

Wokingham Violence Against Women & Girls (VAWG)

Strategy 2023 - 2026



Foreword



Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a fundamental human rights violation, which harms the lives of millions.

It is recognised as a worldwide issue of epidemic proportions. In the UK, one in four women experiences domestic abuse in their lifetime,¹ two women a week in England and

Wales are killed by a current or former partner,² in England and Wales 1 in 4 women have been raped or sexually assaulted (6.54 million women total),³ there are an estimated 137,000 women and girls affected by FGM living in England and Wales,⁴ and two thirds of girls report having experienced sexual harassment from other students at school.⁵ These and other forms of abuse stop hundreds of thousands of women and girls living the lives they would choose for themselves.

VAWG is happening here in Wokingham borough and in many instances remains hidden and under-reported, but it is not inevitable. Collectively we can put a stop to it. This strategy sets out the priorities and approach in ending VAWG as part of our coordinated community response and will be supported by a robust action plan which will outline the steps we will take as a partnership to achieve our objectives.

Ending VAWG requires a system-wide approach that puts victims/survivors front and centre, along with prevention through ending the culture of misogyny and sexism within society. The strategy recognises that men and boys are also affected by crimes classified as VAWG and that whilst there is a lot of good work going on in tackling VAWG, we can and must do more.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the development of this strategy and to our ongoing partnership working to realise our vision of stopping Violence against Women and Girls.

Councillor Sarah Kerr

Executive Member for Climate Change and Resident Services Wokingham Borough council

¹ [Domestic Abuse Statistics UK - NCDV](#)

² [Data Matters – Every Woman Matters – Femicide Census](#)

³ [Rape, sexual assault and child sexual abuse statistics | Rape Crisis England & Wales](#)

⁴ [Prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation in England and Wales: National and local estimates | Trust for London](#)

⁵ [girlguiding-research-briefing_girls-experiences-of-sexual-harassment_june2021.pdf](#)

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1. Introduction

The Wokingham Community Safety Partnership (WCSP), of which Wokingham Borough Council is a key partner, is determined to STOP Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) in all its forms, and to help achieve this a long-term strategic approach is being taken.

Consultation with the community and the WCSP has identified six key priorities and these will underpin the essential work necessary in achieving our shared vision.

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.

This strategy takes an integrated approach to help deliver the cultural and behavioural shift that is needed to change attitudes to women and girls. The strategy does not seek to demonise men and boys, the vast majority of whom are respectful and rightly treat women and girls as equals. There are however men and boys who engage in violence and abuse at all levels towards women and girls simply because of their gender, and this strategy is aimed at targeting and stopping such behaviour through awareness, prevention, tackling and bringing perpetrators to account, and supporting and keeping victims safe.

It is further recognised that men and boys are also affected by crimes classified as VAWG and this was articulated by several respondents to the community safety survey carried out in April 2023.

VAWG is a global problem that takes place in local communities, often unseen and unreported. To effectively tackle VAWG within the Wokingham Borough area, we need our own strategy and the full engagement and support of a wide range of stakeholders from the public, private, and voluntary sectors if we are to ensure that women and girls can live free from the fear of violence and other crimes.

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act that received Royal Assent on 28 April 2022 places new duties on a range of agencies to work collaboratively to prepare a strategy for preventing and reducing serious violence including sexual offences and domestic abuse.

Strategies relating to domestic abuse and serious violent crime have already been produced by the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership, in collaboration with a wide range of partner organisations. Whilst domestic abuse is one element of VAWG, this strategy reflects the need to ensure there is a clear focus on tackling the full range of crimes which disproportionately affect women and girls.

Crimes of violence against women and girls include rape and other sexual offences. Stalking, domestic abuse, 'honour-based' abuse (including forced

marriage and 'honour' killings), 'revenge porn', 'up-skirting' and many others are increasing nationally which is unacceptable, and measures to reverse this trend and tackle the crimes robustly must be a high priority.

Through its work on domestic abuse and serious violence and exploitation, the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership recognises the wider context of VAWG and how elements of it sit within a range of workstreams. It is for that reason that a focused strategy has been written specifically for VAWG.



2. Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) defined



VAWG describes a range of violent and abusive acts and behaviours which are disproportionately directed against women and girls. It can take several forms including physical, sexual, psychological, or economic.

The United Nations definition of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), defines VAWG as: *“Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”*

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (also known as the “Istanbul Convention”), defines VAWG as: *“a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (Article 3).*

VAWG takes place in communities across the UK and can happen within current or previous relationships, in families, with friends, colleagues, people in positions of power and strangers. The violence and abuse can take place in familiar locations, often behind closed doors, including homes, workplaces, leisure facilities and outdoor locations including streets, open spaces and on public transport. This is not an exhaustive list but serves to highlight why women and girls often feel vulnerable and scared if safe places are not available to them.

The abuse is not always in person. Some forms of violence, abuse and coercive behaviour take place in the virtual world of the internet and social media. This could include internet stalking, porn revenge, sexual harassment, bullying or trafficking.

Violence against women and girls describes violent and oppressive patterns of behaviour and practises, which may seek to achieve power and control over women and girls. It impacts on the physical safety, health and emotional well-being of individuals and can lead to victims taking their own lives and may well impact on families, carers, children and the community as a whole.

Women and girls are targeted because of their gender and examples of the types of violence and abuse made against them includes:

- Sexual violence, including rape, abuse and exploitation
- Sexual harassment and bullying
- Stalking
- Revenge Porn
- Up skirting
- Trafficking
- Domestic violence and abuse
- Coercive and controlling behaviour
- Female genital mutilation (FGM)
- Forced marriage
- Crimes committed in the name of 'Honour'

These acts can take place regardless of ethnicity, faith, sexuality or age and whilst these have a disproportionate effect on women and girls, we recognise that men and boys are also victims of violence and abuse. Whilst the focus of this strategy is on VAWG, the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership is committed to providing support for all victims of such abuse regardless of gender.

3. The causes of VAWG

Whilst evidence has shown that gender inequality is a key driver of VAWG, there are many other factors including substance use (alcohol and/or drugs), mental ill health, anger issues, growing up in an abusive household, cultural practices, break up of relationships, revenge, jealousy, sexual gratification, and peer pressure.

The Council of Europe has identified a range of factors which lie at the root of the problem including:-

- Sexist views, and the idea that men can have more power over women and children, results in abuse being used to maintain this power. Gender stereotypes reinforce this inequality and creates an acceptance of violence and abuse. The belief that men must be tough, strong, and always in control can result in them exerting control over a partner.
- Although abuse is illegal, sadly we see many victims blamed for the abuse and low sentences for abusers. This results in low reporting and abuse being allowed to continue. For example, rape convictions remain low and have got worse in recent years that could potentially send a message that offenders can evade justice.
- The under-representation of women and minority groups in power and politics means they have fewer opportunities to shape the discussion and to affect changes in policy, or to adopt measures

to end VAWG. It is because of the lobbying by women's groups that, in the UK, rape in marriage became a criminal offence in 1991 and coercive control became a criminal offence in 2015.

There are increasing concerns about how the internet and social media platforms (Twitter, WhatsApp, TikTok etc.) are being used for the promulgation of the ideology around misogyny, incel, inequality and extremism. These platforms are being increasingly used by social media 'influencers' many of whom who have thousands of 'followers' and who are mainly targeting an audience of young men and boys.

Whilst the freedom of speech is an important principle allowing an individual or a community to articulate their opinions and ideas without fear of retaliation, censorship, or legal sanction there are concerns that on-line content being posted by individuals and influencers can have a negative impact particularly on impressionable young and vulnerable people that will potentially fuel VAWG and as such freedom of speech does not equate to freedom from consequences.

4. Why have we produced a Wokingham VAWG strategy?

The strategy has been designed to provide context and focus around VAWG, including defining what VAWG is, the impact it has on women and girls and society more widely, what is being done to tackle it, and what our priorities and actions are to address these concerns, behaviours and crimes.

VAWG is abhorrent behaviour and should not be accepted in any form in our community. The Wokingham Community Safety Partnership will work with stakeholders, producing a clear plan of action to underpin the activity that will drive improvements to root out such violence and abuse.

The Wokingham Community Safety Partnership will ensure that awareness of VAWG is raised among local agencies and the wider community. Perpetrators will be robustly pursued, victims and survivors will be supported and multi-agency approaches will be used to understand and meet the needs of victims, survivors and family members to support a process of recovery and to achieve positive life outcomes.

The effects of being a victim of these crimes can last indefinitely. That can include mental health problems, physical health problems, not doing well at school or work, becoming homeless, children being harmed and not feeling safe.

Women and girls should be safe and feel safe. If they don't, they can't have the same freedoms and chances in life as men and boys.

An important element of tackling VAWG will be hearing from women and girls that have been subjected to violence. From hearing about those experiences, the community safety partnership can better understand what it can do to prevent such violence. A lot can also be learnt from women and girls that, whilst they may not have been victims themselves, are nevertheless fearful of becoming victims. Their views on what measures can be taken to improve not just the risk of actual harm but also helping to improve feelings of safety can therefore be heard.

Tackling VAWG cuts across several of the CSP's workstreams including Domestic Abuse (DA), Serious Violence and Exploitation (SVE) and Substance Misuse. The strategy for tackling Domestic Abuse was adopted in 2021, and the Serious Violence & Exploitation Strategy is expected to be adopted later this year.

5. What the government is doing to tackle VAWG



The Government's ambition is to reduce the prevalence of VAWG, recognising that at a local level we all have a key role to play in achieving this aim.

The scale and prevalence of VAWG has been brought to the nation's attention in recent times following a number of tragic cases. Thousands of women and girls have also shared their personal experiences of abuse and harassment online via the 'Everyone's Invited' website and the Government's Call for Evidence on VAWG received more than 180,000 responses.

Reports to helplines increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and predictably extended periods of lockdown fuelled violent and oppressive patterns of behaviour.

In addition to passing the Domestic Abuse Act in 2021, the governments VAWG Strategy is clear about the need to support victims and survivors, prevent offending and strengthen the systems in place to address all forms of VAWG. The expectation is that local strategies and services should include:-

1. Putting the victim/survivor at the centre of service design and delivery;
2. Having a clear focus on perpetrators in order to keep victims and survivors safe;
3. Taking a strategic, system-wide approach to commissioning, acknowledging the gendered nature of VAWG;
4. Being locally led and safeguard individuals at every point;
5. Raising local awareness of the issues and involve, engage and empower communities to seek, design and deliver solutions to prevent VAWG.

6. What are Thames Valley Police doing to tackle VAWG

Thames Valley Police produced a [VAWG strategy \(2022/23\)](#) that complements the National Police Chief Council (NPCC) strategy recognising the many forms of violence against women and girls.



7. What is being done locally to tackle VAWG



A lot of positive work is already being carried out by the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership and in particular Wokingham Borough Council, Thames Valley Police, Probation Service, schools and colleges, charities and social enterprise and commissioned service providers including Cranstoun.

Cranstoun Wokingham has been commissioned by Wokingham Borough Council to provide a domestic abuse service and a drug and alcohol service. It is important to recognise that whilst domestic abuse is a pillar of VAWG, it doesn't just affect women and girls, but we know that it does disproportionately affect them.

The Cranstoun Domestic Abuse Service brings together an integrated range of programmes and interventions to support victims and survivors of domestic abuse. Programmes and services are delivered by highly experienced and skilled staff with unique skills in domestic abuse. They are dedicated to delivering the best support possible for the Wokingham community, and do so by providing the following:

- Assessment and support for victims and children
- Assessment and support for perpetrators in order to address and change their behaviours
- Support related to domestic abuse for children and young people in schools
- Targeting services to the most vulnerable and hard to reach groups
- Working with health providers to establish referral pathways
- Outreach victim/survivors case work
- Support to children including both one to one and group support
- Domestic abuse awareness including PSHE support and professional training
- 'Seeking Safety' and 'Freedom' programmes, groups for victims and survivors

There are several charitable and not for profit organisations that are based in and around Wokingham including Kaleidoscopic, SupportU, and Berkshire Women's Aid (BWA) and these all provide valuable support to our communities.

Wokingham Borough Council has shown its commitment, through the Wokingham Anti-abuse Charter, to make a difference by raising awareness and changing cultures within the organisation and aim to further achieve that through accreditation to White Ribbon.

White Ribbon is the internationally recognised symbol for ending male violence against women that was founded in Canada in 1989. It encourages everyone, especially men and boys to make the White Ribbon Promise to never commit, excuse or remain silent about violence against women and girls. It's purpose is to remove the requirement of women and girls to change their behaviours to avoid violence against them and put that onus onto eliminating the violence in the first place.

The aforementioned list demonstrates a very real commitment to tackling VAWG but that's not enough. More could and should be done and that is why this strategy has been produced and key partners have agreed to deliver the priorities and actions contained herein.

Importantly, the strategy clearly articulates how VAWG will be tackled and what difference it will make. It also provides the opportunity for the community to take ownership through sharing concerns, views, ideas and suggestions that can feed into the action plan and review process.



8. Needs Assessment

We know that violence against women and girls exists within our communities, some of the violence is reported whereas much of the violence remains unreported.

The priorities for eliminating VAWG are shown in the next section and how these priorities will be delivered is detailed in the action plan.

Whilst organisations including Thames Valley Police, probation, service providers, charities etc. all collect data, that will be obtained and analysed to inform a VAWG Needs Assessment. This will help to provide a more detailed understanding of the extent of the problems and in turn that will enable the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership to focus resources in the most effective way.

The Needs Assessment will also help to ensure that where additional funding is required it can be justified on the basis of clear evidence. This is not to suggest that concerns, for which there may be limited tangible evidence, will not be tackled as that would not be the case. It is for example not possible, or indeed desirable, to try and account financially for how safe people feel. It is well known that feelings of safety are very important and can impact mental health, influence the places people visit, the routes they take to travel to and from work and venues, the people they meet, the way they dress and many other considerations.

The Needs Assessment would therefore need to take account of all the facets of VAWG, prioritise them where appropriate, and ensure that we clearly show the desired outcomes.



9. The Priorities

The priorities for the Wokingham Community Safety Partnership VAWG Strategy compliment those set out in the National VAWG Strategy, and the strategy produced by Thames Valley Police and the Police and Crime Commissioner:

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.



10. Turning strategy into action

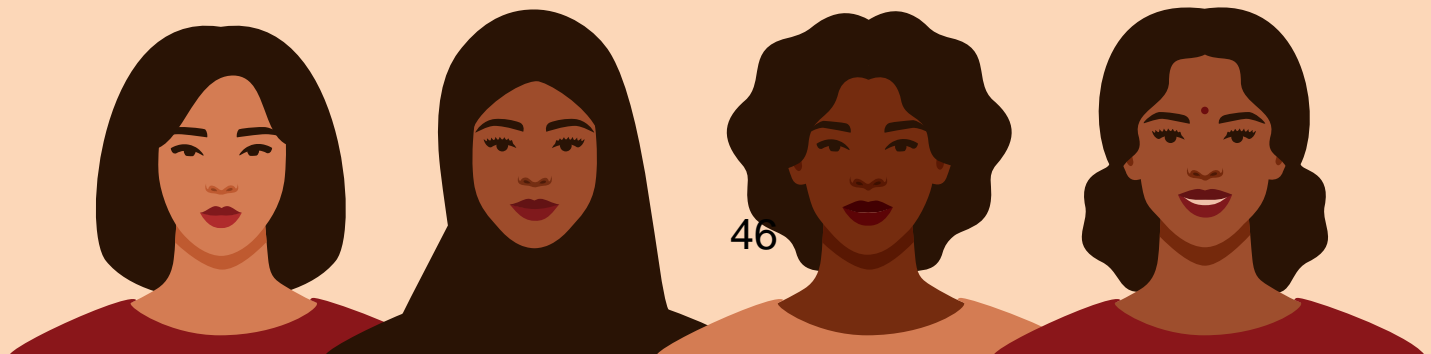
The success of this VAWG strategy is dependent on the buy-in and support of the entire community. That means that the public sector (local authority, police, probation, education, health services), private sector (businesses, service providers), voluntary sector (charities, not for profit organisations, social enterprises) must work collaboratively to achieve the goal of eliminating violence against women and girls.

For the strategy and action plan to make a real difference it will be important to understand the experiences of victims and survivors. That will help the partnership to provide focussed services to tackle the broad range of offences that make up VAWG and to identify a range of methods to tackle the causes and perpetrators.

11. Governance

The Wokingham Community Safety Partnership (WCSP) is responsible for developing and updating this strategy and action plan. The WCSP, through the Performance Management Group (a sub-group of the WCSP), will have responsibility for monitoring

and refreshing the strategy and action plan at the appropriate times with input from the Domestic Abuse Board and the Serious Violence & Exploitation Board.



12. Summary

We know violence against women and girls exists in our community, even if we don't see or experience it personally.

We know that it can seriously affect levels of confidence, independence, health (physical and mental) and life chances.

We know that many women and girls live in fear of violence and abuse and perhaps shrug it off as inevitable and not worth reporting.

We know that in order to address these issues, we need to achieve a cultural shift and change attitudes and behaviours to ensure Wokingham

Borough is a safe place for our residents, visitors and commuters that live, work, study and enjoy visiting our towns and countryside.

Activity designed to tackle VAWG already exists within a range of workstreams and strategies, including Domestic Abuse, Serious Violent Crime, Hate Crime, Exploitation and Anti-Social Behaviour, and this work is delivered on a daily basis by a wide range of partner organisations. This is important work but given the seriousness and impact of VAWG, a dedicated strategy with the single aim of STOPPING VAWG is an absolute necessity and will remain as one of our highest priorities.



