



Home Office's Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

This briefing alerts members to the main components and policy implications of the Home Office's Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls strategy, published on 21 July.

Summary

The Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy sets out the government's key priorities and planned activities for tackling VAWG. The strategy focuses on four key themes:

- Prioritising Prevention
- Supporting Victims
- Pursuing Perpetrators
- Strengthening the System

The Strategy focus on key areas of concern, primarily public sexual harassment and abuse, sexual harassment and abuse in schools, and online safety and exposure to pornography.

Note on Terminology

In the context of the strategy, "Violence Against Women and Girls" refers to violent crimes that disproportionately, but not exclusively, affect women and girls such as rape, sexual harassment and assault, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), honour based violence, forced marriage and domestic abuse. The strategy includes all victims of such crimes, regardless of whether they are women and girls.

Context

The publication of this strategy follows on from the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 receiving royal assent in April, which introduced a range of provisions to support victims of Domestic Abuse including the creation of the statutory duty for local authorities to provide support for victims of domestic abuse in safe accommodation.

The strategy references other strategies, reviews and work programmes, as well as current and anticipated legislation. Several key areas relating to VAWG have been, or will be, dealt with in other strategies or publications, and thus are not fully addressed in this strategy.

- The strategy, while acknowledging Domestic Abuse as a major form of violence against women and girls, does not include extensive priorities relating to Domestic Abuse, as

these will be included in the upcoming Domestic Abuse Strategy.

- Reforms and improvements to the Police and Crown Prosecution Service's approach to investigating and prosecuting rape are addressed in the government's End to End Rape Review.
- Issues facing men and boys who experience the forms of abuse and violence discussed in the VAWG strategy will be addressed in a separate Men and Boys strategy
- Sexual Exploitation in the context of Modern Slavery will be addressed in a standalone Modern Slavery Strategy.

The strategy refers to the following upcoming legislation as vehicles for tackling VAWG

- The Online Safety Bill – draft introduced in the Queen's Speech in May 2021 - potential provisions include the creation of obligations on online content sharing platforms and search services to remove harmful material from their platforms and prevent children from accessing inappropriate material such as pornography.
- A new Victim's Bill –announced in the Queen's Speech in May 2021 – the Ministry of Justice will consult on the bill and consultation will include exploration of provision of community services for victims of domestic abuse and the statutory underpinning of the Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA) and Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) roles.
- The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill – currently in the House of Lords - provisions include removing the presumption against pre-charge bail and ending automatic release half way through sentences for certain violent offenders.

Key Provisions

Prioritising Prevention

- Work to reduce sexual harassment and abuse in public:
 - A £5 million Safety of Women at Night Fund, open to innovative bids, including from local authorities.
 - Piloting the StreetSafe Tool – an app for members of the public to report areas where they feel unsafe; data will be shared with local authorities and Police and Crime Commissioners.
- Work to tackle abuse in schools and prevent children and young people from experiencing VAWG:
 - The Department of Education (DoE) will develop non-statutory guidance and monitoring for teachers in the delivery of Relationship and Sex Education and will work to improve multiagency safeguarding in schools. Revised guidance from DoE on keeping children safe in education is to be published in September.
 - The DoE is also working with the Home Office to consider how to make resources and training on harmful sexual behaviours and sexual abuse available to both social workers and designated safeguarding leads.
 - The government will use the upcoming Online Safety Bill's pre-legislative scrutiny process to explore how best to protect children from online pornography.
 - The government will support raising the age of marriage and civil partnerships from 16 to 18 in England and Wales, when an appropriate legislative vehicle becomes available.
- The government will launch a communications and media campaign to tackle violence against women and girls.
- Invest £3 million in research to identify effective programmes for the prevention of VAWG, exploring both universal and targeted approaches.
- Legislate to introduce a duty on employers to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace and to create explicit protections from harassment by third parties.

Supporting Victims

- £1.5 million in funding will support “by and for” and specialist services, including a helpline for victims of revenge porn.
- The government will commission a support service for rape victims, to be accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, available online or over the phone.
- Local pathfinder projects will be developed by NHS England & Improvement, to provide trauma informed Mental Health support for sexual abuse victims and survivors, with a focus on collaboration between health services and the VCSE sector.
- Work to support victims of sexual harassment and abuse in higher education settings:
 - The Office for Students will encourage universities to review and update policies and procedures for dealing with harassment and abuse, and the government will explore how the Office for Students can be empowered to do more, such as connecting the Statement of Expectations to conditions of registration.
 - The government will review options to limit the use of Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) in sexual harassment cases.

Pursuing Perpetrators

- An Independent Reviewer will be appointed by the Home Office to review police management of registered sex offenders in the community.
- Additional funding will be provided to the National Crime Agency to develop new methods for identifying serial sex offenders.
- The Department for Health and Social Care will work to criminalise “virginity testing”, to be brought forward when parliamentary time allows, and will set up an independent expert panel to consider the clinical and ethical aspects of hymenoplasty and consider whether it should be criminalised.
- The government will work with the College of Policing to produce new advice to police officers to more effectively respond to sexual harassment and “Sex for Rent”
- The Home Office will work with MHCLG to better understand the effectiveness of existing sentences in relation to sex for rent, and will consider whether further reforms are needed.
- The government will carefully consider the recommendations of the Law Commission Review into Online harms to introduce new offences such as “Cyberflashing” - any new offences will be created through the upcoming Online Safety Bill.
- The Strategy reiterates findings from the Ministry of Justice’s [End to End Rape Review](#) on the need to reform both policing and the Crown Prosecution Service to address the decrease in rape prosecutions and convictions in recent years.

Strengthening the System

- There will be a new national Policing Lead for tackling Violence Against Women and Girls.
- The Department for Transport will nominate a VAWG Transport Champion, to tackle sexual harassment and violence on public transport. There will be a range of activity to tackle sexual violence on public transport, including the formation of a sexual harassment on rail steering group and updates to training on harassment for British Transport Police.
- The Home Office will commission a review into the effectiveness of the Disclosure and Barring (DBS) regime.
- The Home Office has requested that police record when violent crimes are perceived by the victim to be motivated by hostility based on their sex. The government will explore options to better understand the experience of such victims.
- There will be a focus on improving safeguarding in sport, including exploring ways to create eligibility for criminal record checks for self-employed people in sports, and criminalising sexual activity between sports coaches and 16 and 17 year-olds in their care through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill.
- The Home Office is to publish a refreshed national statement of expectations for VAWG services, including guidance on commissioning based best practice.

Funding

The Home Office has allocated £43 million to projects tackling violence against women and girls, which includes £25 million allocated to targeting perpetrators. The Safety of Women at Night Fund is open for bids until 1 September 2021 ([guidance on bidding is available here](#)).

Commentary

This Strategy brings a welcome focus on prevention, and targets key areas that have been high profile in the public mind over the past year – especially violence in schools and in public places. There is a small amount of funding attached to the strategy that local authorities can access. The increased investment in research and data from the new Streetsafe App should support local authorities to make informed commissioning and planning decisions. Additional research into preventative programmes will hopefully provide useful resources for boroughs looking to commission preventative services. Support to schools in delivering Relationship and Sex Education will be valuable, as the quality of RSE was noted as a key issue in the Ofsted investigation into sexual abuse in schools.

Despite being a strategy aimed at tackling Violence Against Women and Girls, this document takes a focus which excludes both domestic abuse and experiences of rape victims navigating the criminal justice system. In their response to the publication of the strategy, Women's Aid raised concerns about the separation of domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls, as women and girls experience abuse across public and domestic settings and these experiences are often connected. This strategy concentrates on violence committed against women and girls in public, online and within certain institutions such as schools and universities.

The strategy provides some dedicated funding for specific areas; however, the additional funding is relatively modest and does not include any long-term funding to services providing support to victims of violence against women and girls. The government has already committed £125 million for 2021/22 in funding for local authorities to deliver the new statutory duty to provide support for victims of domestic abuse in safe accommodation, as well as other ad hoc funding pots for prevention and support services, including £19 million committed in the last budget in March 2021. The current funding being provided as part of the Domestic Abuse Act does not include funding for community-based services and concerns have been raised that the lack of consistent, predictable funding undermines the sustainability of support services and limits long term planning. There may be more funding allocated through the upcoming Domestic Abuse strategy, and future legislation (in particular, the upcoming Victim's Bill) will provide opportunities for local authorities to call for more funding for services through the consultation process. The upcoming spending review is also an opportunity to call for more funding to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls.

There are some gaps within the strategy. For example, there is limited discussion of victims of VAWG who have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), or on the issues facing women in the Criminal Justice System, who are disproportionately impacted by VAWG.

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Links:

[Home Office policy paper: Tackling violence against women and girls strategy](#)

This member briefing has been circulated to:

Portfolio holders and those members who requested policy briefings in the following categories: Crime and Public Protection

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Glossary

By and For Services - Specialist services aimed at specific groups delivered by and for these groups (for example, a service designed for BME women, ran by BME women).

Cyberflashing - Unsolicited sending of obscene images.

Hymenoplasty – a form of cosmetic surgery that aims to repair the hymen, based on the misconception that an intact hymen is a sign of virginity.

Revenge Porn – The sharing of private, sexual materials, either photos or videos, of another person without their consent and with the purpose of causing embarrassment or distress.

Virginity Testing – a pseudoscientific “test” based on inaccurate and harmful conceptions of sex and virginity, based on the misconception that virginity can be proved by examining the hymen to see if it is intact.