

Report of: Executive Member for Children, Young People & Families

Meeting of:	Date:	Ward(s):
Executive	25 November 2021	All

Delete as appropriate:	Exempt	Non-exempt
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SUBJECT: Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (2021 -2026)**1. Synopsis**

- 1.1 Islington's current Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy reaches its conclusion this year and needs to be replaced. Islington's approach to tackling VAWG has taken its lead from the Mayor's Office. In March 2017, the Mayor of London published a Policing and Crime Plan which led to the development of a comprehensive, London-wide VAWG strategy after which Islington's was launched. The progress of Islington's VAWG strategy 2017-21 has been reviewed regularly by the strategic VAWG Board. A formal partnership review of the strategy was undertaken in September 2019, by VAWG service providers, local stakeholders and survivors which recognised the significant progress that has been made in the area in recent years. This progress was made more possible because of the additional council funding that has been provided to support and protect women and girls who are at risk of violence and abuse and to help those who are enduring it.

National and regional discussions in relation to VAWG have culminated in the months preceding the launch of this strategy and have represented an unprecedented time in British history in relation to the issue. The public profile and awareness of VAWG has been raised by a number of well publicised murders especially that of Sarah Everard, who was kidnapped and killed by a serving Metropolitan Police officer. In addition, there have also been the murders of sisters Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, who were killed in a park in north west London, Julia James, a police community support officer, killed out while walking her dog in Kent, and Sabina Nessa, a primary

school teacher who was attacked and killed in South East London. The combination of these killings, at a time when statistics have showed that rates of domestic abuse and the number of women requesting support following the COVID-19 pandemic has surged has led to widespread calls for change.

Whilst figures show that Islington has taken important steps towards improving its response to VAWG, we are aware that more needs to be done. For instance, rape offences in the borough have a sanction and detection rate of 5.5%, which whilst higher than the Metropolitan Police average, needs to be far higher. Our overarching commitment is to keep as many of our women and girls and their families as safe as possible, to make perpetrators accountable for their actions and to have a first class system in place to achieve this.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To approve the proposed strategy for Violence Against Women and Girls (2021- 2026) as outlined in this report. It is recommended that this strategy is approved for publication and release this year in order to replace the previous strategy which is now out of date.

3. Background

- 3.1 In order to build upon the progress made in recent years and to enhance service delivery further, the VAWG strategic board has developed an ambitious Service Transformation Programme to support and protect women and girls from harm and violence. This commenced in April 2020 and is supported by £600k additional per annum council funding, as well as funding from central government, the Mayor for London, Clinical Commissioning Group and Public Health. This substantial new investment and service expansion has supported local VAWG services to respond to the unprecedented increase in demand and complexity of need prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3.2 The conditions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and the various lockdowns introduced from March 2020 exacerbated issues such as confinement, economic insecurity, fear of illness, increased substance use and mental health issues and this contributed to a widely anticipated increase in domestic abuse across the world. In the UK, ONS figures show that offences flagged as domestic abuse by police in the period March – June 2020 increased by 7% compared to the same period in 2019.
- 3.3 Nationally 90% of VAWG Services saw an increase in demand for services since the COVID-19 pandemic. In Islington, reported domestic abuse offences rose by 4.2% in 2020-21 compared to 2019-20. This is significantly less than the 7% increase across the Metropolitan Police Service for the same period. However, local VAWG services and in particular helplines were extremely busy as lockdown measures eased.

- 3.4 This does not necessarily indicate an increase in the number of people experiencing violence or abuse. However, there has been an increase in the severity of abuse reported to statutory and voluntary and community services. Women experiencing abuse have also been less able to use coping strategies such as leaving the home to escape the abuse, and less able to access support services. The additional council investment in April 2020 meant that council-funded VAWG services increased their capacity to support victims by 56% in 2020-21.
- 3.5 Islington is committed to ensuring that survivors have a key role in shaping the services they engage with and this year staff from Islington's VAWG Team and local VAWG services engaged with survivors across local services as part of the preparation for the new VAWG strategy. A total of 17 teams/organisations were contacted with requests to help gather feedback from people with experience of VAWG services in Islington. In response to the issues highlighted, we produced a questionnaire and brief on-line survey. Different organisations used these survey tools in different ways. Some used them to structure group conversations, whereas others undertook 1-1 interviews. The experience of survivors is a key thread throughout this strategy in order to ensure that the strategy is as responsive to their needs as possible. It is essential for us to learn from their experiences.
- 3.6 The evidence pertaining to 'what works' and is effective with perpetrators is underdeveloped in the area of VAWG. This is not because of an absence of research, but due to the extremely poor conviction and/or treatment rates in relation to perpetrators in England and Wales (and beyond). For example, national statistics show a 50% drop in the number of convictions in cases where rape had been alleged between 2016-17 and 2019-20. At the time of drafting this strategy, the number of convictions in England and Wales was the lowest since tracking began in 2009. The picture is similar in domestic abuse cases. In June 2021, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire Rescue services (HMICFRS) released a report showing that three in four domestic abuse cases are closed by police without a perpetrator being charged, a deterioration which is extremely concerning. The work that is needed to make perpetrators accountable, in conjunction with key partners such as the Police and the Probation Service is a key part of this strategy.
- 3.7 The Domestic Abuse Act received royal assent in March 2021. At the time of writing, the Government is still notifying the public of when provisions will be enacted. We expect that most of the new proposals will be in place in autumn 2022, with the likely exception of DAPOs (see below) which will be initially piloted before being rolled out more widely. The new legislative changes include amongst others:
- A new statutory definition of DA and the recognition of children as victims of DA in their own right for the first time
 - Local authority statutory duty to provide support, secure tenancy and housing and to provide domestic abuse support to survivors and children e.g. counselling

- Prohibiting perpetrators of abuse from cross-examining their victims in person in the civil and family courts in England and Wales

Other recent legislative changes of note include the Stalking Protection Act 2019 which introduced Stalking Protection Orders, and the 2015 criminalisation of coercive control in late 2015. The implementation of this latter change is still in progress, as Metropolitan Police have only begun to train their officers in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.8 In order to ensure that we fulfil our responsibilities and duties to women and girls who are experiencing violence and abuse, or who are at risk of this, the partnership has set itself five key priorities which are:

- 1) Create and deliver a coordinated community response
- 2) Prevent violence and abuse from happening
- 3) Protect survivors and families and provide support to help them to repair and recover from the violence and abuse they have experienced
- 4) Challenge inequality throughout the delivery of our VAWG services and approach to prevent discrimination and address the impacts of intersectionality
- 5) Make perpetrators visible and accountable

The delivery of the VAWG strategy will be overseen by the VAWG Strategy Board, the Safer Islington Partnership and other key Islington governance boards. The collective aim is to eliminate all forms of Violence against Women and Girls, support survivors and to rehabilitate and make perpetrators accountable for their actions. A number of performance measures have been designed so that we can robustly monitor our progress over the five years of the strategy. There were no performance indicators in the previous strategy, but it is important that the new strategy has metrics to determine our success.

4. Implications

4.1 Financial implications:

There are no direct financial implications for the council as a result of this strategy. The main financial implication to note is that as the strategy seeks to keep as many women and girls safe as possible, there may be reduced pressure on the council's budget in the longer-term. For instance, a large number of children subject to Child in Need and Child Protection Plans are being supported because of domestic abuse concerns within the family home. The more children who become Looked After because of such concerns, the more pressure on the council's budget. Similarly, large numbers of children who are open to the Youth Offending Services have witnessed and been exposed to domestic abuse. This can place pressure on the remand budget if young people perpetrate serious offences due to this exposure and are detained. Subsequently,

the provision of support to women and girls at an earlier stage will be financially advantageous to the Council.

4.2 **Legal Implications:**

Islington has duties and responsibilities under the Domestic Abuse Bill (2021) as outlined in section 3.7. There are also other key pieces of legislation such as the Children Act (1989), which will be relevant to some cases of VAWG when children are involved and also at risk.

1. The report is consistent with the Council's General Power of Competence under the Localism Act 2011 and the Council's general duties.
2. Part of this strategy is aimed to assist looked after children in respect of whom the local authority owes a range of duties under the Children Act 1989, the Children and Families Act 2014 , successor legislation, regulations and relevant guidance.
3. The provisions of this report are consistent with the local authority's statutory duties and applicable guidance.

4.3 **Environmental Implications and contribution to achieving a net zero carbon Islington by 2030:**

The strategy will provide support with the Council's ambition to work together towards finding local solutions to tackle the climate emergency as well as how we will deliver our ambition to achieving net zero carbon by 2030.

4.4 **Resident Impact Assessment:**

The council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and to advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations, between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it (section 149 Equality Act 2010). The council has a duty to have due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages, take steps to meet needs, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, and encourage people to participate in public life. The council must have due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.

The new VAWG strategy plan sets out the council's approach to supporting women and girls, in part, by putting Challenging Inequality at the forefront of our work.

Equality impact issues have been covered throughout the consultation period and during the production of this strategy. This strategy seeks to protect and safeguard women from all backgrounds. However, the strategy outlines that women from certain backgrounds are more likely to be adversely impacted if they experience VAWG. Islington's Fairer Together, For a Fairer Future strategy launched in 2021 and sets out the partnership's commitment to create a more

equal Islington, where all residents have an equal chance to thrive. We are determined to challenge inequality throughout the delivery of our VAWG services, to prevent discrimination and to address the impacts of intersectionality. The partnership is committed to ensuring that key agencies working with survivors should be fully trained in Black and Minoritised women's intersectional experiences/needs and actively encouraged to adopt a more inclusive approach. This is particularly important for the statutory agencies who have the most impact and influence on those survivors and their children's lives.

5. Reason for recommendations

5.1 It is recommended that this strategy is agreed in order to:

- Ensure that the Council and the partnership are clear of the course of action in relation to reducing and eliminating Violence Against Women and Girls for the next five years and beyond
- Set out a framework for quantitative and qualitative monitoring of outcomes in relation to Violence Against Women and Girls

Appendices: Violence Against Women and Girls strategy 2021 – 26
(note: a final version is currently being prepared by the Council's graphic design team)

Background papers: None

Final report clearance:

Signed by:



Executive Member for Children, Young People
& Families

16.11.21

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