

TITLE	Violence Against Women & Girls (VAWG) Wokingham Response to National Strategy and Statement of Expectations (NSE)
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Wednesday, 29 September 2022
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Steve Moore
LEAD MEMBER	Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services - Sarah Kerr

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

To seek approval for the development of a borough wide Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy.

To seek approval to progress with council wide adoption of White Ribbon Accreditation.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive approve:

1. The development of a borough wide Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy outlining the Council's commitment to tackle all forms of violence against women and girls.
2. Development of an action plan and all the necessary requirements to become an accredited White Ribbon organisation.
3. The in year supplementary estimate of £600 required to fund White Ribbon Accreditation this financial year.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2021, the Government published a 'Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)' strategy as well as a National Statement of Expectations in March 2022, to highlight crimes which disproportionately affect women and girls.

This report proposes that the national guidance and National Statement of Expectations is used as a framework for developing a Wokingham specific response to VAWG. By analysing local data by VAWG crime type and exploring best practice, a strategy will be developed which recognises the profound effect these crimes have on victims, survivors and their loved ones, as well as on wider society.

A Wokingham specific VAWG strategy will place the borough in a strong position to develop better processes to work in partnership with its communities to strengthen the understanding of where there are differences in report, responses, risks and outcomes

to individuals experiencing VAWG. The strategy will also focus on targeting prevention of VAWG through changing attitudes and behaviours.

As part of this public commitment to address Violence Against Women and Girls the Council also intends to develop an action plan to achieve White Ribbon accreditation.

BACKGROUND:

Wokingham Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (VAWG)

The public profile and awareness of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) has 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. In addition, there have also been the murders of sisters Bibaa Henry and Nicole Stillman, who were killed in a park in northwest London, Julia James, a police community support officer, killed while walking her dog in Kent, and Sabina Nessa, a primary school teacher who was attacked and killed in southeast London. The combination of these killings, at a time when statistics have shown 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.

Crimes such as rape, female genital mutilation, stalking, harassment and digital crimes such as cyber-flashing, 'revenge porn' and 'up-skirting' 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, children being harmed and not feeling safe.

VAWG is caused by a combination of drivers operating at different levels of society. These risk factors include a person's genetic predisposition, developmental history, attitudes and beliefs, their relationships and household dynamics, community factors such as social norms and levels of poverty, and wider factors such as religious ideologies and gender regimes.

A national consultation, which formed part of the development of the government's VAWG Strategy 2021, highlighted the large number of women and girls who were having bad experiences at school, work, on buses and trains, on the street and at home, with many respondents feeling that crimes such as sexual harassment were almost an inevitable part of being a woman.

The Government's VAWG Strategy 2021 sets out the actions the Government will take moving forward to increase support for survivors, bring perpetrators to justice, and, ultimately, reduce the prevalence of violence against women and girls. It focuses on crimes which disproportionately affect women and girls and sets out a framework to drive changes – the overall ambition being to “reduce the prevalence of violence against women and girls and improve the support and response for victims and survivors”.

The framework focuses on:

- Increasing support for victims and survivors, through ensuring they have access to quality support appropriate to their needs (as measured through increased funded support services);

- Increasing the number of perpetrators brought to justice. In addition, given the under-reporting of these crimes, increased reporting to the police and increased victim engagement with the police and wider public service response.
- Reducing the prevalence of VAWG in the long term

The VAWG National Statement of Expectations sets out expectations of local strategies and services, for stakeholders including local authorities, and provides a comprehensive list of considerations linked to exploring whether the victim/ survivor is at the centre of service design and delivery; there is a clear focus on perpetrator interventions; a strategic, system-wide approach to commissioning which starts from understanding the issue and problem which it seeks to solve; utilisation and coordination of local initiatives and services already in place and; awareness raising activities which seek to engage and empower communities to seek, design and deliver solutions.

Whilst Wokingham Borough Council has taken important steps towards improving its response to VAWG, for example through the Anti-abuse charter and WBC Domestic Abuse Strategy, it is clear that more needs to be done. A local Wokingham VAWG strategy is 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 drive to reduce prevalence of these crimes. This strategy would sit alongside existing workstreams, including the domestic abuse response, which addresses one of the strands within VAWG.

As well as targeting the external response to VAWG, the strategy will also outline the Council's internal organisational response to VAWG. There will be a focus on preventing violence and harassment by identifying potential risks within the workplace, a commitment to gender equality and diversity throughout the organisation, protection of employees with supportive policies and procedures, and accountability and monitoring of actions at all levels within the organisation.

Wokingham Borough Council intends to imminently progress with the development of a local VAWG strategy which will enable:

- All partners involved in the reduction and response to VAWG to be clear about the agreed priorities over the next 10 years and embed these within their organisations and strategic plans.
- All residents to understand and feel able to contribute towards making Wokingham a safer and healthier place for all.
- Victims/survivors to feel supported to seek help and empowered to lead safe lives, free from abuse.
- Perpetrators to know that their behaviour will not be tolerated and where they can seek support for abusive behaviour.

White Ribbon Accreditation

In parallel to the development of a Wokingham specific VAWG strategy, and in order to further strengthen our local approach, the Council intends to attain White Ribbon accreditation. The Council has already adopted an 'Anti-Abuse Charter' which makes the intentions of the council in relation to violence against women and girls clear and helps borough residents, including victims and survivors, understand the council's commitment towards fostering a deep-rooted culture and step change on violence and abuse.

White Ribbon accreditation programme is the most comprehensive and well established available and is recognised in line with the wider violence against women and girl's agenda. In April 2022 it was adopted by Thames Valley Police as part of their VAWG strategy. Therefore, in alignment with Thames Valley Police's approach, it is recommended that the Council proceed with gaining White Ribbon accreditation.

BUSINESS CASE

N/A

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

(Relates to charges made by White Ribbon UK organization)

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£600	Shortfall of £600	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£600	Shortfall of £600	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£600	Shortfall of £600	Revenue

Other Financial Information
White Ribbon Accreditation will require an annual subscription fee of £600. There is no revenue budget available to cover this cost and therefore an in-year supplementary estimate will be required to fund this year's subscription. A growth item will also be required to fund future year's subscription.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation
N/A

Public Sector Equality Duty
EIA has been undertaken.

Climate Emergency – <i>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</i>
The strategy and associated actions could lead to a culture change whereby women in the borough feel safer and therefore are more likely to walk, rather than drive or take a cab. In turn, this may lead to a reduction in carbon emissions.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
N/A

List of Background Papers
None

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