

Violence Against Women Strategy

Summary

The previous Home Secretary announced that the government would be developing a strategy to reduce violence against women and girls. Having held a consultation between March and May, the Home Office is now seeking to develop the strategy by the end of November.

Initial indications are that the consultation has revealed three areas for further work – preventing violence in the first place, better provision of services and increasing the trust of women in the criminal justice system. This paper updates members on the violence against women and girls consultation, and seeks members' views on the areas of work the strategy is likely to concentrate on.

Recommendations

Board members are invited to:

- a. Note the Home Office's work on reducing violence against women and girls following the consultation this spring.
- b. Comment on the points the Home Office is considering in relation to local authority involvement in reducing violence against women and girls, and whether there are any other matters that need to be taken into account.

Action

LGA officers to reflect the Board's views in the LGA's work with the development of the Home Office's Violence Against Women Strategy.

Violence Against Women Strategy

Background

1. Even though official figures show that overall violent crime has fallen since mid-1990s, violence against women continues to make up a significant proportion of violent crime, with domestic violence for instance accounting for 16% of all violent crime in the 2007/08 British Crime Survey (BCS). The total cost of violence against women is estimated as £40.1 billion in terms of time off work, court cases, and costs to the health system. The results from the BCS work also suggested that 23% of women have experienced some form of sexual assault since they turned 16.

2. The impact of violence against women led the government to include a range of commitments in the Action Plan for Tackling Violence published at the start of 2008. Most significantly for local authorities, rolling out best practice in tackling domestic violence is a priority and there are further commitments to reduce both sexual violence and sexual exploitation. Following on from the Action Plan the former Home Secretary Jacqui Smith announced in November 2008 that the government would implement a national violence against women strategy.

The violence against women and girls consultation

3. In order to inform the strategy the Home Office launched a consultation in March 2009. The intention behind the consultation was to raise awareness and to generate discussion on what more could be done to reduce violence against women and girls. The Home Office therefore conducted a series of roadshow events around the country in addition to producing the consultation document, with a view to gaining views from the public as well as frontline practitioners. The consultation concluded at the end of May, with the LGA submitting a response. This outlined local government's commitment to ensuring women and girls feel safe, the work the LGA has done to promote the need to address domestic violence, and the need for reducing violence against women to become part of mainstream council community safety activity.

4. The consultation generated over 7,500 completed surveys, and over 1,000 emails and close to 200 official responses. In addition focus groups were held with 300 victims of violence. The Home Office has been analysing the results over the summer, with the intention of publishing the findings at the end of August.

5. However, the published analysis of the consultation response is not yet available. Discussions with the Home Office have indicated that there are three main issues arising from the consultation: not enough is being done to prevent violence against women; there are not enough specialist services available; and, there is a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system to protect victims.

The violence against women and girls strategy

6. The cross-departmental strategy to reduce violence against women and girls will seek to address these three issues. The intention is that the strategy will be produced by the end of November. The provision of services by local authorities to reduce violence against women and support women victims of violence has been a subject of some controversy over the last year. In January 2009 the Equalities and Human Rights Commission published a report called 'Map of Gaps 2'. This argued that there was considerable variation in the provision of specialist services to help women victims of violence, and that one-third of councils provided no specialist provision at all. The report also set out the funding problems facing the often small voluntary sector groups that provide such services. The LGA strongly contested the validity of some of the arguments made in the report, pointing out the seriousness with which councils regard violence against women. The LGA particularly highlighted the flaws in the research behind the report and the apparent lack of knowledge of local government structures and partnership working.

7. However one strand of the strategy will look at what can be done to ensure adequate provision of services. Councils will be looking to deliver services as efficiently and effectively as possible, and have started to move away from using grants to support services in this area to commissioning the services needed locally. Both the public and voluntary sectors need to address how more can be done with less, so the organisations councils work with will have to adapt and be flexible. The Home Office strategy will therefore pay particular attention to commissioning and how this can be used to build capacity in the voluntary sector while also providing local partnerships with means of identifying what services are needed in their area.

8. In designing the strategy the Home Office will be looking at a range of issues, and are likely to include the following:

- In funding services what should the balance be between commissioning and grants?
- What support do councils need on commissioning services?
- What can be done to increase the capacity of the voluntary sector to gain commissions?
- What role do National Indicators have in ensuring performance on tackling violence against women?
- How can the Audit Commission and the CAA process be used to ensure adequate services are available?
- How can local partnerships identify what sort of services are needed in their area?

9. The risk from the LGA's perspective is that as the strategy develops the Home Office will seek to impose a centrally driven agenda, rather than supporting local partnerships to address the issues that matter in their areas. Mandatory requirements on the provisions of services would mean the delivery of inappropriate services. While domestic and sexual violence will be common across communities, incidences

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of honour based violence or prostitution will vary greatly, and what is an important issue in one area will not be in a neighbouring area. The LGA has already been highlighting the pitfalls of a top down approach, and also setting out the work done to date by the LGA and others in addressing domestic violence, such as that by Oxfordshire County Council through its LAA which has seen the training of frontline staff in dealing with domestic abuse and resulted in a 34% increase in reporting of incidents between 2004/05 and 2006/07.

10. The Home Office is keen to have the LGA's involvement in the development of the violence against women and girls strategy. It would be helpful to have members' views on what role local government can play in reducing violence against women, how councils and the voluntary sector can work together to deliver more for less money, as well as possible answers to the questions set out in Paragraph 8. These views will then inform the LGA's input to the Home Office on the development of the strategy.

Financial Implications

11. Any costs associated with work on this area will be met from existing LGA Group budgets and resources.

Implications for Wales

12. The violence against women and girls strategy will only apply to England as Wales already has its own Domestic Abuse Strategy. However the Welsh Assembly government will be considering the ways to address the issues raised in the consultation, and those areas of violence against women that are not devolved.

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