

Scrutiny Board :	Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board
Report Title	Violence against Women and Girls Strategy
Date of Meeting	4 September 2025
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Lead Officer	Executive Director - Place
Wards Affected	(All Wards);
Appendices (if any)	1. Draft Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report presents Sandwell's draft Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy 2026–2030 to the Board for review and feedback. It outlines the scale and nature of VAWG locally, provides an overview of the proposed strategic vision, priorities and delivery pillars, and seeks Members' views to shape the final strategy prior to wider partner consultation and adoption by the Community Safety Partnership.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Board considers and comments upon the information presented and determines whether it wishes to make any recommendations to the Executive.

3. Background and Context

- 3.1 Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a significant and persistent issue across the UK, spanning childhood exploitation, domestic and sexual abuse, stalking, online harm, and public harassment.
- 3.2 These harms have lifelong consequences for health, wellbeing, relationships and opportunity, disproportionately affecting the most marginalised. Tackling VAWG is a statutory responsibility under the **Domestic Abuse Act 2021**, the **Serious Violence Duty (2022)**, and the national **VAWG Strategy (2021–2024)**

- 3.3 VAWG is now recognised as a national policing priority alongside terrorism and serious organised crime, underlining the urgency of a whole-system response.
- 3.4 In line with these reforms, the Sandwell Community Safety Partnership has committed to a new VAWG Strategy which aligns with the Community Safety Strategy, Domestic Abuse Strategy, Serious Violence Strategy, and Prevent and Exploitation priorities.
- 3.5 The draft Sandwell Strategy sets out a whole-system approach rooted in prevention, protection, recovery, and accountability. Informed by survivor voice and national duties, it emphasises digital abuse, intersecting vulnerabilities, and the recognition of children as direct victims. It also highlights the need for justice reform, cultural change, and equity in service responses. With the regional pledge to halve VAWG, delivery in Sandwell must ensure survivor-centred pathways, early intervention in schools, and trauma-informed practice across all services.
- 3.6 The strategy is structured around five thematic “pillars”:
- Domestic Abuse
 - Sexual Assault, Abuse & Exploitation
 - Stalking & Harassment
 - Women & Girls’ Safety
 - Misogyny & Harmful Attitudes
- 3.7 This framing reflects that VAWG is not a single crime type but a spectrum of gendered harms requiring coordinated prevention, protection, justice and cultural change.
- This report presents the draft strategy to the Board for comment before wider consultation. Specifically, it aims to:
 - Provide an overview of the scale and nature of VAWG in Sandwell, informed by data and survivor/professional insight.
 - Set out proposed ambition, priorities, and delivery pillars.
 - Describe how success will be measured through partnership dashboards and outcomes.
 - Seek members’ input to ensure the strategy is ambitious, evidence-led, trauma-informed, community-focused, and reflective of Sandwell’s diversity.

3.8 **3.8 National and Local Drivers**

National reviews — including the End-to-End Rape Review, Tackling VAWG Strategy, Domestic Abuse Strategy, and Online Safety Act — stress the need for earlier intervention, stronger charging outcomes, and culture change.

Locally, recorded sexual offences have risen by 44% (2021–2024), stalking and harassment cases continue to grow, and domestic abuse remains the largest driver of safeguarding demand.

Survivors report barriers in accessing justice and long-term recovery. Many cases involve online-enabled harms, substance use, vulnerabilities, or historic abuse disclosed in adulthood.

Alongside rising prevalence in recorded offences, local service data demonstrates both the scale of need and the breadth of specialist provision in Sandwell:

- **Refuge support:** In 2024/25, 100 adults (99 women, 1 man) and 107 children were supported in refuge accommodation. Alongside safe housing, 51 adults and 63 children engaged in therapeutic interventions such as one-to-one counselling, therapeutic parenting, wellbeing sessions and art therapy.
- **Sanctuary Scheme:** 56 households were supported to remain safe in their homes.
- **Independent Advocacy:** A total of 3,003 victims accessed **Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA)** support, 634 supported by **Independent Sexual Violence Advocates (ISVA)**.
- **Early intervention:** The Flourishing Futures programme received 102 referrals, supporting young people and families at risk. The IRIS programme, delivered via GPs, supported 107 victims, highlighting the role of health settings in early identification.
- **Community-based counselling:** Murray Hall Community Trust accepted 97 referrals for therapeutic and community counselling, ensuring long-term recovery pathways.
- **MARAC:** 553 high-risk victims were referred to the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), reflecting the most serious and urgent cases.

This evidence highlights:

- High demand across all services, from emergency refuge to community-based therapeutic support.
- The importance of early intervention pathways (GPs, schools, voluntary sector) in reaching hidden victims.
- Ongoing need for trauma-informed therapeutic provision for both adults and children.
- The scale of multi-agency safeguarding demand, particularly through MARAC and IDVA caseloads.

3.9 Purpose of the Strategy

The strategy sets out a partnership commitment to:

- Prevent harm by tackling misogyny, harmful norms, and online risks.
- Protect victims and strengthen safeguarding, recovery, and long-term support.
- Pursue perpetrators through stronger investigations and justice outcomes.
- Create accountability through governance, data, and culture change.

3.10 Alignment with the Police and Crime Plan

The West Midlands Police and Crime Plan (2025–2029) places VAWG as a core priority, recognising its scale and impact across public, private and online spaces. The plan commits to enforcement, victim support, and culture change — directly aligning with Sandwell’s approach to treat VAWG as both a public health and public safety issue. Key priorities include:

- Stronger enforcement against perpetrators of domestic abuse, stalking, harassment and sexual violence.
- Embedding trauma-informed practice to increase victim confidence and reduce attrition.
- Tackling digital-enabled abuse, with a focus on young women and girls.
- Driving culture change through education, engagement and professional training.
- Ensuring women and girls’ voices shape services and safety planning.
- Strengthening partnerships, recognising policing alone cannot resolve VAWG.

3.11 West Midlands Police Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy 2024–27,

The work in Sandwell sits within the wider West Midlands Police Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy 2024–27, which builds on the NPCC national framework. The strategy takes a whole-system approach, built around the 4Ps (Prepare, Protect, Pursue, Prevent), and makes VAWG a policing priority on the same footing as terrorism and serious organised crime.

Key commitments relevant to Sandwell include:

- **Prepare:** Building a policing culture that actively challenges sexism and misogyny, ensuring a fit, skilled, and representative workforce.
- **Protect:** A trauma-informed, victim-centred approach, with strong partnership work to keep victims, families, and communities safe.
- **Pursue:** Relentless focus on perpetrators, particularly repeat and serial offenders, including evidence-led prosecutions and tackling tech-enabled VAWG.

- **Prevent:** Working with communities, schools, and partners to change attitudes and behaviours; involving men and boys in the solution; and targeting harmful spaces, both physical and online.

The strategy also sets out pledges across local policing areas. For example, Dudley & Sandwell policing areas pledge to take all necessary steps to eradicate male violence against women and girls, embedding this into leadership and culture.

- 3.12 The Board is asked to consider whether the draft strategy reflects the right priorities, whether it is ambitious enough to drive meaningful change, and whether there are key gaps before wider consultation and approval.

4. Consultation

- 4.1 The draft Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy builds on extensive engagement carried out as part of the recent Domestic Abuse Strategy refresh (2024), where an external specialist was commissioned to conduct victim-survivor interviews, focus groups, practitioner engagement sessions, and an online public survey.
- 4.2 Findings from this process — including the importance of trauma-informed support, children’s visibility and the need for longer-term recovery services — have been incorporated directly into this broader VAWG Strategy.
- 4.3 A broader Community Safety public survey (covering VAWG, exploitation, serious violence and hate crime) will be launched in summer 2025 to test community concerns and priorities. Subject to feedback from Scrutiny, the VAWG Strategy will also be published for targeted partner and public consultation — including survivors, women’s organisations, young people, schools, and faith/community groups — to ensure lived-experience and local priorities are reflected in the final version.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 Delivery of the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy will be met through a combination of existing partnership budgets and external funding streams. There is no additional budgetary pressure attached to the approval of the Strategy itself.

6. Legal and Governance Implications

- 6.1 The Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy is delivered under the statutory duties placed on relevant authorities by the following legislation:
 - **Domestic Abuse Act 2021** — requires local authorities and Community Safety Partnerships to provide support to victims of domestic abuse (including sexual abuse within domestic settings) and to maintain a local strategy for safe accommodation.

- **Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 (Serious Violence Duty)** — places a statutory duty on specified authorities (local authority, police, health, probation, youth offending services and fire) to work together to prevent and reduce serious violence, which explicitly includes violence against women and girls.
- **Crime and Disorder Act 1998** — requires Community Safety Partnerships to formulate and implement strategies to reduce crime, disorder and reoffending in their area.
- **Victims and Prisoners Act 2024** — places a duty on police, Integrated Care Boards and local authorities to commission joined-up support services for victims of sexual violence and domestic abuse.
- **Equality Act 2010** — requires public authorities to have due regard to advancing equality and preventing discrimination. Violence against women and girls is recognised internationally as an equality and human rights issue.

6.2 The Strategy is governed through the Community Safety Partnership (CSP), with thematic delivery overseen by the *Prevention of Violence and Exploitation (PoVE) Strategic Group* and the *Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership*. Progress will be regularly reported through CSP governance, with annual updates to the Council’s Overview and Scrutiny Board.

7. Risks

7.1 Implementation of the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy carries several key strategic risks, summarised below along with mitigation measures:

Risk	Mitigation
Inconsistent partnership delivery and accountability	Clear governance through CSP/PoVE, with named leads for each pillar and quarterly dashboard performance reporting.
Disproportionate impact on minoritised groups not fully understood or addressed	Equalities impact assessment (EqIA), community engagement, and use of dashboard disaggregated data to track access, experience, and outcome gaps.
It is recognised that men and boys can also be victims of violence and sexual harm. Failure to communicate this could create reputational risk or perceived exclusion.	Clear messaging and signposting to parallel services and strategies (e.g. Community Safety, Serious Violence, Prevent), while maintaining focus on the disproportionate impact of violence against women and girls.

- 7.2 These risks align to the existing Directorate Risk Register for Community Safety and Public Protection and will be monitored regularly by the Community Safety Partnership, with escalations and remedial actions taken as required.

8. Equality and Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty)

- 8.1 Violence against women and girls is both a manifestation and a cause of gender inequality. This Strategy has been assessed as relevant to all three limbs of the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) — to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations.

- 8.2 An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been undertaken and is available as a supporting document. The key findings are summarised below:

- **Sex (female):** women and girls are disproportionately affected by VAWG. The Strategy is designed to reduce harm and promote equality through gender-informed prevention, protection and cultural change.
- **Sex (male):** Although men and boys can also be victims of violence and abuse (supported via wider Community Safety, Serious Violence and Prevent programmes), this strategy focuses on the disproportionate impact experienced by women and girls, consistent with national and international human rights and equality frameworks.
- **Race/Ethnicity:** women from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities are less likely to access support and more likely to experience barriers to justice. The Strategy commits to culturally competent pathways, VCS engagement, and disaggregated performance monitoring to identify and address gaps.
- **Disability:** disabled women face higher risk of sexual and domestic abuse and may require tailored communication and access routes. The Strategy promotes accessibility and inclusive service design.
- **Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity:** LGBTQ+ survivors face distinct forms of abuse and may be less likely to report. The Strategy includes inclusive practice training and support routes.
- **Age:** both younger women/girls and older women experience distinct risks (e.g. CSE, adult disclosures of CSA, stalking in later life). The Strategy promotes age-appropriate, trauma-informed responses across the life course.

8.3 Mitigating Actions

- Survivor engagement and co-production with women from diverse backgrounds.
- Targeted communication and access routes for underrepresented communities.
- Monitoring of take-up, outcomes and experience through the VAWG dashboard to identify inequalities and improve practice.

- 8.4 No significant adverse equality impacts have been identified that cannot be mitigated by the actions above. The Strategy is expected to have an overall *positive* impact on equality and inclusion in Sandwell.

9. Other Relevant Implications

9.1 The following additional implications have been considered in developing the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy:

- **Procurement:** The Strategy will inform future commissioning and procurement of domestic and sexual violence support services and public health interventions. All procurement activity will comply with Contract Procedure Rules and the Social Value Policy.
- **Corporate Parenting:** The Strategy supports the Council's responsibilities as a Corporate Parent by promoting improved safeguarding, identification and support pathways for care-experienced children and young people who may be at heightened risk of violence, exploitation and abuse.
- **Health and Wellbeing:** VAWG has significant impacts on physical and mental health. The Strategy promotes earlier intervention and improved access to supportive, trauma-informed services to reduce health inequalities.
- **Crime and Disorder Act 1998 / Prevent Duty:** The Strategy contributes directly to the Council's duty under Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to reduce crime and disorder. It sits alongside the Prevent Duty (Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015) to safeguard individuals from extremist harms, and links closely to the Serious Violence Duty (2022), Recognising that VAWG is now a national policing priority.

10. Background Documents

- Violence against women and girls draft strategy (Appendix 1)
- West Midlands Police Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy 2024–27 [Download here](#)

11. How does this deliver the Outcomes in the Council Plan?

11.1 The Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy contributes directly to multiple outcomes in Sandwell's Council Plan:

- **Growing up in Sandwell:** promotes safety, healthy relationships and early intervention for girls and young women, including those at risk of exploitation or abuse.
- **Living in Sandwell:** supports safer communities, strengthens local trust in services, and ensures women and girls can live free from harm, fear and restriction in public and private spaces.
- **Healthy in Sandwell:** reduces trauma and health inequalities by improving access to timely, joined-up and trauma-informed support for physical and mental health impacts of violence and abuse.
- **One Council One Team:** brings together multiple Council directorates, partners and communities to deliver a coordinated, prevention-led approach, reflecting Sandwell's commitment to whole-system working.