



Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Violence Against Women and Girls Services - Call for Evidence

Question 1

What do you consider to be the main function or purpose of services challenging violence against women and girls (VAWG)?

Comment

The Vision for Justice in Scotland published this year (2022) said “... the *abuse and violence that women and girls face is underpinned by inequality, societal attitudes and structural barriers that perpetuate that inequality. This includes the operation of the justice system. The current justice system was historically designed by men, for men, and thus does not meet the needs of over half of our society. We must therefore take urgent action to ensure women and children are better serviced by our approaches to justice.*”¹

At Victim Support Scotland (VSS), we believe the main purposes of services working with violence against women and girls (VAWG) are to support the victims of violence, raise awareness of the prevalence and impact of VAWG across the whole of Scottish society and to advocate for change to the criminal justice system to ensure that women and children are better treated within that system.

If we are to better hear, protect and respond to the victims of VAWG, services need to be supported in pushing for a trauma-informed practices when accessing services within the criminal justice system, including the Police, NHS, COPFS and the Courts. As outlined by the Scottish Government in the Vision for Justice there needs to be “...*effective, modern, person-centred and trauma-informed approaches to justice in which everyone can have trust, including as victims and those accused of crimes and as individuals in civil disputes.*”²

VAWG services do a lot of advocacy around creating better criminal justice outcomes for victims of crime within the justice system. Continued funding is vital to allow this valuable work to continue and to keep championing victims’ voices. Only by listening to them their lived experience can we understand the impact of systemic harms and identify the changes needed, in law and practice, to bring about better outcomes.

VAWG services should be funded to ensure that victims of crime have access to quality, trauma-informed support services or specialist support if required, across the whole of Scotland.

¹ [The Vision for Justice in Scotland 2022 \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot) page 6

² [The Vision for Justice in Scotland 2022 \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot) page 22

Question 2

What services should be available for women experiencing any form of VAWG? Please provide any examples of good practice you may have.

Comment

VSS believes that every victim and survivor of VAWG should have access to relevant, effective, and integrated support services where they are needed, as outlined in the objectives within the 'Equally Safe' strategy.³ It is vital that victims and survivors of VAWG are front of mind with criminal justice bodies and are treated with dignity and respect by the entire system. Their rights under the Victims Code⁴ should be acknowledged and upheld throughout their interactions with the criminal justice system.

Victims and survivors of VAWG need to have support available to them to access to the criminal justice system through third-party reporting and access to ongoing support as their cases proceed through the system. We strongly believe that all access to support services should be free for victims and survivors of VAWG.

When VAWG victims and survivors contact the police, they should be responded to in a trauma-informed way. An example of this would be that initial follow up statements are taken by officers who are specially trained in trauma-informed approaches. Victims should only need to make a statement a minimum number of times and should be offered regular breaks, refreshments etc. Being asked to continually repeat their experience of violence is re-traumatising and great care is needed to prevent victims' having to relive events on multiple occasions.

Victims and survivors of VAWG who do not wish to contact the police should always have access to the NHS Sexual Assault Response Coordination Service (SARCS).

Question 3

What services should be available for children and young people experiencing any form of VAWG? Please provide any examples of good practice you may have.

Comment

All states have a responsibility under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) *"... take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment, or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child."*⁵

³ [Equally Safe: Scotland's strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

⁴ [Victims' Code for Scotland \(mygov.scot\)](http://mygov.scot)

⁵ [Convention on the Rights of the Child | OHCHR](http://www.ohchr.org)

We would always insist that children should be treated in a trauma-informed, child friendly environment. This would include not attending police stations or being required to give evidence in court as these buildings are often intimidating and re-traumatising for children. We would prefer that children and young people who are victims of VAWG have access to the Bairns Hoose in Scotland.⁶ The overarching vision of the Bairns Hoose is that:

“All children in Scotland who have been victims or witnesses to abuse or violence, as well as children under the age of criminal responsibility whose behaviour has caused significant harm or abuse will have access to trauma-informed recovery, support and justice.”

The Bairns Hoose key values through which this vision will be achieved are that:

- we are child-centred, trauma-informed and respect the rights and wellbeing of the child at all times
- we provide consistent and holistic support, which enables children to have their voices heard, access specialist services and recover from their experiences
- we aim to prevent children being retraumatised and to improve the experience of the justice process for children and families
- we demonstrate connectedness and national leadership to uphold children’s rights to protection, support, participation, and recovery

Scotland should be working towards a position where that every child who has been a victim of crime and abuse should have access to health, justice, and therapeutic recovery services within a Bairns Hoose where the services come to them.

Question 4.1

What role should third sector organisations play in the provision of specialist services to women, children and young people experiencing VAWG?

Victim Support Scotland believes that third sector organisations have a pivotal role to play providing specialist services or supporting victims of VAWG to access the services they need. The third sector also provides support for victims and survivors of VAWG throughout the criminal justice process, from the initial investigation through the court process and after the court process is over.

Feedback from victims of VAWG, who have used the support services of Victim Support Scotland, has included the following testimonies about the impact of third sector support:

- ***“Even though I blamed myself every day for what happened to me, my supporters told me it wasn’t my fault. Both were very helpful, they were great. My supporter in court made me feel encouraged to go in and give evidence and gave support and reassurance. The recovery process is important, because you waste so many years, but if you have support it can make it easier,”***
- ***“The experience with my support has been amazing. She’s a lifesaver, she has kept me going at difficult times. There were a few times that felt like couldn’t go on, that there was no point in continuing my life. The reason I am alive is because of my supporter. I could explain to her my fears. She has always been fantastic with confidentiality too.”***
- ***“To give support as a VSO supporter you need to be a good listener, which is about personal skills they already have as well as the training brought to them. There should be more trauma informed practice rolled out across public services, there should be***

⁶ Bairns' Hoose - Scottish Barnahus: vision, values and approach - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

people from VSOs working with public sector services, training them. It should be the council, housing, Victim Support, Women's Aid, all working together."

Question 4.2

What role should local authorities play in the provision of services to women, children and young people experiencing VAWG?

Local Authorities must have a role in the provision of safe spaces for victims of VAWG. There should be enough spaces to cater for the number of victims and these must be accessible on a 24/7 basis for emergencies, not just accessible during office hours.

VSS also believes that local authorities have a role in the prevention of VAWG through education. The use of early and effective interventions, when young people either commit VAWG or are exposed to it through indirect means, could have a positive impact on and in reducing future violent behaviour.

Question 4.3

What role should the Scottish Government play in the provision of services to women, children and young people experiencing VAWG?

Scottish Government should ensure that the provision of services to victims and survivors of VAWG are adequately funded and that this is done from the perspective of creating a system that is trauma-informed and so, therefore, prioritises choice, collaboration (co-production) and control. This should include a justice system which listens to victims and survivors with lived experiences to shape service design, policy, and any future legislation. The Scottish Government should constantly look at ways to improve access to justice, especially for victims and survivors of VAWG who are seldom heard. These should include reporting on what measures have been taken to reach seldom heard victims and ensure that pathways to the justice system are clearly communicated to victims of VAWG in a trauma-informed way.

The Scottish Government must ensure that funding is in place to make the criminal justice system victim-centred, and trauma informed. Key to this is the greater use of virtual trials in all cases where the victim is either vulnerable, or there is a possibility that they may be additionally traumatised by the court process. The use of pre-recorded statements and evidence by commission should be maximised, especially in relation to cases involving VAWG.

We believe that to achieve a criminal justice system where the needs of victim's areas at the centre, requires the Scottish Government to ensure that Victim Services Organisations (VSOs) are properly

funded to raise the voices of victims of VAWG and fully support them throughout the criminal justice process and beyond.

Additionally, the introduction of a Victims Commissioner, with sufficient powers to make recommendations to criminal justice organisations, would be a big step forward in making sure services to victims of VAWG will be victim-centred and adhere to the Victims' Code.

Question 4.4

What role should the NHS play in the provision of services to women, children and young people experiencing VAWG?

VSS believes that the NHS should have robust processes for identifying signs of VAWG and reporting on this in a joined-up way with criminal justice bodies. A clear referral pathway from the NHS to VSOs will go a long way to ensuring victims of VAWG get the support they need. We have already seen positive steps taken to deal with crimes of sexual violence with the establishment of the NHS Sexual Assault Response Coordination Service (SARCS).

There is also a role for NHS professionals to provide mental health support to victims of VAWG, or make a referral to specialist services. Victims have often told us about the importance of good mental health support:

“Victims mental health is so important. It is unbelievable that people are not offered more support from psychologists.”

Another service user also provided the following comments on funding ***“Any mental health support recovery for victims should be covered by the government. There are currently waiting times and barrier to getting specialist support.”***

There is also a role for NHS Education for Scotland's (NES) National Trauma Training Programme to continue extend and embed training about trauma informed practice across all services that support victims of VAWG.⁷

Question 4.5

What role should Police Scotland play in the provision of services for women, children and young people experiencing VAWG?

The police have a fundamental role in dealing with VAWG. Police Scotland must ensure that all officers who encounter victims of VAWG, in whatever capacity, have been through trauma-informed training and that policies, processes and environments are trauma-informed. There should be sufficient specialist training and equipment to ensure the widest possibility of using pre-recorded evidence.

⁷ [NES Trauma Informed - Home \(transformingpsychologicaltrauma.scot\)](https://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/trauma-informed/)

Reports of VAWG must be treated seriously and prioritised according to the risk presented, Investigations must not be overly protracted. All cases where there is sufficiency to charge perpetrators should be reported timeously to the Crown and victims of VAWG should be regularly kept up to date with Progress.

With regard to evidence from electronic devices, the police should make sure that processes are clearly explained to victims of VAWG and check that these have been understood. All communications with a victim of VAWG carried out in a trauma-informed way, including any correspondence sent to the victim, which has the potential to traumatise the victim.

We strongly believe that the police should ensure that all VAWG victims should be offered support from a VSO at the earliest opportunity. When creating any new policies or procedures around VAWG, there should be consultation at a local and national level with VSOs to ensure that victims needs are at the centre of those.

Question 4.6

Are there any other organisations that should provide services for women, children and young people experiencing VAWG?

Yes

No

Don't know

Question 4.7

If yes, which organisations? Please explain your answer.

Question 5.1

Should access to services for those experiencing VAWG be a right in law for any woman who needs them e.g. like child/adult protection?

Yes

Question 5.2

Please give reasons for your answer

Victims of VAWG should already expect to receive minimum standards of service from criminal justice agencies under the Victims' Code for Scotland⁸, including access to appropriate services for victims experiencing VAWG.

VSS would support any additional legislation required to ensure effective services are available to victims of VAWG.

Question 6.1

Should access to services for those experiencing VAWG be a right in law for any child or young person who needs them e.g. like child/adult protection?

Yes

Question 6.2

Please give reasons for your answer.

Yes, with the same rationale as question 5.2

Question 7

How can barriers to services for women, children and young people experiencing VAWG be removed across Scotland?

Comment

Question 8

How can a consistent quality of services for women, children and young people experiencing VAWG be ensured across Scotland? Please include examples/ideas/minimum standards you are aware of.

Comment

⁸ [Victims' Code for Scotland \(mygov.scot\)](https://www.mygov.scot/victims-code-for-scotland)

VSS would advocate for a minimum standard of service to be created by and for organisations supporting victims who have experienced VAWG. We believe standards of service should be co-produced with services and victims, working together to set the standards that women, children and young people should expect. We believe that this collaboration would ensure there is both a level of expertise and victims lived experience applied to the standards.

Question 9.1

Should services and providers for women, children and young people experiencing VAWG be based on need in their local area?

Yes

Question 9.2

Please give reasons for your answer.

We strongly agree that services in each local area should be based on the needs of that locality. Additionally, it is important local provision is regularly reviewed and adapted according to demand.

Question 10.1

Should services and providers for women, children and young people experiencing VAWG be the same in every local area?

Yes

Question 10.2

Please give reasons for your answer.

VSS believes that the standards of service should be the same regardless of where a person lives. The provider of the service may be dependent on the availability in that locality. It is important that good quality support is available to victims of VAWG across Scotland.

Question 11

What action should be taken to ensure unmet need is met and regional disparities are addressed?

Comment

VSS would suggest that Local authorities and VSOs should work together, to provide services to victims of VAWG. To assess unmet needs, robust data needs to be collected resources should be flexed where possible, but it is for each organisation and local authority area to ensure that they have provision available to meet demand. We would expect to see local plans predicting demand and making contingency arrangements.

Question 12

How can women, children and young people who have experienced VAWG be meaningfully included in the co-design/evaluation of services? Please provide examples of good practice.

Comment

Many VAWG organisations have victim/survivor reference groups in place to ensure their voices are heard and to consult with. Here at VSS, we have committed to co-design and co-produce services and outputs with our reference group. One way we do this is by including victims' voices in all our consultations. People with experience of VAWG must be involved, from the outset, in the development of new services/products to support victims of VAWG. In VSS, we have experience of taking this co-design approach in the development of our Support for Families Bereaved by Crime service, which involved families bereaved by crime taking a core advisory role in the format of the new service.

We received feedback from one of our Reference Group members who expressed the importance of the involvement of people with experience and of co-design approaches in the following way: ***"To be heard by the people who have the power to implement changes in order to improve the system for victims and their families in the future is crucial."***

VSS also believes that coproduction should also include strategic partnerships in the design of local and national services. Whilst we would not want to jeopardise core funding for organisations providing VAWG service, we do believe that whole systems approaches should be considered. There should be additional funding provided to pilot and adopt more innovative approaches to tackling VAWG issues. We believe this approach would lead to better outcomes for women, children, and young people in the criminal justice system.

Question 13.1

For services receiving funding, what would be the optimum length of funding period to ensure they are able to continue to provide services effectively for women, children and young people experiencing VAWG?

Response options (choose one):

5 years

Question 13.2

Please give reasons for your answer.

VSS believes that funding periods should be over 5 years in duration. A shorter duration is insufficient to set up services for the short- to medium-term. Any funding set for over 5 years needs to provide flexibility to help organisations cope with economic downturns.

Question 14

Should funding application processes remain 'lighter touch' as was the case at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, or revert to a higher level of scrutiny as previously?

Comment

VSS would agree with a lighter touch application process. All VAWG organisations provide regular reports on the use of public funding and reviews should be ongoing based on the reports Government receive.

Question 15

What is the single most important thing that can be done to reduce/mitigate the impact of VAWG?

Comment

Education has a strong part to play in reducing the impact of VAWG. Educating people around issues relating to VAWG will bring home the profound effects such violence has on the lives of victims and survivors and help to make it socially unacceptable in Scottish society.

More needs to be done to make it clear that women and girls are to be safe, respected, and equal in our communities. Scotland needs to do better and adopting a zero-tolerance approach to VAWG within our society is fundamental.

Question 16

Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

VSS believe that a key element of tackling VAWG is the partnership between local authorities key public and third sector organisations. Working in collaboratively to design services to meet the local need. These discussions should also include survivors themselves who know best what survivors both need and would like to see to assist them in dealing with violence and sexual abuse. This was a key priority during the lockdown period and specific guidance (Coronavirus (COVID-19) Supplementary National Violence Against Women Guidance)⁹ was produced we would like to see a similar approach for the longer term.

⁹ [COVID-19-Supplementary-VAW-Guidance-FINAL.pdf \(cosla.gov.uk\)](#)