

TITLE	Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy 2023-26
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Thursday, 28 September 2023
WARD	(All Wards);
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Giorgio Framaliccio
LEAD MEMBER	Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services - Councillor Sarah Kerr

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

The Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) draft strategy requires Executive approval as it sets out how the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership, of which Wokingham Borough Council is a key partner, will tackle such violence.

The strategy aligns with the strategic outcomes of the Council Plan 2022 - 'Providing safe strong communities' and the Wokingham Community Safety Strategy 2021-2024.

The Domestic Abuse strategy and Serious Violence & Exploitation strategy will sit alongside the VAWG strategy with key aims of tackling domestic abuse and serious violence which are key pillars of VAWG.

The Executive is requested to consider and approve the VAWG Strategy 2023 – 2026. The Wokingham Community Safety Partnership (WCSP) will then be asked to adopt the strategy and take responsibility for the development, monitoring and delivery of the VAWG Action Plan. The WCSP will also be asked to take responsibility for reviewing and refreshing the VAWG Strategy as necessary on an annual basis.

RECOMMENDATION

The Executive is requested to:-

- 1) Formally approve the Wokingham Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy 2023-2026;
- 2) Agree that the strategy be presented to the Health & Wellbeing Board with any amendments to be made by the Director for Place & Growth in consultation with the Lead Member;
- 3) Request that the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership (WCSP) adopt the approved VAWG Strategy with the WCSP taking responsibility for the further development and oversight of the VAWG Strategy and Action Plan.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Executive was informed that in July 2021, the Government published a 'Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)' strategy followed by a National Statement of Expectations in March 2022, to highlight crimes which disproportionately affect women and girls.

Following the approval of the Executive to develop a Wokingham VAWG Strategy using the national guidance and National Statement of Expectations as a framework, the draft strategy has been produced. It was agreed that this would place the borough in a strong position to develop better processes and work in partnership with the community we serve. It would also help to strengthen the understanding of where there are differences in reporting, responses, risks and outcomes to individuals experiencing VAWG and where improvements can and should be made.

The indicative action plan attached shows a wide range of activity and this will be refined and focussed on the needs and requirements of the local communities across the borough. This will include the development of a strategic needs assessment that will be based on the analysis of local data by VAWG crime type and by exploring best practice. The strategy will also focus on targeting prevention of VAWG through changing attitudes and behaviours.

BACKGROUND

At the September 2022 meeting of the Executive, members were informed that the safety of women and girls across the country is important for everyone and that crimes of violence against women and girls including rape, other sexual offences, stalking, domestic abuse, 'honour-based' abuse (including forced marriage and 'honour' killings), 'revenge porn', 'upskirting' and many others are increasing nationally.

These crimes can affect women and girls for a long time. It is not always easy to get help and support and that needs to change. Women and girls should be safe and equally they should feel safe. If they don't, they can't have the same chances in life as men and boys.

The Executive was also informed about the public profile and awareness of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) that had been raised in recent years by a number of well publicised murders, especially that of Sarah Everard, who was kidnapped and killed by a serving Metropolitan Police Officer. VAWG related crimes are taking place every day and have a long-lasting impact on victims, including mental and physical health problems, not doing well at school or work, becoming homeless, and children being harmed and not feeling safe.

Whilst Wokingham Borough Council has taken important steps towards improving its response to VAWG, for example through the WBC Anti-abuse Charter, Domestic Abuse Strategy and Serious Violence & Exploitation Strategy, more needs to be done.

A local Wokingham VAWG strategy is therefore essential in drawing together data, best practice, and experiences of victims who are affected by crimes which disproportionately affect women and girls, creating a robust response and a drive to reduce prevalence of these crimes.

This strategy would sit alongside existing community safety workstreams, including the domestic abuse and serious violence response, which addresses key crime types within VAWG.

The strategy will contribute towards making Wokingham a safer and healthier place for all. Victims/survivors will feel supported to seek help and empowered to lead safe lives, free from abuse. Perpetrators will know that their behaviour will not be tolerated and where they can seek support for abusive behaviour.

The draft strategy has been shared with a wide range of partners through the Community Safety Partnership, Domestic Abuse Board and Networking Group, Serious Violence & Exploitation Board, Health & Well Being Steering Group and the Voluntary Sector. The Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee received an update in July 2023 and were invited to comment on the priorities and content.

Members of the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee supported the draft strategy and priorities contained therein and stressed the importance of hearing from women and girls in whatever format that participants, including but not exclusively victims and survivors, preferred (for example focus groups, one-to-one's). This would help to ensure the action plan is based on local needs and concerns. The committee also stressed the importance of having an action plan that contains key performance indicators (KPI's) that will show targets and achievements year on year.

The Community Safety Survey (April 2023) showed that the majority of respondents supported the priorities set out in the draft strategy. Several respondents commented on the importance and need for more education around VAWG. Comments were also made about violence that also affects men and boys, and not just women and girls. Violence against any member of the community is abhorrent and is addressed through work across a range of community safety workstreams and in particular Domestic Abuse and Serious Violence and Exploitation. The reason for focusing on women and girls is that much of the violence that it categorised as VAWG disproportionately affects women and girls.

In summary, the priorities upon which the Action Plan will be focused are:-

1. Putting the victim/survivor at the centre of service design and delivery;
2. Taking a strategic, system-wide approach to commissioning;
3. Having a clear focus on perpetrators and holding them to account;
4. Safeguarding and supporting individuals and victims at every point with a strong emphasis on early identification and help;
5. Raising local awareness of the issues and involve, engage, and empower communities to seek, design and deliver solutions.
6. Changing inappropriate attitudes and behaviours of men and boys.

There will be resource implications for delivering activity in support of the abovementioned priorities but financial and staff costs will not be known until the action plan has been developed. The Community Safety Team already lead on tackling Domestic Abuse and Serious Violence and Exploitation and there is capacity within the team to lead on the delivery of the VAWG strategy and action plan.

Resource implications for activity and initiatives that may emerge from the VAWG Action Plan will need to be considered and costed by the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership. Any requirement for financial support from Wokingham Borough Council will be set out in the medium term financial plan.

In order to achieve successful outcomes, input and support will be required from a broad range of other services across the council. Whilst the strategy has been produced by

WBC, successful delivery will be dependent on multi-agency support and input from partner organisations including Thames Valley Police, Probation Service, NHS and the Voluntary and Not for Profit Sector.

Multi-agency work already contributes significantly to tackling VAWG but there is much more to do. The strategy and action plan will help to identify where and how improvements can be made so that we can ensure that women and girls in our communities are safe, feel safe and have equal opportunities alongside men and boys.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	Nil	N/A	N/A
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Nil	N/A	N/A
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	Nil	N/A	N/A

Other Financial Information
There may be resource implications for delivering activity and initiatives in support of the above-mentioned priorities. However, costs will not be known until the action plan has been developed by the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership. Any financial implications for the council will be set out in the medium-term financial plan. Every effort will be made to identify alternative sources of funding that may include the Community Safety Fund provided by the Polie and Crime Commissioner and project specific government grants.

Legal Implications arising from the Recommendation(s)
There are no legal implications.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation
Consultation has been carried out with partner organisation through a range of boards including the Community Safety Partnership. The community were invited, through the Community Safety Survey that ran between February and April 2023, to consider the priorities set out in the draft strategy.

Public Sector Equality Duty
An Equalities Impact Assessment has been approved by the Inclusion Team.

Climate Emergency – This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030
None

Reasons for considering the report in Closed Session
The report is not being considered in closed session.

List of Background Papers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft VAWG Strategy 2023 - 2026. • An indicative Action Plan that will be used by the Community Safety Partnership as the basis for a Wokingham specific and focussed action plan.

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