Scottish workforce by outlining the knowledge, understanding and practice skills necessary to improve responses to VAWG and ensure safe and positive outcomes for women, children, and young people. The framework splits Scotland's workforce into four tiers, detailing the competencies required across different roles and levels of responsibility in relation to VAWG:

- Group 1: General workforce - Workers of all levels have foundational understanding of gender analysis and VAWG.

- Group 2: Frontline workers - Built on the foundational knowledge from tier 1, tier 2 specifies enhanced learning, and skills and tools that can be used in their daily work.

- Group 3: Specialist sector- Professional development and accreditation for workers requiring specialist knowledge.

- Group 4: Service managers and leads - Managers and leaders will be equipped with the enhanced knowledge to support teams in implementing new learning and operationalising strategic priorities.

Equally Safe at Work is an employer accreditation programme that enables public and third sector employers to improve workplace practices on gender equality and VAW. It is another way that elected members can drive forward the agenda on improving gender equality and VAWG - sensitive employment practice. The programme supports the delivery of Equally Safe and promotes sustainable change across local areas.

Close the Gap, Scottish Women's Aid, and Rape Crisis Scotland have developed an information resource to highlight the different strands of the Equally Safe initiatives, including Equally Safe at Work, Equally Safe in Practice and Equally Safe at School, which is a programme designed to support secondary schools across Scotland to take a whole school approach to address gender-based violence. The resource outlines how each differs from the other but also demonstrates that engaging with one can complement the work of another.

The Safe and Together Institute promotes the principles of the Safe and Together model which seeks to keep children who have experienced domestic abuse safe and together with their non-abusive parent, while supporting and acknowledging non-abusive parents' protective efforts and ensuring perpetrators are held accountable for their abuse. This offers local authorities' multiple levels of progressive domestic abuse centred training, with the goal of informing organisational and systems change. They frequently partner with services that are most likely to interact with women experiencing VAWG- including protective services. This could offer another valuable mechanism for elected members to consider when shaping policy and collaborating with public partnerships.

Examples of 'Good Practice'

Strengthening skills, improving services

A positive working example of good practice and a commitment to change can be seen in the approach Fife Council Housing and Safer Communities team have taken towards strengthening policy, practice and culture. With oversight from the Domestic Abuse Intervention Board, the work has been driven by a steering group of Service Managers and leads from across Strategic Partnerships, Domestic Abuse Intervention, and the Violence Against Women Partnership, who have also engaged with and consulted operational staff at key milestones. They have focused on strengthening workforce development to enhance and improve service delivery.

Building on their earlier involvement in a community research project 'Change, Justice, Fairness', co-delivered with Scottish Women's Aid, Fife Council Housing and Safer Communities teams have focused on the delivery of the housing and homelessness services through a domestic abuse lens, and have prioritised workforce development and departmental culture change. They recognised that training and skill development was central to what they wanted to achieve, ensuring positive outcomes for those using their services, and safer outcomes for women, children and young people overall.

In partnership with the charity Shelter, they developed a training resource focused on Domestic Abuse and Housing Law, to build capacity within their housing teams, and in 2021, connected with Equally Safe in Practice to participate in the piloting of three learning modules which aimed to build a foundation of knowledge and skills across staff of all levels. Over 520 staff completed a core learning module 'Together for Gender Equality', and a high number of staff completed two additional modules 'Understanding Domestic Abuse' and 'Understanding Sexual Violence'. The learning modules were given mandatory status, and all staff were encouraged to participate in reflective practice discussion sessions to deepen their knowledge and offer space for deliberation and practice-specific examples to be shared.

In the time since the Equally Safe in Practice pilot concluded, the housing team has continued to engage with the development of the Equally Safe Knowledge & Skills Framework and have participated in a series of contribution analysis evaluation sessions with Scottish Women's Aid and Matter of Focus and several stakeholder consultation events.

The team launched a new Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Policy in 2023, 'to ensure a proactive housing response to prevent and eradicate all forms of domestic & sexual abuse' and in 2025 the council became the first to trial an Equally Safe in Practice Kitemark Accreditation programme that would support the council to review practice and strengthen workforce development approaches. The housing team have used both the ESiP knowledge and skills framework and the accreditation pathway to conduct training needs assessments, identifying gaps in either delivery or

evaluation data, and have reviewed services, staff competencies and conduct, and considered how the teams work together and collaboratively with other services. Their involvement in the testing of the Kitemark Accreditation has led to a review of how staff competencies are measured against national standards and prompted questions around how meeting standardised competencies can be achieved and supported by existing coaching offerings. The housing team has been proactive in securing leadership support and ensuring mandatory status for the learning modules to ensure that current and new staff complete the same level of learning as a minimum. As part of that work, they have begun to explore protected learning time and how to create and protect space and time for staff to engage in learning and reflective practice – and how this model can be used and replicated across other departments and services within the council.

Key actions for Elected Member to consider

There are several actions for elected members consideration as part of their leadership role:

- Apply a strong gendered lens to strategic decision-making, recognising that women, men, non-binary people, girls, and boys experience systems and services differently, and ensuring these differences shape policy and practice.

- Ensure VAWG strategies, policies and services are routinely considered in committees, embedded within planning cycles, and treated as core business rather than an add-on.

- Promote Equally Safe in Practice, and advocate for both Equally Safe in Practice and Equally Safe at Work to be established as local workforce development priorities,
    - so that staff at all levels have the skills and confidence to recognise, prevent, and respond to VAWG
    - to ensure gendered perspectives inform approaches to community planning, public protection and committee scrutiny and decision making

- Champion gender-competent workforces by ensuring gendered training is included in strategic workforce planning and reflected in scrutiny, public protection processes, and committee decision-making.

- Engage and collaborate with campaigns such as White Ribbon to promote the involvement of men in challenging harmful attitudes and holding perpetrators to account.

- Work constructively with local authorities, VAW Partnerships and specialist organisations to build a clear understanding of local progress on Equally Safe. Use this knowledge to inform your scrutiny role, challenge gaps, and champion improvements that strengthen local responses to VAWG.

- Engage with local authorities and VAW Partnerships to evaluate current activity and resource allocations locally across Equally Safe aligned workforces, service and organisational programmes, approaches, and frameworks.

- Ensure that Equality Impact Assessments (EQIA) are undertaken at every level of service to evaluate policy, practice, and service design, and to address areas for improvement.

- Ensure local outcomes are set and achieved that will improve gender equality and deliver positive outcomes for women and children affected by gendered and other forms of abuse and violence.

- Embed person-centred approaches in policy and service design, ensuring that victim-survivor voices and lived experience meaningfully shape decisions, services, and outcomes.

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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October 2026

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