

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Date: 7th September 2022

Wards: All

Subject: Update on the work of Safer Merton and Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) and the new VAWG Strategy 2022-2025

Lead officers: Calvin McLean (Interim Assistant Director of Public Protection), Alun Goode QPM (Interim Head of Safer Merton), Zoe Gallen (Domestic Abuse and VAWG Lead), Katy Saunders (Interim Community Safety Team Manager)

Lead member: Councillor Eleanor Stringer, Cabinet Lead for Civic Pride

Contact officer: Zoe Gallen, Domestic Abuse and VAWG Lead

Recommendations:

- A. For the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to note the update on the work on the VAWG agenda and the new VAWG Strategy 2022-2025 - *Merton's Ending Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy 2022–2025*.

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1. This report provides an update on the work of Safer Merton in delivering for Domestic Abuse and Violence Against Women and Girls and sets out the new VAWG Strategy to guide our work from 2022-2025.

2 DETAILS

2.1. Safer Merton continues to co-ordinate the partnership approach to respond to VAWG, working with a range of council departments, Police, and other agencies to tackle and prevent violence against women and girls in Merton.

- The Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy Service (IDVAs).
- Running the weekly One Stop Shop drop in advice surgeries.
- Joint commissioning of the Complex Needs IDVA Service with Wandsworth, Kingston and Richmond.
- Refuge provision – run by Hestia, 17 beds for women fleeing domestic abuse.

2.2. The team directly commissions and manages the delivery of front-line services for victims of Domestic Abuse.

2.3. Beyond the commissioned work, the team coordinates cross-borough activity including:

- Developing and delivering the annual VAWG Strategy being discussed today, and the forthcoming Action Plan.
- The management of the VAWG Strategic Board (quarterly meetings), whose membership includes Police, Probation, Children's Services, Health, Victim Support, Hestia, Adult Services, Public Health, South West London Integrated Care System, Rape Crisis and 3rd Sector organisations.

- Running the monthly domestic violence MARAC¹ meetings.
- Raising awareness of Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA) and VAWG across the Council, partnership, and community.
- Ensuring we meet policy and statutory requirements, specifically conducting Domestic Homicide Reviews (two active at present) and co-ordinating the implementation of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

2.4. Following the murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021, there has been increased interest in the work undertaken to keep women and girls safe. Following a cross-party motion accepted by Merton's Full Council in April 2021, Safer Merton has established a Safety of Women and Girls task group, whose role includes considering how we develop safe and confidential opportunities for women and girls to share their experience with the Council and partners and addressing male behaviour.

2.5. The VAWG Strategy underpins the work we do in Merton to support victims and survivors of all forms of domestic abuse and VAWG.

2.6. The Strategy sets out our vision for ending violence against women and girls. This replaces the previous strategy from 2016-18 and was developed in consultation with VAWG partners across the borough. It has been further developed with feedback from the VAWG Board and Safer Stronger Executive Board.

2.7. If agreed by Cabinet, the Strategy's ambitious vision will be realised through a robust Action Plan.

2.8. We will work closely with residents, survivors, and multi-agency partners to develop this in order to address our five strategic objectives:

Partnership Objective 1: Raise awareness and coordinated partnership working

Partnership Objective 2: Prevent VAWG through early intervention

Partnership Objective 3: Support victims, survivors, and their children

Partnership Objective 4: Hold perpetrators to account

Partnership Objective 5: Improve the safety of women and girls

2.9. An action plan will be published later in the year setting out the steps to be taken. Initial conversations suggest that these actions will include:

- work with schools in a preventative capacity,
- projects helping to make our streets safe,
- focused work with survivors from minoritised backgrounds and those who experience multiple disadvantages,
- focused work on how to meaningfully engage with a diverse range of survivors including children and young people,
- work in changing abuser behaviour,

¹ Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference for high risk domestic abuse cases.

<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/MARAC%20FAQs%20General%20FINAL.pdf>

- and a focus on improving systems and referral pathways.

2.10. This work links with Merton's corporate priorities in terms of creating civic pride and a borough where residents feel safe to engage with the council and community services to receive the support they need. It also links to ensuring all equalities strands (sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, pregnancy/ maternity, religion/ belief, age, marriage and civil partnerships have equal access to our VAWG services.

2.11. Update on other key pieces of work in tackling Violence Against Women and Girls:

2.12. **Safer Streets Round 4 Funding:** Safer Merton has been successful in its joint bid with Wandsworth, Kingston, and Richmond for Round 4 of the Home Office's Safer Streets funding. Funding of £183,300 will be shared between the four boroughs on supporting interventions aimed at preventing violence against women and girls in public places and on engaging with men to change attitudes and behaviours. Work will begin on implementation of the bid in the autumn of 2022.

2.13. **White Ribbon Accreditation:** The Safety of Women and Girls Task Group is overseeing the work for Merton Council to achieve White Ribbon accreditation status. White Ribbon UK is a charity focused on engaging with men and boys to end violence against women and girls and is part of our work to develop a strategic approach to ensuring male accountability for ending violence against women and girls. This has previously been agreed by Cabinet. £3,000 in membership for three years will be covered under the Safer Merton budget.

2.14. **Merton 2030 and Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) London Crime Prevention Fund (LCPF) funded work:** Additional work being delivered with Merton Council and MOPAC LCPF joint funding. The interventions delivered include investing in extra capacity for Street Pastors to be trained and deployed to busy night-time economy locations (£11,000 costs were funded by LCPF 2021-22 paid out last financial year and £15,000 funded by the Merton 2030 budget).

2.15. Merton has also signed up to the **Mayor of London's Night Safety Charter**². The charter has been created to make London a city where all women feel confident and welcome at night and is part of the Mayor's Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy and London's commitment to the UN Women Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces global initiative. There are no direct costs in signing up to the Charter.

2.16. Continued communications via the Council's publicity channels to raise awareness of VAWG and promote the services available to victims in Merton. This includes working in partnership with the police and other partners on the annual **16 Days Against Domestic Violence and Abuse Campaign** which includes awareness raising, training and events to shine a spotlight on the different forms of VAWG and signpost to organisations which can provide support to victims. Funding secured under

² <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/arts-and-culture/24-hour-london/womens-night-safety-charter#acc-i-57686>

the Safer Streets bid (2.9) will contribute towards publicity campaigns and promotional materials.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

3.1. There are no alternative options as this strategy covering 2022-25 is needed to inform our work.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

4.1. The draft strategy has been developed by the VAWG Board and shared with partners. Through the work we currently do we have feedback from victims and survivors which has been incorporated into the strategy.

5 TIMETABLE

Action	Date
<i>Safer Stronger Executive Board</i>	20 th July 2022
<i>Overview & Scrutiny Committee</i>	7 th September 2022
<i>Cabinet</i>	19 th September 2022
<i>Official launch of VAWG Strategy 2022-25 and annual action plan</i>	During 16 Days Against Domestic Violence & Abuse Campaign 25 th November -10 th December 2022

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

6.1. Currently the domestic abuse service is funded by the Council and MOPAC. The women’s refuge is funded by the Council’s Housing Department. We will continue to look for additional funding to maintain and grow our services.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

7.1. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (the Act) received Royal Assent on 29/04/21 and is being brought into force in stages. The purpose of the Act is to raise awareness and understanding of domestic abuse and its impact on victims, to further improve the effectiveness of the justice system in providing protection for victims of domestic abuse and bringing perpetrators to justice, and to strengthen the support for victims of abuse and their children provided by other statutory agencies.

7.2. Part 4 of the Act, which came into force on 01/10/21, places new duties on the GLA and London Boroughs in respect of the provision of accommodation-based support to domestic abuse victims and their children in refuges and other safe accommodation. A copy of Part 4 of the Act is available under Appendix 2.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1. Domestic violence and abuse can have major implications on community cohesion. With 1 in 20 residents affected by this crime, the partnership's work in supporting victims, taking action against perpetrators, and ensuring that our communities understand the work we are doing on this subject is vital in achieving our ambitions for more victims to report and for more friends, family and/ or neighbours to report matters of concern.

8.2. The United Kingdom ratifies the Istanbul Convention, and this will be a positive way forward supporting victims and survivors.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1. As Safer Merton oversee the work as lead service, the team ensure that all crime, disorder, and safeguarding concerns are considered within this work.

9.2. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and subsequent guidance from the Home Office and MOPAC sets out the responsibilities for the local authority and the Community Safety Partnership.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1. As a response to the ongoing concerns of the Covid pandemic and now living with Covid, the Safer Merton service and our partners have evolved our business continuity plans to cope with associated challenges.

10.2. Victim Support and Safer Merton have shared each other's plans and are working on a daily basis to understand one another's pressures and challenges as we work to ensure that the service is continued to be delivered to our victims.

11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- **Appendix 1 - Draft Merton VAWG Strategy 2022-2025 – Merton's Ending Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy 2022–2025**
- **Appendix 2 – Part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.**

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1. None.

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