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Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Needs Assessment Tool

2025/26 Test Phase Learning Report

September 2026

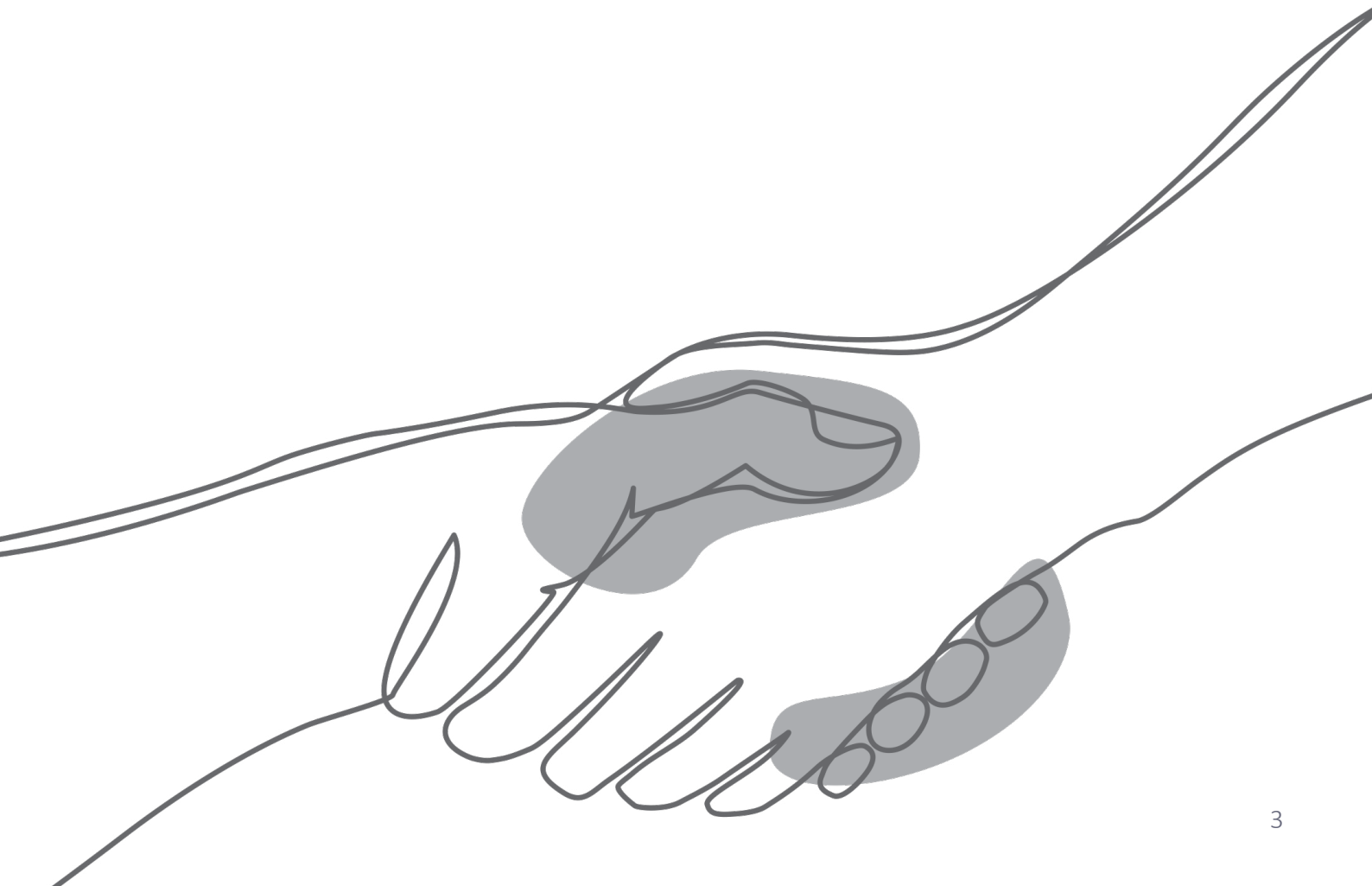


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Introduction

The Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Needs Assessment Tool Test Phase was designed to generate practical learning on how local Violence Against Women Partnerships across Scotland can use a shared framework to understand the needs of women, children and young people affected by VAWG, map existing responses, and identify gaps in systems and services. This learning report draws together the key emerging learning from the 2025/26 test phase to inform refinement of the VAWG Needs Assessment Tool and the wider package of guidance, case studies and practical resources that will accompany future testing and implementation of the VAWG Needs Assessment process. It also aims to capture what support local partnerships may need in future, and how national and local partners can continue to strengthen the evidence base for planning responses to VAWG.



Background

[Equally Safe: Scotland's Strategy for Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls](#) sets out a 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, abuse and exploitation – and the attitudes that help perpetuate it. In delivering on this vision the [Equally Safe Delivery Plan](#) commits to the development of a sustainable funding model for VAWG services, that reflects the ambitions of Equally Safe and is informed by recommendations from the [Violence Against Women and Girls - Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Services](#).

To support this ambition, in early 2025, the Scottish Government and COSLA announced work to develop a VAWG Needs Assessment Tool, with support from the Improvement Service. A Short Life Working Group and wider stakeholder engagement activity helped shape the first draft of the tool, drawing on the expertise of national partners and those with experience of needs assessment, commissioning, service planning and responding to VAWG. The draft tool was designed to help local multi-agency VAW Partnerships, and other relevant strategic groups to build a shared understanding of local need, identify strengths and gaps in current systems and services, and consider how collective resources can be used more effectively.

The learning from stakeholder engagement and co-production activities informed the development of a first draft of a VAWG Needs Assessment Tool, which was shared with partners in summer of 2025. The core questions in the draft tool are:

1. Who are we? What does our local landscape look like in terms of population, demographics and socio-economic outcomes?
2. What are the key issues/ challenges being experienced by women, children and young people who have and/ or are currently experiencing VAWG in our local authority area?
3. What systems and services are currently in place locally to prevent and eradicate VAWG and respond to the needs of women, children and young people experiencing VAWG?
4. To what extent do local systems and services currently meet women, children and young people's needs?
5. What are the collective resources currently available to partners to meet the needs of women, children and young people experiencing VAWG?

Following the development of the draft Tool, the Test Phase was established to explore how partnerships in different contexts approached the questions, what support they required, what challenges they encountered, and what examples of good practice could be shared more widely.

Overview of the Test Phase

The Test Phase ran between September 2025 and March 2026 and involved 10 participating areas:

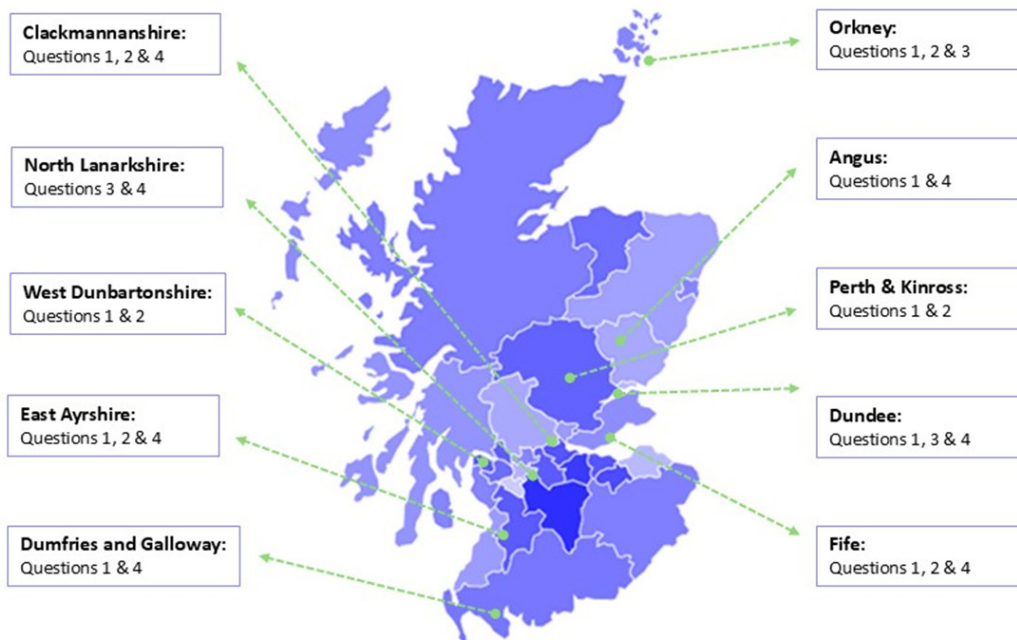
- Angus
- Clackmannanshire
- Dumfries and Galloway
- Dundee
- East Ayrshire
- Fife
- North Lanarkshire
- Orkney
- Perth and Kinross
- West Dunbartonshire

The aims of the Test Phase were to generate learning on improvements needed to the draft VAWG Needs Assessment Tool, identify examples of good practice in how different questions could be approached, and increase understanding of the support that local multi-agency partnerships may need to undertake needs assessment activity in a meaningful and sustainable way.

All test areas were asked to engage with the first question of the tool on local population, demographic and socio-economic context, alongside at least one additional question. This approach allowed the test phase to generate learning across the breadth of the draft tool while also recognising that local areas had different levels of capacity, infrastructure, readiness and access to specialist support. Feedback from workshops also highlighted the importance of considering how these factors differ across urban, rural and island contexts.

Throughout the test phase, the Improvement Service provided support to enable shared learning across the 10 areas. This included learning workshops, peer support opportunities, a Teams space for communication and resource sharing, and 1-1 support where needed. The Improvement Service also used ongoing feedback from the Test areas to develop practical resources such as draft template materials and collation of research papers and data sources. A series of shadow group workshops were arranged so that non-test areas could also contribute feedback to the process. As the test phase progressed, the learning workshops helped identify common challenges around timescales, data gaps, survivor engagement, consistency of evidence, and resource requirements, while also identifying useful approaches and materials to inform the next phase of development.

Methodology and approach



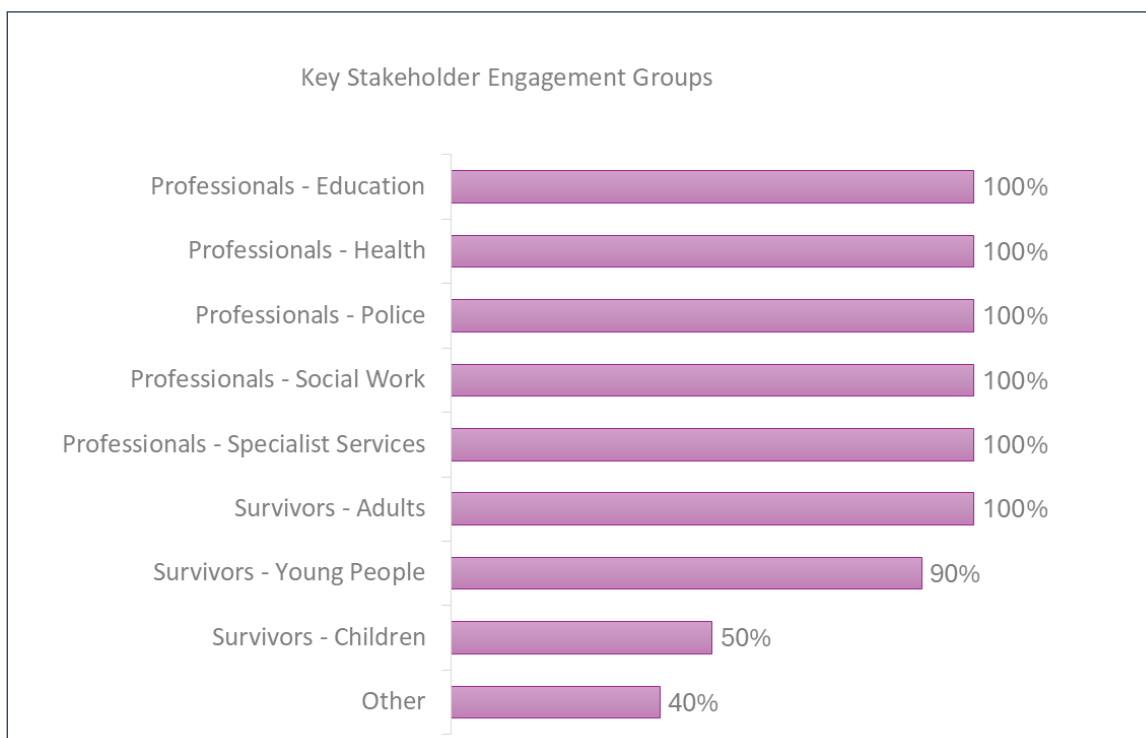
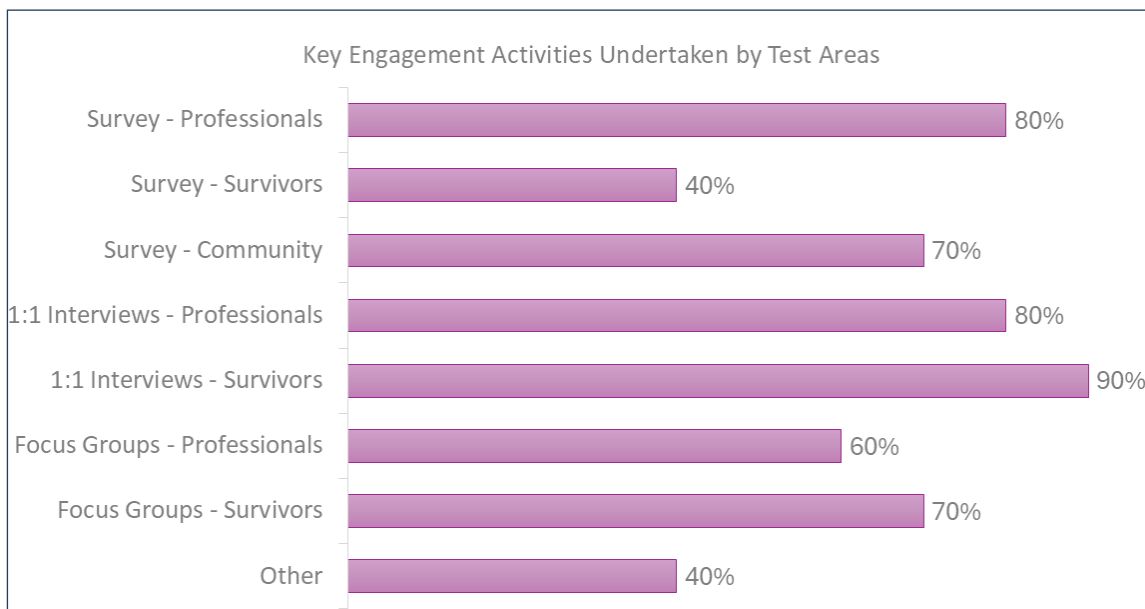
The diagram above shows the different Needs Assessment questions that each of the 10 local authority areas that participated in the Test Phase chose to focus on answering. Across all 10 areas, a multi-agency approach was taken to answering these questions. In the majority of areas (70%) the work was led by the Violence Against Women Partnership (VAWP) Lead Officer and supported by a range of public sector and third sector partners. In many cases (40%), external consultants or academic partners were commissioned to undertake specific elements of the work, such as desk-based research, stakeholder engagement, and data analysis. In some areas, the work was led by Third Sector partners (20%). Wider Public Sector partners (10%) and/ or other temporary posts (10%). This helped increase capacity and brought additional expertise to the process.

Steering groups or sub-groups were commonly established in the Test Areas to oversee delivery. These groups met regularly throughout the Test Phase to coordinate activity, monitor progress, and provide strategic direction. These groups also played a key role in managing the key risks that were identified throughout the Test Phase, including the short timescales to complete the Needs Assessment, limited capacity of staff to undertake work, challenges in engaging with professionals and victims and survivors and challenges in accessing and analysing relevant data. These risks are discussed in more detail in the Barriers and Enablers section of the report.



Engagement and participation

A mixed-method approach to answering the Needs Assessment questions was used by all 10 Test Areas, allowing both quantitative and qualitative data to be captured. A wide range of engagement tools and approaches were used throughout the Test Phase to gather input from different stakeholders, including professionals, victims and survivors and wider members of the community. As shown in the tables below, the most common approaches to stakeholder engagement were surveys, one-to-one interviews and focus groups, with engagement with both “lived experience” and “learned experience” stakeholders being prioritised to ensure that the Needs Assessment reflected both service user and professional insight and expertise.





Interviews

1:1 Interviews were the most common engagement activity that took place during the Test Phase, and were used to engage with both survivors and professionals. Test Areas noted that this format allowed for in-depth discussions to take place with key stakeholders, and for both lived and learned experience to be shared in a safe and supportive environment. Interviews with victims and survivors of VAWG were often facilitated by local specialist services that the survivors had a relationship with, to ensure participants felt safe and supported throughout the process.

“Engagement with survivors was undertaken via specialist organisations, in order to ensure that participation was supported by trusted professionals who could provide safeguarding, advocacy, and follow-up support where needed.”

In some areas, these interviews were undertaken by independent consultants which Test Areas noted brought independence and neutrality to the discussions. Targeted approaches, such as working with youth organisations, were also identified as being effective in reaching specific groups such as young people.



Surveys

Surveys were most commonly used by the Test Areas to capture insights from professionals and wider members of the community, although in a small number of areas (40%) they were also used to capture insights from victims and survivors. In comparison to interviews, Test Areas noted that surveys enabled engagement on a much wider scale providing both quantitative insights and qualitative feedback on key topics.

“The surveys were carefully reviewed and discussed in detail by the groups and the VAWG lead to ensure the language was appropriate, comprehensive, and accessible. Consideration was also given to the fact that respondents might complete the surveys from a range of settings, including their homes or other locations. In addition, pop-up support sessions were arranged in local libraries to assist individuals who required help in completing the surveys.”



Focus groups

Focus groups and practitioner workshops were also a widely used engagement approach, and enabled learning and insights to be captured from both professionals and victims and survivors. Test Areas highlighted these as an effective mechanism to encourage collective reflection, identify shared challenges, and explore barriers and opportunities across systems.

“Practitioners were encouraged to participate in ways that felt safe, including listening or contributing reflectively rather than speaking openly if preferred. Access to support and signposting was also available for practitioners, acknowledging workforce wellbeing and the cumulative emotional load associated with discussing trauma related material. Opportunities for collective reflection helped to normalise emotional responses and reinforce shared responsibility for care.”

“Staff at focus groups were offered the opportunity to engage with Authentic Voice if they were personally affected and/or wanted to give their opinions in an environment where they felt safer.



Other approaches

These engagement activities were often complemented by additional methods such as stakeholder meetings, case file audits, system mapping sessions and community events. Creative engagement techniques, including the use of online tools, QR codes, and partnerships with community organisations, were used by a number of Test Areas to increase reach and accessibility. In some areas, case study development and system mapping sessions were also used to explore how systems and services operate in practice and to identify gaps or areas of fragmentation.

“To minimise the risk of re-traumatisation, engagement focused on systems and service responses, rather than on detailed or graphic accounts of harm. Participants were not asked to recount abuse and were supported to share only what felt safe and relevant. Anonymised case studies were developed based on what individuals chose to share, rather than direct attribution, and participants were given the opportunity to review and request changes to their case study before it was used.”



Supporting safe, inclusive, and meaningful participation

Test Areas noted the importance of ensuring that stakeholder engagement was safe, inclusive, and trauma-informed, especially when engaging with victims and survivors of VAWG. Engagement activities undertaken throughout the Test Phase prioritised safety, consent, and wellbeing. For example, clear information was provided in advance of engagements explaining the purpose of the Needs Assessment and how information would be shared. Careful design of engagement activities, such as focusing on needs and experiences rather than requiring individuals to recount trauma, was noted by Test Areas as being critical in helping to minimise the risk of re-traumatisation and creating a safe environment for participation.

“Participant wellbeing was a core consideration throughout the testing. Engagement with survivors was intentionally limited to what could be undertaken safely and ethically within the available timescales.”

Participants were also supported to make informed decisions about their involvement, including controlling their level of participation and withdrawing from the engagements should they choose to do so. For example, Test Areas noted that offering different formats for participation, such as online surveys, 1:1 interviews or focus groups, allowed individuals to engage in the way that best suited their needs and circumstances. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and support was available before, during, and after engagement including signposting to support services where needed. Structured frameworks, ethical protocols, and standardised tools were also used to ensure consistency, quality, and adherence to research and governance standards.

“For the one-to-one interviews, an ethical framework was created by the consultant to ensure compliance with data laws and to protect the safety, privacy and anonymity of all participants and the data they provide. This was carried out in accordance with recognised good practice in researching VAWG. The consultant has many years’ experience interviewing participants who are living or have lived with violence and abuse in their lives. Their practice is fully risk and trauma-informed to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all participants and themselves, and their practice is also fully compliant with the Research Integrity Framework.”

As noted above, using established relationships with trusted support services was identified by a number of Test Areas as being critical to ensuring victims and survivors felt supported to engage with the Needs Assessment. These approaches also supported higher engagement rates with Test Areas noting that victims and survivors were more likely to engage with the Needs Assessment process when supported by services or practitioners they already knew, and when engagement was embedded within existing support structures rather than introduced as a standalone activity. However, a number of Test Areas noted this meant that some voices and experiences were less visible in the Needs Assessment findings, particularly those not engaged with support services.

“In our local authority area there are no specialist organisations working with Black and minoritised survivors. This significantly constrained our ability to reach and engage these survivors in ways that would normally be prioritised, despite the recognised importance of doing so.”

Some victims and survivors chose not to participate in these engagement activities due to previous negative experiences, or a desire to move on. Consultation fatigue

was also a recurring issue, with some participants expressing reluctance to engage due to repeated consultations without visible change.

“There was considerable reluctance from the women to get involved... Feedback from Women’s Aid staff indicated that the reluctance was caused by a general weariness to being surveyed and a wish to move on.”

Having a dedicated budget for remunerating victims and survivors was also identified by Test Areas as playing a significant role in supporting participation and engagement, and ensuring ethical engagement. Remuneration to victims and survivors was provided by 90% of Test Areas, who noted the importance of being able to recognise the value of survivors’ time and expertise, and reduce practical barriers to their engagement, through offering them financial compensation such as vouchers, cash payments or reimbursement of expenses helped. Flexible approaches to remuneration were noted by Test Areas as being important, with options designed to protect anonymity and avoid unnecessary administrative or financial barriers.

“Remuneration was designed to be respectful, safe, anonymous, and usable across all ages of survivors. This included using cash to thank service users for their time and expertise. Cash allows participants to access remuneration without creating digital trails, requiring bank accounts, or triggering safeguarding or welfare concerns. Particular care was taken to ensure that younger participants were remunerated appropriately.”

“We opted for ASDA vouchers, as these offer flexibility and can be used to purchase a range of goods locally, with two big shops available in the area. This approach also ensured that payments do not affect other forms of income or benefits and allows vouchers to be distributed anonymously, helping to protect participants’ privacy.”

However, a number of challenges around remuneration were also identified by Test Areas, including navigating the administrative processes in place within organisations and finding a payment method that worked for everyone.



Needs assessment test areas – good practice

Emerging learning from the local areas involved in the VAWG needs assessment test phase reflects early insights into promising approaches and strengths as well as areas for further development in the tool and resources. This learning is still evolving, and the Improvement Service will share ongoing learning which emerges as test areas continue to apply the tool and reflect on the process.

Angus

Angus focused primarily on exploring the extent to which local systems and services currently meet the needs of women, children and young people experiencing VAWG. Angus demonstrated a strong multi-agency governance approach, establishing a strategic oversight group with dedicated analytical and practitioner capacity. Key activities included developing a project plan and engagement strategy, reviewing national and local research, systems analysis with a range of stakeholders, survivor engagement, triangulating qualitative and quantitative findings, and producing a final report for strategic review. Existing trusted relationships within specialist services were used to support safe engagement with survivors, multiple participation routes were offered, and all materials signposted participants to support services while recognising that professionals themselves may also have lived experience.

Clackmannanshire

Clackmannanshire developed a lived experience-centred methodology to understanding VAWG with a particular focus on how survivors experience local systems and services in practice. Partners used anonymised case studies to explore whole-system responses. Practitioner and survivor workshops were structured around “walking through” lived experiences, enabling detailed reflection on system strengths and gaps. This approach shifted the focus from individual service performance to survivor experiences of systems. Strong collaboration between the VAW Partnership and a specialist delivery partner ensured clear roles across engagement, facilitation and analysis. The process was underpinned by robust trauma-informed practice, including clear ethical frameworks, participant safeguards and opportunities for co-production and reflection.

Dumfries and Galloway

Dumfries and Galloway focused on the extent to which local systems and services currently meet the needs of women, children and young people experiencing VAWG. The VAW Partnership effectively integrated the Needs Assessment work alongside an ongoing multi-agency self-evaluation process. This strengthened governance through regular cross-agency collaboration, as well as and reducing duplication. Dumfries and Galloway undertook a robust programme of engagement and data analysis, including surveys, interviews and record reading. Established performance and data scrutiny infrastructure within the VAWG Subcommittee supported meaningful analysis and system learning. Engagement with survivors was largely coordinated through specialist services and SafeLives’ Authentic Voice project, whose expertise in lived experience engagement was viewed as particularly valuable.

Dundee

Dundee focused on understanding the local prevalence and impact of VAWG, alongside how effectively systems and services respond to women, children and young people affected by abuse. Partners adopted a mixed delivery model combining local leadership with commissioned external expertise to support both engagement and analysis. The process integrated multiple data sources, including existing datasets, governance information and primary engagement through interviews and surveys. Partners developed a clear ethical and trauma-informed engagement framework with targeted recruitment outreach to engage diverse participants, including young people. Coordination across partners and alignment with wider public protection structures strengthened the integration of the Needs Assessment within ongoing strategic processes.

East Ayrshire

East Ayrshire focused on understanding the key issues experienced by women, children and young people affected by VAWG, and the extent to which local systems and services currently meet their needs. The work built on existing local strategic planning in the VAW Partnership, and used an external research-led model to support open and honest engagement across stakeholders. A wide-ranging mixed-methods approach incorporated creative engagement, youth participation and community outreach. Good practice included working through trusted services to ensure safe participation, using strengths-based engagement questions, and ensuring accessibility for children and young people through supported engagement.

Fife

Fife focused on understanding the experiences and needs of women, children and young people affected by VAWG, and the extent to which local systems and services currently meet their needs. The work was led through a dedicated sub-group and coordinated jointly by the Fife VAW Partnership and an independent consultant. The process combined quantitative and qualitative methods, including surveys, focus groups, demographic analysis and stakeholder engagement. Strong emphasis was placed on collaborative working and shared ownership, with partners contributing actively to both engagement and interpretation of findings. Flexible, trauma-informed engagement methods allowed participants to engage in different ways, supported by clear safeguarding arrangements. The involvement of a consultant supported synthesis of complex data and facilitated structured reflection across the partnership.

North Lanarkshire

North Lanarkshire focused on understanding the local VAWG service landscape and the extent to which systems and services meet the needs of women, children and young people. Local stakeholders and external consultants demonstrated the value of combining academic research expertise with local partnership knowledge. The process incorporated multiple data sources including document review, stakeholder engagement, survivor workshops and partnership discussions. A key feature was the development of an interactive mapping and analysis tool, designed as both a product of the assessment and an ongoing resource for system understanding. A strong ethical framework and commitment to iterative learning were central to the approach.

Orkney

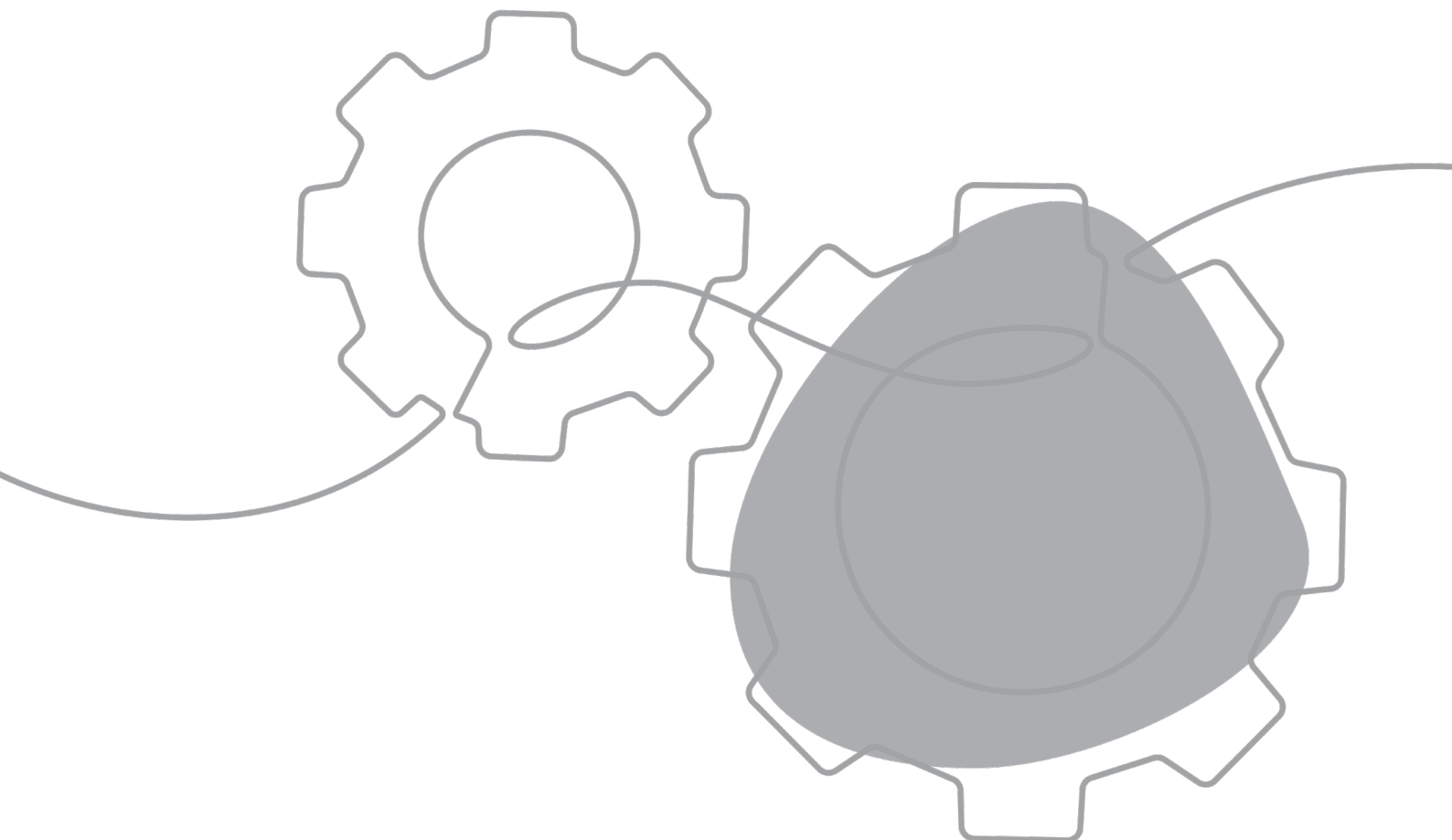
Orkney focused on the key challenges experienced by women, children and young people experiencing VAWG, the effectiveness of existing systems and services, and the extent to which local needs are currently being met. This was delivered by an external consultancy organisation in collaboration with Orkney partners, combining research expertise with strong partnership engagement. The approach included early relationship-building and creative and accessible engagement methods such as community outreach and youth engagement through trusted networks. Partners had a particular emphasis on confidentiality and safety within a small community context. The approach also demonstrated innovative use of multiple evidence sources such as using anonymised storytelling platforms to capture hidden experiences of VAWG.

Perth and Kinross

Perth and Kinross focused on understanding key issues experienced by women, children and young people affected by VAWG. The VAW Partnership appointed a locally connected project worker to lead the assessment, which benefited the process through established working relationships and knowledge of the local landscape. The process focused on coordinated data gathering from strategic leads alongside survey-based engagement with different population groups. Safety and accessibility were considered particularly in relation to young people and survivors. Young people's engagement was undertaken through the Perthshire Youth Partnership. Women engaged in specialist services were also supported by these organisations to participate in the consultation.

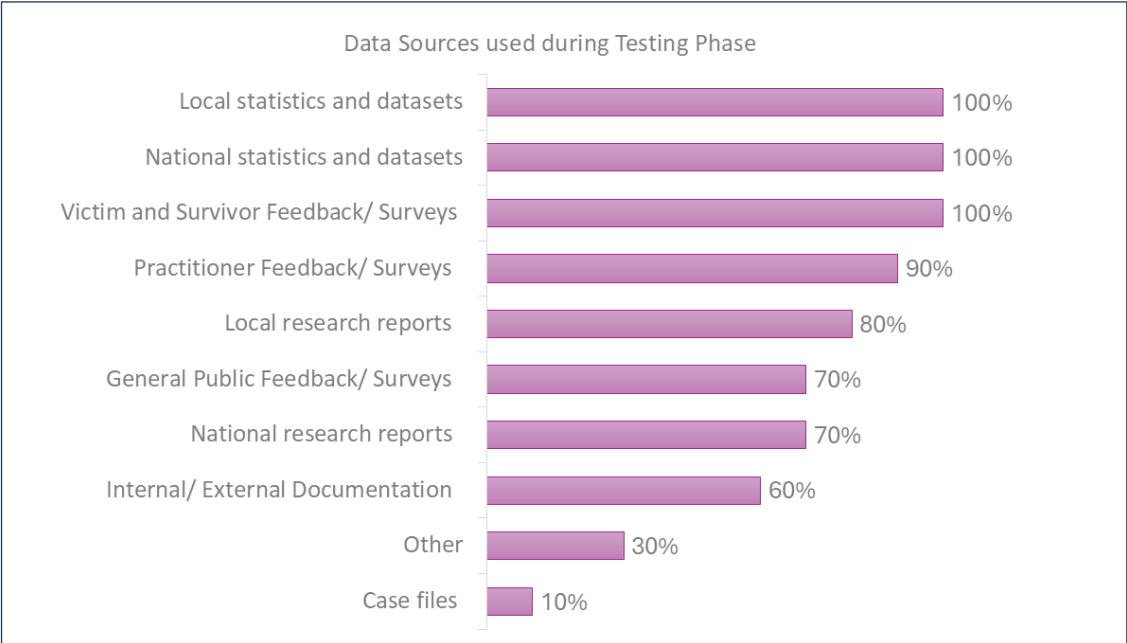
West Dunbartonshire

West Dunbartonshire focused their assessment on understanding key issues experienced by women, children and young people affected by VAWG. The VAW Partnership commissioned external consultants to design and lead engagement and analysis activity. A key feature of the approach was the intentional focus on lived experience and practitioner insight as the primary evidence base, with engagement structured across one-to-one interviews, surveys and focus groups. Engagement methods were designed to be trauma informed and were flexible in response to participation from different groups, including shifting towards facilitated sessions within existing services when open community engagement proved less effective. The approach also combined desk-based research, analysis of local and national datasets, and synthesis of qualitative and quantitative evidence, with a clear emphasis on grounding analysis in lived and learned experience.



Data and evidence gathering

A wide range of quantitative and qualitative data sources were drawn upon during the Test Phase. As shown in the graph below, all Test Areas reported using both local and national datasets, as well as feedback and/ or survey information captured from victims and survivors. The majority of Test Areas also reports drawing on key data sources such as practitioner feedback and/ or surveys (90%), local research report (80%), national research reports (70%), feedback and/ or survey findings from the wider community (70%) and other internal or external documentation (60%). A small number of Test Areas also noted case files (10%), local strategy documents (10%) and social media sites (10%) as key sources of data.



Approaches to data analysis

In the main, Test Areas adopted a multi-layered approach to collating and analysing the wide range of data gathered during the Needs Assessment Test Phase. In most cases, analysis combined quantitative data (such as local and national statistics and survey responses) with qualitative data (including interviews, focus groups, case studies and practitioner insights). Test Areas noted that this approach enabled them to build a more robust understanding of both the prevalence of issues being experienced by victims and survivors and the lived realities behind them than they would have been able to if they had relied on any single source of data.

Rather than analysing datasets in isolation, Test Areas described the need to begin by reviewing the existing statistics and datasets available locally and nationally, and then adding in new data gathered through engagement activities. Whereas the process for analysing quantitative data was generally quite straightforward, and

focused on describing trends, patterns and scale, Test Areas noted that the process for analysing qualitative data was typically more complex and time-consuming. For example, the majority of Test Areas described undertaking a thematic analysis of qualitative data whereby information from interviews, workshops and open-ended survey responses were organised under key themes and used to identify common trends. Some Test Areas also described using other methods and approaches to analysing data, such as socio-ecological frameworks to analyse needs across individual, relational, community and system levels, and systems-based approaches to visually map how victims and survivors navigate systems and services. However, it was highlighted by a number of Test Areas that despite the different processes involved, analysing quantitative data alongside qualitative data was critical in providing additional context and avoiding misleading conclusions.

As noted in the previous section, lived experience data was prioritised by all Test Areas throughout the Needs Assessment process. Importantly, qualitative insights were not treated as supplementary but as being central to developing a robust understanding of local need, particularly where statistical data was incomplete. Analysis of lived experience helped to identify barriers faced by survivors, reveal how systems operate in practice, and highlight gaps or inconsistencies in service provision. Some areas also used mapping tools or case study approaches to connect statistical trends with real-life experiences, enhancing the depth and relevance of analysis.

Test Areas described a collaborative and iterative approach to analysing data with emerging findings reviewed and refined through ongoing engagement with partners, including steering groups, workshops, and practitioner feedback loops. This allowed emerging insights to be tested against local knowledge and practical experience, improving accuracy and ensuring that conclusions were accurate and meaningful. Many Test Areas also highlighted that this collaborative approach to analysis also supported shared ownership of findings across agencies.

Key Challenges and Gaps Identified in Data Analysis

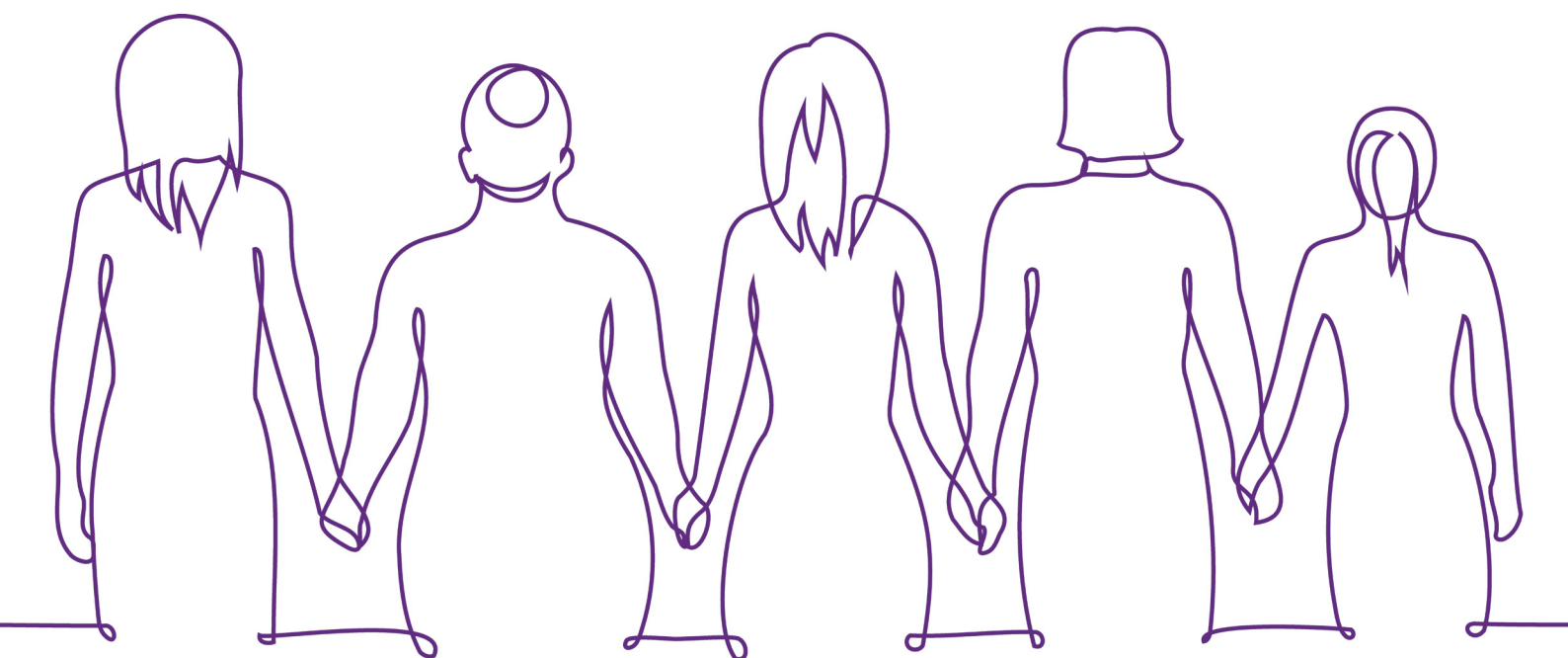
The key challenge identified by Test Areas was gaps in data that limited understanding of local need, particularly in relation to hidden or under-reported forms of VAWG. It was noted that these forms of harm are often not captured in administrative datasets and are less visible in engagement activities, meaning that the true scale of need is likely underestimated. The importance of ensuring that the absence of data is not interpreted as the absence of need was noted as a key consideration for a number of Test Areas.

Test Areas also highlighted notable gaps in equality and demographic data, with limited information on minority ethnic women, migrant women, disabled women and young women in particular. This restricted the ability to understand how needs differ across populations. In addition, it was noted that Test Areas were able to capture limited insight into the needs of those who face the greatest barriers to

engaging with services, as most data is generated through service contact leaving some of the most marginalised groups underrepresented.

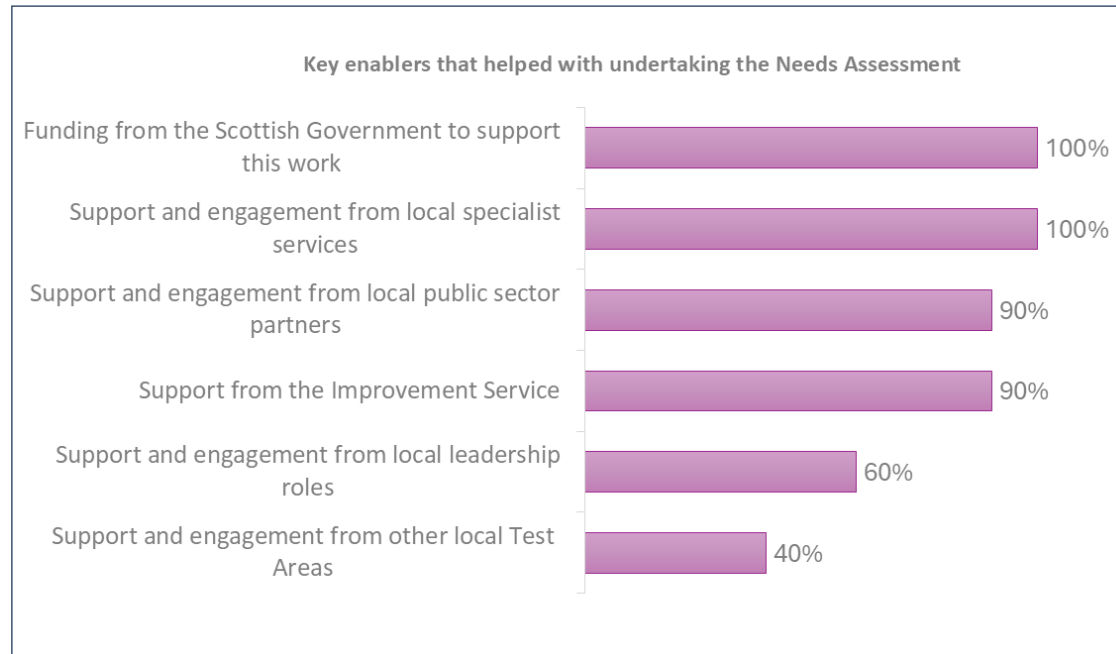
System-level challenges further complicated analysis. Test Areas reported that data was often fragmented across multiple organisations, collected using inconsistent definitions, and difficult to share or aggregate. This made it challenging to build a robust, system-wide picture of need. There was also a lack of outcome-focused data, with most information relating to service activity rather than the effectiveness of interventions or long-term outcomes.

Finally, practical limitations such as time constraints, limited analytical capacity, and barriers to engagement affected both the depth and quality of analysis. These challenges are discussed in more detail in the barriers and enablers section of the report.



Test phase enablers and challenges

Key Enablers to the Needs Assessment Process



- 100% of test areas said that key enablers were Scottish Government funding and local specialist service engagement
- 90% of test areas also said that public sector partner engagement and Improvement Service support were enablers to the process

Draft Needs Assessment Tool Questions

Test areas shared that the question framework in the Draft VAWG Needs Assessment Tool helped areas scope activity, structure evidence-gathering, and organise reporting. Several responses described using the headings to guide mixed-method approaches such as desk research, surveys, focus groups, case reviews, and workshops.

Dedicated Funding

The allocated funding helped test areas to have the time and capacity needed to take part meaningfully in the process. In many cases, it enabled partnerships to bring in additional support, such as external research or consultancy or analyst input. The funding was also used to cover extra capacity within specialist services and short-term project workers with local knowledge. Several areas also described the funding being a key enabler to providing remuneration for survivor engagement.

“The funding enabled there to be fuller engagement with victim/survivors in a meaningful way. Without the funding this would not have been possible.”

Multi-agency Collaboration

Where test areas already had public protection infrastructure and mechanisms such as steering groups/ sub-groups in the local authority, this helped coordination and decision-making throughout the process. Test areas noted using existing multi-agency forums by frequently bringing the work to steering group meetings, embedding work through existing partnership committees, and using established scrutiny/data groups to sense check findings.

Many areas described the value of specialist services’ expertise, particularly for survivor engagement, alongside statutory partners’ access to datasets and governance channels. Several test areas described these collaborations as improving shared understanding of roles/remits and identifying system pressures and gaps.

“Engagement from local partners and specialist services worked particularly well... helping to ensure the needs assessment was grounded in local context and practice realities.”

Trauma-informed Survivor Engagement

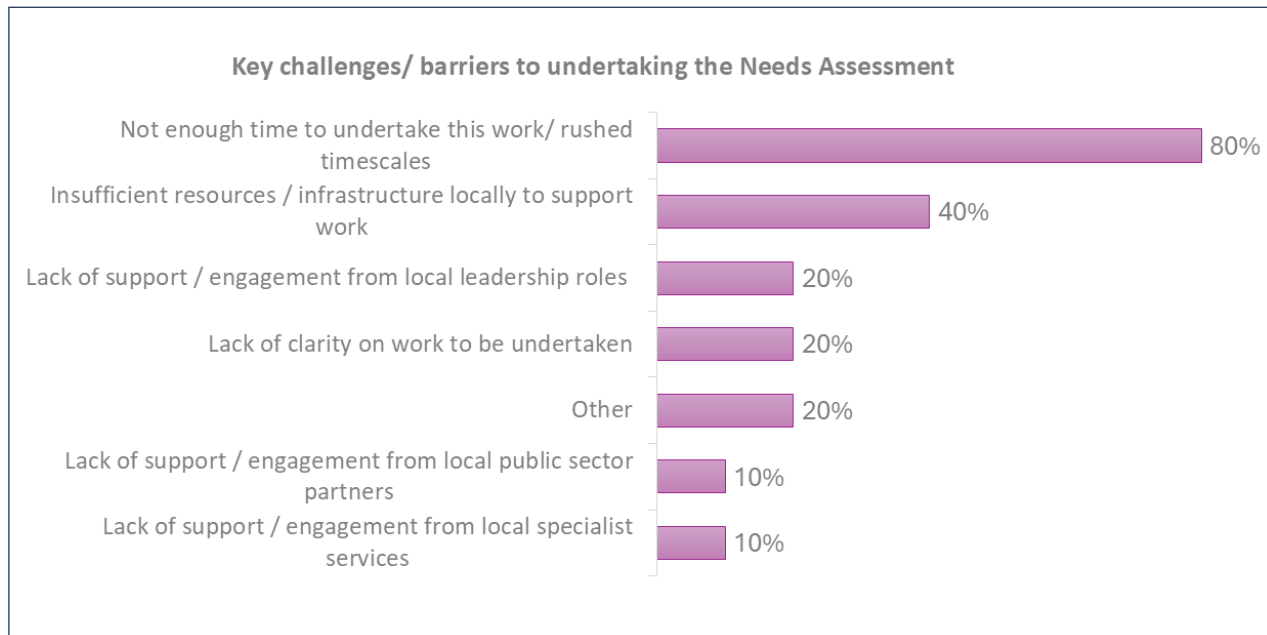
Where areas described what worked in engagement approaches, they often highlighted the importance of offering multiple ways for people to participate, including surveys, 1-1 conversations and group settings. They also emphasised the value of making support available for women through trusted specialist services. Test areas noted that it was helpful to keep questions high-level enough to reduce the risk of re-traumatisation while still gathering meaningful insight. Areas also highlighted the importance of embedding choice, consent and wellbeing into the design of engagement activity.

“Being able to undertake this exercise has been highly beneficial, as it has provided the resources and capacity needed to engage meaningfully with women with lived experience, the workforce, and the wider community.”

National Support

Support from Improvement Service during the test phase was generally described as available and helpful, with 1:1 support particularly valued for problem-solving/ clarification and access to data expertise. Learning workshops were rated positively, and the test areas valued the opportunity for peer support where this was possible.

Common challenges and barriers



- 80% of test areas said that Not enough time / rushed timescales was the key challenge they encountered.
- 40% of test areas said that Insufficient resources/ infrastructure (including staffing) at a local level to support work was a key challenge.

Timescale Constraints

A consistent theme across test areas was that limited time and short delivery timescales significantly constrained the depth and quality of the needs assessment test phase. Several areas highlighted that the timing of the test phase, including overlap with the Christmas and New Year period, reduced capacity for engagement and slowed progress. Test areas reflected that undertaking a robust needs assessment requires substantial time for planning, engagement, analysis, and reflection. Compressed timelines particularly impacted the ability to reach under-represented groups, validate findings, and foster meaningful partnership working.

“Time was the most significant barrier. An exercise of this scale involves a number of lengthy processes, particularly when external resources need to be commissioned.”

Capacity Limitations

Test areas also highlighted limited staffing capacity and competing priorities across local partnerships as a major barrier. Many of the organisations involved already manage significant workloads, particularly within public protection and third sector services, which affected their ability to fully engage in workshops, data collection, and analysis activities. In some cases, attendance at engagement sessions was inconsistent or delegated due to pressure on senior staff. Test areas also highlighted that VAWG coordination/ lead officer roles often have less dedicated resource compared to other public protection areas, which limits the capacity of VAW Partnerships.

“Limited resources affected capacity, pace and the depth of engagement that could be achieved.”

Data Access and Sharing

Difficulties relating to data availability, quality, and sharing were a key barrier across the test phase. Test areas described challenges in accessing data across different agencies, inconsistencies in how data is recorded, and limitations in linking datasets. Legal and governance barriers, particularly around data protection, also restricted some analysis. These issues made it more difficult to develop a consistent understanding of need across the system.

“National VAWG data landscape – there is a real lack of disaggregated data- the sector needs better data.”

Measuring ‘Hidden’ Harm

Test areas noted that most data sources tend to reflect service engagement rather than unmet need, meaning that hidden or under-reported experiences of VAWG remain difficult to capture. This was particularly evident in relation to minoritised communities, young people, and women not connected to specialist services. Time constraints and capacity issues further compounded these challenges, limiting the ability to design and deliver targeted engagement approaches.

“It is challenging to identify unmet need when it is invisible.”

Partnership and Leadership Engagement

While collaboration was widely identified as a strength overall, some areas highlighted variation in levels of engagement across partners, particularly at senior leadership level. In several cases, limited participation from senior leaders or key partners affected decision-making, ownership, and the ability to drive the work forward strategically. This reinforced the importance of strong governance structures and clear leadership commitment in supporting the needs assessment process.

Geographical Differences

Experiences of undertaking the needs assessment test varied depending on geography. Where highlighted, it was clear that local context shaped both the nature of the challenges and how the work was delivered. Learning from workshops and shadow group discussions reinforced that these differences have practical implications for what is feasible, how engagement is designed, and the level of resource required. In island and small-community areas, test areas highlighted concerns around confidentiality and anonymity, with individuals often reluctant to participate in engagement activities due to fear of being identified. Limited local datasets and data suppression also restricted quantitative analysis. In rural areas, distance and travel time were a key constraint on delivery. Long travel times and dispersed populations made it more difficult to organise in-person engagement, creating additional logistical and coordination challenges.

Shadow group workshops also raised concerns about the scale and complexity of undertaking a needs assessment in larger and more urban areas, including the volume of data, the number of services involved, and the diversity of populations.

Variation in partnership infrastructure

Differences in local infrastructure also influenced the experience of the needs assessment process. Areas with established governance, data systems, and dedicated roles were generally able to progress more efficiently. In contrast, areas with less developed infrastructure faced additional challenges, needing to build coordination and analytical capacity to support the process. Shadow group discussions highlighted that the absence of dedicated leads in some areas could further affect ownership and momentum in future use of the Needs Assessment Tool.

“All members of the Partnership are already operating under significant pressure, additional resources are needed to ensure there is sufficient capacity to take on this exercise in the future.”

Recommendations for the VAWG Needs Assessment Tool

Feedback from the test phase survey, learning workshops and shadow group meetings demonstrates that while the VAWG Needs Assessment Tool provides a strong framework to begin progress on this work, it requires further development to become a fully operational, practice-ready resource. The following key recommendations have emerged from the test phase:

Clear Structure of the Tool

There are areas of overlap in the current draft needs assessment questions, particularly where themes cut across multiple sections. The tool will be updated to reflect a clearer structure, and more detailed prompts within each section demonstrating the purpose of each question and the type of information required.

Resource Pack

Test areas reflected that the current draft tool should be developed beyond high-level questions towards a more structured, supported approach that includes templates, guidance, and worked examples. The next phase of the Tool will be complemented by a Resource Pack containing practical resources such as engagement templates, systems mapping tools, data collection and analysis templates, worked examples from test areas, and example reporting formats. The Resource Pack will also reflect feedback across the test phase that more guidance is required around areas of the process such as systems mapping, lived experience engagement and data analysis.

Digital Tools

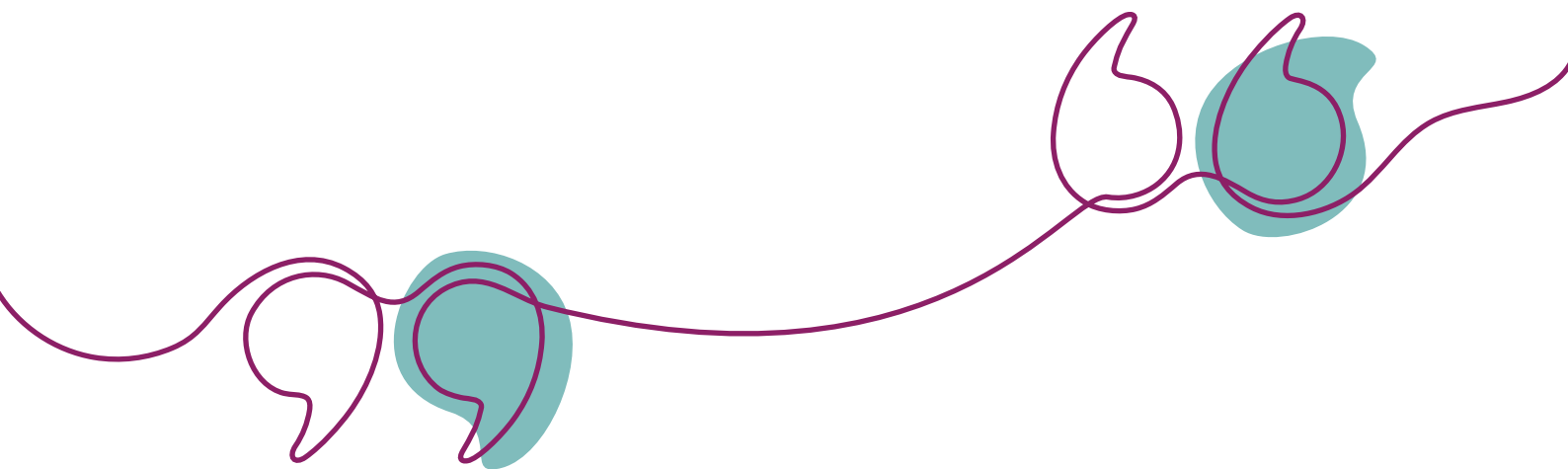
Stakeholders in the test areas and shadow group were supportive of the integration of digital tools (such as data dashboards) to support the needs assessment process in managing multiple data sources, supporting analysis, and improving accessibility of findings. Digital tools such as a data dashboard and collated datasets will be available in the next phase of the needs assessment testing process.

Clarity on Purpose and Findings

Some reflections highlighted that the Tool required enhanced clarity on purpose, outputs and use of findings for local areas. The Tool and Resource Pack will have clearer guidance on its purpose, expected outputs, and how findings can be used in practice. This will include case studies demonstrating how findings have informed planning and decisions locally to further support understanding and application.

Flexible Timescales

Learning from the Test Phase highlights the importance of adopting flexible and realistic timescales. Future use of the Tool should be adaptable to local contexts, recognising that partnerships vary significantly in terms of capacity, infrastructure, data availability, and access to specialist support. Timescales should be proportionate to the scope of activity being undertaken and informed by local learning about what is feasible and appropriate. Allowing for flexibility will support partnerships to plan, sequence and deliver the work in a way that reflects local priorities and constraints.



Use of local findings from the Test Phase

Early outputs are already being used in various ways by the test areas such as:

- Informing local strategic planning, including VAWG strategies, public protection arrangements and integrated partnership plans.
- Shaping future commissioning, funding priorities and workforce development activity.
- Sharing the learning across key governance structures, including partnership boards, Chief Officer Groups and elected members.

Test area feedback suggests that the needs assessment process is adding value not only by identifying service gaps, but by enabling partnerships to better understand how systems operate in practice, where pressures exist, and how responses might be improved to better meet the needs of women, children and young people affected by VAWG.

Next Steps

Building on the learning from the test phase, the Improvement Service will take forward a programme of work to further strengthen both the VAWG Needs Assessment Tool and the support available to VAW partnerships. In preparation for the next phase, a resource pack for the needs assessment process will be developed. This will include practical tools, templates, and worked examples to support partnerships in areas such as engagement, data collection and analysis, systems mapping, and reporting. The aim of this resource pack is to ensure that the VAWG Needs Assessment is accessible and practical to implement across different local contexts.

In 2026-27, a further Test phase will begin with a new cohort of local authority areas. This will provide an opportunity to build on the initial Test phase by:

- Exploring how the tool can be applied across a broader range of geographies and partnership structures;
- Addressing identified gaps and challenges, particularly in relation to capacity, resourcing, and infrastructure; and
- Strengthening approaches to identifying and understanding hidden or under-reported forms of harm.

This next phase will continue to take an iterative approach, using ongoing feedback from local areas to refine the Needs Assessment and supporting resources.

The Improvement Service will also continue to provide learning and peer support opportunities for areas currently testing the Needs Assessment Tool and resources, as well as wider networking opportunities for the previous test areas and stakeholders interested in future use of the tool.

There will also be an opportunity for Partnerships to share emerging findings from the testing of the Needs Assessment Tool to date, as a new Equally Safe delivery plan is developed.

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