

Scrutiny Review

Violence Against Women and Girls
(VAWG): How to Tackle It

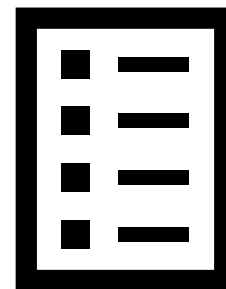
Democratic Services



**Adult Social Care and
Health Scrutiny –
21/07/2026**

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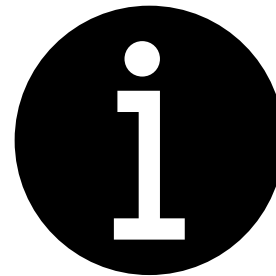
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COMMITTEE INFORMATION



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Overview and Scrutiny Board

Adult Social Care & Health

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- Overview and Scrutiny Board: Scott Bonner & Joanne Dixon/ Tanya Harrison
- Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Committee: Claire Jones and Sue Lightwing
- Children's Scrutiny Committee: Joanne McNally
- Place Scrutiny Committee: Tabitha Frankland and Rachael Johansson

AIMS OF THE REVIEW



1. The aims of the review are to:
 - Understand the extent and nature of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Middlesbrough, including relevant national and local data and trends.
 - Examine the role of Middlesbrough Council in preventing VAWG, including how services contribute to early intervention, particularly in relation to children and young people.
 - Consider how the Council provides strategic leadership in tackling VAWG, including alignment with the national VAWG strategy and opportunities to strengthen coordination and oversight.
 - Identify how the Council can support long-term cultural change across the area, including challenging harmful attitudes and behaviours and progressing initiatives such as the White Ribbon accreditation.

2. The review also aims to assist the Local Authority in achieving the following priorities from the Council Plan 2024-2027:
 - **A Healthy Place** - Improve life chances of our residents by responding to health inequalities.
 - **A Healthy Place** - Promote inclusivity for all.
 - **Safe and Resilient Communities** - Reducing crime and antisocial behaviour

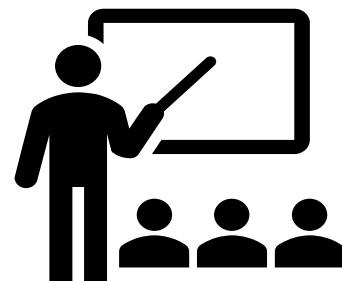
TERMS OF REFERENCE



3. The Terms of Reference for the Scrutiny Panel's review, are as follows:

- Term of Reference A – To understand the extent and nature of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Middlesbrough, including analysis of available data, trends, and comparison with regional and national positions, and to consider the underlying causes and contributing factors.
- Term of Reference B – To examine current approaches to prevention and early intervention, including work with young people, education settings, and community-based initiatives aimed at addressing attitudes, behaviours, and cultural norms linked to VAWG.
- Term of Reference C – To consider the Council's strategic response to VAWG, including alignment with national policy, and to explore opportunities to strengthen leadership, coordination, and long-term cultural change (including initiatives such as White Ribbon accreditation).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION



4. Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is widely recognised as a significant and complex societal issue, encompassing a range of harmful behaviours rooted in gender inequality. The Government's *Freedom from violence and abuse: a cross-government strategy to build a safer society for women and girls* (December 2025) describes Violence Against Women and Girls as:
5. *"A range of behaviours that disproportionately affect women and girls and are underpinned by misogyny, harmful gender norms and unequal power dynamics. It includes domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking and harassment, coercive and controlling behaviour, exploitation and so-called honour-based abuse."*
6. This definition reflects the broad and interconnected nature of VAWG, recognising that such behaviours can emerge early in life, are reinforced across families, communities, institutions and online spaces, and may escalate over time if left unchallenged. It highlights the need for a coordinated, whole-system response focused on prevention, early intervention and long-term cultural change, alongside effective responses when harm occurs.
7. While domestic abuse represents a significant proportion of Violence Against Women and Girls, the VAWG framework also encompasses a wider range of harms, including sexual violence, stalking, harassment and misogyny, requiring a broader preventative and cultural response.
8. Within a local context, evidence presented to the Panel identified that Middlesbrough, and the wider Cleveland area, continues to experience disproportionately high levels of VAWG-related offences when compared with regional and national averages. This reinforces the importance of a strong local response, including visible leadership, coordinated partnership working and a sustained focus on prevention to address the underlying causes of harm.
9. In this context, the Panel agreed to focus its review on the role of prevention and education, with a particular emphasis on children and young people. Members recognised the importance of inclusive education for all, while placing a specific focus on boys and young men, given evidence about patterns of perpetration. While much existing activity focuses on responding to domestic abuse and supporting victims, the Panel sought to concentrate its review on prevention, education and long-term cultural change, particularly in areas where the Council can influence, provide leadership and drive system-wide change. Members were also keen to explore how the Council can demonstrate leadership in this area, including through initiatives such as White Ribbon accreditation.
10. The Panel further recognised that Middlesbrough's high levels of deprivation, health inequality and safeguarding pressures create additional complexity and reinforce the importance of early intervention, prevention and coordinated partnership working. The review therefore considered how early intervention could contribute to challenging

harmful attitudes, supporting healthy relationships and reducing the risk of future harm, alongside the Council's role in influencing and coordinating this agenda at a local level.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE



Term of Reference A - To understand the extent and nature of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Middlesbrough, including analysis of available data, trends, and comparison with regional and national positions, and to consider the underlying causes and contributing factors.

11. Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is widely recognised as a pervasive and systemic issue, encompassing a range of abusive behaviours that are disproportionately perpetrated by men against women and girls. These behaviours include domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking and harassment, coercive and controlling behaviour, exploitation and so-called honour-based abuse. Evidence presented to the Panel highlighted that VAWG is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality and is rooted in wider social, cultural and structural factors, including misogyny, harmful gender norms and socioeconomic inequality.

National Context

12. At a national level, the scale of Violence Against Women and Girls remains substantial. National evidence highlights the significant human impact of VAWG. Data referenced in the Government's national VAWG strategy indicates that one in eight women in England and Wales experienced domestic abuse, sexual assault or stalking in the year ending March 2025. In the year ending June 2025, almost 200 rapes were recorded by the police each day, noting that sexual offences are widely under-reported. National data also indicates that more than 150 women are killed each year in England and Wales as a result of violence.
13. In the year ending March 2024 the national crime survey estimated 2.3 million adults experienced domestic abuse, of whom 1.6 million were women. In the same period, 851,062 domestic-abuse-related crimes were recorded by police, accounting for 15.8% of all recorded crime. Survey data indicates that approximately one in twenty people experienced domestic abuse in the previous year, with women significantly more likely to experience repeated, prolonged and severe abuse, including sexual violence and coercive control.
14. The Panel also noted the wider impact on children. National estimates suggest that around 20% of children have lived with an adult perpetrating domestic abuse, reinforcing the view that VAWG should be understood as a whole-family and intergenerational issue, rather than an isolated criminal justice matter. The Youth Justice Board (YJB) published an Evidence and Insights Pack detailing a 47% rise in proven sexual offenses by children. The board attributes this surge not only to shifting behaviors but also to improved reporting, better police detection, and algorithmic exposure to online misogyny.
15. In relation to other forms of VAWG, national police data recorded 2,905 offences relating to so-called honour-based abuse, 84 female genital mutilation (FGM) offences, and 172 forced marriage offences in the year ending March 2024. While numerically smaller than domestic abuse, Members acknowledged that such crimes are significantly

under-reported and often associated with heightened barriers to disclosure, help-seeking and access to support.

Cleveland Position

16. Evidence presented to the Panel demonstrated that the Cleveland Police force area experiences significantly higher levels of VAWG-related crime than national averages. In total, 20,355 domestic-abuse-related incidents and crimes were recorded in Cleveland, the highest number of any police force area in the country. Despite this scale of demand, only 9% of recorded domestic abuse crimes resulted in a charge or summons, with 62% of cases closed due to evidential difficulties where the victim did not support further action.
17. Members were particularly concerned by data relating to repeat victimisation. 41% of cases discussed at Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) were repeat cases, placing Cleveland as the fourth highest force area in England for repeat domestic abuse. This was viewed as indicative of ongoing risk, complex victim needs and limitations within the criminal justice system's ability to provide sustained protection.
18. Cleveland also records lower arrest rates per 100 domestic abuse crimes (37 arrests) compared with the national average (44 arrests), reinforcing concerns about enforcement, perpetrator accountability and victim confidence in the justice process.
19. Sexual violence data further highlighted regional pressures. Cleveland has the highest rate of sexual offences per 1,000 population of all North East police forces. In 2024/25, Cleveland Police recorded 8,689 stalking and harassment offences, of which 42% were domestic-abuse-related, again the highest proportion nationally.

Middlesbrough Position

20. Local data indicates that Middlesbrough experiences particularly acute levels of VAWG when compared with both regional and statistical peers. The rate of sexual offences in Middlesbrough was 5.3 per 1,000 population, compared with a North East local authority average of 3.9 per 1,000, and 4.2 per 1,000 among authorities within the same deprivation decile. This reinforces concerns that VAWG in Middlesbrough is not only high, but significantly exceeds levels expected even when deprivation is taken into account.
21. Local service data for 2024 further illustrates the scale and complexity of demand:
 - 417 MARAC referrals, of which 137 were repeat cases
 - 1,127 children identified as known to services and at risk due to domestic abuse
 - 3,177 referrals to specialist domestic abuse services via My Sister's Place, resulting in 3,290 episodes of IDVA support
 - 350 referrals for safe accommodation, with 625 women and children supported
 - 609 referrals to sexual violence counselling services
22. Members noted the high prevalence of additional vulnerabilities among survivors accessing services, including mental health needs, homelessness and suicide risk, reinforcing the interconnected nature of VAWG with wider health and social inequalities.
23. While recorded police incidents of forced marriage and FGM within Middlesbrough were reported as zero in the latest period, Members recognised that this is unlikely to reflect true prevalence and may instead indicate barriers to reporting, particularly among minoritised and migrant communities.

Trends and Emerging Issues

24. Trend data presented by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner indicated that, while overall recorded VAWG offences decreased by 8.16% in the 12 months to September 2025, the overall picture remains mixed. Domestic-abuse-related VAWG offences fell by 4.47%, while sexual-violence-related offences increased by 16.22%, indicating a change in the pattern and composition of recorded harm rather than an overall reduction in risk.
25. The Panel also heard that applications under the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (Clare's Law) increased by 12%, reflecting growing public awareness and demand for preventative safeguarding measures.

Perpetration and Age Profile

26. National evidence indicates that harmful and abusive behaviours can begin at a relatively young age. Data referenced in the Government's national Violence Against Women and Girls strategy indicates that 39% of 13- to 17-year-olds who have been in a relationship in the past year experienced emotional or physical abuse. Members recognised that such experiences highlight the early emergence of unhealthy and abusive relationship dynamics, which can shape attitudes and behaviours in later life if left unchallenged.
27. Analysis of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Crime Survey for England and Wales, published within the *Nature of Crime: Violence* dataset, shows that young people and young adults account for a significant proportion of domestic abuse perpetrators.
28. According to ONS Table 8f (Offender characteristics in incidents of domestic violence), individuals aged under 25 have consistently represented around a quarter to one third of identified domestic abuse perpetrators in recent survey years. In the latest available data (year ending March 2024), people aged under 25 accounted for over one third of perpetrators in domestic abuse incidents where the victim was able to identify the offender's age. Within this, children under the age of 16 were identified as perpetrators in a small but notable proportion of incidents, fluctuating year-on-year but reaching around one fifth of cases in the most recent survey period.
29. The ONS advises that these figures should be interpreted with caution due to sample size variability. However, the data provides important contextual evidence that domestic abuse is not confined to adulthood, and that abusive and controlling behaviours can emerge during adolescence and early adulthood. The presence of under-16 perpetrators includes a range of scenarios, such as abusive behaviour within young intimate relationships and abuse occurring within wider family or household contexts.
30. While this data is national rather than local, it reinforces the case for early intervention, education and healthy-relationships work, particularly with young people and young men, to prevent harmful behaviours becoming entrenched and escalating into the high-risk domestic abuse cases seen later in life.

Underlying Causes and Contributing Factors

31. Throughout the evidence, Members consistently heard that violence against women and girls cannot be understood solely through crime data. Presentations emphasised the role of misogyny, sexism and harmful gender norms in creating a climate in which abuse is tolerated or minimised. Individual acts of sexism were described as contributing to wider cultures of intimidation and fear, which in turn normalise violence against women and girls.
32. Economic hardship, housing insecurity and deprivation were identified as key contextual factors in Middlesbrough, increasing vulnerability and limiting survivors' ability to escape abuse. Members also noted emerging challenges, including online abuse, younger

people experiencing or perpetrating intimate partner abuse, and low engagement with perpetrator programmes, which were viewed as critical barriers to long-term prevention.

33. Evidence to the Panel also highlighted the importance of challenging common myths about violence and sexual offending, including misconceptions about the identity of perpetrators. Such myths were identified as minimising abuse, discouraging reporting and undermining effective prevention and education.
34. Members recognised that these influences, combined with wider societal pressures, highlight the importance of early, preventative work to promote healthy relationships, challenge harmful attitudes and support long-term cultural change.
35. The Panel concluded that violence against women and girls in Middlesbrough is widespread, persistent and deeply rooted in wider social and cultural inequalities. While enforcement and victim support remain essential, the evidence demonstrates that long-term reduction in harm cannot be achieved through criminal justice responses alone.
36. Members agreed that tackling violence against women and girls requires a sustained focus on prevention, education and cultural change, beginning early in the life course and addressing the attitudes, behaviours and social norms that enable abuse to occur. This includes challenging misogyny, harmful gender norms and myths that normalise or minimise violence, as well as promoting healthy, respectful relationships for children and young people.
37. The Panel emphasised that preventing violence against women and girls is everyone's business and requires a whole-Council and whole-system approach. Members recognised the Council's role as a civic leader, with influence beyond direct service delivery, including through education, workforce culture, partnerships, commissioning and visible leadership within communities.
38. Members concluded that the Council is well placed to strengthen its strategic response by improving coordination across departments, working collaboratively with partners, and embedding prevention and culture change consistently across the organisation. Clear leadership, shared ownership and joined-up working were identified as critical to ensuring that efforts to prevent violence against women and girls are effective, sustainable and aligned with national priorities.

Term of Reference B – To examine current approaches to prevention and early intervention, including work with young people, education settings, and community-based initiatives aimed at addressing attitudes, behaviours, and cultural norms linked to VAWG.

Prevention and Early Intervention

39. Evidence presented to the Panel emphasised that prevention and early intervention are critical to reducing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in the longer term. Members consistently heard that effective prevention requires early action to challenge harmful attitudes, behaviours and social norms before abuse becomes normalised or escalates into high-risk situations.
40. The Panel recognised that prevention activity relating to VAWG takes place across a range of settings, including education, community services and partnership-led initiatives, and involves both universal and targeted approaches. Members also

acknowledged that increased awareness and education may lead to higher levels of disclosure and reporting in the short term, which should be understood as a positive indicator of improved understanding and confidence to seek support, rather than an increase in prevalence.

Education-Based Prevention and Healthy Relationships

41. Evidence provided to the Panel confirmed that Middlesbrough Council currently fund a domestic abuse specialist service to deliver education-based prevention activity is delivered within schools and colleges in Middlesbrough, focusing on promoting healthy relationships, consent, respect and equality, and challenging harmful gender norms linked to VAWG.
42. At the time of reporting, preventative education sessions had been delivered in 29 of 49 primary schools, reaching 3,605 pupils, and in 6 of the 8 secondary schools approached, reaching 2,173 pupils. This evidence demonstrates that prevention activity is taking place across a significant proportion of education settings, while also highlighting variation in engagement and coverage.
43. Members were advised that responsibility for curriculum delivery sits with individual schools and academy trusts. The Council's role was therefore described as one of support, partnership working and safeguarding influence, rather than direct control over curriculum content. Members recognised that while many schools are receptive to this work, curriculum pressures and competing demands can limit the capacity for consistent delivery.
44. Members emphasised that education-based prevention activity must be inclusive of girls and young women as well as boys and young men. While engaging men and boys was recognised as critical to preventing perpetration and challenging harmful attitudes, the Panel agreed that girls and young women also require education to support healthy relationships, recognise abusive behaviours, build confidence to challenge harm and understand where to access support.

Early Help, Safeguarding and Work with Young Men and Boys

45. Evidence provided by Children's Services highlighted the role of safeguarding and Early Help pathways in identifying and responding to concerns relating to VAWG involving children and young people. Members were advised that schools and partner agencies refer concerns into the Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH), where referrals are screened to determine whether statutory thresholds are met.
46. Where thresholds are met, families are allocated for a Children's Social Care assessment. Where thresholds are not met but complex needs are identified, families are allocated to the Stronger Families service. Members heard that Stronger Families casework is relationship-based and multi-agency, and that where concerns relating to VAWG emerge among boys and young men, staff work collaboratively with specialist services, including My Sister's Place and ARCH, while maintaining oversight through Stronger Families.
47. Children's Services also advised that Stronger Families undertake educative work with families and young people alongside referrals to specialist provision where appropriate. Barnardo's was identified as offering a service that Stronger Families can refer into, with funding typically supported through primary care.

Planned Work and Emerging Practice

48. Children's Services highlighted emerging evidence linking unresolved parental conflict and strained family relationships to the development of child-to-parent aggression (CPA)

and other harmful behaviours, including those associated with VAWG. Members heard that CPA remains under-recognised and can sit across the boundaries of parenting support, adolescent behaviour, mental health and safeguarding.

49. Members were advised that Stronger Families has secured Department for Work and Pensions funding to commission Amity to develop a programme building on existing Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) investment. The programme aims to:
- strengthen workforce understanding of child-to-parent aggression within family relationships;
 - improve confidence in recognising and responding to these dynamics;
 - support more consistent and effective responses across services; and
 - develop sustainable, long-term workforce capability.
50. The Panel recognised that this planned work aligns with prevention and early-intervention principles by addressing harmful behaviours before escalation and supporting coordinated responses across the system.

Engagement with Schools and Safeguarding Leads

51. Children's Services confirmed ongoing engagement with schools through Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) network meetings, which are used to promote awareness of VAWG, including White Ribbon, and to understand emerging themes identified by schools.
52. Members heard that this engagement also provides an opportunity to explore what support schools require in relation to prevention activity, including whether schools would benefit more from access to specialist providers for one-off healthy-relationships sessions, or from teacher training to embed good practice more consistently within Relationships, Sex and Health Education.
53. Members were advised that all schools and voluntary and community sector organisations were offered RPC training and awareness sessions, with 41 voluntary and community sector services and 17 schools participating. Moving forward, the proposed child-to-parent aggression programme will also be offered to schools, voluntary and community sector partners and the Children's Services workforce.

National Curriculum Changes and Readiness

54. Statutory changes to the Relationships, Sex, and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum are to take effect from September 2026. The updated framework places significant emphasis on safeguarding, challenging misogyny, online safety, and the prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG).
55. The National VAWG Strategy identifies education at the core of the government's cross-departmental strategy to prevent abuse before it starts. Backed by curriculum funding, teachers will receive training to confidently address sensitive issues like consent, coercion, and gender stereotyping and will be supported in integrating respect, empathy, and positive relationship teachings across all aspects of school life. Schools will be legally required to update their RSHE curriculum and written policies in line with the new requirements.
56. Members noted that Children's Services will continue to use school network meetings to monitor emerging issues relating to VAWG and to understand the impact of curriculum changes as they are implemented.

Strategic Role of Children's Services and Public Health

57. Through evidence provided by Children's Services, Members became aware of the role of the Healthy Child Programme for young people aged 11–19 as part of the local approach to supporting prevention, early intervention and health and wellbeing for adolescents, with extended provision up to age 25 for young people with special educational needs and disabilities and care leavers.
58. Members noted that responsibility for delivery of the Healthy Child Programme sits with Public Health South Tees, with Children's Services contributing to and aligning with this offer where prevention and early-intervention activity intersects with safeguarding, Early Help and family support pathways.
59. Following a review in 2024, Members were advised that the programme is expected to move towards a bespoke, skills-based, non-clinical model to better address emerging health and wellbeing needs, including emotional health and relationships advice, delivered through universal and targeted interventions across youth settings. While the Panel recognised that a range of relevant activity is underway across Public Health, Children's Services and partners, Members noted that there is currently limited strategic oversight bringing this activity together within a single, coordinated Violence Against Women and Girls prevention framework.
60. Members were advised that, once finalised, the revised Healthy Child Programme will be incorporated within the Family Help Strategy and Action Plan, which may provide an opportunity to strengthen alignment between Public Health, Children's Services and wider partnership activity in support of prevention and early intervention.

Term of Reference C – To consider the Council's strategic response to VAWG, including alignment with national policy, and to explore opportunities to strengthen leadership, coordination, and long-term cultural change (including initiatives such as White Ribbon accreditation).

National Policy Context

61. Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a stated priority of the UK Government. In December 2025, the Government published *Freedom from violence and abuse: a cross-government strategy to build a safer society for women and girls*, which sets out the national approach to preventing and responding to VAWG.
62. The national strategy sets out the Government's ambition to halve violence against women and girls within a decade, recognising that this can only be achieved through sustained prevention, early intervention and long-term cultural change, alongside criminal justice responses.
63. The national strategy is organised around four key strands:
 - prioritising prevention, including education on respectful and healthy relationships
 - supporting victims, through improved access to specialist services
 - pursuing perpetrators, strengthening criminal justice responses and accountability
 - strengthening systems, ensuring agencies work together effectively
64. The Panel noted that Pillar 1 of the national strategy, "Prevention and Early Intervention", places a clear emphasis on stopping violence and abuse before it starts, including breaking intergenerational cycles of abuse, protecting children and young people, disrupting harmful attitudes and preventing the escalation of abusive behaviours. Members recognised that this focus closely aligns with the Panel's own emphasis on

education, early intervention and long-term cultural change as the most effective means of reducing violence against women and girls.

65. A central emphasis of the strategy is that long-term reduction in VAWG cannot be achieved through criminal justice responses alone. Instead, it requires sustained cultural and behavioural change, early intervention and prevention, particularly among children and young people. The Government has also highlighted the importance of engaging men and boys in addressing VAWG, recognising that challenging misogyny, harmful gender norms and sexism is critical to preventing violence before it occurs.
66. The Panel recognised that the national strategy's cross-government approach implies an expectation of equivalent cross-Council leadership at local level, with Violence Against Women and Girls treated as a shared strategic priority rather than the responsibility of a single service or partnership.

Local Strategic Context and Existing Arrangements

67. The Panel recognised that Middlesbrough Council has a well-established Domestic Abuse Strategy (2025–2028), which provides a strong statutory foundation for protecting victims-survivors, commissioning specialist services and meeting duties under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Members noted the breadth of activity delivered through the Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership, including prevention activity, workforce training, safeguarding arrangements and alignment with the Tees-wide Tackling Perpetration Strategy.
68. The Panel also noted that a number of other local authorities have developed dedicated Violence Against Women and Girls strategies or prevention frameworks to complement statutory domestic abuse arrangements, particularly to strengthen leadership on prevention, culture change and system coordination. Examples include authorities such as Bristol City Council, Nottingham City Council, Lewisham Council and Camden Council, which have adopted VAWG-specific approaches alongside domestic abuse strategies. Members recognised that these examples demonstrate how a clearer focus on prevention and cultural change can be embedded within local governance arrangements.
69. However, the Panel identified that the statutory focus of the Domestic Abuse Strategy does not fully encompass the wider Violence Against Women and Girls agenda, particularly in relation to sexual violence, misogyny, online harms, education-based prevention, workforce culture and broader societal attitudes. Members therefore concluded that a dedicated VAWG Prevention Framework would complement existing domestic abuse arrangements by providing clearer strategic oversight of prevention, cultural change and partnership coordination across the wider system.
70. The Panel further agreed that such a framework would require corporate ownership, reflecting the cross-cutting nature of VAWG, and should be led through the Council with clear alignment across children's services, adult services, public health, community safety and wider partners, rather than being located within a single service area.

White Ribbon and Organisational Culture Change

71. The Panel considered the role of White Ribbon as a mechanism for supporting long-term cultural change and engaging men and boys in the prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls. White Ribbon is an international campaign focused on preventing male violence against women by encouraging individuals and organisations to challenge harmful attitudes, behaviours and social norms that underpin abuse.
72. White Ribbon accreditation for organisations requires a clear commitment to:

- senior leadership ownership
- a time-limited action plan
- workforce engagement and awareness
- measurable objectives to support sustained culture change

73. Members noted that Middlesbrough Council had previously held White Ribbon accreditation, which had lapsed due to capacity constraints. The Panel recognised that renewed accreditation would provide an opportunity to embed prevention and equality principles more systematically across the organisation, supported by clearer governance and accountability.
74. The Panel was provided with information on how other local authorities and statutory partners are using White Ribbon to demonstrate organisational leadership on VAWG. Members noted that, at the time of the review, 45 local authorities nationally held White Ribbon accreditation, with no councils in Teesside or the wider North East currently accredited.
75. In addition, Members were advised of a recent report to the Cleveland Fire Authority, which demonstrated how alignment with White Ribbon can support visible leadership, workforce culture change and accountability. The Panel agreed that these examples provide a useful benchmark for strengthening a coordinated local response.
76. Members also noted local precedent for engaging high-profile role models, including sports figures, to promote White Ribbon messages, recognising the value of visible leadership in reinforcing cultural change.

Workforce Capability and Organisational Leadership

77. The Panel also considered the role of the Council's workforce in supporting the prevention of and response to Violence Against Women and Girls. Members discussed the importance of mandatory training for professionals across both children's and adults' services, noting that staff in a wide range of roles may encounter individuals affected by VAWG, even where this is not their primary function.
78. The Panel recognised that consistent training and awareness across the organisation is a key element of strategic leadership, helping to ensure shared understanding, early identification of risk and trauma-informed responses. Members agreed that workforce capability should be viewed as part of the Council's wider organisational commitment to tackling VAWG, rather than solely as a matter for specialist teams.

Partnership Working, Data and System Coordination

79. The Panel heard evidence regarding the availability and use of data to support strategic oversight of Violence Against Women and Girls. Members were advised that a dedicated analyst was now in post within the Council and was supporting work on domestic abuse data and insight. However, it was noted that access to relevant partner data, including from Cleveland Police, was not yet fully in place. Members agreed that improved data-sharing arrangements would support a stronger understanding of local trends, demand and outcomes, and enable more effective prevention, planning and performance oversight.
80. The Panel also considered the role of commissioning in supporting a coordinated response to Violence Against Women and Girls. Members noted that commissioning decisions relating to victim support, prevention and early-intervention activity are currently taken across multiple organisations, including the Council, the Police, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and health partners. Evidence presented to the

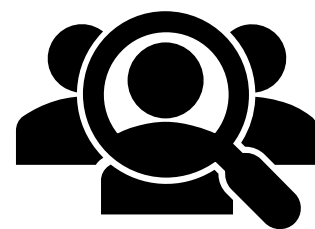
Panel highlighted that this has resulted in a complex commissioning landscape, with different funding streams, priorities and timescales operating alongside one another.

81. Members agreed that stronger alignment of commissioning activity, informed by shared data and a common understanding of need and outcomes, would support more effective prevention and reduce fragmentation across the system. The Panel recognised that a joint approach to commissioning would be consistent with the duty to collaborate set out in the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, and could strengthen strategic oversight, coordination and accountability in responding to Violence Against Women and Girls.
82. The Panel considered the Council's wider role in working with partners to address Violence Against Women and Girls, including the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, Cleveland Police and the wider criminal justice system. Members heard evidence of partnership working through arrangements such as the Local Criminal Justice Board and the Tees-wide Tackling Domestic Abuse Perpetration Strategy.
83. While Members welcomed this partnership activity, the Panel identified ongoing challenges in relation to coordination, data-sharing and alignment of priorities across agencies. Members agreed that clearer strategic oversight at a local level would support more effective partnership working and ensure that prevention, victim support, perpetrator accountability and cultural change are addressed as part of a single, coherent system.

Strategic Gaps and System Impact

84. Across the evidence, the Panel identified a number of strategic gaps that limit the effectiveness of the current response to VAWG. These included limited clarity of ownership for prevention activity within Children's Services, variable influence over education settings, gaps in data relating to prevention and early intervention, and the absence of a single strategic overview bringing together activity across the system.
85. Members also noted the wider system impact of prevention activity, including increased referrals into safeguarding and support services as awareness improves. The Panel emphasised that such increases should be anticipated and planned for as part of a preventative approach, rather than viewed as a failure of intervention. Ongoing demand pressures and funding constraints were recognised as significant risks to sustainability, reinforcing the need for strong leadership, coordination and long-term planning

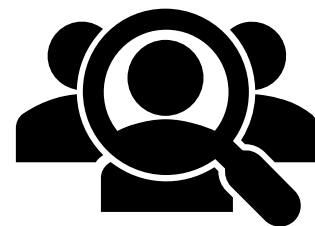
CONCLUSIONS



86. Based on the evidence provided throughout the investigation, the Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Panel concluded that:

- Violence Against Women and Girls remains widespread in Middlesbrough, with levels of domestic abuse, sexual violence and repeat victimisation significantly higher than regional and national averages.
- The impact of VAWG extends beyond individual victims to children, families and communities, reinforcing the need for whole-system responses.
- Harmful attitudes and behaviours can emerge during adolescence and early adulthood, strengthening the case for early intervention, education and work with young people and young men.
- Middlesbrough benefits from a strong statutory Domestic Abuse Strategy; however, this does not fully address the wider VAWG agenda, particularly in relation to prevention, culture change and societal attitudes.
- A range of prevention and early-intervention activity is underway, but coverage and consistency are uneven, particularly across education settings.
- Stronger strategic leadership, clearer coordination and corporate ownership are required to embed prevention and cultural change across the local system.
- Workforce capability and organisational culture are critical to effective prevention and early identification of abuse.
- Initiatives such as White Ribbon provide a valuable mechanism to support long-term culture change if underpinned by clear governance and accountability.

RECOMMENDATIONS



87. The Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Panel recommends to the Executive:

- A. That the Council develops and agrees a Middlesbrough Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Prevention Framework, by March 2027, informed by the Government's national Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy and complementing the Council's Domestic Abuse Strategy. The Framework should set out existing prevention and early intervention activity, identify gaps, and clearly define partnership roles and responsibilities.
- B. That a cross-directorate steering group is established to provide oversight of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) prevention activity, ensuring strategic leadership, coordination and accountability across services and partner organisations, including alignment with the proposed 11–19 Health and Wellbeing Service. A progress update should be provided to the Panel in 6 months time.
- C. That the Council demonstrates organisational leadership in tackling Violence Against Women and Girls by implementing mandatory online training for all Council employees and elected Members by December 2026, aimed at improving awareness of VAWG, helping staff to recognise signs of abuse affecting service users or colleagues, and ensuring staff understand how to respond appropriately and access support pathways.
- D. That the Council works with key partners, including the Police, Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and the Integrated Care Board, to establish a joint commissioning approach for Violence Against Women and Girls, ensuring that commissioning decisions are informed by shared data, evidence of need and agreed outcomes. An update should be provided to the Panel within 12 months.
- E. That the Council progresses White Ribbon accreditation, supported by a time-limited action plan with clear objectives, milestones and performance measures, enabling progress to be monitored and reported to Members.
- F. That, as part of progressing White Ribbon accreditation, the Council explores opportunities to engage visible local ambassadors and role models, including civic leaders, sports figures and community representatives, to support awareness-raising in the community and reinforce positive messages around respect, equality and the prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls. An update should be provided to the Panel in 6 months' time.
- G. That, in advance of the revised statutory Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) guidance, the Council works with schools and education partners to better understand existing VAWG prevention activity, identify gaps in provision and explore

opportunities to strengthen consistent delivery of healthy relationships and prevention education across Middlesbrough. An update should be provided to the Panel in 6 month's time

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- Annabel Bates, Corporate Director of Children's Services
- Caroline Cannon, Interim Director of Education, Middlesbrough Council
- Louise Grabham, Corporate Director of Adult Social Care and Health
- Claire Moore, Domestic Abuse Strategic Lead, Middlesbrough Council
- Lucy Price, Domestic Abuse Coordinator, Middlesbrough Council
- Tracey Brittain, Partnership and Delivery Manager, Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland

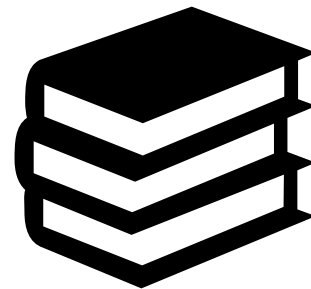
ACRONYMS



89. A-Z listing of common acronyms used in the report:

- ASC Adult Social Care
- CPA Child-to-Parent Aggression
- CSEW Crime Survey for England and Wales
- DSL Designated Safeguarding Lead
- DWP Department for Work and Pensions
- FGM Female Genital Mutilation
- IDVA Independent Domestic Violence Advocate
- ICB Integrated Care Board
- MACH Multi-Agency Children's Hub
- MARAC Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference
- ONS Office for National Statistics
- OPCC Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner
- PCC Police and Crime Commissioner
- RPC Reducing Parental Conflict
- RSHE Relationships, Sex and Health Education
- VAWG Violence Against Women and Girls

BACKGROUND



90. The following sources were consulted or referred to in preparing this report:

- Cleveland Fire Authority, report on responding to the national Violence Against Women and Girls strategy and White Ribbon commitment
- Cleveland Police – recorded crime and performance data
- Department for Education, Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) statutory guidance (updated 2026)
- Domestic Abuse Act 2021
- Freedom from violence and abuse: a cross-government strategy to build a safer society for women and girls (December 2025), UK Government
- Healthy Child Programme (11–19), NHS / Public Health England
- Home Office, Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (Clare's Law)
- Middlesbrough Council (2025–2028), Middlesbrough Preventing Domestic Abuse Strategy
- Middlesbrough Council, Family Help Strategy and Action Plan
- My Sister's Place – service data and evidence submitted to the Panel
- Office for National Statistics (ONS), Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/crimesurveyforenglandandwalescsewtableindex>
- Office for National Statistics (ONS), Nature of Crime Tables: Violence (including offender age profile) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/natureofcrimetableviolence>
- Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland – data, reports and presentations provided to the Panel
- Tees-wide Tackling Domestic Abuse Perpetration Strategy (2025–2035)
- Victims and Prisoners Act 2024
- White Ribbon UK – Local Authority Accreditation Framework <https://www.whiteribbon.org.uk>
- Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Panel – reports/presentations to, and minutes of, meetings held during the review period January 2026 – April 2026