

Halving VAWG in 10 years: the principles that must underpin the Strategy

The Government has a strategic aim to halve violence against women and girls (VAWG) in a decade. To support this ambition, a new 10-year government Strategy is set to be published this autumn.

This paper outlines six foundational principles that the Victims' Commissioner believes must underpin this Strategy if the Government is to deliver meaningful and lasting progress towards this aim.

1. The strategy must be truly cross-governmental

The majority of survivors do not report or disclose to statutory services or engage with the criminal justice system. While often described as 'cross-governmental', in practice previous strategies have been disproportionately justice-led. A 2025 [National Audit Office \(NAO\) report](#) criticised the Government for failing to deliver a genuinely whole-of-government approach. For the new Strategy to succeed, it must be truly cross-cutting – spanning all departments and workstreams, with clear prioritisation from the top.

2. The strategy must ensure and facilitate a robust criminal justice response

It is the Commissioner's view that the Strategy must strengthen the criminal justice system (CJS) response to VAWG and ensure that the system better meets the needs of victims.

The CJS is facing both internal and external challenges. Public confidence is declining, staff retention is poor, prisons are at capacity, and the [courts backlog](#) regularly reaches new record highs.

The Commissioner's report on the impact of the courts backlog, '[Justice Delayed](#)', found that victims were losing faith in the court system and lengthy delays were taking a significant toll on their wellbeing and welfare. Victims [frequently report poor experiences with the justice process](#), and it is widely acknowledged that criminal justice agencies are failing to meet their obligations under the Victims' Code.

Victims of VAWG crimes are withdrawing from the criminal justice process at alarming rates. [Research by the London Victims' Commissioner](#) shows that victims of rape and domestic abuse are withdrawing at disproportionately high rates (69% and 59%, respectively) and although the findings are London-specific, [the latest national figures show this is an issue across the country](#).

Getting the criminal justice system offer right for victims is an important step to help prevent future harm, as it will help encourage more victims to come forward. As it

stands, victims tell the Commissioner how the system compounds their trauma. This not only makes them less likely to engage with the system again but can also have a chilling effect on other victims who may have considered coming forward.

The Strategy must aim to increase victims' involvement in the CJS. The Commissioner would like to see increasing engagement with the criminal justice system as one of the core strategic objectives of the Strategy. Accordingly, it must include measures that will ensure that when a survivor engages with the CJS, the system is able to respond appropriately, deliver justice (including procedural justice) in a timely manner, and protect both the individual and society from future harm.

Measures and initiatives designed to help victims engage and remain with the CJS process must be, at a minimum protected, and ideally expanded:

- Legal advocacy for victims of rape (a government manifesto commitment) is currently being [piloted](#) in London (February 2023- June 2025). This should be rolled out nationally and as recommended by the [Law Commission](#).
- Government must invest in the necessary infrastructure to support Pre-recorded cross-examination (s.28) and other 'special measures' that help victims to give their best evidence at court, ensuring they are available for all victims who want or need them, as also recommended by the [Law Commission](#).
- Government must take steps to ensure that suitable data is collected and available so that the Victims' Commissioner is able to fully and rigorously monitor compliance with the Victims' Code, and to monitor the victims' experiences with the agencies of the CJS.

Fixing the foundations of the justice system – so that victims of VAWG can have confidence in the system to deliver justice and feel able to engage - will take investment. Critically, this means not just increased funding for the criminal justice system but also for victim services due to their interconnected relationship.

Whilst the Commissioner is encouraged by the Chancellor's [spending review announcement](#), which indicates a degree of governmental intention to invest in the justice system, it remains to be seen how money will be invested. Improved efficiency is important to victims, but their needs, safety and procedural justice must not be sacrificed simply to reduce costs. The Commissioner remains concerned that victims have remained conspicuous by their absence in recent budgetary announcements.

3. The strategy must take an intersectional approach

Inequalities make certain women and girls more vulnerable to, and at greater risk of, violence. For example, women and girls from black and minoritised backgrounds are [at greater risk of certain types of domestic abuse](#). However, it is often women and girls from minority groups that are also [more hesitant to engage with the justice system](#).

Inequalities can have a compounding effect on the harms experienced by survivors and can be used by offenders to further victimise. These inequalities not only impact the ability of survivors to access the criminal justice system but also other systems that are crucial to our collective response to VAWG, such as housing, work and/ or benefits.

Some black and minoritised victims may, for example, face additional barriers to participating in the criminal justice process due to the fear of, or actual reprisals from, community members should they report. They may also have additional language needs, [and issues with their immigration status](#).

Migrant women are also less likely to report due to fears that their data may be shared between the police and Home Office immigration enforcement, resulting in this group being '[hidden](#)'. Those that do report face potential enforcement action at the expense of the police [investigation](#). This is often weaponised by domestic abuse perpetrators, who are known to use a victim's insecure immigration status as a means of control.

Disabled women and older women may face abuse from those that also support or provide 'care' to them which can add additional barriers to reporting. When disabled women do report, police are often ill-equipped to respond appropriately, and [research suggests](#) that they are less likely to see a prosecution.

While not exhaustive, these examples illustrate why the strategy must take full account of intersecting inequalities.

4. The strategy must tackle all forms of VAWG

VAWG takes many forms, and often women and girls are subjected to multiple forms of VAWG across their lifetime. It is therefore imperative that VAWG is considered holistically and that different offence types or forms of VAWG are not treated hierarchically. The Commissioner is concerned, however, by apparent disparities in how different forms of VAWG are currently being prioritised by Government. A recent [Home Office](#) announcement detailed considerable investment in Drive, a perpetrator programme targeting perpetrators of domestic abuse. Whilst this investment is welcome, there needs to be commensurate investment in measures and initiatives to address all forms of VAWG.

The previous Government excluded child sexual abuse (CSA) from their 2021 Strategy and created a separate 2021 CSA/E (child sexual abuse and exploitation) strategy which contained virtually no gendered analysis of this issue. The Commissioner is of the view that merely referencing child sexual abuse and exploitation in its Strategy, as the previous Government did, would undermine its aim of halving VAWG. CSA/E is undoubtedly a gendered issue and positioning it outside VAWG is at odds with international frameworks and criminal justice agencies nationally.

In contrast, the 2021 VAWG Strategy did include interpersonal abuse and violence against men and boys, categorising it under the broader umbrella of ‘violence against women and girls.’ This was a decision the previous Commissioner opposed, a view shared by Baroness Newlove. Male victims may experience the same offence types, but that does not mean they are necessarily victims of gendered violence in the same structural or societal sense. Moreover, male victims of interpersonal violence have distinct needs. For instance, there are harmful misconceptions and stereotypes, including around masculinity, that can act as barriers for male victims when it comes to reporting and seeking help. The Commissioner [continues to advocate for a distinct, dedicated strategy for men and boys](#) affected by such violence.

The rapid increase in online and ‘online facilitated’ VAWG is another area of concern. The Government has a clear growth agenda in respect of AI and digital technology and whilst the Online Safety Act and appointment of Ofcom as regulator are both welcome developments, the Department for Innovation, Science and technology (DSIT) relies on these as the ‘answer’ to the evolving proliferation of online VAWG. However, Ofcom are unable to make meaningful change in this area. To date their codes of practice indicate a bias towards [commerciality over safety](#) and they are further hampered by the fact that they are only able to issue [guidance in respect of VAWG](#).

The Commissioner recommends that as part of the VAWG strategy, the Government commit to amend the [Online Safety Act 2023](#)¹ so that instead of being limited to providing guidance to tech platforms on preventing VAWG, Ofcom could create an enforceable code of practice. It is vital that any strategy seeks to address the issues in the online as well as offline space and includes robust measures to ensure that the tech growth agenda is not at odds with the preventing VAWG agenda. Ensuring that the online space is free of VAWG must be central to the Strategy, not least because there are connections between online and offline offending.

Women and girls experience a broad spectrum of gendered harms throughout their lives. The Strategy must recognise and reflect violence against women and girls in all its forms. all types of VAWG equally.

5. The strategy must be underpinned by accurate data and metrics

There is a dearth of data collected about victims. Much official data is reliant on engagement with the criminal justice system and, as outlined earlier in this document, most victims do not engage with the CJS. Moreover, there is no centralised repository for criminal justice data, so it is not possible to track cases, victims, or offenders through the system.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales is the best official data source available in terms of understanding levels of victimisation as it should capture those that do not

¹ [Online Safety Act 2023](#)

report, however, this data still has limitations and must not be relied on in isolation or at the expense of other valuable data sources.

We know that certain groups are less likely to engage with the criminal justice system and other statutory bodies, but we do not have a good understanding of the numbers of victims nor the barriers they face in accessing justice and/or safety due to this lack of data. Previously, the Commissioner has recommended that research be commissioned to understand who is not engaging with the system and why, so that they do not remain hidden in official data.

The [VAWG sector has suggested](#) that Government could make better use of the data held in support services and the Commissioner agrees. To meet the proposed target on VAWG, it is imperative the Government utilises all available data to build an accurate picture of the scale of the problem.

The Strategy should include measures to improve data collection across the criminal justice system, including the ability to track offenders and victims through the system. There also needs to be measures to improve data sharing between agencies to ensure that victims are properly informed and safeguarded.

6. The strategy must be underpinned by funding commitments and commissioning models that ensure the sustainability of the specialist support sector

The importance of the victims' support sector must not be overlooked. As most survivors do not engage with the criminal justice system and do not seek support through statutory channels, the independent support sector provides a vital lifeline to many. Additionally, for those who do, specialist support helps them stay the course and [remain engaged in the criminal justice process](#).

Victims for whom the justice system is less accessible rely on specialist 'by and for' services, that is specialist services that are led, designed, and delivered by and for the users and communities they aim to serve, [many of which exist in a state of existential crisis](#).

Prevention and perpetrator work will be a considerable focus of the strategy and is undoubtedly important, but it is only one part of the puzzle. The Commissioner is clear that any investment in prevention must be matched by equivalent funding for victim and survivor support.

Support services play a vital role in prevention by contributing to shared intelligence on offenders and offending, whilst also preventing repeat victimisation by empowering victims, and helping them to rebuild their lives. Additionally, many support services also undertake direct prevention work, for example by delivering education programs in schools.

Further, services have expressed concern to the Commissioner that any expansion of perpetrator programmes may inadvertently increase pressure on their already

overstretched resources, as advocates supporting the partners and ex-partners of the men involved make additional referrals. Investment must not be focused purely on the criminal justice architecture and prevention to the neglect of support services for victims.

The Commissioner has consistently recommended that government sustainably funds the specialist support sector in [reports](#), in [submissions to government](#), and recently in a joint letter with the [Domestic Abuse Commissioner](#).

The recently published '[Spending Review: Departmental Efficiency Plans](#)' specifies that the Ministry of Justice, which currently funds the bulk of victim support services, will investigate how further efficiency savings can be made in the key policy area of 'victims'. Given these services have been subject to frozen budgets for the past few years, "further efficiencies" will be interpreted by many as cuts to existing service levels. We must not allow already over-stretched support services to close; to do so would be disastrous for victims both in the short and longer term. It would also mean losing expertise built up over years that, once gone, it is difficult to envisage how it would be built back.

A Strategy to halve VAWG in ten years cannot be delivered against a background of reduced funding and diminished service provision. The Strategy needs these vital services and the expertise they bring if it is to ever meet its target of halving VAWG in a decade.

Conclusion

Halving VAWG in a decade is an ambitious but necessary goal. The principles set out in this paper are the foundations on which a credible, effective and lasting Strategy must be built.

To succeed, the Strategy must be genuinely cross-governmental and fully intersectional. It must tackle VAWG in all its forms - whether online or offline - with no perceived hierarchy of abuse or harm. It must ensure a criminal justice system that is capable, resourced and responsive to victims' needs. It must be rooted in accurate data, driven by measurable outcomes, and underpinned by long-term, sustainable funding for specialist victim support.

Without these core elements in place, the Government's ambition is likely to remain just that - an ambition, rather than a reality.