

***'INTERIM REPORT: INSPECTION INTO HOW EFFECTIVELY THE POLICE ENGAGE WITH WOMEN AND GIRLS' PUBLISHED BY HMICFRS ON 7TH JULY 2021
AVON & SOMERSET PCC REPOSENSE DATED 30TH AUGUST 2021***

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by a number of very serious and harmful crimes such as domestic abuse and sexual offences. This sadly starts from a young age with girls much more likely to be the victims of sexual assaults on children. Women and girls are more likely to suffer harm as victims and men are considerably more likely to be those causing harm and committing these crimes.

This important topic will form part of my Police and Crime Plan. Focussing on violence against women and girls does not in any way detract from the fact that men and boys are also victims, nor is it meant to minimise their experience as victims. However many of the improvements made as a result of this work will also benefit male victims (as is demonstrated by the local recommendations below).

The scale of violence against women and girls is significant and cannot be solved by individual police forces alone. I accept police forces, including Avon and Somerset, do need to improve but I also welcome that many of the recommendations in this report are at a national level including funding and partnership working which are pivotal to successful outcomes.

This report does contain two points for local police forces set out below.

Recommendation 3: Structures and funding should be put in place to make sure victims receive tailored and consistent support.

- All police forces should ensure information on the protected characteristics of victims is accurately and consistently recorded.
- Police forces and partner agencies should have clear responsibilities in supporting victims through every stage of the case. The victim's voice should play a central role in shaping this, and their individual needs should be understood and addressed throughout.

It is worth noting that Avon and Somerset Police are producing their own strategy to tackle violence against women and girls which will seek to deliver against the national [Tackling violence against women and girls strategy](#).

In response to the particular recommendations from this report, I can confirm the following.

Protected characteristics

Many police forces across the country, including Avon and Somerset, use Niche as their crime recording system. Niche has the fields to record seven out of the nine protected characteristics: this does not include sexual orientation or pregnancy/maternity. These additional fields cannot be added locally. However, if pregnancy/maternity was an issue for a victim this information should be recorded as part of a vulnerability risk assessment for that victim.

At this stage I can say that, in the last two years, 7.5% of victims did not have their sex recorded in the correct place and 9.7% did not have a properly recorded age. In response to this recommendation the Constabulary will be undertaking an assessment of the available information on protected characteristics. This will establish what is recorded, when it is recorded, how visible that data is to the organisation and how it is used. Once this assessment is complete the Constabulary will identify where and how they need to improve, working across the organisation to achieve this.

The Constabulary are currently taking part in a campaign which is running across all 43 police forces in England and Wales. The campaign is designed to encourage their workforce to share protected characteristics internally, with confidence. Although this is internally focused it is hoped this will also give employees a broader understanding and confidence in order to be able to ask for this information from victims.

Supporting victims

Supporting victims is really important to me: it featured in my election manifesto and will feature in my Police and Crime Plan.

In the Constabulary, the Lighthouse Safeguarding Unit (LSU) has responsibility for supporting victims through the Criminal Justice System. They are responsible for all victims after a suspect has been charged. Before charge they offer support to all victims that are vulnerable, intimidated or persistently targeted (in line with the Victims' Code of Practice).

For additional support LSU will also refer victims onto specialist support agencies which have been commissioned by my office. These agencies provide a much broader and deeper level of support to the victims, aside from any criminal justice process.

This is not to forget that victim support is bigger than a particular team or specialist agencies. Any member of the police workforce that interacts with that victim, especially the Officer in Charge (OIC), must ensure they are dealt with in an empathetic, professional and timely manner.

The Constabulary have started a review of how victims can provide feedback. This will start with a review of existing surveys including the central victim survey, the LSU survey and those conducted by Independent Sexual and Domestic Violence Advisors. As well

understanding how the feedback is captured the review will look at how that information is then used to drive service improvements.

This review was already being planned in support of the National Crime and Policing Measures. These national measures have a focus on victims of domestic abuse, which is not currently routinely captured by the Constabulary. They are now looking to some forces who do gather this feedback to understand best practice.

Integrating the voice of the victim into the commissioning process is something that is already worked towards by my office. When the services were last contracted, in 2019, work was done, by an independent organisation, specifically engaging victims. Recommendations from this consultation informed the commissioning plan. In addition, victims were directly involved in the competitive tender process through which the providers were appointed.

In this tender process one of the criteria that the potential providers were marked against was the way in which they listen to the victims they support to improve their own services. Commissioning is an ongoing process and my office have regular performance and contract management reviews with these commissioned services to ensure they are delivering the best service possible.

As well as managing services on an individual basis my office also facilitates a victim services provider forum which brings together the LSU and the other commissioned services. This is a collaborative forum where all organisations agree roles and responsibilities and discuss any issues and ways to collectively improve the victim's experience.

The work on surveys, discussed above, is part of a broader review to understand what the Constabulary and partners are doing to support victims. This is also necessary given the changes and additional duties brought about by the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. The review aims to close any gaps identified and ensure a holistic response to victim support.

This response is published on the OPCC website <https://www.avonandsomerset-pcc.gov.uk/reports-publications/hmicfrs-reports/>