

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

Report for the Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee

March 2023

Context

1. In November 2022, full Council passed motion 908 condemning all violence against women and girls (VAWG) and committing the Council to taking a series of actions to help prevent VAWG in Gloucestershire.
2. The motion included a request that the Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee investigate and produce a report for Cabinet on the steps the County Council could be taking to end VAWG in the county; and how it can engage with relevant local agencies in relation to training and support for victims and survivors of violence and abuse.
3. This paper provides an overview of VAWG in the county and the current work underway to address the issue to inform the work of the scrutiny committee. The paper has been prepared jointly by the County Council strategic leads for domestic abuse and the strategic leads for VAWG at the Office of Police and Crime Commissioner and Gloucestershire Constabulary. Officers will attend the March meeting of the committee to present the paper and provide an opportunity for questions.

Background: what is VAWG and what is the scale of the issue in Gloucestershire?

4. The Government published the national 'Tackling Violence against Women and Girls Strategy' in 2021. The strategy defines VAWG as 'acts of violence or abuse that we know disproportionately affect women and girls' including, but not limited to the following crimes and behaviour 'rape and other sexual offences, domestic abuse, stalking, 'honour'-based abuse (including female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and 'honour' killings)', as well as offences committed online.
5. According to the most recent statistics ¹ cited in the Government strategy: nationally, 1 in 5 women are victims of sexual assault (or attempted assault) in their lifetime (5% of victims are men); over 27% of women have experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16 (14% of men); and 20% of women aged 16-74 have experienced stalking since the age of 16 (10% of men).
6. Local Data for the period 2021/2022 tells us that:
 - 12,797 crimes recorded by Gloucestershire police were tagged as VAWG (a 44% increase from 20/21)
 - Domestic Abuse accounts for 44% of all VAWG crimes recorded by Gloucestershire police. There were 7670 domestic abuse crimes recorded by Gloucestershire Police in 21/22 (a 42% increase from 20/21: reflecting a continued upward trend).
 - 1516 stalking crimes were recorded in 21/22 (compared with 591 recorded in 20/21). While the vast majority of stalking crimes are linked to domestic abuse; 2% of recorded stalking crimes that are classified as VAWG relate to non-Domestic Abuse stalking.
 - 1912 sexual offences were recorded in 21/22 (a 39% increase from 20/21)

¹ [Tackling violence against women and girls \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

7. It should be noted that while increases in crime may reflect a higher incidence, it may also be the result of improved crime recording measures and improved awareness. Increases in reported crime can be viewed positively as we know these crime types are often underreported.

How is the local response to VAWG co-ordinated

8. The local response to VAWG is shared between several lead organisations, including, but not limited to the County Council, Gloucestershire Constabulary and the Office of Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC). There are a number of multi-agency partnership groups who provide strategic oversight and co-ordination:

- The Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board (chaired by the Director of Public Health)
- The Sexual Violence Partnership Board (chaired by the Office of Police and Crime Commissioner); and
- Safer Gloucestershire (chaired by the Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner) (which works with the district led Community Safety Partnerships).

9. Operational leadership is provided by several jointly funded roles, including a County Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (DASV) Strategic Coordinator. The coordinator also oversees the county Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) process and is involved in the wider constabulary response to VAWG.

Overview of current interventions and workstreams

Our local response to addressing domestic abuse

10. The County Council plays a lead role in co-ordinating the delivery of the countywide strategy for the prevention of domestic abuse in line with its statutory duties under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. While both men and women can be victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse, local statistics show that in line with the national picture, most victims of DA are female (78% in the most recent local domestic abuse needs assessment).

11. The countywide DA strategy focuses on five priority areas:

- Prevention and early intervention
- Multi-agency working and pathway development to ensure a joined-up approach to supporting victims and helping them access services
- Workforce development with a focus on upskilling professionals to enable people to spot signs of domestic abuse and signpost/refer people to support
- Providing high-quality domestic abuse services for victims and their families; and
- Breaking the cycle of perpetrator behaviour.

The delivery of the strategy is overseen by the multi-agency Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board and work is underway across all five priority areas, including the development of a new training pathway and the roll out of a training programme for front-line staff which focuses on domestic abuse awareness raising and assessing risk.

12. Alongside delivery of the strategy, the council also commissions several core services, including:

- The *Gloucestershire Domestic Abuse Support Service (GDASS)* which provides a comprehensive range of support to victims, including a helpdesk, group support, and 1:1 support from specialist Independent Domestic Violence Advisers (IDVAs)
- *The STREET service* (Safe Teenage Relationships Education and Empowerment Team) who provided support to young people aged 13-19 years affected by DA; and
- *Positive Relationships Gloucestershire (PRG)* a countywide service aimed at addressing the behaviours of perpetrators of domestic abuse through structured support programmes.

13. The Council also provides funding (via the DLUHC Domestic Abuse grant) to the women's refuge in Stroud, and to cover the support costs of victims of domestic abuse residing in safe accommodation.

14. Other partners within the county commission complementary services to support victims of domestic abuse, including target hardening and sanctuary schemes to enable victims to remain safely in their own homes if they choose to do so, Independent Domestic Violence Advisers based in healthcare settings, and safe accommodation ('Places of Safety') commissioned by the district councils. You can read more about the range of work underway to prevent domestic abuse in the domestic abuse strategy available online: [gcc-domestic-abuse-strategy.pdf \(gloucestershire.gov.uk\)](https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/gcc-domestic-abuse-strategy.pdf)

The police's approach to addressing VAWG

15. An overview of Gloucestershire Constabulary's approach to Violence and Intimidation Against Women and Girls is [available online](#). The approach focuses on three core pillars:

- Pillar 1: Build trust and confidence
- Pillar 2: Relentless perpetrator pursuit
- Pillar 3: Safer Spaces

16. As part of this work, the constabulary is developing a Crime Prevention Command to take the lead on Pillar 3 and adopt a public health approach to the prevention of VAWG in public spaces. The constabulary work to address VAWG also includes an internal strand to focus on challenging internal misogyny and holding police offenders to account.

17. The constabulary are looking at their approach to rape and serious sexual assault and is one of 14 pilot forces involved in the Operation Soteria Bluestone which aims to improve the criminal justice process for rape to better support victims and focus on tackling perpetrators and repeat offenders. The operation also includes a specialised learning and development programme for officers.

18. As noted previously, there has been an increase in stalking crimes reported to Gloucestershire police, and the constabulary have set up a Stalking Clinic to coordinate the response to high-risk stalking reported to police. The clinic provides a range of services, including advice and guidance to investigating officers; and risk assessment using the Stalking Risk Profile. The Clinic can also facilitate

referrals to the Independent Stalking Advocacy Caseworker (ISAC) and partner agencies to ensure victim support and safeguarding.

The work of the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC)

19. Tackling Violence against women and girls is also a key priority within the county's Police and Crime Prevention Plan overseen by the OPCC. The plan is based on a number of commitments including:

- Improving understanding through listening to victims and survivors to help improve policies and practices.
- Improving local services through evaluating policies, practices, and performance to ensure continuous improvement and public confidence.
- Focusing on the perpetrator through working in partnership to address the unhealthy and threatening behaviours and cultures through early intervention and ongoing education; and
- Supporting and resourcing support services for victims and survivors.

20. In 21/22 the OPCC was successful in bidding for £1.06m from the Home Office Safer Streets Fund. This funding was spent specifically on activity to address violence and intimidation against women and girls, including mobile CCTV, lighting in Gloucester Park, Bystander intervention training and a Consent video for primary age children.

21. This financial year, the OPCC has again been successful in three further Safer Streets bids, totalling just over £2 million. One of these bids was specifically focused on tackling VAWG and has funded target hardening activities for Community Safety Partnerships for specific locations where there are issues. In addition, the funding has been invested in the provision of educational theatre throughout the county on the topic of sexual harassment, two drug testing machines for the night-time economy to tackle spiking, and videos for the public around the work of the Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC).

Our local response to addressing sexual violence (SV)

22. The OPCC also take the lead role in co-ordinating the Gloucestershire Sexual Violence Partnership which is currently finalising its new countywide sexual Violence Strategy (2023-2026). The priority areas identified within this strategy include:

- Priority 1: Creating long term cultural change and preventing the harm of sexual violence
- Priority 2: High quality service provision that is survivor led
- Priority 3: Building confidence in the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and holding perpetrators to account
- Priority 4: Collaborative approaches to improve access and awareness of pathways to support
- Priority 5: Sustaining a strong and resilient workforce

Work is now underway to develop the delivery plan to fulfil this multi-agency strategy.

23. Alongside the development of the sexual violence strategy, the OPCC also commission the:

- Independent Sexual Violence Advisors service provided by Gloucestershire Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre which provides free and confidential support and advice to anyone who has been raped or sexually assaulted at any time in their lives; and
- the county's Sexual Assault Referral Centre (the SARC) based at Gloucestershire Royal Hospital (commissioned jointly with the NHS). The SARC offers immediate emotional and practical support, as well as medical care to anyone who has been raped or sexually assaulted.

Support for young people

24. There is a recognition across all partners involved in addressing VAWG about the importance of providing support to young people not only as potential victims of VAWG, but also in terms of preventative activity to raise awareness of and address unhealthy relationship behaviours at an early age.

25. The County Council commission STREET - a specialist service for young people aged 13 – 19 who are either witnessing Domestic Abuse at home, experiencing unhealthy teenage relationships, or demonstrating harmful behaviours in their own relationships. The Gloucestershire Domestic Abuse Support Service (GDASS) also have a specialist Young Persons Independent Violence Advisor who provides support to young victims of domestic abuse (aged 16 plus) assessed at high risk.

26. Both STREET and GDASS engage with education providers and specialist providers of support to young people to offer awareness raising activities focussing on healthy relationships, how to identify unhealthy behaviours and how to get support. Work is also underway to gain a fuller understanding of the training needs within schools in this subject area to inform the redevelopment of the domestic abuse training pathway.

27. Domestic abuse support for children under the age of 13 is primarily provided by the Children and Family Centres in the county; and includes a range of programmes, such as 'You, Me and Mum', 'Helping Hands' and the trauma informed domestic abuse recovery toolkit.

Listening to the voice of victims

28. The Council and its partners are also committed to ensuring that we hear and learn from the voices of victims/survivors of VAWG; and a Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Consultation Officer post has been jointly funded between the OPCC and GCC. The role will enable us to gather the views and feedback of victims/survivors, their children, and the wider community with respect to experience of domestic abuse and sexual violence across the County. This engagement activity will feed into the development of local strategies and action plans and inform the work of the Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board, and Sexual Violence Partnership.

Role of the County Council in addressing VAWG- additional recommendations & suggested next steps

29. This paper is intended to provide assurance to committee members regarding the approach of local partners, including the County Council to addressing violence against women and girls. The November Council Motion also asks the committee to consider any further actions that the Council could take, and we would ask members to note the following opportunities:

- *Supporting the Council's commitment to White Ribbon*

The November Council Motion committed the council to seeking White Ribbon accreditation; a nationally recognised accreditation demonstrating an organisation's commitment to ending male violence against women. Officers are currently setting up a steering group to oversee the process and develop our corporate action plan.

Staff and members will have an opportunity to sign up to become White Ribbon Ambassadors (men) or Champions (women), and further updates will be provided to members as the programme progresses.

- *Attending the planned VAWG training*

The Council Motion included a commitment to offer an awareness session on VAWG to all elected members, and officers are working with the OPCC to plan this session. We would ask committee members to help promote this session to other members.

- *Using your influence at the system and community level*

Recognising the role that elected members play within their local communities, there is an opportunity for members to take an active role in supporting local work to end violence against women and girls. Members may wish to consider:

- Actively promoting national and local VAWG awareness raising campaigns, such as the international White Ribbon Day and the 16 Days of Action in November.
- Supporting the development of Domestic Abuse champion networks on a district level
- Facilitating links between community groups and the new Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Consultation Officer to support their work to listen and learn from victims and survivors.
- Linking in with the work of the district led Community Safety Partnerships.
- Promoting awareness of the FLARE app developed by Safer Gloucestershire which enables women and girls to anonymously share their experiences of where and when they've felt unsafe. The app can also connect the user to sources of support and advice. The information will help local agencies understand how and where women and girls feel unsafe in the county and take appropriate action.

Officers can provide further information on the above.

