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Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

Summary

The previous Home Secretary announced that the government would be developing a strategy to reduce violence against women and girls. The Home Office published the strategy on 25 November 2009. This paper outlines the strategy and in particular those recommendations that will affect local government.

Recommendations

Board members are invited to:

- a. Note the publication of the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy;
- b. To offer any comments on the Strategy and its recommendations in light of the presentation from Detective Superintendent Jon Chapman from Hertfordshire Constabulary.

Action

LGA officers to reflect the Board's views in the LGA's work around the implementation of the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

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Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

Background

1. Violence against women has a significant impact on society both in the amount of incidents that occur, and the effect that has on women and girls, but also more widely in the costs to society of such violence. Domestic violence for instance accounted for 16% of all violent crime in the 2007/08 British Crime Survey, while it is estimated that the cost of violence against women and girls amounts to £40.1 billion in time off work, court cases and health care.
2. Due to the impact violence against women has, the former Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, announced in November 2008 that the government would implement a national violence against women strategy. Following on from the announcement the Home Office launched a consultation from March to May 2009 to both raise awareness of the issue of violence against women and generate discussion of what could be done to reduce it. The results of the consultation then informed the final strategy.

The Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

3. The aim of the strategy is a simple one: to reduce violence against women so that they feel safe and confident in both their homes and the communities they live in. In this context the strategy outlines the extent of violence against women and girls, with around half of all women and girls recalling that they have been victims of violence within their lifetime, and its cost to society. It also points out that while there have been a number of initiatives to address specific offences, the strategy is the first time a co-ordinated approach has been taken to tackling violence against women and girls.
4. The strategy itself is effectively divided into three. It looks at preventing violence against women and girls in the first place, then looks at the provision of services to support women and girls who have been victims of violence, and concludes by protecting women victims through an effective criminal justice system. The two key strands for local authorities are the prevent and provision themes.

The recommendations relating to local government

5. The strategy points out that until now government activity has concentrated on supporting women and girls once they have been subjected to violence, rather than preventing such violence occurring in the first place. The strategy argues it is just as important to reduce incidents of violence in the first place and goes on to set out how the government will challenge attitudes to violence, promote healthy relationships and support training in the early identification of abuse.

6. Changing attitudes to violence against women will require national action and the strategy sets out a number of proposals for doing so. These include a national communications strategy around changing attitudes to violence against women, and raising awareness of existing support services; the development of best practice on addressing issues arising in the workplace from women staff who have experienced violence; looking into the feasibility of rolling out programmes like the 'Ugly Mugs' Scheme and improve early identification of repeat offenders; and, researching and developing a film on forced marriages.
7. There are also a range of proposals which directly impact on local authorities. These include:
 - Ensuring that schools treat all forms of violence against women as a safeguarding issue, and all staff know how to deal with girls they identify as being affected;
 - Incorporating information on what schools can do to prevent and tackle violence against women and girls in existing and planned guidance so it is considered through out school policies and roles;
 - The National Safeguarding Delivery Unit developing guidance on referral and assessment systems for children affected by domestic violence;
 - Increasing investment in Family Intervention Projects; and,
 - Publishing a review of Women's Safety in January 2010, which will include new measures to increase women's safety in public spaces, such as:
 - Development of accreditation criteria and systems for bus stations similar to the Secure Rail Stations Scheme;
 - Establishing a dedicated stalking/harassment helpline; and,
 - A named single point of contact in each police Basic Command Unit (BCU) for all matters relating to stalking and harassment.
8. While the government's ideal remains to prevent violence against women and girls in the first place, there needs to be assistance in place to help those women who do experience violence. The consultation around the strategy included focus groups with several hundred victims of violence and consistently called for a service that listens to them, treats them with dignity and respect, and is accessible and available when needed. The victims often felt that the statutory services they had approached had not given them the support they needed. As a result the government is looking to raise the quality of services in every area, many of which are the responsibility of local partners.
9. The intention of the strategy is to ensure tackling violence against women and girls becomes part of the core business of all statutory agencies, including local authorities. The strategy looks to achieve this by:
 - Developing a new online directory and a new online resource centre of violence against women services and materials;
 - Identify a locality willing to pilot a Total Place-style approach to violence against women;

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- Continuing to invest in specialist VAWG services such as Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences, Independent Domestic Violence Advisers, Independent Sexual Violence Advisers, help lines, and Sexual Assault Referral Centres;
- Ensuring violence against women is included in the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment process to establish current and future needs of the population;
- Publishing a recommended framework for local commissioners to bring together areas such as health, crime and children's services;
- Exploring the development of a wide ranging violence against women indicator in the national indicator set;
- Improving the way violence against women is included in existing audit and inspection arrangements and in the Comprehensive Area Assessment process;
- Encouraging every local authority to have a co-ordinated violence against women and girls strategy with a director-level champion working across partnership structures in the area (e.g. including LSPs, Children's Trust and CDRPs) to encourage areas to make arrangements that best suit local circumstances to drive this forward;
- Working with a wide range of professional bodies and others to explore how violence against women could be included in initial training for all frontline staff or in continuing professional development; and,
- Launching an awards scheme to celebrate the achievements of local areas delivering excellence in tackling violence against women and to recognise best practice.

Local partnerships' views of the strategy

10. Detective Superintendent Jon Chapman from Hertfordshire Constabulary has been invited to address the Board and talk about the opportunities and challenges presented by the strategy from a practitioner perspective, including what will make a real difference in tackling violence against women and girls. It would then be helpful to have members' views on the proposals in the strategy and what the LGA Group could be doing to assist councils on this agenda.
11. As the strategy's proposals effect the work not only of this Board, but also the Children and Young People's Board and the Community Wellbeing Board this report will be shared with the other two Boards and their views also sought on the proposals in the strategy.

Financial Implications

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

Implications for Wales

13. The strategy applies to England only as Wales already has a Domestic Abuse Strategy. However the Welsh Assembly Government will be considering ways to address the issues covered by the strategy.

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