

TITLE **Wokingham Violence Against Women & Girls (VAWG) Strategy 2023-26**

FOR CONSIDERATION BY Wokingham Borough Wellbeing Board on Thursday, 12 October 2023

WARD None Specific

DIRECTOR/ KEY OFFICER Director, Place and Growth - Giorgio Framaliccio

Health and Wellbeing Strategy priority/priorities most progressed through the report	The key priority in the Berkshire West Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2021- 2030 that most closely aligns to the VAWG Strategy is ‘Support individuals at high risk of bad health outcomes to live healthy lives’.
Key outcomes achieved against the Strategy priority/priorities	Prevent, promote awareness and provide support to those who have experienced domestic abuse in line with proposals outlined in the Domestic Abuse Bill. Increase the visibility of existing services and signposting to them, as well as improving access for people at higher risk of bad health outcomes, working with and alongside voluntary and community organisations who are supporting these groups.

Reason for consideration by Wokingham Borough Wellbeing Board	As the Wokingham Borough Wellbeing Board provides oversight for the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership it is appropriate for this Board to contribute to the development and on-going review of the VAWG strategy and VAWG action plan.
What (if any) public engagement has been carried out?	Consultation on the priorities contained in the VAWG strategy was undertaken and completed as part of the Wokingham Community Safety Survey that ran from February to April 2023.
State the financial implications of the decision	There are no direct financial implications.

RECOMMENDATION

The Wokingham Borough Wellbeing Board is invited to note the report and comment on the VAWG strategy in accordance with the resolution of the Executive (28 September 2023) as follows:-

- 1) The Wokingham Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy 2023-2026 was formally approved subject to the strategy being presented to the Wokingham Borough Wellbeing Board and any further amendments arising being delegated to the Director of Place & Growth in consultation with the Lead Member; and
- 2) The Wokingham Community Safety Partnership (WCSP) be requested to adopt the approved VAWG Strategy and take responsibility for the further development and oversight of the VAWG Strategy and Action Plan.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy, approved by the Executive, 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 Wokingham Community Safety Partnership (WCSP) will adopt the strategy and take responsibility for its development, including the monitoring and delivery of the VAWG action plan.

Background

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 in September 2022 to develop a Wokingham VAWG Strategy using the national guidance and National Statement of Expectations as a framework, the 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 action plan, to be developed by the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership, will include a range of initiatives and activity that will be 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 also focuses on targeting prevention of VAWG through changing attitudes and behaviours.

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 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 was therefore considered 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 will sit alongside existing community safety strategies and 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 and 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 their abusive behaviour.

The draft strategy was shared with a wide range of partners including the Community Safety Partnership, Domestic Abuse Board and DA 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 the participants, including but not exclusively victims and survivors, preferred (for example focus groups and 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) showing clear 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 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 categorised as VAWG disproportionately affects women and girls.

In summary, the priorities shown in the VAWG strategy upon which the VAWG 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.

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 also be dependent on multi-agency support and input from partner organisations including Thames Valley Police, Probation Service, Public Health, NHS and the Voluntary and Not for Profit Sectors.

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.

Analysis of Issues, including any financial implications

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. Alternative sources of funding that may include the Community Safety Fund provided by the Police and Crime Commissioner and government grants will be sought where possible.

Partner Implications
Consultation has been carried out with partner organisation through a range of boards including the Community Safety Partnership.
The successful development of the VAWG action plan will be dependent on the support and input from a wide range of partner organisations and service providers and they will be invited to actively participate in the development and delivery of the action plan.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
N/A

List of Background Papers

Wokingham VAWG Strategy 2023 – 2026

Contact Philip Stoneman Community Safety Officer, Wokingham Borough Council	Service Place and Growth
Telephone No 0118 237 9187	Email philip.stoneman@wokingham.gov.uk

This page is intentionally left blank