

Interim report

Inspection into how effectively the
police engage with women and girls

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Foreword

In March 2021, the Home Secretary commissioned Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) to inspect the effectiveness of police engagement with women and girls. Our final report will be published in September 2021.

This interim report sets out findings and recommendations from one part of this inspection, which focuses on how effectively the police respond to violence against women and girls (VAWG) offences. These are violent and high-harm crimes that disproportionately affect women and girls, such as domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking, and female genital mutilation (FGM).

The police approach to VAWG offences has been a focus of many of our inspections since 2015. For this interim report, we completed an analysis of themes and findings from these inspections (including those currently in the field), and assessed progress made against our recommendations. We also consulted widely with experts in this area of policing, through an external reference group convened for this inspection. We thank all reference group members for their invaluable contributions to our work.

We are publishing this report now for two reasons. First, so our findings can inform the government's updated VAWG and domestic abuse strategies, due for publication in summer/autumn 2021. And second, because our findings show the need for immediate, radical and cross-system action to respond with greater pace and urgency to what we consider to be an epidemic of offending against women and girls.

The statistics on the prevalence and range of these crimes are stark and shocking. To give just three examples: the Crime Survey for England and Wales showed that an estimated 1.6 million women (and 757,000 men) in England and Wales experienced domestic abuse in the 12 months to March 2020; over a third of all police-recorded sexual offences are against children, with girls more likely to experience sexual abuse; and in the 12 months to September 2020, the police recorded 153,136 rape and other sexual offences. The victim was female in 84 percent of these cases.

Each of the cases that make up these statistics represents a woman or girl who has experienced harm and suffering. This was most recently brought to the forefront of everyone's mind in March 2021 by the disappearance of 33-year-old Sarah Everard in south London. Her body was found in woodland in Ashford, Kent a week later. One month later, Julia James, a police community support officer in Kent Police, was killed whilst out walking her dog. As we are publishing this report, the trial is continuing of the man accused of murdering Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman in a park in north west London in June 2020. Although rare, these abhorrent and chilling events acted as a catalyst for women and girls across the country to raise concerns and fears for

their own safety, drawing on their personal experiences of inappropriate behaviour and abuse.

Our review of inspection evidence found that the police have made vast improvements over the past ten years in how they respond to and investigate VAWG crimes. For instance, we have reported on improved and more consistent risk assessments; better identification of repeat [victims](#), to ensure more tailored responses, safeguarding measures and support; an increased use of body-worn video, to capture evidence at the scene of an incident; committed and professional police officers and staff; and passionate and visible local and national leaders, dedicated to improving services for victims. This has been achieved against a backdrop of increased reporting (some of historic crimes), the continuing effects of austerity on policing and partner-agency budgets, and the introduction of new crime types, such as coercive control.

The police should maintain this momentum and build on these improvements. However, as a member of our external reference group put it: “We can’t just police our way out of violence against women and girls”. It is a societal problem that requires a societal response. Our analysis of past and current inspection evidence leads us to conclude that improving the police approach – and making recommendations aimed solely at this – isn’t enough. Significant, system-wide reform to the response to VAWG offences is urgently required.

When a crime has taken place, there needs to be a seamless approach across the criminal justice system to make sure that the best support is in place for the victim; investigations are timely and robust, and strong cases are built; and the perpetrator is brought to justice. Regrettably, our inspection evidence shows this isn’t always the case. Court delays are still a significant concern in some areas. In some crime types, including rape and domestic abuse, only a fraction of those cases that are reported by the victim reach the point of charge and then prosecution. Investigations are too often subject to drift and delay, and joint working between the police and the Crown Prosecution Service can sometimes be ineffective.

There also needs to be better working across the whole public sector to respond to VAWG offences – including through activity to prevent them happening in the first place. These crimes are deep-rooted and pervasive in our society. Criminal justice alone cannot uproot them, nor do victims always want a criminal justice outcome. Although the focus of this inspection has been on the policing response, our inspections have found there isn’t always an effective whole-system approach in which all partner agencies (such as police, local authorities, and health and education services) work together to safeguard victims and help prevent further offending.

The needs of victims must be a central focus of any investigation across the criminal justice system. This is both in recognition of the trauma many have experienced, and because this should help make sure they are in the best position to support a prosecution, if this is the right option for them, and so achieve justice. However, in too many cases, our inspections find inconsistencies, and sometimes failures, in the support given to victims.

In parallel with this victim focus, if all forces are to follow the example of the best, they need the capacity, capability and relentless focus on using the full extent of their police

powers to relentlessly pursue and disrupt perpetrators. Again, this will help prevent further offending (we will say more about the critical importance of preventative work in our final report).

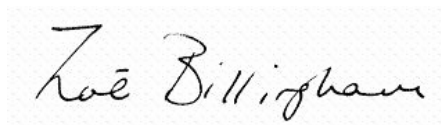
We conclude that there needs to be a radical and bold shift in thinking about how to tackle crimes that disproportionately affect women and girls. This should be supported with multi-year, sustained funding, backed by solid evidence, and structured through an overarching governance system and framework, which may need a statutory footing.

We have made three overarching recommendations in this interim report and set out some of the specific steps we consider necessary to achieve this shift. The detail of how this should happen needs to be rapidly determined by government, with full input from leaders within policing and partner agencies, and from the voluntary and community sector.

Our recommendations, detailed in Section 4, are:

1. There should be an immediate and unequivocal commitment that the response to VAWG offences is an absolute priority for government, policing, the criminal justice system, and public sector partnerships. This needs to be supported at a minimum by a relentless focus on these crimes; mandated and clear responsibilities; and sufficient funding so that all partner agencies can work effectively as part of a whole-system approach to reduce and prevent the harms these offences are causing.
2. The relentless pursuit and disruption of adult perpetrators should be a national priority for the police, resourced with the appropriate level of capability and capacity.
3. Structures and funding should be put in place to make sure victims receive tailored and consistent support.

We will give further details on these recommendations in our final report. This will also draw on the findings of new inspection activity, and on our work to gather the views of female victims and survivors themselves.



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Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary

Background

On 26 March 2021, the Home Secretary commissioned HMICFRS, under Section 54(2B) of the Police Act 1996, to carry out a thematic inspection into the ways in which the police work with female [victims](#), offenders and witnesses. This is our interim report. We will publish our final report in September 2021.

Our inspection question for this work is: How can the police better protect women and girls? We are assessing this through three major pieces of work:

1. a review of all our existing inspection evidence, and progress made against past recommendations;
2. lived experience work with women and girls themselves; and
3. new thematic inspection activity.

This interim report gives our initial findings and recommendations from the first of these three strands of work, and focuses on the police response to VAWG offences. We agreed to publish this before our final report to inform the government's considerations as part of its forthcoming VAWG strategy update.

However, we recognise that women and girls can be subjected to many crimes, and there are crimes where those with different genders and with other protected characteristics are also disproportionately affected. We envisage that some of our findings and recommendations, if adopted, will lead to improvements to support others as well.

Evidence used in this report

The evidence used to inform this report is based on our review of findings from our previous inspections.

We have reported on the police approach to different VAWG offences in multiple inspections, and we continue to do so – evidence from 2021 is included in this report. The inspections reviewed for this report include force-level PEEL assessments, rolling child protection programmes, and thematic inspections focused on domestic abuse; rape; missing children; honour-based abuse; harassment; and modern slavery and human trafficking. We also considered data and findings from other reports and sources, including those published by the Home Office. A list of documents reviewed can be found in Annex A.

We also discussed our evidence in detail with our expert reference group, which includes representatives from government, policing, academia and the voluntary and community sector. This enabled us to make the overarching recommendations in this interim report. We will provide further detail on these in our final report.

Section 1: Defining the problem

VAWG crimes result in devastating harm to individuals and society.

The domestic abuse charity [SafeLives](#) estimates that, each year, more than 100,000 people in the UK are at high and imminent risk of being murdered or seriously injured because of domestic abuse. Women are much more likely to be a victim of high-risk or severe domestic abuse than men. On average, seven women a month are killed by a current or former partner in England and Wales. Data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales indicates that over twice as many women are victims of stalking compared to men, and over three times as many women are victims of domestic abuse-related stalking. In addition, Home Office data shows 13,692 cases of coercive and controlling behaviour were reported to the police between October 2019 and September 2020, and there were 10,360 offences of exposure and voyeurism in the year ending September 2020.

In its June 2021 Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges, Ofsted reported that girls are disproportionately affected by sexual abuse and violence. The review found extremely high levels of sexual harassment and online sexual abuse between children, with girls being much more likely to be subject to sexist name-calling, online abuse, 'up-skirting' (that is, taking intimate photos underneath a person's clothes without their consent) and unwanted touching in school corridors. The review found that the frequency of harmful sexual behaviours meant that, for some children, this had become the norm, and many saw no point in reporting incidents because they were so common.

The challenge is a global one. The United Nations estimates that 736 million women worldwide – almost one in three of all women – have been subjected to intimate-partner violence, non-partner sexual violence or both at least once in their lives. This figure doesn't include sexual harassment. Less than 40 percent of women worldwide who experience violence seek help of any sort.

The impact and scale of the harm caused to victims is often immeasurable

Victims often suffer in silence. The trauma and experience of abuse can have severe psychological, emotional and physical consequences for them and their families. These harms are long-lived and can be [intergenerational](#). People who are vulnerable are also susceptible to wider offending behaviour, including gang involvement and exploitation, including through, for example, [county lines](#) offending, as well as other complex issues such as mental ill health and drug and alcohol misuse.^{1, 2}

On average, [SafeLives](#) estimates that victims at high risk of serious harm live with domestic abuse for two to three years before seeking help. Someone who has previously been a victim is more likely to be one again in future.

VAWG causes high demand on the police and other public services

In the 12 months to September 2020, police forces in England and Wales recorded 56,152 offences of rape. In the same period, 96,984 other sexual offences were recorded – a total of 153,136 sexual offences. The victim was female in 84 percent of these cases.

The number of sexual offences recorded by the police has almost tripled in recent years. This increase reflects improvements in police recording and the increased confidence of victims in reporting sexual offences. However, comparison of police crime figures with CSEW self-reported data on crimes experienced shows that the number of offences recorded by the police remains well below the number of actual victims.

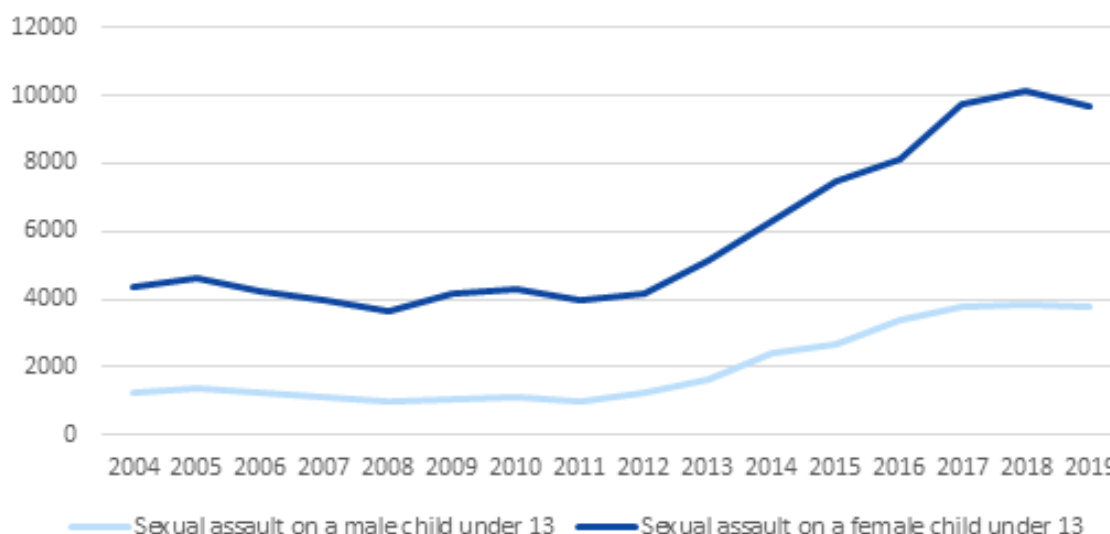
In the 12 months to March 2020, the police service in England and Wales received approximately 1,150,000 domestic abuse calls – an average of 130 calls an hour. In an average 24-hour period, there were around 3,100 domestic abuse calls, resulting in control room staff recording some 3,000 incidents and 2,200 crimes every day. Domestic abuse-related crime constitutes 1 in 6 (15 percent) of all crime recorded by the police in England and Wales and over a third (35 percent) of all recorded violence-against-the-person crimes.

Figure 1 shows that the police recorded more than 2.5 times as many sexual assaults on girls under the age of 13 compared to boys under the age of 13 in the year ending March 2019. Since 2004, they have consistently recorded nearly double the number of sexual assaults on girls in comparison with boys.

¹ [PEEL: Police effectiveness 2015 \(vulnerability\) – A national overview](#), HMIC, 14 December 2015.

² [Violence Against Women and Girls \(VAWG\) strategy 2021 to 2024: call for evidence](#), Home Office, 10 December 2020.

Figure 1: Police-recorded sexual assaults on children aged 13 and under across England and Wales, April 2014 to March 2020



Source: Office for National Statistics – Police-recorded crime.

Note: Years run from April to March of the following year

The Home Office estimated that, in 2016/17, the social and economic costs of domestic abuse totalled £66 billion for victims identified in England and Wales ([Home Office Research Report 107](#)). The largest component of the estimated cost was derived from the physical and emotional harms inflicted on victims (£47.3 billion), particularly the emotional harms (that is, the fear, anxiety and depression experienced by victims because of domestic abuse), which accounted for most of the overall costs.

The cost to the economy was also considerable: the lost output from time off work and reduced productivity due to domestic abuse was estimated at £14 billion. The other costs were to health services (£2.3 billion), the police (£1.3 billion), victim services (£724m), and the wider criminal justice system. The costs to victim services included expenditure by voluntary and community organisations and the time given up by volunteers to support victims. In 2015/16, the total cost of rape in England and Wales was estimated to be £4.8 billion. (Figures from [The economic and social costs of crime second edition](#), Home Office, 2018).

Section 2: Current response to VAWG: review from our analysis of previous inspection findings

This section summarises and presents themes from more than 20 HMICFRS inspection reports about the police approach to VAWG offences. These are listed in Annex A. We analysed the recommendations we have made most frequently; the evidence we have on the good progress made against many of these recommendations; and the barriers to improvement in some other areas.

Victims of VAWG offences aren't always given consistent and appropriate support through the criminal justice system

Victims' needs should be a central consideration in investigation, and victims should be fully supported in achieving the right outcome for their individual case and circumstances.

The police have a range of powers to tackle VAWG but need to make sure they are being used consistently and effectively in a way that supports the victim and ultimately makes them feel safer. The best outcome may not always be one within the criminal justice system, so it is essential that the views of the victim are fully understood and that they are consulted during the decision-making process.

The needs of the victim are often complex. This means that the range of support they need should be carefully considered and co-ordinated across multiple partner agencies, including health and local authorities. Effective pathways need to be in place to make sure the victim is offered support based on their individual needs (which might include one or more protected characteristics) and is reassured that they will be kept safe from any further violence from the perpetrator.

The most effective services are those that offer end-to-end support, consider the entirety of the victim's situation and are informed by their trauma. Police forces have some support available, but this is often generic and doesn't provide the specific support each victim needs.

Given all victims have their own specific (and sometimes complex) needs, police officers understandably aren't always best placed to give the support required. This often leads to an inconsistent approach throughout the process, starting from when the police first receive the report of an incident. Often, the victim doesn't have one person to act as a point of contact and with whom they can build a working relationship. Victims also describe having a poor experience due to staff members'

and/or officers' lack of empathy and understanding. Victims we talked to as part of our 2021 joint inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's (CPS) response to rape cases described feeling as if they were the ones under investigation, rather than the perpetrators.

Delays in investigation and, if charges are brought, future court dates can also put immense pressure on victims.

When tailored and specialist support is in place, it makes it more likely that the victim will see through the criminal justice system process. Victims also see it as a positive intervention – for example, specialist support services such as independent domestic violence advisors/advocates (IDVAs) and sexual violence advisors/advocates (ISVAs) can provide wellbeing and practical support to victims throughout the criminal justice system. This level of support isn't always available, however, nor is it consistent across all offences that disproportionately affect women and girls. While we have found some evidence of forces and advisors/advocates working well together, the police aren't always aware of the importance of the role, and there isn't always enough funding in place to support it. In addition, quite often, the support required by the victim goes beyond what the IDVA and ISVA can offer and should include a wider range of community-based services, some but not all commissioned by the police.

The police don't always investigate VAWG-related offences effectively

In every inspection we reviewed, there was evidence of dedicated, committed professionals providing an excellent policing response to some very vulnerable victims, often in difficult circumstances and with high caseloads. However, there were also some consistent themes of areas for improvement.

Some of these – such as delays in investigation, slow criminal justice system processes, and a lack of specialist resource – don't just affect VAWG victims. What is of particular concern with VAWG offences is the number of cases the police close as requiring no further action (NFA). This is most commonly due to:

- the Home Office-defined outcome 15, where the victim wants to proceed but the police consider there is insufficient evidence to do so; or
- [outcome 16](#), where the victim no longer wants to proceed with the case, resulting in there being insufficient evidence to proceed.

In our earlier reports, we expressed concern about the number of reported domestic abuse crimes the police decide NFA. Recent figures show the police now decide not to continue to investigate three in every four domestic abuse crimes reported to them. This will be the right decision in some cases – in some historic cases, for instance. But there is variation among forces in their use of outcomes 15 and 16, and many forces are unable to explain why these figures are so high.

In our [Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic](#) we asked all forces to take immediate action to review their use of outcome 15, outcome 16 and evidence-led prosecutions. This was to make sure that:

- domestic abuse investigations guaranteed that all attempts to work with victims were explored and all lines of evidence considered, so that, in all cases, the best possible end results for victims were achieved;
- there was regular and effective supervision of investigations; and
- the use of outcomes 15 and 16 was appropriate, and the reasons for using either of them, including auditable evidence of working with victims, was clearly recorded.

In addition, half of all sexual offences recorded by the police don't proceed, due to difficulties assembling evidence. For example, the success of evidence-led prosecutions, where the police go ahead with the prosecution even though the victim is reluctant to support it, has been limited. Although these could be a useful advance in keeping victims safe, they aren't always carried out effectively, and, as such, there isn't always enough available evidence to support a prosecution. In addition, neither the police nor the CPS consistently record which cases are evidence-led, making it impossible to analyse the data or learn from good practice.

The low prosecution rates in cases involving VAWG offences are indefensible

A successful prosecution requires a thorough investigation by the police, and good joint working between the police and prosecutors to build the case. But many cases that are reported to the police don't proceed further through the criminal justice system. We have significant concerns about the referral and prosecution rates for VAWG offences. For example, rape convictions have been dropping since 2017, and fell to a record low last year. As of April 2020, [Home Office data](#) shows only 1.4 percent of rape cases reported to the police in 2019/20 resulted in a suspect being charged.³ For domestic abuse incidents, the CPS recorded only 47,534 successful prosecutions of offences in 2019/20, despite the police recording more than 750,000 offences.

The lack of prosecutions for such serious crimes, coupled with the sometimes disjointed arrangements made by partner agencies within the criminal justice system, including the police and the CPS, again contribute to victims' lack of confidence in the process. Given the courage shown by women and girls in reporting offences in the first instance, a better and more accountable system is needed to make sure the criminal justice system is achieving the best and most effective outcome for the victim.

³ In the same period, 33.4 percent of rape cases reported to the police had not yet been assigned an outcome. On average, it takes 98 days to assign an outcome to a rape case, reflecting the sensitive nature and complexity of investigating such offences. As these cases are resolved, the numbers assigned to other outcomes will increase.

The police have made welcome improvements in recent years, but these aren't enough to tackle the epidemic of VAWG crime

The focus of policing has changed over the past ten years, with a shift towards supporting vulnerable people, and notable improvements in how the police approach VAWG offences. These improvements have included stronger leadership and the prioritisation of these crimes, better training, and, in some cases, more effective working with partner agencies.

The roll-out of further police powers, including [domestic violence protection orders](#) (DVPOs), sexual violence protection orders, marriage prevention orders, sexual risk orders and stalking protection orders have provided another avenue of support to the victim. These have had some positive impact, particularly when there is no option to charge the perpetrator.

Further action has been led by other agencies, as well as central government through its domestic abuse and VAWG strategies. This has included the introduction of significant new legislation, including, most recently, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. This followed the introduction of other legislation covering the specific offences of stalking, forced marriage, failure to protect from FGM and revenge pornography, as well as the expanded definition of domestic abuse to include coercive or controlling behaviour in an intimate or family relationship. These new offences put extra demands on the police, including the need for further training and specialisation.

Our inspections have found that training across forces in England and Wales is inconsistent. In addition, some forces couldn't tell us who had been trained, whether updates were available, or whether or not the training had been effective.

The workload of specialist officers and staff responding to VAWG offences are often too heavy. Forces also told us that funding hadn't kept pace with the growth in demand in this area as a result of both more offences having been reported and the increased breadth of reported offences.

There is clearly a risk that police forces aren't able to prioritise all these devastating crimes to the same extent. For example, the Home Office [Review of the controlling or coercive behaviour offence](#) showed that, in 35 percent of such offences in 2018/19, there was insufficient evidence to charge, despite the victim wanting to progress with the case. This proportion was higher than for all domestic abuse-related offences (24 percent), but similar to that for domestic abuse-related stalking (33 percent). In some cases, this was the result of a police officer's lack of understanding of the legal powers available to apply to offence types and the evidence needed for an investigation of that crime type to support a prosecution.

The police need the capacity and capability to cope with the changing demand

In a small number of forces, high-risk cases, such as those involving serious sexual offences and high-risk domestic abuse, are still too often being allocated to response officers who don't have the necessary training and experience to deal with them. In addition, response teams often work in shift patterns that can cause delays in the investigation and in maintaining contact with the victim. More could also be done to deal with volume crime (that is, any crimes that, because of the sheer numbers committed, have a significant impact on the community and the ability of the police to tackle them), such as stalking and harassment, as these are too often being identified as low-risk and being resolved through a call resolution centre without any further action. This means vulnerable victims aren't receiving the level of service they need, and safeguarding measures are being overlooked. These problems have been prevalent for years and continue as demand on the police increases.

Where forces have dedicated domestic abuse officers, or a public protection unit with specific staff responsible for investigating and safeguarding victims, these personnel usually focus on victims assessed as high-risk, and generally deal better with such cases than if they are allocated to generalists. However, in many forces, domestic abuse investigations are still being allocated based on crime type and complexity, rather than on an assessment of risk to the victim. This is consistent with the findings in our report [*Increasingly everyone's business: A progress report on the police response to domestic abuse*](#).

Most forces have reported that they have capability and capacity gaps in areas involving vulnerability. Many have ongoing vacancies and find recruitment into this area difficult. One in six crimes that a police officer encounters will involve domestic abuse – a figure that would be even higher if other VAWG crimes were included. This is a complex area, with a heavy workload that requires officers to manage high-risk investigations for which they need the correct experience, awareness and supervision. These cases are long and need a sustainable effort to succeed.

There should be a shift in police culture away from prioritising early closure or investigations being discontinued towards getting the best outcome for the victim, whether or not that outcome is within the criminal justice system. The evidence around staff perception and culture is an area we intend to explore further during this inspection and report on in more detail in our final report.

We also feel there will then be the opportunity to discuss culture inside the police force, such as offences by police officers and staff, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue.

Successful police work can create more work for the police, again increasing demand. For example, the growth in the identification and prosecution of those committing online abuse and exploitation of children has resulted in an increase in the number of people on the sex offenders' register.

In addition, since the publication of our report [Everyone's business](#) in 2014, there has been a 181 percent increase in the number of domestic abuse-related crimes recorded by police forces in England and Wales. In the 12 months to 31 March 2020, the volume of recorded crime was 269,700 compared with 758,941 in the 12 months to 31 August 2013.

The capacity and capability gaps can't be fixed through training and recruiting new police officers alone. Consideration needs to be given to recruitment, progression, support and succession planning. Each force needs to consider how it makes sure its officers and staff have the skills and competence they need to do their job. There also needs to be further focus on policing practices to make sure the crimes perpetrated against women and girls are being investigated to an appropriate standard and quality. Without this – as well as multi-year and sustained funding – it will be impossible for forces to be in a position where they can make improvements.

In multi-agency working, roles and responsibilities need to be clearer and more consistent

The police are a significant partner agency in tackling VAWG, but they cannot do it alone. It needs a multi-agency approach, with clear roles and responsibilities across the criminal justice system and other agencies, as well as multi-year and sustained funding and the motivation to succeed. Each partner agency – whether local authority, health, social care or education – needs to have clear responsibilities and play an active role in the partnership. There are some examples where this happens, but usually on a small scale and without enough funding to achieve longer-term goals.

The [multi-agency risk assessment conference](#) is one example of a forum where domestic abuse cases are considered and victims at greatest risk identified in order to develop multi-agency intervention plans to support them and prevent their perpetrator reoffending. By their very nature, they have only ever considered the highest-risk cases. Referrals can come from police or other agencies, but there isn't often a joined-up approach between the various groups who take part. For example, within one family, the adult victim's case and some elements of a child's case may be considered through one multi-agency process and other elements of the child's case through another. This can result in the doubling of effort and, occasionally, gaps in provision.

Other examples of a multi-agency approach include multi-agency tasking and coordination (MATAC) interventions, in which partners work locally to target and disrupt serial perpetrators or domestic abuse; or the Harm Reduction Unit (HRU) run by Cheshire Constabulary, the Probation Service, Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust, and Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. Its aim is to manage the risks associated with stalking and serial domestic abuse, and to provide specialist independent advocacy support for victims. The victim-centred approach enables the HRU to shine a spotlight on both the victim and the behaviour of serial perpetrators through a range of evidence-based interventions aimed at holding the perpetrator to account. The HRU's multi-agency working enables it to make sure the victim is fully supported, and the day-to-day management of the perpetrator is co-ordinated, seamless and responsive, giving them the best opportunity to overcome and change their thinking and behaviour.

The police, together with other partner agencies, should have a relentless and consistent focus on protecting the victim and preventing further offending by bringing perpetrators to justice and identifying early opportunities to address harmful behaviour by children

The first duty of the police must be to protect the life of the victim through the reduction or removal of risk.

Where the perpetrator is under the age of 18, the police need to have the skills and experience to address early signs of harmful behaviour and determine when an alternative intervention to the criminal justice system is required, including through using out-of-court disposal. This is an area we will make further comment on in our final report.

Where the perpetrator is an adult, every police officer should have the appropriate skills and training to use the full extent of their powers to investigate and, where a crime has been committed, bring them to justice.

Some police forces have achieved this to a certain extent and made recent improvements. Notably, with the aid of leading academics, Avon and Somerset Police has developed Project Bluestone. The pathway project took an evidence-based approach to transforming the policing response to rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO). It reviewed how the force was dealing with RASSO offences against five pillars. The five pillars were:

1. suspect-focused investigation;
2. disrupting repeat offenders;
3. procedural justice for victims;
4. learning and development and wellbeing of investigators; and
5. using data more effectively in RASSO investigations.

This established areas of improvement and several recommendations were made. The model will now be embedded, trialled and evaluated on a rolling basis so learning and good practice can be shared immediately with all forces. It also provided evidence of the benefits of having dedicated specialist RASSO investigators.

Project Bluestone depends on strong collaborative working relationships with academia, the ISVA service, and other agencies specialising in sexual violence and abuse. Avon and Somerset Police also works closely with its local CPS RASSO unit, with promising results.

Building on Project Bluestone, the cross-government [end-to-end rape review](#) published in June 2021 announced Operation Soteria. This will see five forces and corresponding CPS areas testing innovative ways for police and prosecutors to progress rape cases. If applied nationally, this approach has the potential to transform how the criminal justice system, particularly policing and the CPS, tackles RASSO crimes in future. We intend to consider whether this approach could be expanded further in our final report.

Police engagement with programmes aimed at perpetrators can also have a positive impact. For example, the [Drive Partnership](#) (comprising Respect, SafeLives and Social Finance, which receives local funding from PCCs, among others) works with high-harm, high-risk serial perpetrators of domestic abuse to prevent their abusive behaviour and protect victims. It supports perpetrators to change and works with partner agencies such as the police and local authorities to prevent abuse. This has shown some excellent results in both reducing reoffending and keeping victims and their children safer.

There are also police-led initiatives, such as Project Vigilant, led by Thames Valley Police, which is a proactive perpetrator initiative aimed at preventing sexual offences in the night-time economy. From June 2021, both uniformed and plain-clothed officers will be carrying out local patrols to identify people who may be displaying signs of predatory behaviour after nightfall.

The Drive Partnership is co-ordinating the first domestic abuse perpetrator strategy for England and Wales, which will be published later this year. The [call for action campaign](#) which describes the strategy has been created and co-signed by a range of partners across the public and voluntary sector including health; social care; housing; probation; substance misuse; and victims' and children's services and commissioners. This emphasises the need for a multi-agency framework, alongside high-quality victim services (including for children), and an effective criminal justice response.

These approaches all highlight the importance of a multi-agency approach to tackling and disrupting VAWG, and the need for proper evaluation to understand what works in changing perpetrators' behaviour. While forces may recognise the benefits of these types of schemes, they are often run on a small scale for a brief period as part of a pilot, without any subsequent shared learning or evaluation. The only way to fully realise the benefits is for better co-ordination of both activity and thinking at both a local and a national level, supported by multi-year, sustained funding.

Better evidence is needed to improve accountability at all levels

A more sophisticated understanding of the data and evidence is needed to fully understand the extent of the challenge presented by VAWG. This includes data to inform prevention activity and response, as well as local and national co-ordination.

There is currently no consistent method used by the police or the wider criminal justice system to understand how the system is performing when it comes to VAWG crime. Although these questions are complex, there is a need for a defined set of parameters that can be used consistently at all levels to establish whether the approaches being taken are the most effective.

One area where understanding needs to be improved is how the police support victims with certain protected characteristics. For example, it is mandatory for the police to collect data on gender, but not on ethnicity. Policing needs to have a better understanding of whether certain crime disproportionately affects different parts of our community. This will inform activity on early intervention and prevention, as well as helping the police to make sure they are properly equipped to respond to changing demand.

Section 3: Call for change

There is a major need for an immediate, co-ordinated and relentless focus on the whole system to tackle these offences

Despite some improvements, the current response to VAWG crime is unsustainable. While there is some extremely effective practice across England and Wales, this is inconsistent in too many respects. The demand on the police associated with these crimes is also increasing, as is the number of offences not resulting in a charge or a timely prosecution. We cannot keep making the same recommendations and expect them to have the impact that is needed. A radical refocus and shift is required.

The new approach should be multifaceted; act to prevent VAWG from happening in the first place; support victims/survivors; and relentlessly pursue and disrupt offenders with the full force of police powers and the law.

To achieve this, we need to take a whole-system approach, with the following characteristics:

- an overarching and unequivocal cross-government ambition to reduce VAWG crimes, supported by prioritisation of and co-ordination of the response to these offences, and clear measures to evaluate progress;
- mandated responsibilities and better accountability for and heightened expectations of all national and local partners and criminal justice system agencies, including requirements for joint working, which may need a statutory footing. Elements of the multi-agency arrangements in place for child protection may provide a model for elements of this;
- improved prioritisation and determination at a local level;
- senior leaders, sponsors and politicians acting to relentlessly agitate the system and challenge decision-makers;
- sustained, multi-year funding linked to making improvements to tackle these offences, including a focus on preventing them occurring in the first place;
- collection of, access to and action on real-time data and analytics, locally and nationally, which includes accurate information about the demographics of victims and offenders;
- close collaboration and effective partnership at both national and local level to identify and pursue offenders, and to prevent further offences occurring;
- consistent support for victims to make sure their voices are heard throughout the process via an independent advocate; and

- greater evidence to understand emerging trends, best practice, and how well victims are being supported through the criminal justice system, and to improve performance.

There also needs to be an upwards shift in priority in how the police pursue and disrupt offenders

VAWG offences need to be a higher priority, both within forces and on a national scale. Ways of working should be informed by other areas of policing, including [serious and organised crime](#) and counter-terrorism, in terms of both prioritisation and resource. Neither approach is a perfect fit for tackling VAWG crime, but there are certain characteristics that could be applied to an effective whole-system approach.

Both the government's Serious and Organised Crime Strategy and CONTEST, the UK's Counter-Terrorism Strategy, are split into four work streams that are known as the [four Ps](#): prevent, pursue, protect and prepare. They are all seen as a national priority and, as such, are included as a threat within the [Strategic Policing Requirement](#) (SPR). Both areas are seen as a cross-government priority, are well resourced and funded, and are supported by strong legislative frameworks that provide the means by which to hold all partner agencies to account. This could be used both by police forces and nationally as the basis of a model for tackling VAWG, and to set a clear message as to the scale of the problem. For example:

- **Prepare:** to make sure all involved are sufficiently prepared to respond to VAWG, and to provide the right support;
- **Prevent:** to take action to prevent crimes against women and girls before they are committed, including through working with partner agencies to tackle the issues that can contribute to someone adopting harmful behaviour;
- **Pursue:** to relentlessly pursue and disrupt adult perpetrators and take immediate action to address harmful behaviours in children; and
- **Protect:** to strengthen our protection of women and girls to stop them becoming victims of violent crime, and close opportunities for individuals or groups of perpetrators to cause them harm.

To further support this, the College of Policing could look to develop and adopt a VAWG minimum standard aimed at creating a consistent and clear standard for police investigations. The Home Secretary could then consider the use of her powers under section 53A of the Police Act 1996 to require police forces to adopt the procedures and practices it sets out.

The increased priority of and effective, immediate action taken by the police to tackle [county lines](#) drug-dealing gangs may also provide some useful lessons. These are gangs who are notorious for exploiting children to work as couriers and forcing vulnerable people to let them use their homes to conceal or deal drugs. The police approach to county lines has increased over the past 18 months, and there has been a relentless focus on pursuing offenders and on doing everything possible to rescue those being exploited. This work has included a recent 'intensification week' that allowed the police, with support from the National Crime Agency, to dedicate time and resources to tackle and disrupt criminal activity associated with these crimes, and safeguard victims.

Section 4: Recommendations

Recommendation 1: There should be an immediate and unequivocal commitment that the response to VAWG offences is an absolute priority for government, policing, the criminal justice system, and public-sector partnerships. This needs to be supported at a minimum by a relentless focus on these crimes; mandated responsibilities; and sufficient funding so that all partner agencies can work effectively as part of a whole-system approach to reduce and prevent the harms these offences are causing.

The police cannot tackle VAWG on their own. By the time there is a response from the police, a crime has been committed, but action is needed to prevent it happening in the first place. The only way we can achieve bold and sustainable change is if national and local government, partner agencies, and organisations work together with the police to prevent women and girls becoming victims, and make sure those who do become victims receive all the support they need.

For this approach to be effective, VAWG needs to be a higher priority. All agencies involved need to have a relentless, consistent and co-ordinated focus on it, and the whole system needs to be accountable for tackling these offences.

We recommend the following short- and medium-term actions, all of which are needed to make sure the whole-system approach is successful in protecting women and girls. These actions should be supported by a clear and rapid implementation plan that provides a pathway for how and when change is going to happen:

Short-term

- The Home Office should add the policing of VAWG to the SPR. This will give a clear signal that the government sees VAWG as a priority and that sufficient capabilities are in place to tackle it. It would also help chief constables and police and crime commissioners (PCCs) to balance national and local priorities.
- The Home Office should make sure that VAWG is a priority for the ministerially chaired crime and policing performance board. It should introduce a new Home Secretary-led board to provide clear governance for the VAWG strategy and for the urgent improvements needed.

Medium-term

- The Home Office and other government departments should consider proposing a statutory duty on all appropriate partner agencies to collectively take action to prevent the harm caused by VAWG.
- In doing this, consideration should be given to whether this could be included in any existing duties and how those for safeguarding children will interact and complement the changes.
- The Home Office should agree with other government departments the measures and actions that each partner agency needs to implement both at a national and local level to encourage joint responsibility in tackling VAWG. This may need a new statutory framework.
- The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) and the Home Office should jointly appoint a full-time national policing coordinator to lead on all police activity related to VAWG. The lead should act as a point of contact for each police force, work closely with the College of Policing to make sure best practice is identified and communicated, ensure progress is monitored, act as the 'voice of policing' at cross-sector national discussions, and regularly report to the Home Secretary.
- The Home Office and other government departments should agree sustained, multi-year funding to support collaboration between agencies, where they have joint responsibilities.
- The College of Policing and the NPCC should establish mechanisms and processes to allow rapid and consistent sharing of evidence, information and evaluation on new and effective ways of working in response to VAWG offences, and methods that improve VAWG investigation. This should include input from partner agencies and assess specific actions or skills which could be used to develop a minimum standard for VAWG crimes, to improve the consistency and quality of outcomes for victims.
- If this minimum standard is established (and depending on whether and how other agencies need to act), the Home Secretary should consider whether it is appropriate to use her power under section 53A of the Police Act 1996 to require police forces to adopt the procedures and practices it sets out.
- As per the recommendation in the government's 2021 report 'The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions', the Home Office should implement a 'score card' for measuring improvements in performance in the criminal justice system for all crimes that disproportionately affect women and girls. This should be developed with input from victim representatives.

Recommendation 2: The relentless pursuit and disruption of adult perpetrators should be a national priority for the police, and their capability and capacity to do this should be enhanced.

An effective criminal justice system is critical to ensuring that perpetrators are held to account for their crimes, and for behaviours to be addressed in a way that stops further crimes being committed. The police need to have the resources to be able to respond to the changing demand and complexity of these crimes. They should also assure themselves that they are performing in a way that the public would expect in prioritising violent crimes against women and girls.

We recommend the following:

- The Home Office and the NPCC should review police capability and capacity to relentlessly pursue and disrupt the perpetrators of VAWG offences and enhance these, as necessary.
- The NPCC and the Home Office should review whether the ‘4Ps’ approach used for counter-terrorism and serious and organised crime should be adopted for policing VAWG.
- The Home Office should carry out an urgent review of the role of the detective constable. This should establish appropriate incentives, progression and support for both officer and staff investigators to encourage this career path. It should include specific recommendations to make sure there is adequate capacity and capability in every force to thoroughly and effectively investigate VAWG offences.
- The Home Office, together with the Ministry of Justice, should improve the evidence it has about perpetrators. This includes considering how to consistently evaluate the effectiveness of perpetrator programmes and use models to plot a perpetrator’s progress through the system more effectively.

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.

The best result may not always be one within the criminal justice system. The needs of the victim are often complex. This means the range of support they should be given access to should be carefully considered and co-ordinated across victim services – some of which will be commissioned and others of which will be independent, such as advisors/advocates – and other agencies, including health and local authorities. An effective pathway needs to be in place that offer the victim the right bespoke support, as well as the reassurance that they will be kept safe from any further violence by the perpetrator.

We recommend the following:

- The Home Office and other government departments should provide funding so that an independent advisor/advocate is available to support victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence as they go through the criminal justice system (and should consider this for victims of other crimes that disproportionately affect women). This support should be designed in consultation with the victim and should continue after a perpetrator is released from prison.
- 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.

Next steps

The time to tackle the threat posed to victims by VAWG is now. This cannot be delayed. There is significant momentum behind this critical issue, including from the forthcoming publication of the government's VAWG and domestic abuse strategies.

There needs to be significant change to do this. This report lays out our interim findings and provides recommendations about how to begin this crucial work.

In September, we will publish our final report, which will include further details about the whole-system approach and other recommendations, and a road map for change. This will include our findings from new 'lived experience' research, as well as thematic inspection activity. We will also carry out a wide consultation with experts from across policing, government, academia and the voluntary and community sector.

Annex A

| Report | Year |
|--|------|
| <u>Girls and gangs</u> , Centre for Social Justice | 2014 |
| <u>Girls in the criminal justice system</u> , Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (CJJI) | 2014 |
| <u>Everyone's business: improving the police response to domestic abuse</u> , Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) | 2014 |
| <u>Protecting children from harm: a critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network in England and priorities for action</u> , Children's Commissioner | 2015 |
| <u>The welfare of vulnerable people in police custody</u> , HMIC | 2015 |
| <u>Witness for the prosecution: Identifying victim and witness vulnerability in criminal case files</u> , HMIC | 2015 |
| <u>Increasingly everyone's business: a progress report on the police response to domestic abuse</u> , HMIC | 2015 |
| <u>The depths of dishonour: Hidden voices and shameful crimes – an inspection of the police response to honour-based violence, forced marriage and female genital mutilation</u> , HMIC | 2015 |
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| ' <u>Barriers to help-seeking: older women's experiences of domestic violence and abuse – briefing note</u> ', Dr Michaela Rogers, Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit, University of Salford | 2016 |
| <u>Missing children: who cares? The police response to missing and absent children</u> , HMIC | 2016 |
| <u>Living in fear – the police and CPS response to harassment and stalking</u> , HMIC and Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPsi) | 2017 |

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| <u>A progress report on the police response to domestic abuse</u> , HMICFRS | 2017 |
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| Perennial issues in policing, College of Policing | 2018 |
| National Policing Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme – action plan | 2018 |
| <u>Statistics on race and the criminal justice system</u> , Ministry of Justice | 2018 |
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| Domestic abuse problem profile, Greater Manchester Police | 2019 |
| <u>Stalking and harassment: an inspection of Sussex Police commissioned by the police and crime commissioner, and an update on national recommendations in HMICFRS’s 2017 report</u> , HMICFRS | 2019 |
| <u>Evaluation of the Drive Project – a three-year pilot to address high-risk, high-harm perpetrators of domestic abuse</u> , Marianne Hester et al, Centre for Gender and Violence Research, University of Bristol | 2019 |
| <u>Rape, inequality and the criminal justice response in England: The importance of age and gender</u> , Sarah-Jane Lilley Walker et al, <i>Criminology and Criminal Justice</i> , volume 1, issue 3 | 2019 |
| <u>Statistics on women and the criminal justice system 2019</u> , Ministry of Justice | 2019 |
| <u>National child protection inspections: 2019 thematic report</u> , HMICFRS | 2019 |
| <u>The police response to domestic abuse: an update report</u> , HMICFRS | 2019 |
| <u>National Vulnerability Action Plan (NVAP) revised</u> , National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) | 2020 |
| <u>A joint thematic inspection of Integrated Offender Management</u> , CJI | 2020 |
| <u>Evidence-led domestic abuse prosecutions</u> , CJI | 2020 |
| <u>Final report: evaluation of the sexual violence complainants’ advocate scheme</u> , Olivia Smith and Ellen Daly, Loughborough University | 2020 |

| Report | Year |
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| <u>'Feeling heard': partner agencies working together to make a difference for children with mental ill health</u> , Ofsted, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, HMICFRS and the Care Quality Commission | 2020 |
| <u>Reclaiming voice: minoritised women and sexual violence</u> , Dr Ravi Thiara (University of Warwick) and Sumanta Roy (Imkaan) | 2020 |
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| <u>An inspection of the Metropolitan Police Service's policing of a vigil held in commemoration of Sarah Everard</u> , HMICFRS | 2021 |
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| Force data collection tracker, HMICFRS | 2021 |

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