

How effectively police engage with women and girls

On 7th July 2021, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) published an interim inspection report on how effectively the police engage with women and girls.

HMICFRS said there is an epidemic of offending against women and girls – for example, an estimated 1.6 million women in England and Wales experienced domestic abuse in the 12 months to March 2020.

The West Midlands has seen a marked increase in domestic violence recorded crime since the start of the pandemic and the resulting lockdowns/containment measures, with 2020/21 seeing a 39% increase overall when compared with 2019/20. Sexual offences have also seen an increase, up 10% in 2020/21.

Along with the increase in domestic abuse during the pandemic, women's fears about street harassment has also increased significantly¹ with a recent poll finding that 7 out of 10 women had experienced some form of sexual harassment in public². In 2020/21 there were circa 44,000 records of crime relating to stalking and harassment, up 96% on 2019/20 - Of these, 67% did not relate to domestic abuse.

Initial findings from London City University and the University of Durham suggest that the pandemic exposed, rather than created the domestic abuse crisis' i.e. it may be that these areas were particularly good at encouraging reporting during this time. Locally, newly implemented systems and improved recording practices will have also further 'exposed' the domestic abuse crisis.

Worryingly, whilst there have been increases in recorded crime a local Women and Safety Survey found that 92.5% of respondents who had experienced sexual assault and rape in the West Midlands did not report their experience to the police

In the report, it is noted that a whole-system approach is needed to tackle offences against women and girls, involving not only the police but also other partners, and that transformation of the whole system is needed, including:

- the Government, police, criminal justice system and public sector should immediately and unequivocally commit to prioritising the response to violence against women and girls, supported by sufficient funding and mandated responsibilities;
- the police should make the relentless pursuit and disruption of perpetrators a national priority, and their capability and capacity to do this should be enhanced; and

¹ [Sarah Everard: 'Epidemic' of violence against women in UK not taken seriously enough after 33-year-old's disappearance, MPs warn](#)

² [Prevalence and reporting of sexual harassment in UK public spaces](#)

- funding and structures should be put in place to ensure victims receive tailored and consistent support.

This approach is welcomed. It is argued that the prevalence of violence against women and girls has been underestimated for decades and suggests that violence against women and girls is better positioned as a systemic, global and enduring phenomenon³. We would argue that any inspection into rape, domestic abuse, and violence against women and girls must acknowledge that these are systemic, structural issues that can only be addressed via multi-agency, long term activity.

We are supporting a Force consultation on a Violence and Intimidation Against Women and Girls Strategy (VAIWG) the local strategy will follow the national approach and will seek to coordinate the WMP's response and approach to VAIWG crimes:

- Ensuring VAIWG is everyone's business
- Being perpetrator and prevention focused
- Making the best use of data
- Being clear on tone and language, avoiding victim blaming and setting clear standards and expectations
- Ensuring that the lived experiences of women and girls are captured and heard.
- Involving men and boys in the solution.

As part of Home Office funding for domestic abuse perpetrator behaviour change programmes, we are launching the Early Awareness Stalking Intervention programme where the objective is to research and tackle repeat stalking offences whilst increasing victim confidence in the police response to stalking. Parallel support will be provided by the West Midlands Stalking Support Service, via a dedicated stalking advocate. This programme will be evaluated by the University of Derby to gauge success in terms of the desired outcomes and to also highlight key learnings for future programmes.

Alongside this, a task and finish group has been set up to understand whether victims' experiences of reporting crime to the Police matches the Force's perceptions of code compliance. Key priorities of this group include:

- Ensuring there are robust and effective mechanisms to hear victims' voices and experiences and utilise this to drive improvements;
- Improving compliance against the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime;
- Reducing attrition rates;
- Increasing the likelihood that victims would report again;
- Ensuring that victims are not retraumatised by the reporting and criminal justice process;
- Increasing trust and confidence in policing, and subsequently feelings of safety

³ [Understanding the scale of violence committed against women in the UK since birth](#)

The report outlined one recommendation which related to police forces, the remainder of the response will focus on this.

Recommendation 3:

Structures and funding should be put in place to make sure victims receive tailored and consistent support. Victims' needs should be a central consideration of any investigation. Victims should be fully supported towards a result that reflects their wishes and considers any discrimination and inequality they may face. Consistent and accurate recording of information on the protected characteristics of victims is needed to help ensure the right support is offered.

- **All police forces should ensure information on the protected characteristics of victims is accurately and consistently recorded.**
- **The Home Office and the NPCC should introduce a single national survey to measure victim satisfaction. This should allow for both local and national quality assurance, as well as the identification of any emerging issues, risks or variables that need further action to resolve. Police forces and partner agencies should have clear responsibilities in supporting victims through every stage of the case. The victim's voice should play a central role in shaping this, and their individual needs should be understood and addressed throughout**

This recommendation is similar to recommendation 2021/RAPE/19781 from the Joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape report. These recommendations will be review at the Vulnerability Improvement Board and added to the plan.

The Force is working towards compliance with the victim's code and monitor this on a monthly basis. We will soon be introducing PPU satisfaction surveys which will help us to understand victim satisfaction. In terms of the recommendation itself, it is a recommendation for the Home Office and the NPCC which we will support and seek to influence as and when this is picked up and progressed by them.