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Guidance and Resources Toolkit

VAWG Needs Assessment Toolkit Engagement Guide

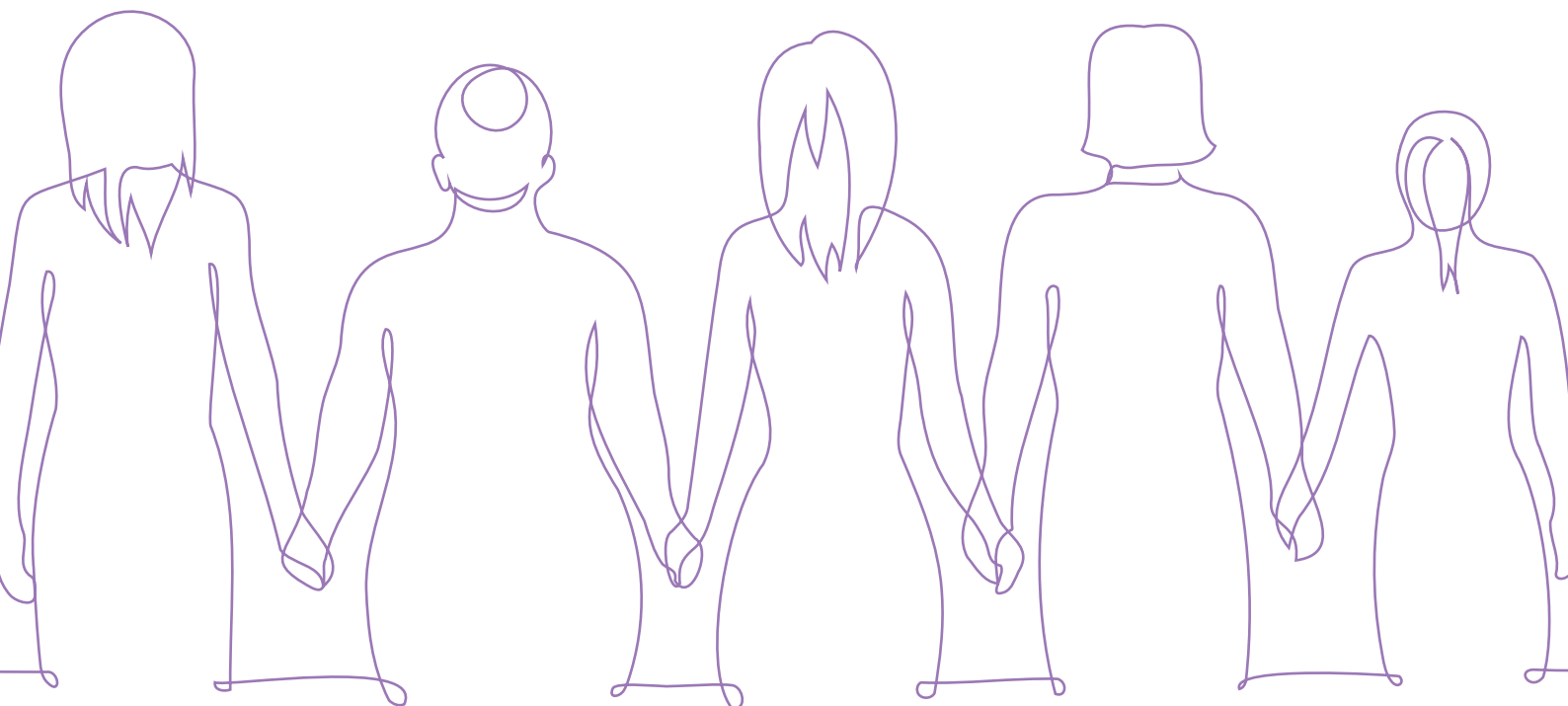
Practical guidance, templates and resources
to help partnerships engage with survivors,
communities and partners



Acknowledgement

This toolkit has been developed in partnership with the initial testing areas: Angus, Clackmannanshire, Dumfries and Galloway, Dundee, East Ayrshire, Fife, North Lanarkshire, Orkney, Perth and Kinross and West Dunbartonshire and integrates resources created by a range of consultants and third sector and public sector partner organisations.

We want to thank all those who supported the test phase and shared resources, expertise and insight in the creation of this toolkit.



Contents

1. Choosing how to engage	4
2. Engaging different groups well	7
3. Supporting survivor safety and wellbeing	10
Resources alongside this guide	13



1. Choosing how to engage

Different engagement methods suit different purposes, audiences and questions. Most needs assessments use a combination, bringing the findings together so that each method compensates for the limits of the others. No single approach reaches everyone or answers everything, so the right blend depends on local capacity, the questions you are trying to answer and, above all, who you need to hear from.

Whichever methods you choose, engagement should always be voluntary, respectful, trauma-informed and focused on learning and improvement rather than scrutiny of individual choices.

1. Surveys

Wider anonymised insight

A structured, consistent set of questions shared with a large number of people, online or on paper.

Capture themes and patterns across groups, and offer a flexible, anonymous way to take part.

Good for: broad community reach and comparing across groups

2. Interviews

Depth and individual journeys

One-to-one conversations that follow a person's experience in their own words and at their own pace.

Good for: rich, detailed insight and sensitive topics

3. Focus groups

Shared and contrasting views

Small facilitated group discussions that surface common experiences and differences between people.

Good for: exploring themes and testing emerging findings

4. Stakeholder events

Whole system insight

Larger sessions, often using a carousel format, that gather insight from practitioners across services in one place.

Good for: mapping how the system works and where it falls short

Survey findings, in particular, should be considered alongside other sources of evidence, including service data, case studies, stakeholder engagement and workshop discussions. Together these different forms of evidence build a more complete understanding of local need, service effectiveness and opportunities for improvement.

Mapping methods to the needs assessment questions

Different methods answer different questions. The grid below shows, in broad terms, how well each engagement type tends to answer the needs assessment questions that engagement is best suited to, questions 2 to 5. Question 1 (who are we?) is answered mainly through national and local data rather than engagement, so it is not included here.

Needs assessment question	Surveys	Interviews	Focus groups	Stakeholder events
Q2 · Key issues and challenges experienced	●●○	●●●	●●●	●●○
Q3 · Systems and services in place	●●○	●○○	●●○	●●●
Q4 · How well current needs are met	●●○	●●●	●●●	●●●
Q5 · Collective resources across partners	●●○	●○○	●●○	●●●

●●● Strong, ●●○ Moderate, ●○○ Limited

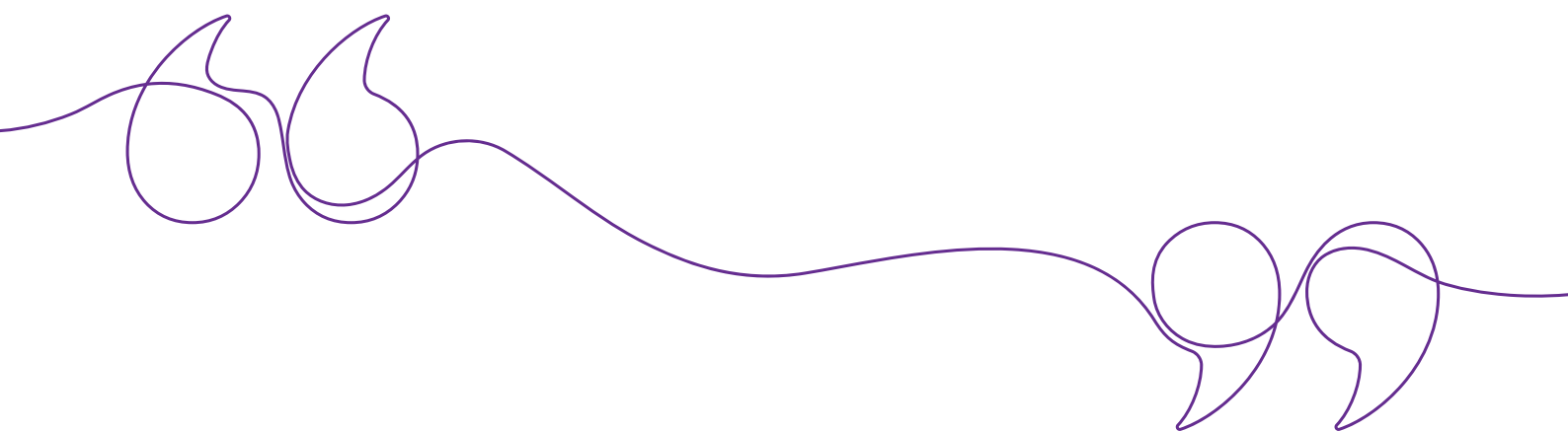
Designing effective surveys

Surveys are widely used because they reach a wider range of people than interviews, workshops or case studies alone, including those who may not feel comfortable attending in person. A few design principles help maximise both the quality of responses and the experience of taking part.

- Keep surveys focused and manageable. Completion rates and data quality drop when surveys take longer than around 15 minutes, particularly on sensitive topics. Shorter surveys of roughly 8–10 questions work well for broad community reach, while more detailed surveys of 18–22 questions suit those with lived experience or professional knowledge
- Use skip logic to keep things relevant. Showing people only the questions that apply to them keeps the survey shorter and more respectful without losing depth overall

- Balance question types. A mix of closed questions (quick to answer and easy to analyse) and open-text questions (which capture nuance numbers cannot) works best
- Order questions thoughtfully. Begin with broader, less sensitive questions and move gradually towards more personal ones. Open-text and demographic questions sit best towards the end

TIP **Survey Question Bank** contains questions drawn from previous VAWG needs assessments. Rather than starting from scratch, select and combine questions into a short or long-form survey, and review every question for local context, audience and method of delivery before use.



2. Engaging different groups well

Many experiences of VAWG are hidden. Some of the people most affected are the least likely to appear in routine engagement, either because their experience is concealed and controlled, because services do not reach them, or because engagement has not been designed with them in mind. If engagement only reaches those already visible to services, the needs assessment is likely to reproduce the system's existing blind spots.

Reaching marginalised communities and surfacing hidden forms of harm takes deliberate planning. In most cases it means working with and through specialist and 'by and for' organisations, those led by and for the communities they serve, which already hold relationships and trust. These organisations should be resourced and credited for that work. It is important to build relationships with organisations early in the process.

Plan for accessibility

Accessibility shapes who can take part at all. The following accessibility needs might be helpful to consider for designing engagement processes:

- Physical and sensory access: step-free venues, hearing loops, BSL interpretation, and quiet spaces; check venues in advance rather than assuming
- Language and communication: use professional interpreters rather than family, friends or community members, who may be connected to the perpetrator or community; offer easy-read and translated materials
- Digital exclusion: do not rely on online surveys alone; offer paper, telephone and in-person options so that people without devices, data or privacy at home are not excluded
- Neurodiversity and learning disability: use plain language, allow processing time, and offer flexible formats and pacing
- Practical barriers: consider timing, location, travel, childcare and reimbursing expenses, all of which determine who can realistically attend

Cultural considerations and racially minoritised communities

Women and girls from racially minoritised and migrant communities can face additional barriers to taking part, including distrust of statutory services, fear of involving children's services, insecure immigration status or no recourse to public funds, language barriers, isolation, and pressure within close-knit communities. Confidentiality is especially critical where communities are small and people are easily identified.

- Work with by-and-for organisations led by minoritised women, and do not expect any one organisation to speak for all communities. Be prepared to be flexible about the methods of engagement to suit community needs
- Build in time to establish trust; one-off invitations rarely reach people who have reason to be cautious of services
- Apply an intersectional lens e.g. race, disability, age, faith, sexuality and immigration status combine to shape both experiences of harm and barriers to support

Including LGBT+ people

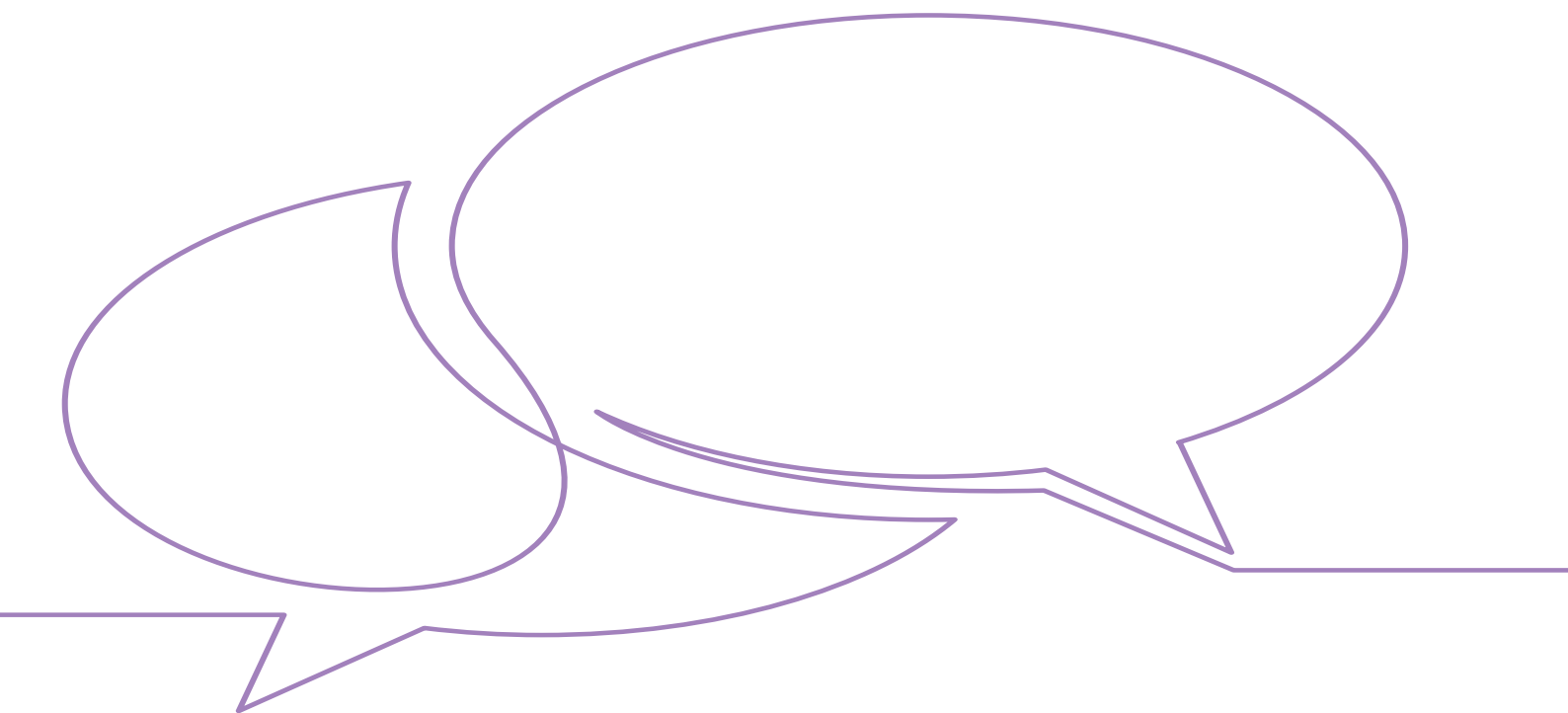
VAWG affects LGBT+ people, yet engagement and services often assume survivors are heterosexual and cisgender. Barriers to taking part can include fear of discrimination, fear of being 'outed', and the use of identity itself as a tool of abuse, such as threats to disclose someone's sexuality or gender identity.

- Partner with LGBT+ organisations and use inclusive language and monitoring throughout
- Offer safe, self-described ways for people to share their gender and sexuality, without requiring them to do so
- Recognise that some people will not have disclosed their identity elsewhere; protecting confidentiality is part of protecting safety

Surfacing hidden forms of VAWG

Some forms of VAWG rarely reach mainstream services or appear in routine data. These include commercial sexual exploitation and the experiences of those selling or exchanging sex, trafficking, so-called 'honour-based' abuse, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, image-based abuse and other online harms, and abuse experienced by older women and disabled women. People affected may not recognise or describe their experience as VAWG, and may never have used a VAWG service.

- Reach people through trusted intermediaries and specialist services rather than open calls for participation
- Take particular care with safety and confidentiality: for someone who is being controlled or exploited, the act of taking part can itself carry risk
- Never require people to label their experience or identify as a 'victim' or 'survivor' in order to be heard
- Offer flexible forms of engagement for women to protect their safety, e.g. phone or written formats, and 1-1 interviews rather than focus groups



3. Supporting survivor safety and wellbeing

When engaging with survivors as part of the VAWG Needs Assessment process, partnerships have a responsibility to plan for their safety, confidentiality and emotional wellbeing, and that of their dependents and family. Planning should be done with survivors, not for them, and reviewed and updated as arrangements change.

It helps to work at two levels: a general safety assessment for the activity as a whole, and an individual safety assessment completed with each survivor taking part. Each survivor's needs are different, and a plan may need to capture factors not anticipated in advance.

Local authorities might choose to partner with specialist organisations for survivor engagement work (e.g., local VAWG services, survivor-led groups, and lived experience networks). These partners will have their own expertise around safety and wellbeing support for survivors which can also help to guide the process.

Planning the activity (e.g. workshop/ interview)

- Check the date does not clash with other events, awareness weeks or key meetings, and is not immediately before a weekend or holiday when support may be hard to access
- Walk through the venue in advance for accessibility and for survivor-specific risks, such as the risk of encountering a perpetrator or of particular buildings being distressing
- Provide a quiet space where people can take time out

Support for the survivor

Consider the following questions when planning support for survivors for any in-person engagement activities, and work with partners to make these arrangements:

?

Who is providing dedicated support, and do they and the survivor have each other's contact details?

?

Who is meeting the survivor, and where?
Where can they go for time out if they need it?

?

What specific support will the survivor need before, during and after the event?

Briefings, debriefs and feedback

- Hold a pre-brief (usually immediately before the activity) and a debrief (usually immediately after). You can use the [Authentic Voice Pre-brief and Debrief Resource](#) for example questions.
- Consider a longer-term debrief, giving space to reflect on the event once some time has passed
- Plan how you will feed back the impact of the survivor's contribution and be honest about how much it can realistically influence outcomes, so that you do not overpromise
- Agree on the timeline of any feedback processes with survivors who have contributed to research, such as when you will share any draft or published learning with them

Confidentiality

- Agree whether the survivor will use a pseudonym or take part anonymously, for example through pre-recorded words, audio or video
- Decide what will appear on any materials, and whether a confidentiality statement is needed for workshop attendees
- Agree who is responsible for intervening if confidentiality is breached, and what steps will follow

Remuneration for Survivor Engagement

Payment for essential expenses in engagement processes:

- Trauma-informed principles highlight that survivors are bringing their expertise to engagement and organisations seeking this engagement should value this
- It can be helpful to set an hourly rate or pay scale for engagement work that reflects the time given at the beginning of project planning. Local authorities might also work in collaboration with specialist partners who can act as a trusted intermediary, reducing barriers for participants and helping meet safeguarding, finance, and data protection requirements
- Pay travel, accommodation and subsistence in advance or immediately afterwards. Make the process for claiming clear from the start
- Inform participants about any potential benefit or tax implications, and provide an alternative if payment is not suitable

A trauma-informed approach to payment processes should include:

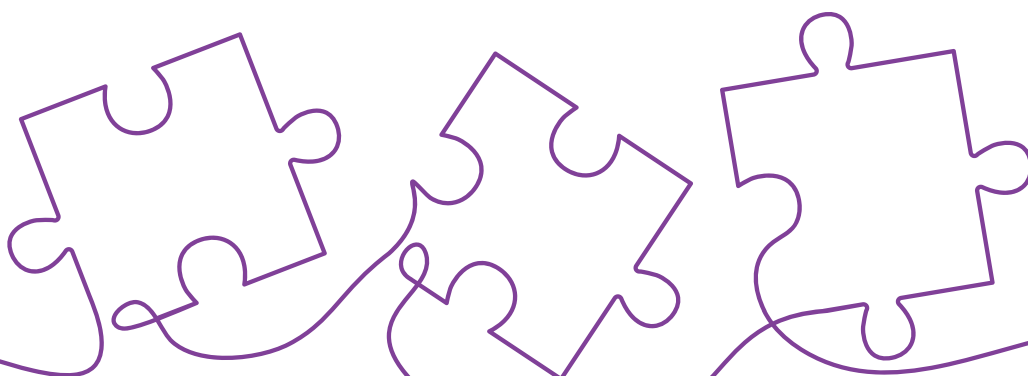
- Offer choice: bank transfer, voucher, or other agreed method; never require a single route
- Establish trust and pay for the real time: include preparation, participation, and follow-up (and reimburse essential expenses separately)
- Ensure safety and minimise personal data: only collect what is necessary to pay people; avoid sharing survivor details across multiple systems
- Collaborate with survivors and agree prompt payment: agree payment timescales up front and provide a named contact for queries
- Empower and support survivors to choose a process that works for them and explain implications: provide clear information on potential impacts (tax/ benefits/ employment) and offer alternatives if payment is not suitable

Photography and media

- Where there is photography or media as part of engagement activities, be clear where images will be used, how you will identify people who do not wish to be photographed, and how that will be communicated to other attendees
- Make sure support for any media work is arranged in advance, with a chance for the survivor to see questions beforehand

Risk, back-up and legal considerations

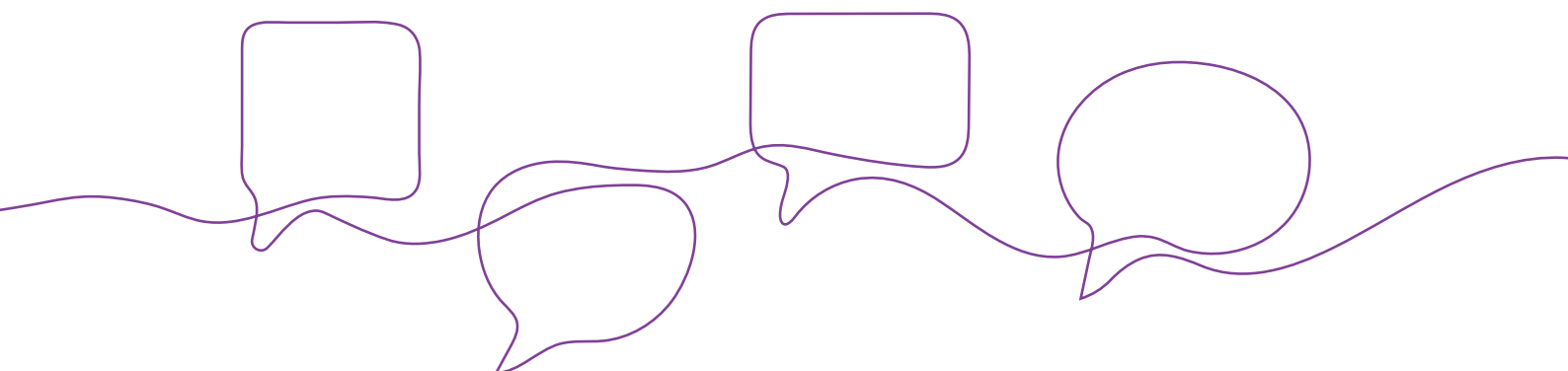
- Consider the physical and emotional safety of the survivor and their family, including any impact on ongoing court proceedings
- Be aware of the potential for the survivor, or your organisation, to face defamation or privacy claims, and take advice where needed
- Agree a back-up plan in case the survivor is unable to take part on the day



Resources alongside this guide

The following templates and resources accompany this guide. Each can be adapted to local circumstances before use, and all are prefixed “VAWG Needs Assessment” in the toolkit.

Resource	What's it for
Question Bank	A bank of survey questions from previous VAWG needs assessments, organised by theme, used to build short or long-form surveys.
Example Surveys	Example surveys for community, lived-experience and professional audiences, showing how questions fit together.
Stakeholder Event Resource	A reusable carousel-style event agenda and participant feedback sheet for gathering practitioner insight across services.
Case Study Development Pack	A trauma-informed pack for developing anonymised case studies, with facilitator guidance, participant information, data-collection tools and worked examples.
Participant Information Sheet	A plain-language sheet explaining what taking part involves, how information is used, and the choices and safeguards available.
Interview Consent Form	A consent form covering recording, anonymity, use of contributions and the right to withdraw.
Privacy Notice	A template setting out how participants' personal data is handled under UK GDPR, including their rights and who to contact.



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