

Police response to violence against women and girls - Final inspection report

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. Following this, the full report was published on the 17th of September 2021. This response includes our response to the interim report along with a response to the expanded element for Recommendation 3 along with responses to the additional Recommendations 4 and 5.

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

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](#)

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

Simon Foster

West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner



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

The reports outlined three recommendations 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 reviewed 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.

Update following the expansion of Recommendation 3:

Further to the initial response submitted on the interim report published earlier in 2021; whereby I stated that 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. Indeed, the strengthening of the Victim's Code in 2021 seeks to address many of these issues yet there is clearly as demonstrated by the full report a significant gap in policing to demonstrate compliance.

The recent HMICFRS PEEL Inspection highlighted that the force's data for victims of crime shows that age and gender are well recorded whilst other protected characteristics (ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation) are not. This is an issue that the OPCC is aware of through various work streams with the Force and ways to improve recording are being explored.

This data is essential in understanding the demography of victims and offenders and is crucial in the commissioning of services to support victims of crime and in the commissioning of diversionary activity.

Recommendation 4 [Added as part of the full report]

All chief constables should immediately review and ensure that there are consistently high standards in their forces' responses to violence against women and girls and should be supported in doing so by national standards and data.

In response to the inspection, the national VAWG coordinator, national VAWG transport champions and NPCC VAIWG strategy and national VAWG framework were created. It is key that I ensure that the Chief Constable's team is well linked into the national VAWG coordinator and this compliments the work that my team is doing Regionally.

Further developments have included the inclusion of a VAWG SME lead within the force at Superintendent level for an interim period. This role has linked through to my office and also to other key forums such as the West Midlands Combined Authority where the two national VAWG transport champions sit who are working with partners to support reducing VAWG on public transport.

My office has been supporting the embedding of the force's Violence, Abuse and Intimidation Against Women and Girls (VAIWG) strategy as attached below which is loosely based on the NPCC VAIWG strategy nationally. In respect of the commitments of the NPCC to the VAIWG strategy; The NPCC state "this strategy should be very much seen as a work in progress, with the aim of becoming embedded in business as usual throughout policing," The strategy proposes that it runs from 2021-2024, and will need to include regular review points and updates in line with the plethora of upcoming national inspections and strategies as well as the pending independent enquiry into the murder of Sarah Everard. The NPCC need to ensure that there is a sufficient reviewing process of the need to update the strategy in line with the likelihood that significant change will be coming, this should be specified within the work plan and highlighted as to frequency within the strategy itself.

The closing statements read "Our next actions will directly impact upon the confidence that women and girls have in policing," which leads me to emphasise that this is a key turning point for both society and policing in the work to End Male Violence Abuse and Intimidation Against Women & Girls and there is a distinct need to recognise that women and girls will only have confidence in policing when there is an acknowledgment of the past and a commitment to continue to develop and embed good practice across the scope of the strategy's term. These are key elements which are important to hold the force to account on.

WMP VAIWG Strategy



final_VAWG_strategy.
pdf

Recommendation 5 [Added as part of the full report]

Immediate review of use of outcomes 15 and 16 in violence against women and girls' offences.

In the response I submitted to the similar recommendation in the HMICFRS review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic, I noted that in February 2021, the Domestic Abuse Lead conducted a series of meetings with Adult Abuse Investigation Sergeants to go through the requirements for OC15, OC16 and evidence led prosecution considerations (based on the HMICFRS assessment criteria). 2 x audits have been conducted on OC15/OC16 which provides assurance that their correct application is being applied.

PPU and CPS conduct bi-monthly audits of DA cases which both the police and CPS have NFA'd in order to identify if there are missed opportunities. To date, police decisions have been supported and 2 x evidence led CPS NFA cases which should have been prosecuted. An evidence led prosecution tool kit has been developed for investigators which has been launched.

WMP Domestic Abuse lead is also currently focusing heavily on outcome 14 and it's over-recording within the Domestic abuse arena where there is no reason why the offender would not be identified as they are a known domestic entity in any event. The system recording and the move to connect has affected the ability to effectively record in the interim but this is being evaluated and measures put in place to assist rectifying this.

The audit for domestic abuse case management, currently ongoing, will assess the effectiveness of those changes to ensure processes for managing domestic abuse cases are robust and the proposed benefits are being delivered. This will include areas such as response times, outcome rates, capacity monitoring, staff well-being and supporting victims.

In relation to the concerns and recommendations regarding outcome 16, attrition has been a long-held area of focus for the OPCC's Victims Commission and Victims and Witnesses Delivery Group (subgroup of the LCJB). This is also a key area of focus for the PCC with the ambition in his police and crime plan to see fewer instances where evidential problems prevent a charge being brought, fewer instances where cases are discontinued because the victim does not support a prosecution and identify the reasons for and ultimately reduce the number of investigations which are discontinued due to insufficient evidence where the victim supports police action (Crime Recording Outcome 15) and where victims feel unable to support police action (Crime Recording Outcome 16). The Peel inspection suggests we may want to scrutinise the Force to ensure there are auditable records for victims withdrawing support and this is something we will seek to progress through the access to justice work stream as we recognise records clearly describing why victims have withdrawn their support as a valuable source of information to identify barriers victims are facing in continuing with the reporting process and use this to direct and inform service improvements. Evidence-led and 'victimless' prosecutions have been a topic of conversation within the aforementioned multi-agency Victims and Witnesses Delivery Group and we hope to formalise work on this within the action plan in the near future, with a focus on Domestic Abuse and other crimes with the highest OC16 rates such as rape and sexual offences (RASSO).