

Thurrock Council

**Domestic Abuse and Violence Against Women
and Girls Strategy**

2023-2026

Our partnership approach to tackling domestic abuse and violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Thurrock.

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Introduction

Sadly, violence against women and girls feels inevitable, and it shouldn't be that way.

The sheer scale and prevalence of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) has been brought to the forefront of the nation's attention in the last couple of years following a number of high-profile tragic cases. There appeared to be a turning point within society in recognising the extent of gender-based violence and public sexual harassment faced by women. These circumstances also supported conversations about the role of wider society, in particular men, to prevent these issues. The public had had enough, the outcry was the largest we had seen since the #MeToo movement.

Thurrock has proudly been trying to address VAWG crimes since 2012. Our previous strategy was written just prior to the world 'pausing' because of the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic affected everyone in society and in the context of VAWG and personal safety, it sadly added another barrier to individuals reaching out for support. Due to the initial 'stay at home' guidance, many experiencing VAWG crimes were sadly locked away with their abuser.

Technology in the form of mobile phones and internet access is accessible to many, however these are often monitored by abusers. The option to find a brief window of time alone to make a phone call would have been incredibly difficult for many. Reports to national helplines also increased during the pandemic and local services were supporting individuals for longer periods of time. The courts system was severely affected, adding lengthy delays to an already slow process. The saying 'justice delayed is justice denied' feels very true for many survivors.

Thousands of women and girls have also shared their personal experiences of abuse and harassment online through the 'Everyone's Invited' website. The government's Call for Evidence to help shape the new national tackling violence against women and girls strategy received more than 180,000 responses. This was a record number of responses for any call of evidence request from government.

This strategy continues to build upon the work that occurs across the borough since the launch of our first VAWG strategy in 2012. Our new Domestic Abuse and VAWG Strategy is constructed around six key priorities. These align with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and Government's Violence Against Women and Girls strategy. This strategy considers key areas of information, including:

- an initial and reviewed domestic abuse needs assessment for support within safe accommodation
- the Thurrock Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022/26¹
- lessons learnt from Domestic Homicide Reviews across Essex
- feedback from engagement sessions with the community
- national and local data
- best practice examples

The local authority duties within the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 are detailed in Part A- this is our Domestic Abuse Strategy. Part B details the VAWG strategy and community element of domestic abuse, detailing services available to support all survivors. There is a natural overlap between part A and B, and both support each other.

¹ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/health-and-well-being-strategy/health-and-well-being-strategy-2022-2026>

The Strategy will be accompanied by a robust action plan which will outline the steps we will take as a partnership to achieve our objectives. Our approach will use existing strong foundations to continue our wish to see a holistic approach to tackling VAWG crimes and the profound long-term effects on survivors and people close to them.

Legislative and policy framework

The Domestic Abuse Act was enacted in April 2021, complemented by the government's strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, published in July 2021. There was a commitment to continue to seek alignment between statutory Integrated Care Services (ICS) in health and social care in England and victim support services for survivors of sexual violence and domestic abuse. It separated Domestic abuse from this strategy, due to the separate statutory guidance that was due to be published to support the Domestic Abuse Act.

The national statement of expectations was refreshed, as was the male victims position statement where government reiterated their commitment to ensuring that male victims of crimes which disproportionately affect women and girls are supported.²

Many changes have occurred in national policy and legislation since the previous strategy. These are summarised below:

- Victims Code: November 2020
- Domestic Abuse Act: April 2021
- Tackling VAWG Strategy: July 2021
- Statutory guidance: Domestic Abuse Act Statutory Guidance: August 2021
- Statutory guidance: Delivery of support to victims of domestic abuse in domestic abuse safe accommodation services: October 2021
- Tackling domestic abuse plan: March 2022
- Supporting male victims position statement: May 2022
- Introduction of Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) – partnerships of organisations that come together to plan and deliver joined up health and care services, to improve the lives of people who live and work in their area, July 2022 – Health and Care Act 2022 requires the joint forward plan for an integrated care board and its partners to set out any steps it proposes to take to address the particular needs of victims of abuse (including domestic abuse and sexual abuse, whether of children or adults)
- Violence against women and girls' national statement of expectations: July 2022
- Women's Health Strategy: August 2022 – responses highlighted the impact of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls on the mental health of women their lifetime.
- Online safety Bill- in progression – the government VAWG strategy says this Bill will require companies to take swift and effective action against illegal content targeted at women
- Victims and Prisoners Bill – in progression

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-male-victims>

Scrutiny of national organisational responses to VAWG

The VAWG and domestic abuse landscape has seen increased scrutiny across several organisations over the past couple of years. As the responses to scrutiny develop, this is likely to influence the services we provide to our residents at a local level.

Nationally the role of the police and how they respond to VAWG has received increased criticism, resulting in a national police lead for VAWG and delivering a new police strategy that will focus on interventions to prevent violence, target perpetrators, and help victims achieve justice.

Essex Police has developed a Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2022-2024. This is principally an internal facing document, focusing on High Harm, Safer Spaces and Culture and Behaviours. HM Inspectorate of Probation identified in their submission to the VAWG Call for evidence that improvements could be made in their response to tackling VAWG within the services they deliver.

At the time of writing, nationally, the Probation service are exploring the concept of employing more men to help bring a male perspective to cases involving violent offenders, including cases of domestic abuse.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has seen its charging rate scrutinised. The domestic abuse-related charging rate in England and Wales increased for the first time in four years to 72.7% in the year ending March 2022 but remains below the year ending March 2018 (75.9%).

There is a lot of change that is happening across multiple organisations, many are now taking a detailed look to understand what they can do to improve their organisational response to the issue of VAWG. As the responses are developed, we will begin to see the impact on matters such as cultural transformation regarding sexism and misogyny, improved justice data recording and accountability for police perpetrated violence.

Part A: Thurrock Council Domestic Abuse Strategy

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021

The Domestic Abuse Act was enacted 29 April 2021.

The Act outlines guidance and support for agencies to prevent and respond to domestic abuse. There are a range of statutory and non-statutory duties. The aims of the Act include:

- protect and support victims – to enhance the safety of victims and the support they receive
- transform the justice process – to provide support to victims throughout the justice process and an effective response to perpetrators to end the cycle of abuse
- improve performance – to drive consistency and better performance in the response to domestic abuse
- promote awareness – put domestic abuse at the top of everybody's agenda

Crucially, children were added to the statutory definition of domestic abuse as victims in their own right if they see, hear or experience the effects of abuse.

The recently reappointed Domestic Abuse Commissioner carried out a mapping exercise of domestic abuse services across England and Wales.

The early findings from this report suggests that there is a post code lottery response to domestic abuse. Early findings and recommendations³ are detailed below – a full final stage report is due shortly:

- specialist domestic abuse services are effective in supporting victims and survivors to cope and recover from their abuse
- most victims and survivors want some kind of community-based support
- advocacy support alone is insufficient to meet the needs of victims and survivors
- the independence of services is vitally important
- services in England and Wales are unable to meet demand
- gaps in support for children, and access to perpetrator programmes, were particularly notable.
- specialist 'by and for' services are disproportionately underfunded, with considerable gaps in provision across England and Wales

The government will now consider how it will respond to these issues; a suggestion is that the Victims Bill should be utilised to fill the gaps identified.

³ <https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/DAC-Mapping-briefing-paper-final.pdf>

Local Authority duties within the Domestic Abuse Act 2021

The act includes new duties on tier 1 local authorities in England relating to the provision of support for victims and their children residing within relevant safe accommodation. 'Safe Accommodation' is defined in the Act.

Thurrock Council has responded to these as detailed below.

New Duties for Thurrock Council from the Domestic Abuse Act 2021	Thurrock Council progress on the new duties
Appoint a multi-agency domestic abuse local partnership board to be consulted when performing certain functions.	Amended the terms of reference of the former Thurrock Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Board to reflect the duties of the act, assisting the local authority in its functions of the newly required local domestic abuse partnership board. The Thurrock VAWG Board is the domestic abuse local partnership board for Thurrock.
Assess the need for accommodation-based domestic abuse support of survivors and their children in their area, including the need of those coming from outside the area.	Completed a needs assessment regarding the need for accommodation-based domestic abuse support of survivors and their children in their area, including the need of those coming from outside the area. Further details in this document.
Develop and publish a strategy, by 5 January 2022, for the provision of support.	Amended the previous VAWG 2020-2023 strategy to reflect the duties for local authorities under part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. This strategy already detailed support for domestic abuse victims including safe accommodation provision as defined by the Act. A decision of the VAWG Strategic Board has resulted in the VAWG strategy from 2023 onwards will continue to deliver the content required of a domestic abuse strategy. This will include links to existing work streams such as Community Safety, Housing and Homelessness and Safeguarding strategies.
Give effect to the strategy by commissioning and de-commissioning services.	Thurrock Council have commissioned new services of support as a result of the recommendations from the needs assessment. Further information is provided below.
Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy and report back to central government and to the Domestic Abuse Commissioner.	Annual review by the VAWG Strategic Board to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy in order to report back to government within the timescales specified.

Assessing the need for accommodation-based domestic abuse support of survivors and their children.

A needs assessment was conducted capturing data from April 2018 to March 2021 (see page 11). Information collected from Thurrock Refuge during this time period indicates that 295 victims of domestic abuse were provided with safe accommodation – 120 refuge clients with 175 children. The average age of domestic abuse victims in safe accommodation was 35, however the ages ranged from 21 to 71.

72% of those provided accommodation had children, and 7% were pregnant. 88% of Thurrock Refuge clients were British nationals, 5% of clients had no recourse to public funds. The top four areas (unitary or district level local authority) where Thurrock's Refuge residents were most likely to come from were Southend-on-Sea (13%), Thurrock (11%), Basildon (10%) and Barking and Dagenham (8%).

There is a strong association between some data sets and the deprivation levels across wards in Thurrock. On average, 52% of residents in safe accommodation in Thurrock were unemployed while approximately 42% of residents' employment status was unrecorded in the same time frame, based on a three-year cohort.

The unemployment rate is high which could be for a range of reasons, such as mental health needs, or language barriers, 5% of residents required an interpreter and 9% of residents' first language was not English. These may also be potential barriers in accessing and navigating employment or being financially able to continue to alternative accommodation.

Individuals identifying as having a disability was an emerging trend in the data. Although numerically small, there is limited understanding of these needs and therefore this area required greater focus. Mental health support emerged as the largest need for residents of refuge, corroborated by the understanding that emotional or psychological and jealous or controlling behaviour abuse types affected over half of residents each year.

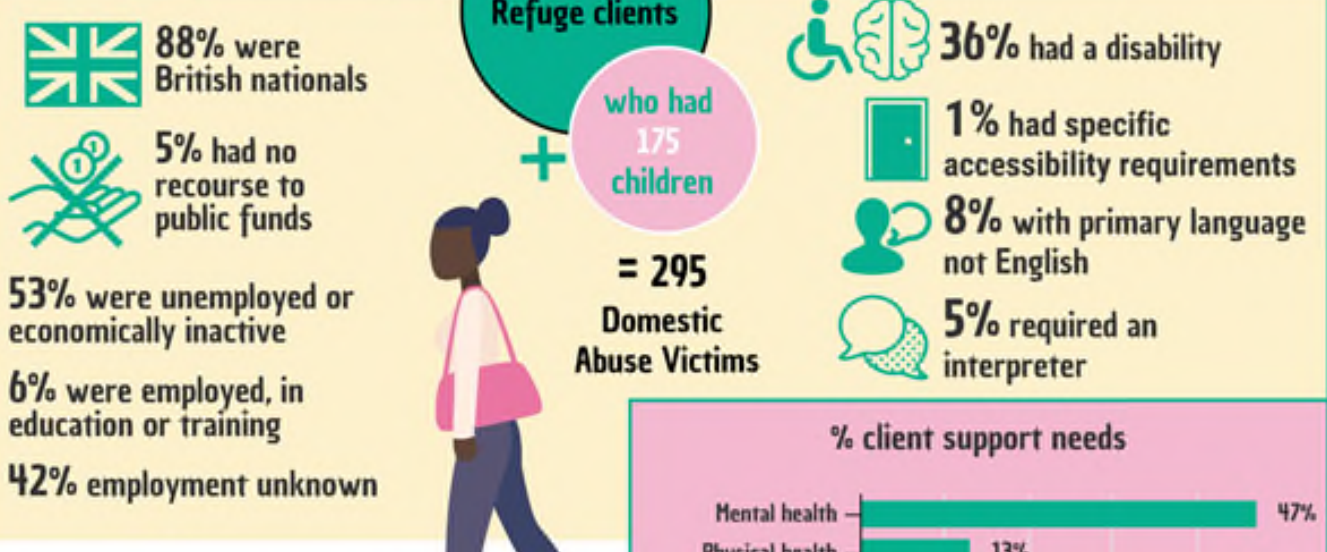
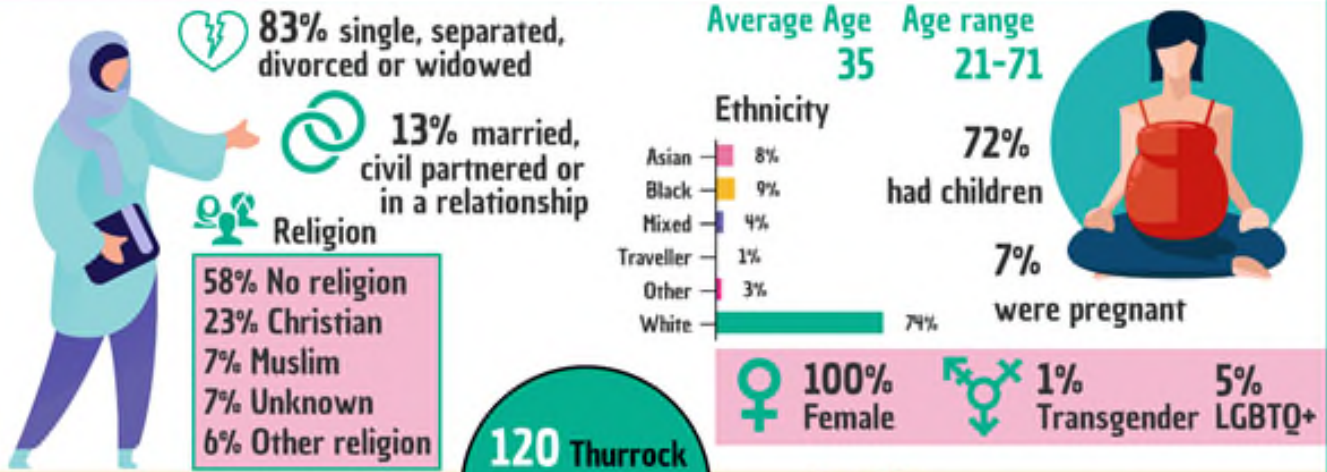
The Domestic Abuse Act has defined children as victims in their own right, therefore data recording across agencies will have to capture this with greater accuracy for future assessments. The specific needs of children residing in refuge is not known and will be a focus for future assessments.

This assessment has highlighted that there is a need for a regular multi-agency analytical product, overlaying partnership data sets and reviewing them all together rather than individually within own organisations. This would be of significant benefit to the local domestic abuse partnership board in assisting the local authority to deliver the duties under the Domestic Abuse Act.

'No space or capacity to provide support' was the second most recorded reason for being refused safe accommodation. There is a lack of specialised accommodation for minority groups or individuals who face additional barriers to reporting or for those who cannot/may not feel comfortable residing in current safe accommodation provision, such as males and LGBTQ+ community.

The ability to extend safe accommodation buildings and capital spending is outside of the Domestic Abuse Act new burdens funding remit, however this has emerged as gap in current service within Thurrock and will require further exploration.

What were the characteristics of domestic abuse victims in safe accommodation in Thurrock? April 2018- March 2021 (Source: Thurrock Refuge, 2021)



61% were initially 'high risk'

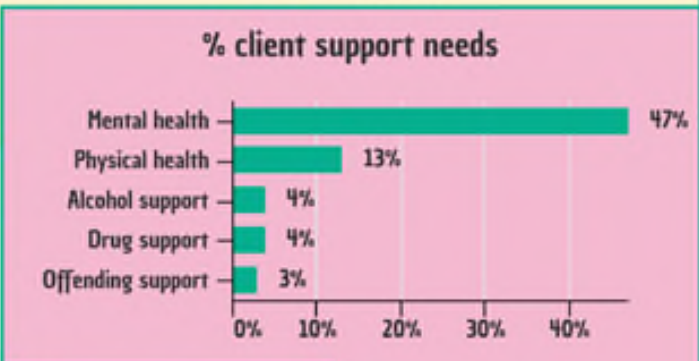
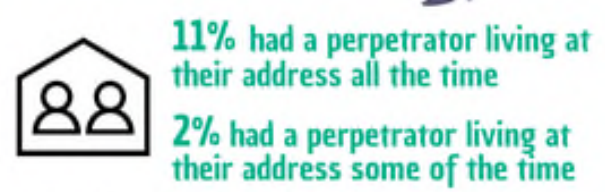


Image: summary of findings from the domestic abuse needs assessment, figures detailed 2018-2021.

Responding to the needs assessment- commissioning of new services

The needs assessment had several recommendations which resulted in the commissioning of new services.

New services within Refuge, a form of 'Safe Accommodation':

- financial inclusion support officer
- trauma-focused counselling for children
- children's worker – increase from 4 to 5 days
- trauma focused counselling for adults
- specialist sexual violence and abuse counselling for survivors in refuge and onto resettlement
- training need identified for Refuge to better understand complexity and differing levels of mental health and disability
- inclusion service, providing a drug and alcohol support service – building relationships with staff leading to a drop-in service
- tuition for children whilst waiting for a school place when residing in safe accommodation

Additional provision supporting residents residing in safe accommodation:

- Domestic Abuse Officer: Refuge x2 – Housing Safeguarding Team
- flexible fund payments to organisations directly supporting clients accessing safe accommodation, following the whole housing approach
- children's support group delivered by Thurrock Children Social Care

Review of services commissioned in response to needs assessment recommendations

Local Authorities have a duty to ensure that services of support are fit for purpose and have an impact on the issues identified within the needs assessment. The following changes have occurred to commissioned services from the New Burdens Fund:

Specialist Sexual Violence counselling for survivors in Refuge and onto resettlement- this service ceased after 1 year of funding due to limited take up of the service from individuals residing in safe accommodation. The clients coming forward for this service were from community-based services, which is not covered by the remit of this funding.

The analytical support role and a multi-agency analytical product was put on hold whilst we collaborated with our Essex County Council and Southend City Council colleagues on a piece of work to explore if the current pathways of support for domestic abuse survivors across Essex was still meeting the needs of the individuals who were accessing them. This work is ongoing and has reached some initial conclusions and recommendations for future services.

Domestic Abuse Officer – Refuge – the requirement of officers reduced from 2 to 1. This is largely in part to the positive impact of the other newly commissioned services in Refuge, reducing the need for a second officer in this role.

Case study – impact of the Flexible Fund payment assisting a survivor to start a new life

Client profile:

- gender – female
- age – 51
- domestic abuse experienced – emotional, physical, financial, coercive controlling behaviours
- complexities – alcohol-dependent, language barrier

Client entered the service via the hospital. Client had been strangled and pushed down the stairs by her abuser. The hospital identified this as a Domestic Abuse case and the Changing Pathways Essex Domestic Abuse Partnership Project (EDAPP) service was notified and a Health Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (HIDVA) was assigned.

The HIDVA supported the client whilst in the hospital with emotional support and then by securing a refuge space.

The caseworker identified that the client would need support with her abusive experiences, housing, alcohol misuse and mental ill health support.

Client was referred to the local alcohol service Inclusions for support, she engaged with this service for several months and eventually ceased all alcohol misuse.

Client completed 1-1 work with the caseworker to help ease her worries and fears about the abuse that she had experienced and to educate her about future warning signs of another potentially abusive relationship.

Client attended 1-1 in house counselling for an allocated number of sessions.

It was identified that the client was vulnerable and was isolated due to her language and cultural barriers.

The caseworker made a homeless application to a Northern Authority as she had decided that she wanted to start afresh somewhere out of London and Essex, the caseworker and client researched the area and there were several community factors that would support her life moving forward, this would reduce her isolation. Client was accepted and was offered a Social Housing accommodation after 6 months.

Due to the client's language barriers and vulnerabilities, she was unable to liaise with external agencies independently. The caseworker had to advocate on her behalf to ensure that she got the support that was available to her and to communicate clearly in relation to the providing of documents and legalities of the new tenancy.

When it came to the client moving on to her new home, it was identified that she would require even more support. The client needed transport to get to her new home up North, due to the distance of the move, it would mean that she would need to view, sign and move in on the same day.

To ensure this could happen, the Flexible Fund made it possible to fuel the work vehicle for the journey (without this, it may not have been possible due to limits on charity spending), and enabled purchasing of essential items such as a bed, bedding, microwave, kettle, toaster and

basic food items so she could stay at the property for the first few nights with ease until the local authority were able to put a scheme in place to support her with furniture and ongoing support. The client was extremely grateful.

Without the support that was provided from start to finish, the clients' own words were, 'I would be on the streets with nothing or dead if it wasn't for Changing Pathways'.

Changing Pathways were able to provide a safe place, able to support her move and thanks to the Flexible fund, were able to provide her with the essentials to begin her new life with minimal worry and angst.

Housing, Homelessness, and the Domestic Abuse Act

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 resulted in amendments to several pieces of legislation and guidance policies nationally. The Homelessness code of conduct was amended to reflect the new duties and implications of the Act. This included the new statutory definition of domestic abuse and in relation to housing:

- ensuring that fleeing abuse does not result in the loss of right to lifetime or assured tenancies when these were in place
- ensuring that homeless people identified as survivors of domestic abuse are given priority

The Thurrock homelessness strategy recognises that the overall under provision of safe, suitable and affordable accommodation in Thurrock for those with specific support needs is a factor in limiting positive outcomes for survivors of domestic and sexual abuse. These challenges include

- a lack of social housing stock to meet 'move on' needs
- turning to private sector renting can contribute to financial instability and insecure tenure
- engagement with specific groups requires different approaches to improve underreporting

The council has conducted a review its of policies and processes as part of its efforts to achieve DAHA accreditation – the benchmark for how housing providers should respond to domestic abuse. Through this work, a new domestic abuse policy has been developed. To reflect the council's commitment to tackling domestic abuse, the policy introduces several measures to ensure that residents receive a dedicated approach, considering the circumstance of each individual and always upholding best practice. The policy⁴ sets out that residents can expect the council to:

- get our response right first time
- work with specialist services
- be flexible in our approach
- assist and guide survivors to obtain tailored support
- ensure survivors can remain in their property if they wish through the sanctuary scheme
- safeguard survivors and their families
- take a survivor centred approach
- adopt a coordinated multi-agency response
- proactively engage with 'hard-to-reach' groups
- promote awareness of our zero tolerance support services
- assist survivors to find alternative safe accommodation, and continue to provide support
- ensure staff safety

⁴ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/housing-strategies/housing-strategy-2022-2027>

The work to achieve the DAHA accreditation will continue into 2023 and will demonstrate the council's commitment and coordinated community response to domestic abuse in areas such as case and risk management, inclusivity and accessibility, partnership working, and publicity and awareness.

The existing joint protocol for survivors of sexual and domestic violence has set a strong foundation, ensuring that partners commit to following good practice to provide support in a consistent, safe and effective way. Further work will be undertaken to review the joint protocol to reflect the current practice, including identifying and engaging with other agencies and organisations which work with those affected by sexual and domestic abuse.

Part B: Thurrock Council VAWG Strategy

Our vision

Reduce the prevalence of VAWG crimes and ensure that where they do happen all those affected get the right support.

What are VAWG crimes? VAWG crimes addressed in this strategy

VAWG is a term adopted from the United Nations 1993 declaration that includes "Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life".

The Council of Europe outlines four factors which lie at the root of the problem: Cultural, Legal, Economic and Political⁵. It acknowledges that the main cause of the violence is the perpetrator and the person who has been affected is never responsible for the perpetrator's actions. There is no single factor, but rather a myriad of factors contributes to it, and the interplay of these factors lies at the root of the problem.

Types of VAWG covered in this strategy include.

- sexual exploitation
- sexual violence
- child sexual abuse and adult survivors of child sexual abuse
- sexual harassment
- stalking
- domestic abuse
- female genital mutilation (FGM)
- forced marriage
- 'honour-based' abuse

Modern day slavery and human trafficking crimes are now addressed with a standalone, tri-partnership, modern slavery strategy⁶.

Legislation to address VAWG crimes can be slow to change. In UK law, rape in marriage only became a criminal offence in 1991, and coercive control in 2015. In 2012 the UK signed the Istanbul Convention but were unable to ratify it due to the UK's domestic laws not being able to meet its requirements.

The Convention is the first legally binding instrument which creates a comprehensive legal framework and approach to combat violence against women. It covers all forms of violence against women and girls and includes offences such as rape and stalking. In November 2022 the UK became the 37th state to ratify, with some reservations, the Istanbul Convention⁷.

⁵ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/what-causes-gender-based-violence>

⁶ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/modern-slavery>

⁷ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=declarations-by-treaty&numSte=210&codeNature=2&codePays=UK>

How can we prevent VAWG crimes from occurring?

As we recognise the complexity of why VAWG crimes occur, the Social-Ecological Model: A Framework for Prevention⁸ offers 4 key areas that could influence the prevention of such crimes. This model considers the complex interplay between individual, relationship, community, and societal factors. It explores the range of factors that put people at risk for violence or protect them from experiencing or perpetrating violence.

In the UK, the Coordinated Community Response⁹ and the Whole Housing Approach¹⁰ are two frameworks that are viewed as the most effective way to respond to domestic abuse. They recognise the importance of a whole person approach. These approaches shift responsibility for safety away from individual survivors to the community and services that exist to support them. They do not look at the issue from a single agency lens.

Thurrock has been progressing in adopting elements of both approaches throughout the previous strategy and will continue to do so in this strategy.

⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/about/social-ecologicalmodel.html>

⁹ <https://www.standingtogether.org.uk/blog-3/in-search-of-excellence>

¹⁰ <https://www.dahalliance.org.uk/innovations-in-practice/whole-housing-approach/whole-housing-toolkit/>

Priorities of the VAWG strategy and how we will achieve them

Positive communities – understand what VAWG crimes are and know about support available locally

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) year ending March 2022¹¹ highlights that an estimated 6.9% of women (1.7 million) and 3.0% of men (699,000) experienced domestic abuse in the last year. A higher proportion of adults aged 20 to 24 years were victims of domestic abuse in the last year compared with adults aged 55 years and over. A higher percentage of adults with a disability experienced domestic abuse in the last year than those without.

The feeling of safety on the streets and feeling safe in public spaces as you walk around in your daily life is incredibly important. In April 2021 Street Safe was launched across several police forces. This allows individuals to report anonymously where they do not feel safe across Thurrock and wider Essex. Although limited in number, Thurrock have had several reports submitted to street safe. Initial analysis has shown alcohol, drug use and areas with insufficient lighting are a concern to residents.

The top three reasons why people did not report these concerns to the police were:

- they didn't think anyone would do anything about it
- they did not consider the experience to be a crime
- they thought the experience was too trivial to report

These concerns, alongside the focused work of a programme of exploring local VAWG data sets called Minerva, will assist us to respond appropriately to the issues our residents are raising.

We will offer Bystander awareness training to members of the public so that they feel equipped to safely challenge unacceptable behaviour that they witness. This complements the existing domestic abuse awareness training, Community J9, which is offered to the public to help them spot the signs of domestic abuse and signpost individuals to support.

We will ensure that Council staff and Members are offered appropriate training to identify domestic abuse and signpost survivors to the correct support. The Thurrock Community Safety Partnership provide awareness training regarding domestic abuse and sexual violence.

We will support the annual 16 Days of Action (25 November to 10 December) with our daily messaging throughout the 16 days, hosting events to promote broader awareness of domestic abuse and VAWG, and the services of support that are available.

Our community engagement events throughout the year, across the borough and within educational settings assist us to raise awareness of domestic abuse, VAWG issues and provide information about services available to support anyone experiencing these crimes or behaviours.

Through challenging the social and economic impact of VAWG, challenging victim blaming and gender inequality, we can increase the knowledge and understanding across our communities.

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2022>

Prevention – increased awareness and education of VAWG across education establishments/professionals

Safeguarding Boards and the Education system have a very important role to play in the preventative work we can do to reduce VAWG crimes.

When asked which of several options they thought should be the highest priorities for the government in tackling all forms of violence against women and girls, most respondents selected "more action to prevent violence against women and girls from happening. Education programmes in schools to teach children about these crimes" was the highest-ranking option.

The Ofsted review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges (2021) surveyed children aged 13+ on what types of harmful sexual behaviours they think happened 'a lot' or 'sometimes' between people their age:

- 79% of girls said sexual assault
- 88% of girls said receiving pictures or videos they did not want to see
- 53% of boys said rumours about sexual activity
- 92% of girls said experiencing sexist name-calling

This rapid review concluded that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are prevalent for children and young people. For some children, incidents were so commonplace that they saw no point in reporting them. The review did not analyse whether the issues were prevalent for different groups but found that they were so widespread it needed addressing for all children and young people.

The key recommendation was that schools should assume that this is happening, even if there were no reports of it occurring. Thurrock have recently initiated a project with the NSPCC to conduct a harmful sexual behaviour audit to better understand any gaps in professional understanding of this topic or gaps in support provision. The outcome of this will impact our support service offer.

We will utilise the annual audit tool through the Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership to better understand any gaps in training or understanding of domestic abuse, the wider VAWG agenda and the services available to support education establishments to respond accordingly.

We will promote existing services that are able to attend our schools and contribute to the statutory Relationship and Sex Education duty such as the Good Man and Sisters In Strength projects.

We will provide relevant briefings and communication to schools, headteachers and support events such as the annual 'Walk Online Roadshow' to support schools and to raise awareness of online exploitation and how parents can help to safeguard children when they use online platforms.

Operation Encompass provides a method of sharing information between the Police and local Schools. This provides the designated "Key Adult" within the school with information where a child has been present in a household where an incident of domestic abuse has been recorded. The information is aimed to be shared with the school prior to the commencement of the next school day so that the school can provide any appropriate support within the school environment for that pupil on that day. Encompass, piloted in Thurrock, is now offered to all Thurrock schools.

Project Goldcrest is an initiative, designed collaboratively with input from young people, through focus group discussions. It was recognised that many young people say that Police/Social Care involvement can be a barrier to reporting child sexual exploitation (CSE), sexual violence and sexual abuse.

Whilst Police referrals and self-referrals into the Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) are preferable (for both criminal justice outcomes and improving patient outcomes), obtaining anonymous evidence and having some contact with the young person is better than none. This allows young people (who have already been identified as being at risk of CSE) to take their own forensic samples at home, with parental responsibility or an appropriate adult as a witness. Their information, along with the exhibits, are provided to the Police and stored for 25 years.

The young person remains anonymous to the Police (unless they later decide they want to formally report)¹². This was also a pilot in Thurrock, following an evaluation, it is being considered for roll out elsewhere across Essex.

Knowledge and understanding of VAWG crimes are an ongoing learning process for everyone, as these crimes and behaviours evolve and new concerns emerge, such as online crimes via technology.

Nationally and locally, our understanding of the prevalence and causes of these newer forms of violence against women and girls is limited. For example, we know that online dating abuse via dating apps has become a societal concern, damaging self-esteem and potentially future relationships. However, we do not have numbers of those affected.

There are also acknowledgement of concerns of abuse and extreme sexism surfacing in the use online forums and social media platforms as well as new apps, though again, accurate figures for this are not yet available. The government VAWG strategy acknowledged the limitations in the national data regarding crimes against women and girls in the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

The landscape can change rapidly. Most respondents in all parts of the government public survey agreed that online forms of violence against women and girls are more common now than five years ago.¹³

Any emerging concerns will be addressed within the action plan that supports this strategy, the action plan will be a 'live' document responding to changes and concerns. All our partners are stakeholders in this agenda, and we must all understand how we can respond to this issue to achieve change.

Partnership – effective multi-agency arrangements

The governance for this area of work is through the Thurrock Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Board, this Board also fulfils the duties of the statutory required Domestic Abuse Partnership Board. The Board reports to the Thurrock Community Safety Partnership Board.

'Tackling disproportional violence against women and girls' and 'breaking the cycle of domestic abuse' are priorities for the Thurrock Community Safety Partnership 2023/24.¹⁴

¹² <http://www.oakwoodplace.org.uk/professionals1.html>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-abuse-act-2021>

¹⁴ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/tcsp>

There are strong links between this strategy and Thurrock's Health and Wellbeing Strategy which sets priorities for reducing inequalities in health and well-being, and for improving the health and well-being of the people of Thurrock. This strategy has a strong shared priority with Domain 6 which focuses on ensuring that victims/survivors of crime can access support to cope and recover from their experiences.¹⁵

At a County level, Thurrock is a member of the Southend, Essex and Thurrock Domestic Abuse Board (SETDAB) and we also work closely with the Office of the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex (OPFCC). We share common strategic commitments within our strategies and plans with a focus on prevention and early intervention. This strategy aligns with the aims of both the SETDAB Strategy¹⁶ and Essex Police and Crime Plan¹⁷.

There is an existing strong working relationship between Thurrock and our Essex and Southend colleagues, with includes jointly commissioned services and collaborative working on specific projects.

Locally we will continue to strengthen existing relationships to bring about beneficial outcomes for the wider VAWG agenda, an example is the professionals' visits to refuge. This is an opportunity for professionals working in Thurrock to visit the local women's refuge. Attendees are shown around to get a clearer picture of refuge life. The host details how the process works from a victim entering and their journey whilst staying at the refuge.

Whilst on an individual organisational level there is limited resources and capacity, through working together, we can all view tackling VAWG as core business and share our knowledge, skills and capacity to respond together.

Domestic Homicide Reviews

In 2022 at least 108 UK women were killed in circumstances where a man or men were the principal suspect. Women are murdered on average every three days in the UK, mostly, by people they know and trust.

Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs) came into effect on 13 April 2011. There were established on a statutory basis under Section 9 of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Adults Act 2004.

The Thurrock Community Safety Partnership have the statutory duty to complete these reviews. Locally, this process is centralised across Essex and co-ordinated through the SETDAB team on behalf of all Essex Community Safety Partnerships. A Domestic Homicide Review refers to a review of the circumstances in which the death of a person aged 16 or over has, or appears to have, resulted from violence, abuse or neglect by either:

- a person to whom they were related, or had been in an intimate personal relationship with
- a member of the same household

The purpose of the DHR review is to:

- establish what lessons are to be learned from the domestic homicide regarding the way in which local professionals and organisations work individually and together to safeguard victims

¹⁵ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/health-and-well-being-strategy/health-and-well-being-strategy-2022-2026>

¹⁶ <https://setdab.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/SETDAB-Strategy-Consultation-Draft-Jan-2020.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.essex.pfcc.police.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Police-and-Crime-Plan-2021-2024.pdf>

- clearly identify what those lessons are both within and between agencies, how and within what timescales they will be acted on, and what is expected to change as a result
- apply those lessons to service responses including changes to inform national and local policies and procedures as appropriate
- prevent domestic abuse and homicide and improve service responses for all domestic abuse victims and their children by developing improved intra- and inter-agency working

Reviews may also be carried out if it is believed that a history of domestic abuse was an influencing factor in a suicide.

Following the completion of a DHR, and approval from the Home Office quality assurance panel, community safety partnerships must publish the anonymised executive summary and action plans, unless extenuating circumstances prohibit the publication.

Since the introduction of this requirement, Thurrock has had one DHR, a joint review alongside a Thurrock Safeguarding Adults Review. Thurrock CSP and Adult Safeguarding have begun the work to implement the proposed recommendations as we wait for the final approval from the Home Office assurance panel.

Provision – support victims of VAWG crimes with the appropriate service for their need

The support available regarding 'safe accommodation' and local authority duties under the domestic abuse is detailed in Part A. Naturally there is some fluidity between the transition of community support and 'safe accommodation' support.

The Housing Safeguarding Team (HST) is our community response to domestic abuse and other crimes and behaviours that fall under a safeguarding remit. They have an important role to play in the wider safeguarding agenda regarding many different types of abuse, and work closely with services across the borough, Essex wide and nationally.

The HST are uniquely positioned within the housing team at Thurrock Council. They are a highly skilled team of Domestic Abuse advisers, many of whom are trained Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVA) and Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVA).

They are well versed in partnership working with agencies such as Essex Police, COMPASS (partnership of domestic abuse services in Essex), NHS services, Inclusions, (Drug and Alcohol support), Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care and specialist organisations such as SERICC (rape and sexual abuse specialist service) for individuals experiencing certain crimes, such as Honour Based Abuse or rape and sexual abuse.

These organisations are vital support so that people can receive the service that is right for them.

Effective support can be lifechanging. Some examples of support this team have achieved during the time period September 2021 to August 2022 include:

- 19 survivors were found new tenancies to maintain their safety
- 1 perpetrator was evicted at an average court cost of £4,000
- 64 survivors were offered 'Sanctuary' adaptations (a form of 'safe accommodation' under the Domestic Abuse Act) to their home to ensure their safety at a cost of £52,296

This team work closely with both the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) and the Thurrock IDVA (High Risk support). These services provide the first-hand response to domestic abuse across Thurrock.

Between these services, they received the following referrals for support in 2022.

Agency	Male overall referrals 2022	Female overall referrals 2022
IDVA	13	154
Housing Safeguarding Team	26	773
MARAC	23	191

This data demonstrates not only the disproportionality of women experiencing a form of domestic abuse, but also that men are experiencing it too. The HST employ a male worker who assists any client; however, some men may feel more comfortable speaking to him about their experiences. The government published a new position paper to accompany the 'Tackling violence against women and girls' strategy. Thurrock Council take the same position as the government. The use of the term 'violence against women and girls will not negate the experiences of, or provision of support for male victims of these crimes. The male data referenced demonstrates that service provision is available to males and is accessed.

These services of support are available to any survivor who is seeking help and Thurrock will do all it can to ensure that any survivor feels able to come forward to seek such help.

The case study below details the incredible human element of helping another, whilst also demonstrating the working relationship between community support and 'safe accommodation'.

Case study

A male in his early 20s with learning disabilities attended Thurrock Civic Offices because of being subjected to violent physical abuse from a male family member, which resulted in him losing control of his bodily function and urinating from fear from the traumatic incident he had suffered. He did not approach the police or seek medical assistance.

An officer on duty from the Temporary Accommodation Team contacted the Housing Safeguarding Team requesting immediate safeguarding support.

Two female members of the team responded and began by creating a rapport and building trust that he would be supported, before completing a risk assessment.

This young man had fled with nothing, he had no money and had not eaten since the attack. The proprietor of the Civic Café provided him a drink and a hot meal free of charge as he could see the distressed state the young man had arrived in.

Another male member of the team who lives locally provided the client with some of his own clothes, to make him more comfortable. At this stage he was willing to make a police statement about the incidents and an officer accompanied him to the police station to support him and continue to provide him with the confidence to make the report.

Police then escorted the client into safe and secure temporary accommodation which was provided by the Housing Solutions Team. A Domestic Abuse Officer from the Housing Safeguarding Team provided some cash to ensure he could pay for gas and electric services.

Another member of the team purchased essential toiletries, which they delivered to the temporary accommodation.

Following words of advice, he decided to go to a Refuge. A HST officer sought a suitable refuge space, ensuring they were able to assist clients with learning difficulties.

The refuge provided us with a travel warrant under the 'rail to refuge' scheme. Due to the distance from the temporary accommodation to the train station, he felt unable to do this alone, so a Community Liaison Officer from the HST met the client from his temporary accommodation and accompanied him onto the train, seeing him safely on his way.

We received a call from the client and the refuge stating that the client had arrived and is settling in well.

The role each team and officer played in this case demonstrates the importance of kindness and support can have on an individual's outcomes and the value of kindness in the local community to those most vulnerable and in need.

Support for survivors of childhood and adult sexual abuse

In 2019 Thurrock Public Health carried out a 'Sexual Violence and Abuse: A Thurrock Joint Strategic Needs Assessment' (JSNA). The needs assessment sought to further our understanding of the nature, prevalence and types of sexual violence and abuse occurring locally in Thurrock.

This assessment is a unique piece of work, engaging local survivors and professionals. It is believed to be the first JSNA nationally to solely focus in this depth on sexual violence and abuse. The JSNA produced a series of 41 recommendations to address sexual violence and abuse (SVA) in Thurrock.

These recommendations included suggestions to improve local approaches to prevention, training and education for the wider workforce, improving pathways of support for victims/survivors and setting up a communications strategy to address myths, improve reporting of SVA and raise awareness of support available to cope and recover.

SERIC¹⁸ our local specialist support service, supporting anyone who is experiencing, or who has experienced, any form of sexual violence and abuse at any time in their life, were heavily involved in this needs assessment.

The JSNA recommendations were ambitious and even more challenging without additional funding to implement them. The COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably impacted on the ability for Public Health and wider stakeholders to immediately contribute to this agenda. For this reason, a decision was made to prioritise workforce training and education.

Achievements to date include:

- the production of a training and resource directory for professionals and parents/carers. this is currently an electronic document, however there are plans to move this online for ease of updating and circulation
- liaising and presentations to multiple forums with education colleagues internally and within Thurrock schools to raise awareness of the existing support available and identify further training requirements

¹⁸ <https://sericc.org.uk/>

- launch of e-learning sexual violence and abuse animated awareness training¹⁹
- joint working with the NSPCC to conduct a harmful sexual behaviour audit to better understand any gaps in understanding or provision

A key area of focus for the future will be responding locally and Essex wide with our partners to the recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. Proudly, Thurrock were one of only 10 locations in the East of England to be given a bench with a message of hope on a plaque, honouring survivors. This will remain in place for 10 years.²⁰

Underrepresented communities and crime types

Domestic abuse and sexual violence related offences are the crimes that we have the most data about, we know who is accessing these support services.

It is recognised that we can always do more, the work is never 'complete'. There are communities and crime types that where we have limited data, we need to better understand how we can support in different ways. We are committed to addressing the needs of underrepresented communities within our VAWG communication messages to ensure that people are confident that they too can come forward and seek help and support. Our Community Equality Impact Assessment recognises this approach.

We know that Thurrock has a large community across the boroughs three Gypsy and Traveller sites. Despite the population, there is very little data about their experiences of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls' crimes.

Studies have shown that disabled women are twice as likely to experience domestic abuse and are also twice as likely to suffer assault and rape²¹. National data suggests that up to one third of LGBTQ+ people experience abuse by relatives, and on average, older victims experience abuse for twice as long before seeking help, compared to those aged under 61²².

The support offered by agencies across Thurrock are available to all our residents, and often individuals are supported by more than one agency. The remaining VAWG crimes in this strategy, such as sexual exploitation, sexual violence, sexual harassment and stalking would initially access a support service from Thurrock Council, or some of the partner agencies mentioned earlier who work with the Housing Safeguarding Team, such as Essex Police.

Whilst our knowledge of those experiencing stalking is increasing and we are exploring more opportunities for extending support services, there does remain some gaps in others, such as sexual exploitation. This appears to be a relatively 'hidden' crime in the borough, but anecdotally, we have awareness that it does occur.

There is currently no reliable measure of the prevalence of 'honour'-based abuse; national police recorded crime data shows that 2,725 offences were recorded by the police in the year ending March 2021, of these, there were 78 Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) offences and 125 forced marriage offences.²³

¹⁹ <https://www.thurrocklscp.org.uk/lscp/e-learning-training-courses/sexual-violence-and-abuse-awareness>

²⁰ <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/our-legacy#benches-eastern>

²¹ https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Disabled_Survivors_Too_Report.pdf

²² <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20Later%20Lives%20-%20Older%20people%20and%20domestic%20abuse.pdf>

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-on-so-called-honour-based-abuse-offences-england-and-wales-2020-to-2021>

For crimes such as those listed above, the HST can support in the first instance, however, they will also seek specialist support assistance if needed from another agency, for example, via Karma Nirvana or the Forced Marriage Unit.

There are several organisations offering support across the VAWG agenda, for people experiencing VAWG crimes. If someone has contacted an agency that is not best placed to support them, through our existing partnerships, the person will be helped to speak to the support service for their need.

Supporting survivors of VAWG crimes can be complicated, intersectionality plays a huge role and prioritising risk over need is difficult to balance. Through a trauma informed lens and intersectional approach, we can all follow best practice and make the referrals required to support individuals in the best way possible.

Protection – appropriate intervention for all individuals displaying concerning behaviours

"I think we're failing perpetrators as well – I say that as a survivor. I just don't believe that we can't change behaviours. I think we're failing perpetrators, which means we're failing the public and future victims." – Call for Evidence, Focus Group, Government VAWG Strategy

Pursuing perpetrators is a key pillar in the government VAWG strategy. The call for evidence quotes detailed within it, and more recently, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner mapping exercise referred to in Part A of this strategy, highlights that survivors also want to see an offer support of to perpetrators to change their behaviours, so that survivors do not have to continually change theirs.

Thurrock have a perpetrator intervention provision which is available to Thurrock residents (victims of domestic abuse and their partners) who are using violence and abuse in their relationships and want to change.

At the time of writing, this offer of support is in two parts, a voluntary high-risk element, individuals who have social care involvement, delivered by a Specialist Domestic Violence Practitioner within children's social care, and a voluntary community element delivered by a commissioned service. There are also support services for young people through commissioned services to deliver support in schools and training for social care staff for intervention approaches related to adolescent to parent violence.

In the year September 2021 to August 2022 within the High-risk element, there were 85 appointments completed for risk assessments or case discussions that consisted of meeting with the high-risk perpetrator of abuse alongside the social worker. 14 individuals completed intensive direct work. Data from the community element was initially at a county level, we will be disaggregating that data to a local level for a full year from April 2023 onwards.

We work closely with Essex Police, local domestic abuse and sexual violence support services to better understand victims' decisions for withdrawing from a prosecution against their perpetrator. Recently, Essex Police and SERICC, the local rape and sexual abuse specialist service, have decided to part take in The Better Outcomes through Linked Data (BOLD) programme, led by the Ministry of Justice. This will look at attrition rates for domestic abuse and sexual offences. We welcome this area of work which will benefit Thurrock and shape future delivery.

We are ensuring that Council procedures and policies are robust to reflect that domestic abuse and violence against women and girls will not be tolerated and that perpetrators are held to account.

The council has successfully removed a perpetrator from a council tenancy because of domestic abuse and we continue to build momentum to achieve Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) status.

Looking to the future, we are awaiting the outcome of a bid with Essex for funding that will amend our perpetrator intervention support offer. Funding is one of the identified barriers to achieving change with perpetrators, there is limited funding for programmes, further challenged by a lack of evidence detailing which programmes are most successful and a cultural stance of victim blaming which then offers the perpetrator an unintentional layer of invisibility. However, by professionals safely challenging abusers and offering them the support provisions available, these services seek to change the behaviours and hold abusers to account for their action.

Participation – ensure survivors voices are heard (and influence decision-making)

The Domestic Abuse Act highlighted that the voice of the survivor was paramount. We not only want the voice heard clearly in domestic abuse work, but also within the broader VAWG agenda. It is important to increase survivor engagement, consultation and Co-Production within policies that consider domestic abuse or VAWG related responses. Addressing this will support our future needs assessments, strategies and decision making.

Our existing commissioned services collate survivor feedback to help inform service delivery. The VAWG Board have suggested that case studies are an effective mechanism and providers have extensive experience of collating input in this manner. This focus is to look at if our current mechanisms are enough or if we need to implement improvements to achieve better lived experiences within our service delivery

The recently completed piece of work across Southend, Essex, Thurrock (SET) identified a number of recommendations to improve the influence of lived experiences across the work we do. We will progress these throughout this strategy to improve the engagement of lived experience within our work and approach to commissioning services.

Closing comments

This strategy has detailed the partnership approach that Thurrock will take to continue to address VAWG and domestic abuse across the borough. Together we work towards a shared goal: to reduce the prevalence of violence against women and girls. This is an integrated approach between legislative framework, law enforcement, service providers and civil society. Together all elements are essential for tackling the issues of domestic abuse and VAWG.

Glossary

Domestic abuse is defined in section 1 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 as

(1) Behaviour of a person ("A") towards another person ("B") is "domestic abuse" if a. A and B are each aged 16 or over and are personally connected to each other, and b. The behaviour is abusive. (2) Behaviour is "abusive" if it consists of any of the following: a. Physical or sexual abuse. b. Violent or threatening behaviour c. Controlling or coercive behaviour. d. Economic abuse (see subsection (4)). e. Psychological, emotional, or other abuse. And it does not matter whether the behaviour consists of a single incident or a course of conduct. (3) "Economic abuse" means any behaviour that has a substantial adverse effect on B's ability to a. Acquire, use, or maintain money or other property, or b. Obtain goods or services. (4) For the purposes of this Part A's behaviour may be behaviour "towards" B despite the fact that it consists of conduct directed at another person (for example, B's child). (5) References in this Part to being abusive towards another person are to be read in accordance with this section.

Personally Connected is defined in section 2 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 as:

(1) For the purposes of this Part, two people are "personally connected" to each other if any of the following applies— a. they are, or have been, married to each other. b. they are, or have been, civil partners of each other. c. they have agreed to marry one another (whether or not the agreement has been terminated). d. they have entered into a civil partnership agreement (whether or not the agreement has been terminated). e. they are, or have been, in an intimate personal relationship with each other. f. they each have, or there has been a time when they each have had, a parental relationship in relation to the same child (see subsection (2)); they are relatives. (2) For the purposes of subsection (1)(f) a person has a parental relationship in relation to a child if— a. the person is a parent of the child, or b. the person has, or has had, parental responsibility for the child. (3) In this section— "child" means a person under the age of 18 years. "civil partnership agreement" has the meaning given by section 73 of the Civil Partnership Act 2004. "parental responsibility" has the same meaning as in the Children Act 1989 (see section 3 of that Act). "relative" has the meaning given by section 63(1) of the Family Law Act 1996.

Forced Marriage is a marriage conducted without the valid consent of one or both parties where duress is a factor

Honour Based Violence/Abuse (so called) is an international term used by many cultures for justification of abuse and violence. It is a crime or incident committed in order to protect or defend the family or community "honour"; this can often, but not always, go hand in hand with forced marriages.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) refers to procedures that intentionally alter or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons

Sexual Violence and Abuse (SVA) – Sexual Violence can be defined as any behaviour perceived to be of a sexual nature which is unwanted and takes place without consent or understanding:

- Rape is defined as penetrative sex with another person against their will. This includes vaginal, anal and oral penetration.
- Sexual assault covers any other sort of sexual contact and behaviour that is unwanted, ranging from touching to any other activity if it is sexual.

- Child Sexual Abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent
- Sexual Harassment is unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) – Sexual exploitation of children and young people involve exploitive situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive "something" (such as food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities (this can include forms of grooming).

Sexual Exploitation including trafficking for sexual exploitation the forcible or deceptive recruitment of woman, men and children, for the purposes of forced prostitution or sexual exploitation:

Stalking – whilst there is no strict legal definition of 'stalking', The Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 created two new offences of stalking by inserting new sections 2A and 4A into the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 section 2A (3) and sets out examples of acts or omissions which, are associated with stalking. For example, following a person, watching or spying on them or forcing contact with the victim through any means, including social media. The effect of such behaviour is to curtail a victim's freedom, leaving them feeling that they constantly have to be careful. In many cases, the conduct might appear innocent (if it were to be taken in isolation), but when carried out repeatedly so as to amount to a course of conduct, it may then cause significant alarm, harassment or distress to the victim.