

Committee of Public Accounts

Tackling Violence against Women and Girls

Twenty-Sixth Report of Session 2024–25

HC 644

Committee of Public Accounts

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Summary

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a serious and growing problem, affecting at least 1 in 12 women each year. The government has set an ambition to halve violence against women and girls in the next decade, as part of its 'Safer Streets' mission, led by the Home Office. To meet this ambition the Home Office must lead a truly cross-government effort that puts preventative measures at its heart and has the commitment of all departments. The Home Office recognises that a fundamental shift in approach is needed and is producing a new strategy informed by a review of the available evidence. However, based on what we have heard during our inquiry, we remain sceptical that departments are sufficiently set up to deliver this ambition.

We read and heard about the experiences of survivors of violence against women and girls seeking support, and the demands being felt at a local level, but were not convinced that the departmental officials truly understood the scale of the issue. We also heard about how the housing crisis and the demand on the justice system is exacerbating the issue as it is making it harder for survivors to receive adequate support. Government departments do not have a complete understanding of the extent of violence against women and girls, nor do they fully understand the work taking place in local areas and communities that could help improve its understanding of what works to tackle this issue.

An estimated £979 million was spent tackling violence against women and girls by departments other than the Home Office over the period from 2021–22 to 2023–24, but the Home Office did not oversee this spending. This means that it could not be sure that efforts were not being duplicated or that spending was having the greatest impact. The Home Office has told us that the 'Safer Streets' mission will help coordinate VAWG-spend across all relevant government departments going forwards.

We were particularly concerned to hear of the increasing dangers from online harms, and that children as young as 11 were both victims and perpetrators of sexual violence online. It is therefore vital that government is doing all that it can to protect children and young people from the dangers of harmful online content. For example, it must ensure that social media platforms are held accountable for removing harmful content quickly, in line with regulation. The Home Office must seize the opportunity presented by the government's commitment to halve violence against women and girls to address dangerous attitudes and protect younger generations from the devastating harm that these crimes can cause.

Introduction

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is an umbrella term used to describe a variety of different crimes that are known to disproportionately impact women and girls. These crimes include domestic abuse, rape (and other sexual offences), stalking, harassment, upskirting, revenge porn, so-called ‘honour’-based abuses (such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation and so-called ‘honour’ killings) and many more.

At least one in 12 women are victims of violence against women and girls every year with over one in four women being a survivor of sexual assault in their lifetimes. In 2022–23, the National Police Chiefs’ Council reported that one in five police recorded crimes were related to violence against women and girls. Despite the stark nature of these statistics, the true scale of VAWG is likely to be even higher, as not all survivors will report their experience to authorities. These crimes can have devastating impacts on survivors, affecting them physically, mentally, socially and financially.

The Home Office leads cross-government efforts to tackle violence against women and girls and is the lead department for the government’s ‘Safer Streets’ mission. Achieving long-term, sustainable change will require the commitment and coordination of multiple government departments, including education, health, justice and local government.

The Home Office has led successive efforts to address violence against women and girls, and in July 2021 published its third strategy since 2009–10, followed by the accompanying Domestic Abuse plan in March 2022.

The Home Office has spent £149 million between April 2021 and the end of September 2024 tackling VAWG, whilst the National Audit Office estimated that around £979 million was spent by other government departments tackling VAWG in the period from 2021–22 to 2023–24. The new government has set an ambition to halve violence against women and girls in the next decade, as part of its new ‘Safer Streets’ mission. The Home Office told us that it will outline government’s plans to deliver on this ambition in its new VAWG Strategy, due to publish in summer 2025.

Conclusions and recommendations

- 1. Under previous iterations of its strategy to address violence against women and girls, the Home Office failed to secure the full support of other government departments.** The Home Office is responsible for leading the cross-government effort to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG). While delivering its 2021 Strategy, the Home Office failed to gain the necessary commitment from other government departments that have vital roles in addressing this issue. The Home Office has not always had a strong reputation for working constructively with other government departments, and despite efforts to improve this in recent years, there is still a long way to go. The Home Office told us that one of the many benefits of the ‘Safer Streets’ mission is that it creates a framework for collaboration across government and beyond. The mission will play a crucial role in coordinating work across government and holding departments to account. We are encouraged to hear that since September the mission board has already met four times, and the sub-board (including Home Office and Ministry of Justice Ministers) has met three times. We are also encouraged to hear that the appropriate accountability structures are in place to scrutinise Government’s progress against the mission objectives via the Prime Minister’s regular stock-takes. The Committee welcomes efforts to better coordinate efforts between all relevant government departments, but would welcome more assurance about how the Home Office will hold departments to account for delivering the meaningful change in practice.

RECOMMENDATION

As part of its Treasury Minute response, the Home Office should outline precisely how the mission-led approach will hold all departments to account for their contributions to tackling violence against women and girls and ensure collective buy-in.

- 2. Government departments do not have a realistic understanding of the experiences of survivors seeking support, nor the demands faced by local services on the ground.** Government departments appear to have a starkly different understanding of the support provided to survivors of domestic abuse who seek support in their local communities compared with the reality. We were particularly concerned to hear that the Ministry

for Housing, Communities and Local Government believes that in the majority of cases domestic abuse survivors are met with adequate support from their local authority, as this does not align with what we have learnt from our constituents. It is also clear that this disjointed understanding extends to departments' understanding of the demands being felt by support services locally. The Chief Executive of Women's Aid told the Committee that the demands being faced by charities are increasing both in volume and complexity. For example, an increased demand for specialist mental health support for victims and survivors of violence against women and girls following the COVID-19 pandemic. Developing technology is also contributing to changes in the nature of abuse and the methods used by perpetrators. Wider pressures on services are exacerbating these demands, for example the housing crisis is making it even harder for local authorities to provide survivors with safe accommodation and, in turn, increasing the demand for temporary refuges. Wider demands on the justice system also mean that the criminal justice process is taking longer, with family courts processes becoming harder to navigate, thus increasing the demand on independent advocacy services (IDVAs). We are particularly concerned to hear that it is common for survivors to find going through the family courts processes to be almost more abusive than having experienced abuse by the perpetrator, seeing the courts as harmful, misogynistic spaces.

RECOMMENDATION

As part of its Treasury Minute response, the Home Office should set out plans, over and above what it has done in the past, explaining how it will:

- engage with services supporting survivors to gain an accurate understanding of the demands faced by support services, and the experience of survivors seeking support; and
- engage with MoJ and His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service to ensure that all survivors are appropriately supported by the family courts system.

- 3. Short-term and fragmented funding hinder government departments' efforts to maximise the impact it is having both at the local and national level.** The Home Office spent £149 million from April 2021 to the end of September 2024 tackling VAWG. Meanwhile, other government departments spent around £979 million over broadly the same period. It is vitally important that departments coordinate spending so that they can prioritise effectively and ensure efforts are not duplicated. As lead department, the Home Office is best placed to oversee this. However, throughout the 2021 Strategy, the Home Office did not understand the cross-government spend committed to tackling VAWG, nor did it centrally

coordinate funding. Short-term funding settlements can also impact locally run services' ability to provide adequate, specialist support to survivors of VAWG. Single-year funding settlements make it difficult for local services to recruit and retain specialists, and this has devastating consequences for support services particularly those run 'by-and-for' the people that they serve. 'By-and-for' services play a crucial role in ensuring that every survivor has access to, and trust in, local support, regardless of their specific needs. The Home Office told us that it intends to address these challenges by approaching funding settlement bids in a more coordinated way in the upcoming Spending Review.

RECOMMENDATION

In light of the forthcoming Spending Review, the Home Office should then write to the Committee within one month outlining how government's approach is changing in order to coordinate all spending on VAWG-related activities across government and provide long-term funding stability to the sector.

4. The Home Office has a limited awareness of initiatives proving effective so cannot use this information to improve its understanding of what works to prevent and reduce violence against women and girls.

The Home Office acknowledges that departments do not have a strong understanding of what works to tackle violence against women and girls. Written evidence submitted to the Committee highlighted many examples of successful locally run initiatives and the Home Office may be missing opportunities to learn from good practice. While the Committee accepts that what works in some local areas may not be appropriate to be rolled out more broadly, if the Home Office is to improve its understanding of what works within the context of constrained resources, it must ensure it is benefitting from all the evidence that already exists. The Home Office has sought to improve its understanding of what works by conducting a review of the available evidence, with the aim of using this to inform its new strategy. The Committee is encouraged to hear that this work has provided some valuable insights, and it is vital that the Home Office does all it can to identify and share lessons learnt from local initiatives.

RECOMMENDATION

Prior to the launch of the new VAWG Strategy, the Home Office should set out how, over and above what it has done in the past, it will capture and share evidence of successful initiatives at the local level, to continually inform its understanding of what works to prevent and reduce violence against women and girls.

5. **There are considerable gaps in the Home Office’s understanding of the scale of violence against women and girls, which will undermine its efforts to target interventions and monitor progress against its ambition to halve VAWG.** To improve its chances of success, the Home Office must outline clearly how it intends to measure progress against its ambition to halve the prevalence of VAWG in a decade. This approach must be understood and accepted by all relevant government departments, and there must be clear milestones within this 10-year period to support effective accountability. The Home Office intends to use the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) to measure prevalence, but acknowledged that the survey does not collect data on all crime types, nor does it collect responses from under-16s. The Committee is concerned that monitoring progress in this way fails to adequately reflect the broad range of abuse types, and will therefore only present a partial view of how trends in prevalence are changing over time. Gaps in data make it difficult to develop a suitably agile response to VAWG. It is currently impossible to track a single case through the entire criminal justice system due to limitations in available data. Additionally, while education and healthcare settings can often be where some VAWG crimes first become apparent, the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), and the Department for Education (DfE) do not routinely capture or share appropriate intelligence with the Home Office.

RECOMMENDATION

As part of its Treasury Minute response, the Home Office should set out how it will:

- Measure progress against its ambition to halve VAWG in a decade, demonstrating what alternative indicators will be used to measure progress in those areas not covered by the Crime Survey for England and Wales; and
- Ensure all relevant departments, notably DHSC and DfE, are sharing intelligence relating to VAWG appropriately, to build up government’s understanding of the scale of VAWG, and its ability to prioritise efforts effectively.

6. **We are concerned that, to date, the approach to tackling violence against women and girls has not put enough emphasis on preventative measures that are necessary to achieve long-term change.** Although it is imperative that all survivors receive effective support, government needs to do more to prevent perpetrators committing these crimes in the first instance. It is shocking to hear that the most likely age range to become a survivor or perpetrator of sexual violence is between 11–20 years old. Many government departments have significant roles to play if

sustainable change is to be achieved, particularly those working closely with children and young people. For example, it is vital that DfE prioritises this issue and does more to educate children and young people on healthy relationships to reduce the chance of them becoming perpetrators in the future. We are not convinced that DfE is doing all it can to support work with young boys to prevent harmful attitudes perpetuating. Work such as Operation Encompass (a police and education sharing partnership designed to deliver a more joined up approach to supporting children as survivors of domestic abuse) shows the key role that education can play in tackling this issue by supporting survivors, but also in preventing children from becoming perpetrators in the future. However, neither Home Office nor DfE could tell us the proposed start date of implementation. We welcome these sorts of initiatives but remain unconvinced that DfE is prioritising this issue sufficiently and doing all it can to prevent these crimes occurring.

RECOMMENDATION

As part of the Treasury Minute response to this report, the Home Office should outline:

- how it intends to put greater emphasis on preventative measures over and above work it has done previously through its upcoming Strategy, to achieve long-term change; and
- how it will work with other relevant departments, notably the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, MHCLG and MoJ, to ensure all opportunities are being taken to work with young boys to prevent harmful attitudes perpetuating, and how this work is being incorporated into the upcoming VAWG Strategy.
- Also, as part of the Treasury Minute response to this report, the Department for Education should set out how it intends to work with children and young people to prevent violence against women and girls, including further changes to the relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum, and how this is being coordinated through the Home Office's upcoming VAWG Strategy.

- 7. We are concerned that government departments' approach to tech-enabled violence against women and girls is not sufficiently agile to address the threats posed by online harm.** Tech-enabled VAWG is a rapidly evolving threat. For example, in 2024 the revenge porn helpline received 22,000 cases, compared with 521 in 2015. The Online Safety Act, introduced in October 2023, was designed to ensure that people are protected from harmful online content, notably children and young people. The Act legislates the removal of harmful content from social media platforms. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT)

is the sponsoring department for the Online Safety Act and is responsible for investigating how the design of online platforms can contribute to or mitigate such violence. As of 16 March 2025, service providers must have completed their risk assessments for illegal content which assessing the risk of users encountering illegal content or, of the platforms being used to commit or facilitate an offence. The Committee welcomes these efforts to try and address some of the evolving threats emerging from technological advancements, as it is clear that social media can play a significant role in shaping the attitudes of young people. However, the Committee is concerned that departments' reactive approach to tackling this issue may not sufficiently protect those at risk compared with focusing on reducing the production and possession of the harmful content in the first instance. We did not hear convincing evidence that DfE is yet taking a sufficiently proactive role in educating young people, especially boys, on the dangers on exposure to harmful online content, and how this can lead to misogynistic attitudes.

RECOMMENDATION

- a.** In six months' time, DSIT should write to the Committee outlining the impact that the Online Safety Act has had on improving the safety of children and young people online, and the role it is expected to play in preventing VAWG in the long-term.
- b.** As part of the Treasury Minute response to this report DfE should set out what it intends to do, over and above previous work, to keep children and young people safe from the dangers of exposure to harmful online content.

1 Delivering a whole-system response

Introduction

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Home Office, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology on tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG).¹ We also took evidence from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Nicole Jacobs DBE; the Chief Executive Officer of Women's Aid, Farah Nazeer and the independent advisor to government on criminal justice responses to sexual violence, Professor Katrin Hohl.
2. Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is an umbrella term used to describe a variety of different crimes that are known to disproportionately impact women and girls. These crimes include domestic abuse, rape (and other sexual offences), stalking, harassment, upskirting, revenge porn, so-called 'honour'-based abuses (such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation and so-called 'honour' killings) and many more.²
3. Over one in four women are estimated to be survivors of sexual assault or attempted assault in their lifetime, at least one in 12 women are victims of VAWG each year. In 2022–23, the National Police Chiefs' Council reported that 20% of all police-recorded crime was related to VAWG and described the issue as an epidemic. The victim was female in 86% of all police-recorded sexual offences in March 2022, and in the year ending December 2023, over 97% (23,723) of people convicted of sexual offences were male, with these crimes often being committed by someone known to the victim. Despite these stark statistics, the actual number is likely to be much higher as many of these crimes go unreported. These crimes can have devastating impacts on survivors, affecting them physically, mentally, socially and financially.³

1 C&AG's Report, [Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls](#), Session 2024–25, HC 547, 31 January 2025

2 C&AG's Report, para 1.1

3 C&AG's Report, paras 1.2, 1.9

4. The Home Office has led successive efforts to address violence against women and girls, and in July 2021 published its third strategy since 2009–10, followed by the accompanying Domestic Abuse plan in March 2022.⁴ The Home Office spent £149 million over the period April 2021 to September 2024 tackling VAWG, whilst the National Audit Office estimated that around £979 million was spent by other government departments tackling VAWG in the period from 2021–22 to 2023–24.⁵ The new government has outlined an ambition to halve violence against women and girls in the next decade as part of its ‘Safer Streets’ mission led by the Home Office.⁶ The Home Office told us that it will publish a new VAWG Strategy designed to achieve this ambition by summer 2025.⁷ Achieving long-term, sustainable change will require the commitment and coordination of multiple government departments, including education, health, justice and local government.⁸
5. We also received a high number of written submissions from a range of different sources including voluntary sector organisations, academic and researchers as well as wider government stakeholders. A full list of the written evidence we received is available on the inquiry page of the Committee’s website.⁹ Particular issues and concerns drawn to our attention included:
- gaps in available data to measure the scale of violence against women and girls, especially for some specific VAWG crime types such as so-called ‘honour’-based abuses;
 - the risks associated with not having an agreed definition for VAWG, including specific crimes sitting underneath this umbrella term, across all government bodies with key roles delivering the Strategy;
 - the impact that short-term funding can have on organisations’ ability to provide adequate support for all survivors, regardless of specialist needs;
 - research showing the low likelihood that survivors will report their experiences to the police and the wider impact low trust in police can have on addressing this problem;

4 C&AG’s Report, para 1.11, 1.12

5 C&AG’s Report, paras 2.5, 2.9

6 C&AG’s Report, para 5, 6

7 Q 21

8 C&AG’s Report, para 5

9 Committee of Public Accounts, [Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Written evidence](#)

- how well the wider criminal justice system is supporting survivors, with submissions highlighting the current wait times and worrying concerns over the role that family courts could be playing in perpetuating VAWG;
- how well designed the industry currently is to support and protect sex workers at risk of VAWG; and
- the role that technology plays in exacerbating the harms caused by existing forms of violence against women and girls, as well as introducing a rapidly evolving set of new crimes perpetrated via online platforms.

Ensuring the buy-in from all relevant government departments

6. Many government departments have important roles to play in tackling violence against women and girls. This is reflected by the Home Office's 2021 VAWG Strategy, which outlined 13 other government departments and bodies responsible for delivering commitments.¹⁰ For example, MHCLG has a statutory duty to support survivors of domestic abuse in finding safe accommodation, while DfE and the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) have important roles to play in identifying signs of abuse, supporting survivors as well as helping efforts to prevent VAWG in the long-term. The police and wider criminal justice system are responsible for pursuing perpetrators, and DSIT has an important role to play in ensuring online platforms are kept free from harmful content that might perpetuate dangerous attitudes.
7. The National Audit Office (NAO) found that throughout its 2021 VAWG Strategy, the Home Office did not lead an effective whole-system response. The Home Office failed to secure the commitment of all relevant departments and the cross-departmental governance in place did not ensure all departments were pulling in the same direction. While the Home Office set up both an Officials' oversight group and a Ministerial oversight group to coordinate the cross-government effort and hold departments to account, the Officials' group did not meet until a year after the Strategy was published.¹¹ The Home Office also did not routinely include all government bodies with responsibility for delivering commitments in meetings to develop the Strategy, for example NHS England.¹² The Domestic Abuse Commissioner told us that without effective coordination on this issue,

10 C&AG's Report, Figure 10

11 C&AG's Report, para 8

12 C&AG's Report, para 3.6

departments cannot be sure that their efforts are not being duplicated. For example, currently both the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Home Office commission national domestic abuse helplines.¹³ The Home Office acknowledged that it has not always had a strong reputation for working collaboratively, and that while it had been moving in the right direction in recent years, there is a lot further to go.¹⁴

8. The Home Office told us that one of the many benefits of the ‘Safer Streets’ mission is that it will create a framework for collaboration across government and beyond.¹⁵ It told us that progress will be overseen by a mission board, which has met four times since September, and the sub-board (including Home Office and MoJ Ministers), which has met three times. The Home Office, which has responsibility for delivering the ‘Safer Streets’ mission, also spoke positively about the accountability structures that are in place to scrutinise government’s progress against the mission objectives via the Prime Minister’s regular stock-takes.¹⁶

Understanding the demand of local services

9. Throughout its 2021 VAWG Strategy, the Home Office did not make the most of the available expertise and knowledge, for example by engaging with the voluntary sector to understand the demands being faced on the frontline.¹⁷ Evidence submitted by End Violence Against Women (EVAW) expressed the importance of departments consulting sector experts to ensure that their knowledge and understanding is being used to inform the Government’s approach, and that there is clarity and transparency around this engagement. EVAW told us that the expertise of specialist VAWG sector should be embedded in the development and review of the new VAWG strategy.¹⁸ Charity representatives told the NAO that it was not clear how Home Office’s engagement with them had been used to inform government’s approach, throughout the 2021 VAWG Strategy, and felt that the invitee list to meetings was very long, limiting the scope for discussions about issues which disproportionately impact survivors from marginalised groups.¹⁹

13 [VAWG0076](#)

14 Q 23

15 Q 23

16 Q 24

17 C&AG’s Report, para 13

18 [VAWG0083](#)

19 C&AG’s Report, para 2.18

10. Women's Aid told the Committee that the demands being faced by charities are increasing both in volume and complexity.²⁰ For example, demand for specialist mental health support for survivors has increased following the COVID-19 pandemic, with over 45% of people in refuges now presenting with mental health problems.²¹ Women's Aid described the current situation as a "crisis", and explained that refuges have to refuse 65% of requests for a place and community-based services can only support 50% of people who ask for help.²² Written evidence submitted to the Committee highlighted how external factors such as housing shortages and the increased cost-of-living are exacerbating these demands. It is therefore becoming increasingly difficult to provide victims and survivors with safe accommodation, in turn increasing demands on temporary refuges.²³
11. Women's Aid also raised concerns over how well-equipped services were to provide the necessary support to all survivors, stating that there are only two refuges nationally that are wheelchair accessible.²⁴ Written evidence submitted by Commonweal Housing highlighted that mothers with older sons may be considered unsuitable for many refuges, and suggested that this may increase the likelihood of survivors returning to a perpetrator of domestic abuse.²⁵
12. The Committee is aware of examples where domestic abuse survivors did not receive adequate support. Examples shared during our evidence session included women turning to an MP's advice surgery for support having struggled to be rehomed despite engaging with the local authority and housing association.²⁶ The 2021 Domestic Abuse Act introduced a new statutory duty making MHCLG responsible for ensuring all domestic abuse survivors have access to refuges or another safe form of accommodation. This duty requires local authorities to assess the need for accommodation-based support in their area and develop a strategy for providing such support. MHCLG told us that it's understanding is that in the majority of cases survivors are supported to find safe accommodation by the local authority, funded through MHCLG. We noted that in our experience it is clear that what MHCLG described is not routinely happening and the examples we had heard were in no way unusual.²⁷

20 Q 6

21 Q 7

22 Q 3

23 [VAWG0040](#), [VAWG0050](#)

24 Q 7

25 [VAWG0055](#)

26 Q 25

27 Q 26

Funding a whole-system response

13. The Home Office spent £149 million from April 2021 to the end of September 2024 tackling VAWG, with other government departments spending around £979 million over the period April 2021 to March 2024.²⁸ However, the NAO found that throughout the 2021 VAWG Strategy, the Home Office did not have a full understanding of the cross-government spend committed to tackling VAWG, or centrally coordinate funding. In contrast with the 2021 illegal drugs strategy, the relevant departments did not prepare a joint spending review bid.²⁹
14. We asked the Home Office about the potential implications of this on how well it can prioritise efforts and ensure that work is not being duplicated. The Home Office agreed it did not have a comprehensive account of exactly what government departments are spending on tackling VAWG, but told us that this will be addressed through its approach to the forthcoming spending review.³⁰ We asked whether the Home Office intended to submit a joint spending review bid for its new Strategy. It told us that it hopes the new approach to coordinating spending, supported by the Safer Streets mission, will be “stronger even” than a joint bid.³¹
15. Written evidence submitted to the Committee highlights the impact that short-term funding settlements can have on locally run services’ ability to provide adequate, specialist support to survivors of VAWG. Women’s Aid told us that single-year funding settlements limit service providers’ ability to recruit and retain specialist staff as they are unable to provide long-term employment security.³² Evidence submitted by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner highlights that short-term funding settlements can lead to service providers recruiting and training staff at very short notice, only to potentially close the service or make staff redundant a year later.³³ The Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s 2022 mapping of specialist domestic abuse services found that 80% of organisations receive statutory funding as their main source of income, meaning that the majority of organisations are affected by the short-term and insecure nature of funding.³⁴ The Home Office told us that it is expecting the current spending review to be three years’ RDEL and four years’ capital, which moves away from a series of one-year

28 C&AG’s Report, paras 2.5, 2.9

29 C&AG’s Report, para 9

30 Q 28

31 Q 33

32 Q 6

33 [VAWG0076](#)

34 [VAWG0076](#)

spending reviews. Whilst acknowledging that it is a 10-year ambition to halve VAWG, the Home Office told us that it cannot expect a settlement longer than 4-years given the current financial climate.³⁵

16. This financial uncertainty can have particularly devastating consequences on smaller, specialist organisations, including those run ‘by-and-for’ the people that they serve. Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse told us that funding ‘by-and-for’ services not only ensures adequate support for all survivors, regardless of specific needs, but also saves costs. For example, research referenced by Southall Black Sisters suggests that when migrant survivors with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) can access ‘by-and-for’ services, net savings to local public services over 3 years total more than £18,000 per women.³⁶ However, After Exploitation told us that throughout the delivery of the 2021 VAWG Strategy there was a dearth of support services ‘by-and-for’ survivors with diverse characteristics.³⁷ The Home Office told us that it is committed to taking an intersectional approach to its new strategy, so that it recognises the diverse range of needs.³⁸

35 Q 40

36 [VAWG0069](#); [VAWG0078](#)

37 [VAWG0059](#)

38 Q 87

2 Monitoring and evaluation

Engaging locally to understand what works

17. Government departments have a limited understanding of what works to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG). Since 2021–22, the Home Office has spent at least £4.2 million on new research into what works, but the projects funded are not complete and have yet to provide significant insights to inform future interventions.³⁹ Written evidence submitted to the Committee highlighted some examples of successfully run local interventions.⁴⁰ The NAO found that, under the implementation of the 2021 strategy, the Home Office did not have a formal mechanism for identifying and sharing good practice with these organisations.⁴¹
18. We asked the departments how they planned to learn from these local initiatives to support government’s understanding of what works. The Home Office recognised there was local variation, but said it did not wish to mandate a single approach to tackling VAWG nationally, as it felt this would stifle local innovation and assume that every community is identical.⁴² The Home Office told us that it wants to continue to encourage local variation by continuing to fund small local charities to carry out evaluations effectively. This includes bidding into the £100 million Cabinet Office fund for test-and-learn initiatives to help support these evaluations.⁴³
19. The Home Office also spoke about certain things working well and its desire to roll them out nationally. An example provided was through the national centre for VAWG and public protection, a team set up in the College of Policing and sponsored by the national police lead for VAWG—Chief Constable Maggie Blyth. The Home Office told us that this team will collate approaches taken by different police forces and disseminate nationally the ones proven most effective.⁴⁴

39 C&AG’s Report, para 12

40 For example: [VAWG0025](#), [VAWG0027](#), [VAWG32](#), [VAWG40](#)

41 C&AG’s Report, para 13

42 Q 66

43 Q 65

44 Q 66

20. The Home Office has also sought to improve its understanding of what works by conducting a review of the available evidence at a national level, which it intends to publish with the new VAWG strategy, in summer 2025.⁴⁵ Officials told us that this work has provided some valuable insights on the importance of education; bystander interventions; screening to identify domestic abuse survivors; perpetrator programmes and therapeutic support. However, there was weaker evidence around what sorts of communications campaigns really work, and whether there is a greater role for specialist courts.⁴⁶

Gaps in data and inconsistent definitions

21. Government has set an ambition to halve the prevalence of violence against women and girls in the next decade. To measure progress against this ambition, the Home Office told us it intends to use prevalence estimates from Crime Survey for England and Wales data (CSEW).⁴⁷ We asked the Home Office how it would account for the fact that the CSEW only collects responses from individuals over the age of 16 and only includes prevalence estimates for some VAWG crime types; rape, domestic abuse, other sexual offences and stalking.⁴⁸ The Home Office told us that it has agreed three headline metrics, that will be used in combination to track progress against its ambition to halve VAWG, although it did not outline specifically what these will be. The Home Office told us its approach to measuring progress will include a basket of sub-metrics to help address some of the gaps in data available.⁴⁹
22. Written evidence submitted to the Committee highlighted the importance of ensuring all specific VAWG crime types are reflected within this target, and that there is transparency over how these crimes impact different people. Southall Black Sisters told us that the full extent of harms perpetrated against Black, minoritised and migrant survivors is not known due to inadequate data recording. They also stressed the importance of addressing the gaps in data by monitoring how different trends emerge by protected characteristic and by crime type.⁵⁰ Professor Katrin Hohl told us that without data, government departments can have no idea the prevalence of specific crime types, and have no ability to understand what is working to reduce VAWG.⁵¹

45 Q 21; C&AG's Report, para 16

46 Q 62

47 Q 46

48 C&AG's Report, para 3.18

49 Q 46

50 [VAWG0078](#)

51 Q5

- 23.** There are also different definitions of VAWG used across government, which makes it difficult to monitor progress in a consistent way. For example, the definition of VAWG used by the Home Office includes all victims and survivors of VAWG-related offences, regardless of whether they are men or women, boys or girls. Whereas, in contrast, the police definition only includes VAWG-related offences perpetrated against women and girls.⁵² Despite the police defining VAWG in a different way, the Home Office told us that this will not impact its ability to measure progress, as it does not consider police-recorded crime an accurate measure of prevalence. The Home Office told us that this is because police data is likely to underreport the true scale of VAWG, stating that underreporting levels can be between one in six and one in five.⁵³ Research submitted by Dr Caroline Miles and Professor Rosemary Broad found that 68% of 498 women surveyed had experienced VAWG whilst out running, but only around one in 20 of these women reported to the police.⁵⁴
- 24.** The lack of clear definitions for some specific VAWG crime types also contributes to these challenges. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner told us that the government needs to decide a clear definition of so-called ‘honour’-based abuse⁵⁵ while Professor Katrin Hohl described the current definitions of tech-facilitated abuses as “flimsy”.⁵⁶ Written evidence submitted by the Muslim Women’s Network UK calls for official definitions of other recognised forms of abuse such as spiritual abuse and transnational abandonment (a type of domestic abuse) that are not currently mentioned across either the 2021 VAWG Strategy or 2022 Domestic Abuse Plan.⁵⁷

52 C&AG’s Report, para 10

53 Q 46

54 [VAWG0006](#)

55 Q 4

56 Q 8

57 [VAWG0026](#)

3 Prevention

Progress on prevention

- 25.** The NAO found that, to date, the Home Office has made little progress developing measures to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG).⁵⁸ The Home Office told us that it expects that reported rates of VAWG will increase initially due to an increase in trust in the system.⁵⁹ However, stakeholders told the NAO that they were concerned about the capacity that exists in the rest of the criminal justice system to manage this increased demand.⁶⁰ This issue is exacerbated by other challenges faced by the wider justice system such as the lack of prison spaces and crown court backlogs. In the first quarter of 2024–25, the mean number of days from police referring a rape case to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), and the CPS authorising a charge was 158 days, compared to a mean average of 46 days for all crime.⁶¹ Although it is important that survivors receive adequate support, and whilst acknowledging that this plays an important role in preventing revictimization, to achieve long-term, sustainable change, VAWG needs to be prevented in the first instance. Evidence submitted by the Local Government Association calls for a well-coordinated approach to tackling VAWG, that prioritises the reduction of future costs to the criminal justice system and health services.⁶²
- 26.** Professor Katin Hohl told us that the most common age of survivors and perpetrators of sexual violence is between 11–20 years old.⁶³ Evidence submitted by the Youth Endowment Fund suggested that 7% of girls and 6% of boys between 13–17 years old had experienced sexual violence in the last year. The research also found that 27% of these respondents had been in a romantic relationship over the past year, with nearly 49% having experienced violent or controlling behaviours. This research also found that children aged 13–15 years in relationships are significantly more likely to report violence or controlling experiences (58%) compared with those aged 16–17 (42%).⁶⁴ Written evidence from Operation

58 C&AG’s Report, para 15

59 Q 46

60 C&AG’s Report, para 15

61 C&AG’s Report, para 1.5

62 [VAWG0050](#)

63 Q 8

64 [VAWG0014](#)

Encompass highlighted that the likelihood of becoming a perpetrator of domestic abuse in the future is increased if you experienced or witnessed it as a child.⁶⁵

- 27.** We asked DfE what work it was doing to protect children and young people as well as prevent them from becoming perpetrators in the future. DfE told us it was doing a lot work through early interventions of family support which it told us supported 60,000 families across England where there are early signs of domestic abuse. Going forward, DfE told us it is working with MHCLG to continue early intervention work with families including doubling funding through the new children's social care prevention grant, worth £270 million.⁶⁶
- 28.** DfE also told us that it has made relationships and sex education (RSE) compulsory in schools since 2020, and in May 2024 revised the curriculum to include discussions on online harm, social media influencers, sharing of intimate imagery and upskirting as a new offence. In terms of evaluating the success of this work, DfE told us that it has had a good awareness among school leaders, and some studies show that the changes to the RSE curriculum could reduce violence in teenage relationships by as much as 17%.⁶⁷ We asked DfE about the effectiveness of this work, since the rates of problematic relationships are not being reduced. DfE told us that the lack of data on under 16-year-olds and transparency on survivors' experiences means that the ground keeps shifting in terms of where the harm is coming from. When asked whether DfE considers its approach as sufficiently agile to respond to evolving harms, DfE told us that it is important to keep the RSE curriculum up to date.⁶⁸
- 29.** DfE also told us about Operation Encompass which is a police and education sharing partnership designed to deliver a more joined up approach to supporting children as survivors of domestic abuse.⁶⁹ This work has a key role in supporting survivors, but also in preventing children from becoming perpetrators in the future. In written evidence, Operation Encompass noted that, despite the Victims and Prisoners Act placing a statutory obligation on all police forces in England and Wales to participate in Operation Encompass, it is yet to formally begin. Neither DfE nor Home Office could tell us the planned commencement date.⁷⁰

65 [VAWG0021](#)

66 Q 73

67 Q 73

68 Q 74

69 Q 27

70 Q 85; [VAWG0021](#)

30. We asked DfE specifically what role boys are playing in the prevention work it was delivering through the VAWG Strategy. DfE told us that there is not a part of the new VAWG Strategy specifically designed to address harmful attitudes amongst boys.⁷¹ DfE told us that it had expanded the new draft guidance on RSE to include misogynistic online influencers, and that it is an expectation that boys will be educated on this. When asked what else it will be doing beyond the RSE curriculum, DfE told us that it could be working with male role models through youth services, social workers, youth offending teams and secondary school teachers. When asked how this work will feed into the future Strategy and mission, DfE said it is something that could be explored with MHCLG and MoJ.⁷²

Responding to tech-enabled violence against women and girls

31. Tech-enabled violence against women and girls refers to the use of technology to perpetrate violence, harassment, or abuse. Crimes include online harassment; image-based abuse (including the sharing of intimate imagery of perpetrator to victim, without the victim's consent); revenge porn (the sharing of intimate images of the victim by the perpetrator, sometimes referred to as NCII (non-consensual intimate imagery)) and many more. Statistics show that tech-enabled VAWG is a rapidly evolving threat. For example, in 2015, the revenge porn helpline received 521 cases compared with 22,000 in 2024.⁷³ Written evidence submitted by Miss Amy Moir highlighted Ofsted's 'Review into sexual abuse in schools and colleges' which found that nearly 90% of girls, and nearly 50% of boys said that being sent explicit pictures of things they didn't want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers.⁷⁴
32. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner also highlighted how developing technology is also contributing to changes in the nature of abuse and the methods used by perpetrators.⁷⁵ The Gender and Tech Research Lab at University College London, claims that technology has transformed the landscape of VAWG crimes, and highlighted reporting by domestic abuse charity, Refuge, which showed 72% of their cases involved a technology element as of 2019.⁷⁶

71 Q 94

72 Qq 91-93

73 Q 56

74 [VAWG0003](#)

75 Q 14

76 [VAWG0012](#)

- 33.** The Online Safety Act, introduced in October 2023, was designed to ensure that people are protected from harmful online content, notably children and young people. The Act legislates the removal harmful content from social media platforms.⁷⁷ As of 16 March 2025, service providers must have completed their risk assessments for illegal content which assessing the risk of users encountering illegal content or of the platforms being used to commit or facilitate an offence. DSIT is the sponsoring department for the Online Safety Act and is responsible for investigating how the design of online platforms can contribute to or mitigate such violence. DSIT has told us that the Online Safety Act will have a significant impact on tackling VAWG, as platform providers can be fined up to 10% of worldwide qualifying revenue.⁷⁸ We asked DSIT about the decision to not legislate against the possession of NCII, while the creation of it, threat to share it, or sharing of it, are all illegal. We stressed our concern that this was a loophole that needed addressing. DSIT could not provide evidence of work it was doing to address this loophole, but said it intended to address to through consultation with the Home Office.⁷⁹

77 Q 5

78 Q 54

79 Q 55

Formal minutes

Thursday 8 May 2025

Members present

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, in the Chair

Mr Clive Betts

Nesil Caliskan

Anna Dixon

Sarah Green

Lloyd Hatton

Chris Kane

Sarah Olney

Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls

Draft Report (*Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 33 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Twenty-Sixth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available
(Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

Adjourned till Monday 12 May at 3 p.m.

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Monday 17 March 2025

Nicole Jacobs DBE, Domestic Abuse Commissioner England and Wales;
Professor Katrin Hohl, Independent advisor to government on criminal justice responses to sexual violence, Professor of Criminology & Criminal Justice, City St George's University of London; **Farah Nazeer**, Chief Executive Officer, Women's Aid [Q1-94](#)

Sir Matthew Rycroft, Permanent Secretary, Home Office;
Richard Clarke, Director General, Safer Streets, Home Office;
Justin Russell, Director General for Families, Department for Education;
Emma Payne, Director for Social Housing, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; **Talitha Rowland**, Director for Security and Online Harms, Department of Science Innovation and Technology [Q1-94](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

VAWG numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- | | | |
|----|---|--------------------------|
| 1 | 5Rights Foundation | VAWG0053 |
| 2 | After Exploitation | VAWG0059 |
| 3 | Association of Police and Crime Commissioners | VAWG0060 |
| 4 | Barker, Dr Anna (Associate Professor in Criminal Justice and Criminology, University of Leeds); Barrientos, Dr Melissa (Research Fellow, University of Leeds); Brunk, Dr Rebecca (Sustainability Project Officer, University of Leeds); Holmes, Professor George (Professor of Conservation and Society, University of Leeds); Houlden, Dr Vikki (Lecturer in Urban Data Science, University of Leeds); Pontin, Dr Fran (Senior Research Data Scientist, University of Leeds); and Quinlan, Dr Maeve Murphy (Research Software Engineer, University of Leeds) | VAWG0035 |
| 5 | Barlow, Dr Charlotte (Associate Professor in Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Leeds); and Walklate, Professor Sandra (Eleanor Rathbone Chair of Sociology, University of Liverpool) | VAWG0008 |
| 6 | Bhalotra, Professor Sonia (Professor, University of Warwick) | VAWG0070 |
| 7 | Bird, Dr Karen Schucan (Associate Professor of Social and Political Science, EPPI Centre, UCL Social Research Institute) | VAWG0025 |
| 8 | Broad, Professor Rosemary (Professor of Criminology, University of Manchester); and Miles, Dr Caroline (Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of Manchester) | VAWG0006 |
| 9 | Caritas Westminster | VAWG0064 |
| 10 | Centre for Protecting Women Online | VAWG0042 |
| 11 | Chowbey, Dr Punita (Senior Research Fellow, Sheffield Hallam University); and Qureshi, Dr Kaveri (Senior Lecturer, University of Edinburgh) | VAWG0065 |
| 12 | Commonweal Housing | VAWG0055 |

13	DECIPHer, Cardiff University	VAWG0015
14	Duffy, Ms Grace (Director of Policy, Influencing & Engagement, Bridges Outcomes Partnerships)	VAWG0057
15	Durham Police and Crime Commissioner	VAWG0034
16	Eglen, Dr Laure (Rights Lab Senior Research Fellow in Gender Justice, University of Nottingham); and McCabe, Dr Helen (Associate Professor in Political Theory, University of Nottingham)	VAWG0086
17	Employers' Initiative on Domestic Abuse	VAWG0056
18	End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW)	VAWG0083
19	FiLiA	VAWG0039
20	Fletcher-Brown, Dr Judith (Associate Professor of Social Marketing, University of Portsmouth); and Middleton, Dr Karen (Senior Lecturer in Marketing, University of Portsmouth)	VAWG0074
21	Francis, Professor Brian (Professor of Social Statistics, Lancaster University)	VAWG0017
22	Gender and Tech Research Lab (UCL)	VAWG0012
23	Global Institute for Women's Leadership, King's College London	VAWG0075
24	Groot, Miss Sophie de (Postgraduate Researcher, University of Leeds)	VAWG0031
25	Harvey, Dr Orlanda (Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Bournemouth University); and Dr Louise Oliver (Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Bournemouth University)	VAWG0023
26	Hestia Housing & Support	VAWG0052
27	Hunter, Professor Ruth (Professor of Public and Planetary Health, Queen's University Belfast), Jones, Dr Sophie (Research fellow, Queen's University Belfast); and O'Kane, Dr Niamh (Research fellow/Science Communication and Impact Lead for GroundsWell Belfast, Queen's University Belfast)	VAWG0051
28	Institute for Addressing Strangulation	VAWG0063
29	Internet Matters	VAWG0067
30	Kypraios, Professor Theodore (Professor of Statistics, University of Nottingham); McCabe, Dr Helen (Associate Professor of Political Theory, University of Nottingham);	

	NorrIDGE, Charlotte (PhD Student in Applied Mathematics, University of Birmingham); and Seymour, Dr Rowland (Assistant Professor of Statistics, University of Birmingham)	VAWG0010
31	Kellezi, Dr Blerina (Associate Professor, Nottingham Trent University); Mackay, Dr Jennifer (Principal Lecturer, Nottingham Trent University); Mclocklin, Georgina (Lecturer, University of Derby); and Stevenson, Dr Clifford (Professor, Nottingham Trent University)	VAWG0022
32	Local Government Association	VAWG0050
33	London Councils	VAWG0040
34	Bewley, Susan MA MD (Professor Emeritus (honorary) of Obstetrics and Women's Health, King's College London)	VAWG0018
35	McGlynn, professor Clare (Professor of Law, Durham University)	VAWG0038
36	Men and Boys Coalition; We Are Survivors;	VAWG0024
37	Mitie	VAWG0079
38	Moir, Miss Amy (Public Policy Southampton Intern, University of Southampton)	VAWG0003
39	Money Wellness	VAWG0001
40	Muslim Women's Network UK	VAWG0026
41	National Ugly Mugs (NUM)	VAWG0036
42	Nordic Model Now!	VAWG0041
43	Online Safety Act Network	VAWG0043
44	Operation Encompass	VAWG0021
45	Paule, Dr Michele (Reader, Oxford Brookes University); and Yelin, Dr Hannah (Reader, Oxford Brookes University)	VAWG0020
46	Phipps, Dr Catherine; and Velija, Professor Philippa (Professor of Sociology, Dean of School of Education, University of Roehampton)	VAWG0027
47	Police Digital Service	VAWG0013
48	Rape Crisis England & Wales	VAWG0080
49	Refuge	VAWG0081
50	Respect	VAWG0016
51	SHERA Research Group C/O University of Manchester	VAWG0007
52	SafeLives	VAWG0082

53	Sandy, Dr Larissa (Associate Professor in Criminology , University of Nottingham)	<u>VAWG0032</u>
54	Sharp-Jeffs, Dr Nicola	<u>VAWG0071</u>
55	Shaw, Dr Rebecca (Lecturer in Law, University of Leeds)	<u>VAWG0009</u>
56	SignHealth	<u>VAWG0085</u>
57	Solace Women's Aid	<u>VAWG0058</u>
58	South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) and UK Safer Internet Centre (UKSIC)	<u>VAWG0084</u>
59	Southall Black Sisters	<u>VAWG0078</u>
60	Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse	<u>VAWG0069</u>
61	The Domestic Abuse Commissioner	<u>VAWG0076</u>
62	The For Baby's Sake Trust	<u>VAWG0054</u>
63	The Runnymede Trust	<u>VAWG0005</u>
64	The Survivors Trust	<u>VAWG0061</u>
65	The Vavengers	<u>VAWG0037</u>
66	The Virago Movement	<u>VAWG0073</u>
67	Transform Justice	<u>VAWG0045</u>
68	Trickett, Professor Loretta (Professor, Nottingham Trent University); and Welsh, Dr Kirsty (Senior Lecturer, Nottingham Trent University)	<u>VAWG0068</u>
69	University of Birmingham	<u>VAWG0044</u>
70	VAWDASV Research Network Wales, University of South Wales	<u>VAWG0047</u>
71	Violence and Society Centre, City St George's University of London	<u>VAWG0072</u>
72	Walby, Professor Sylvia (Professor of Criminology, Royal Holloway, University of London)	<u>VAWG0029</u>
73	Welsh Women's Aid	<u>VAWG0048</u>
74	White Ribbon UK	<u>VAWG0028</u>
75	Women in Prison (45922)	<u>VAWG0033</u>
76	Women in Refugee Law (WiRL)	<u>VAWG0049</u>
77	Women's Budget Group	<u>VAWG0030</u>
78	Youth Endowment Fund	<u>VAWG0014</u>

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

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25th	DHSC Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24	HC 639
24th	Government cyber resilience	HC 643
23rd	The cost of the tax system	HC 645
22nd	Government's support for biomass	HC 715
21st	Fixing NHS Dentistry	HC 648
20th	DCMS management of COVID-19 loans	HC 364
19th	Energy Bills Support	HC 511
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17th	The Remediation of Dangerous Cladding	HC 362
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10th	HS2: Update following the Northern leg cancellation	HC 357
9th	Tax evasion in the retail sector	HC 355
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5th	NHS financial sustainability	HC 350

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3rd	HMRC Customer Service and Accounts	HC 347
2nd	Condition and maintenance of Local Roads in England	HC 349
1st	Support for children and young people with special educational needs	HC 353