

'POLICE RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS: FINAL INSPECTION REPORT' PUBLISHED BY HMICFRS ON 17TH SEPTEMBER 2021
AVON & SOMERSET PCC REPONSE DATED 8TH NOVEMBER 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 males are considerably more likely to be those causing harm and committing these crimes.

This important topic forms part of my Police and Crime Plan. Focussing on male violence against women and girls (VAWG) does not in any way detract from the fact that any person can be an offender or victim, nor is it meant to minimise anybody's experience as a victim. Many of the improvements made as a result of focused work in this area will benefit all victims.

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 contains three specific recommendations for local police forces set out below.

Recommendation 3.2

By March 2022, all police forces should ensure information on the protected characteristics of victims is accurately and consistently recorded.

Recommendation 4.1

By March 2022, chief constables should establish and publish an action plan that specifies in detail what steps the force will take to improve and standardise its approach to responding to violence against women and girls offences, with the aim of ensuring policies, processes and practices are effective, actively monitored and managed, and meeting national standards. This should include (but is not limited to) improving and standardising:

- the use of police powers to protect women, including arrest of perpetrators, use of pre-charge bail, the applications for orders (where appropriate) and processes for responding to breaches of non-molestation and other orders;
- the use of the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme;
- the capability of generalist and specialist staff to respond to violence against women and girls offences effectively, including consistent understanding of newer offences (such as coercive control);

- the identification and management of high-harm violent offenders against women and girls (in partnership with other organisations);
- the identification and protection of the most at-risk victims of violence against women and girls offences (in partnership with other organisations); and
- internal and public communications related to violence against women and girls to ensure that messages raise awareness of the risk and emphasise the seriousness of the issues

Recommendation 5.2

By December 2022, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) VAWG National Delivery Lead should develop and disseminate to forces a process for consistent and robust monitoring of outcomes 15 and 16 violence against women and girls cases. This should require, as a minimum, inspector-level sign-off of these cases and that evidence on the rationale for these closure codes is recorded and auditable.

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

Recommendation 3.2

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, 7.6% of victims did not have their sex recorded in the correct place and 9.5% 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.

Recommendation 4.1

The NPCC have newly appointed a VAWG Lead that will be providing direction to local forces in respect of national standards and a framework for local level action plans. While waiting for the national direction the Constabulary have started drafting their local VAWG plan.

The Constabulary want to ensure robust governance of this important theme. They have appointed a Chief Superintendent to take responsibility for this work. A group, with members from across the force, will be set up to ensure progress and this will report to the Confidence and Legitimacy Committee, chaired by the Deputy Chief Constable.

My office will help oversee this work through our existing governance arrangements and I will hold the Chief Constable to account for the delivery through the Police and Crime Board. I will also work to bring partners together, where necessary, to help ensure the success of this plan.

Recommendation 5.2

- Outcome 15 – suspect identified, insufficient evidence
- Outcome 16 – suspect identified, victim declines to prosecute

When the NPCC has communicated the process for robust monitoring of outcomes 15 and 16 the force VAWG Chief Superintendent will ensure the process is reviewed, adopted and embedded. Progress will be monitored via the sub group mentioned above.

The inspector-level sign-off is already in place in some VAWG cases as the Constabulary has a process in place that requires Inspectors to agree discontinuing domestic abuse cases.

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