

Coronavirus (COVID-19) Supplementary National Violence Against Women Guidance

(Updated September 2020)



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Cosla/Ministerial Spokesperson Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures that continue to be put in place to control the spread of the coronavirus,¹ are no excuse for the perpetration of violence against women and girls (VAWG). However, they may create an environment whereby the risks to women, children and young people suffering or recovering from all forms of VAWG are heightened in local communities across Scotland.

Across Scotland, we know that professionals within local authorities and other key community planning organisations are working incredibly hard to reduce risks to, and help safeguard, people within their local communities. Despite the challenging environment they are operating under, local authorities and other key public sector and third sector partners are continuing to play a vital role in ensuring that women, children and young people's needs are met throughout periods of heightened risk and as Scotland moves towards recovery, renewal and transformation.

As co-owners of [Equally Safe: Scotland's Strategy to Prevent and Eradicate Violence Against Women and Girls](#), COSLA and the Scottish Government have developed this supplementary guidance for local authorities and other key community planning partners to support them with this important task. The guidance has been developed in partnership with the Improvement Service and Public Health Scotland and has been informed by a wide range of specialist VAWG organisations working across Scotland, as well as key professional bodies.

Specifically, this guidance aims to ensure that a sustainable, joined-up approach to safeguarding the needs of women, children and young people experiencing VAWG during COVID-19 is embedded at a local strategic level. It is intended to support the strong leadership already being demonstrated by Local Government and other key community planning partners across Scotland in ensuring effective protection and provision of support for people experiencing VAWG.

1 The Scottish Government introduced [measures](#) as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak requiring people to stay at home and away from others to help protect the NHS and save lives. The [Health Protection \(Coronavirus\)\(Restrictions\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2020](#) ("the Coronavirus Regulations") (implemented 26th March) contain the lawful basis for these measures and are reviewed at least once every 21 days. In addition, supporting guidance to the Coronavirus Regulations for circumstances where there may be domestic abuse may be found at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-domestic-abuse/>

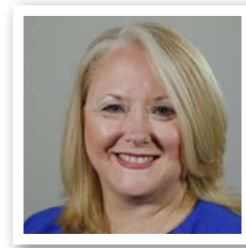
Ultimately, the guidance is intended to be a useful resource that can support local decision-makers across a wide range of organisations and partnerships. Originally published in May 2020, and updated in September 2020 to reflect Scotland's current phase of COVID-19 recovery and renewal, this guidance aims to ensure collaborative responses to women, children and young people affected by VAWG continue to be prioritised as part of our wider strategic response to addressing the pandemic and its economic and social harms.

Despite the significant challenges that continue to be posed by COVID-19, we firmly believe that by continuing to work together to deliver on our shared commitments, we can realise our shared ambition of making Scotland truly Equally Safe.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "K. Parry".

Councillor Kelly Parry
Community Wellbeing
Spokeperson, COSLA



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christina McKelvie".

Christina McKelvie MSP
Minister for Older People
and Equalities

Introduction and Aims of the Guidance

Background

Equally Safe: Scotland's Strategy for Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls was launched in 2014 and revised in 2016. The strategy sets out the Scottish Government and COSLA's joint vision for a strong and flourishing Scotland where all individuals are equally safe and respected, and where women and girls live free from all forms of violence and abuse – and the attitudes that help perpetuate it.

At a local level, Violence Against Women Partnerships (VAWPs) are recognised as the multi-agency mechanism for delivering Equally Safe. In 2016, the Scottish Government and COSLA, with the support of the Improvement Service, published [updated guidance for VAWPs](#), which clarifies the roles and responsibilities of these strategic partnerships in coordinating the responses of the key public sector and third sector organisations working locally to ensure the safety and wellbeing of women and children affected by violence and abuse.

In recognition that VAWG damages health and wellbeing, limits freedom and potential, and is a fundamental violation of human rights, the 2016 guidance highlights the importance of collaborative working between VAWPs and other relevant thematic community planning partnerships wherever possible. This includes (but is not limited to): Adult and Child Protection Committees; Community Justice Partnerships; Community Safety Partnerships; Alcohol and Drugs Partnerships and Health and Social Care Partnerships.

Impact of COVID-19 on Women, Children and Young People

The COVID-19 pandemic has, and will continue to, place women, children and young people experiencing all forms of VAWG at increased risk of harm for the foreseeable future.² This includes women and children experiencing domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, commercial sexual exploitation (CSE), trafficking, forced marriage and female genital

2 This is due to a number of factors including (but not limited to): women, children and young people having less opportunity to seek support from their normal social networks such as friends and family while restrictions are in place; a perception that both universal and specialist services are under pressure creating a reluctance to seek support; perpetrators of VAWG potentially using COVID-19 social restrictions as an additional tool of exerting control, abuse and exploitation; increased financial challenges and dependencies if women are not able to work due to redundancy, caring responsibilities, illness or other factors.

mutilation (FGM). Recent evidence reviews published by the Scottish Government³ have highlighted that while many specialist VAWG services initially saw a drop in referrals during the lockdown period due to increased barriers in accessing support, many women and children experiencing VAWG in local authority areas across Scotland will have experienced increased levels of harm and trauma during this period. Moreover, consultation with service providers highlights that there is likely to be increased demand for specialist support now social restrictions are being lifted and women and children are coming back into contact with both universal and specialist services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also helped to make the harm women and children are experiencing more visible to a wide range of decision-makers across Scotland and has highlighted the need to ensure that systems and services better recognise and respond to the needs of women, children and young people in the future. Since the beginning of the pandemic, local Public Protection Chief Officer Groups (COGs) across Scotland have been playing a vital role in reviewing all available data to better understand and respond to risks to women and children experiencing domestic abuse in their local authority areas, as part of their wider public protection duties. However, it is important to note that this data is only likely to show the small proportion of women and children who have been identified by third sector and public sector partners as requiring support, and the actual levels of VAWG being perpetrated, and the harm being experienced by women and children, is likely to be significantly higher than current data shows. As Scotland moves towards recovery and renewal, it is vital that robust processes are put in place locally to capture and share data about all forms of VAWG to ensure decision-makers have a more complete picture of the nature and prevalence of the problem.

While all women and children experiencing VAWG may be at increased risk of harm during the pandemic, it is important to note that women and children with protected characteristics and experiencing socio economic disadvantage may face additional barriers to support⁴ and be at increased risk of exploitation and coercion throughout the duration of the pandemic. This includes: minority ethnic women and girls; refugees and asylum seekers; disabled women and girls (including those with learning disabilities⁵); LGBTI people; and women at different ages and stages of life (including older women). Women and children

3 See [“Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls during Phases 1, 2 and 3 of Scotland’s route map”](#) and [“Children, Young People and Families COVID-19 Evidence and Intelligence Report”](#)

4 For more information on the additional barriers and inequalities that different communities of interest may experience, please see [Improvement Service Briefing: Poverty, Inequality and COVID-19](#)

5 For more information on safeguarding people with care and support needs from abuse and neglect during the pandemic, please see [SCIE: Safeguarding adults during the COVID-19 crisis](#)

experiencing poverty and deprivation are also likely to experience additional challenges, as are women migrants with no recourse to public funds.

Additionally, women, children and young people with multiple, complex needs including problem alcohol and drug use, a history of offending behaviour, homelessness and/ or mental health issues and trauma who are experiencing VAWG may experience additional challenges and support needs during the pandemic. It is vital that local authorities and other community planning partners ensure they are considering this during all stages of their COVID-19 responses.

Towards Recovery and Renewal

Looking ahead, it is crucial that the emphasis in local policy and practice continues to be on early intervention, so that victim/ survivors are identified and supported as early as possible and perpetrators of VAWG are held to account for their actions and supported to change their behaviour. There is also an opportunity to support a shift towards prevention by identifying opportunities for local strategies in relation to recovery and renewal, employability and poverty and welfare to address the inequalities that put women at increased risk of violence and abuse.

Equally Safe is underpinned by the understanding that VAWG is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Research highlights that the pandemic is likely to exacerbate the inequality of outcomes that women already experience in society.⁶ For example, research shows that women have been disproportionately affected economically by the restrictions put in place to reduce the spread of the pandemic and the crisis has further entrenched unequal gender roles, such as unpaid care.⁷ As local authorities and other key stakeholders begin to consider how they can 'build back better', there is an opportunity to ensure there is a robust commitment to promoting gender equality and ensuring policy and practice is gender sensitive in order to drive forward improvements to women and children's lives. This shift towards prevention will help to reduce levels of gender inequality and VAWG in the long-term and will ensure that policy and practice effectively addresses the root causes of VAWG, rather than only dealing with its negative consequences on women, children and young people's lives.⁸

6 For more information on the ways that women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, please see [Engender Briefing: Women and COVID-19](#)

7 [Engender: Gender and Unpaid Work – The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Caring Roles](#)

8 For more information on developing effective local strategies and activities to embed gender equality, please see [VAWG: Primary Prevention Guidance for Community Planning Partners](#)

Aims of the Supplementary VAW Guidance

The overall aim of this supplementary guidance is to ensure that a sustainable, joined-up approach to safeguarding the needs of women, children and young people experiencing VAWG during COVID-19 continues to be embedded at a local strategic level. Specifically, it aims to:

- Ensure local decision-makers are aware of the suite of COVID-19 guidance that has been developed nationally that will be relevant to supporting women, children and young people affected by VAWG, and tackling perpetrators of that abuse⁹
- Highlight potential risks to women, children and young people during the pandemic and support local decision-makers to identify mitigating actions they can undertake in the short, medium and long-term; and
- Support planning through recovery, renewal and transformation to ensure that women, children and young people's equality and human rights are promoted at a strategic level in order to support a longer-term shift towards preventing VAWG in Scotland.

An overview of key risks and mitigating actions for decision-makers to consider is outlined in the table below. More detail on each of these risks and actions is available in the remainder of the guidance.

This Guidance also aims to provide elected members, Chief Officers and other key decision makers with a framework they can use to ensure they have a robust understanding and oversight of the wide range work of that is being progressed locally to respond to the safety and wellbeing needs of women, children and young people and the impact of this work. Ultimately, it is intended that this will help to strengthen local democratic accountability and help to drive forward any areas for improvement that are identified locally.

While aimed primarily at local authorities, the guidance recognises that a joined-up approach across a wide range of public sector and third sector partners will be needed locally in order to ensure women, children and young people are protected during the pandemic, and that tackling and preventing VAWG is embedded in broader medium- and long-term recovery strategies.

This includes (but is not limited to) Councils, Police, NHS, specialist VAW support services such as Women's Aid organisations, Rape Crisis services, other key third sector partners, housing providers and the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA). It is intended

⁹ A list of the [key guidance that has been developed to date](#) has been included as an appendix to this guidance.

to be a 'live' document that can be updated to respond to changing challenges and opportunities facing decision-makers at the different phases of pandemic.

Key Risks and Mitigating Actions for Local Decision-Makers to Consider as Part of Their Wider Strategic Responses to COVID-19

SHORT-TERM: HEIGHTENED PERIODS OF RISK DURING LOCKDOWNS & OTHER SOCIAL RESTRICTIONS TO SUPPRESS THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 DURING PHASES 1 – 3 OF SCOTLAND'S ROUTE MAP

Area of risk	Effects of COVID-19 pandemic response
Domestic abuse, sexual violence and abuse, FGM and forced marriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home is not a safe place for many women, children and young people (WCYP) • There are increased barriers to accessing support and emergency housing during periods of local lockdown, particularly for WCYP with protected characteristics and complex needs • Perpetrators of domestic abuse may increase levels of control, surveillance and violence during periods of local lockdown or when households are in quarantine • Vulnerable CYP are particularly at risk when they are unable to attend school and ELC settings as are less visible to agencies/services • There may be increased risk of sexual violence, exploitation of children, online abuse/grooming, FGM and forced marriage because of social isolation • Social isolation may exacerbate existing mental health issues for survivors, as will restriction to support and health services • Women face increased risk of financial and economic dependency and deprivation because of economic crisis
Prostitution and other forms of Commercial Sexual Exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular safety mechanisms and support might not be available to women involved in prostitution and other forms of CSE, increasing risk of harm and exploitation • As a result of financial desperation and lack of financial support, women may be forced to sell sex at reduced prices and unsafe conditions during periods of lockdown, either online or in-person • Women engaged in selling sex in-person (including in saunas, which are no longer required to be closed under public health regulations) are at increased risk of infection from COVID-19 due to difficulties in applying public health guidance in commercial sex settings • Women are at increased risk of being targeted to sell sex online
Women with complex needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social isolation may exacerbate existing trauma and mental health issues for survivors • There may be decreased access to services for women with problem alcohol/ drug use and housing needs • Women in the criminal justice system released from prison during the pandemic may face increased safety risks and reduced access to support, housing and benefits • Women's access to reproductive, abortion and sexual health services may be reduced due to social restrictions. There may be a higher risk of abuse going undetected for pregnant women/ new mothers while restrictions are in place and perpetrators may use the pandemic to intensify control over women's reproductive health, resulting in higher risks of unwanted pregnancy and STIs

Perpetrators

- Perpetrators in the criminal justice system released from prison during the pandemic may pose increased safety risks to their families
- Challenges in ensuring perpetrators remain engaged virtually with programmes/support and continue behaviour change
- Perpetrators may use current situation to justify non-compliance & avoid challenge
- Emergency provisions in prisons and those related to CPOs may create specific risks

Mitigating actions local authorities and other community planning partners may wish to consider during periods of lockdown and other restrictions

1. Ensure Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessments are undertaken when developing any new policies/ responses to COVID-19, to reduce any unintended negative consequences to WCYP experiencing VAWG and ensure they meet the specific needs of people with protected characteristics
2. Ensure MARACs continue to function to identify and enable safety plans to be put in place for WCYP at greatest risk of harm
3. Develop a COVID-19 domestic abuse housing policy based on good practice guidance
4. Work in partnership with specialist VAWG services to ensure that robust pathways are in place to identify children and young people experiencing domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG and that they are able to access spaces at ELC and Education Hubs where possible, during periods when schools and nurseries are closed.
5. Develop a strategy for effective multi-agency communication & data sharing to capture both quantitative and qualitative evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on women, children and young people.
6. Consider how to support and enhance capacity of specialist services. Wherever possible, this will include ensuring that any local funding and contractual expectations are flexible to support service delivery and the changing needs of WCYP
7. Encourage community planning partners to work together to ensure a consistent approach to meeting the needs of WCYP, particularly in adult protection, child protection and criminal justice responses
8. Use social media and other communication channels to highlight local services & support available to WCYP and ensure different sectors of the workforce know the role they can play in reducing risks. The use of accessible communication should be promoted wherever possible to ensure that women and children with visual or sensory disabilities, learning difficulties, language barriers or other communication support needs are not excluded.
9. Update risk assessment & management plans for convicted perpetrators & ensure close monitoring of high-risk perpetrators. Where possible, and this can be done safely, intervene directly with perpetrators face-to-face or virtually to support them to change negative behaviours. If not possible, consider other ways of safely engaging to monitor behaviour
10. Ensure that criminal justice partners have relevant details of index offences relating to VAWG and information around protective orders (e.g. NHOs) preventing contact with WCYP

MEDIUM TERM: DURING COVID 19 RECOVERY AND RENEWAL PLANNING	
Area of risk	Effects of COVID-19 pandemic response
Increased demand for support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of prolonged, intense trauma during the pandemic and long-term mental health issues for WCYP may have been exacerbated by the lockdown and other restrictions • Long waiting lists, lack of person-centred support and lack of support for WCYP with protected characteristics and/ or complex needs, all of which could exacerbate issues • Lack of access to support could contribute to some WCYP engaging in harmful behaviours • WCYP leaving perpetrator as social restrictions are lifted, are at high risk of serious physical harm and murder
Funding and capacity constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There may be challenges for services to meet anticipated increases in demand for specialist support once social restriction are lifted, because of capacity and budget constraints • Potential for further local lockdowns, resulting in challenges for both specialist and universal services in affected areas to plan for and provide support to WCYP
Compounding Inequalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The existing inequalities women experienced prior to COVID-19 are likely to have been further entrenched by the pandemic, with women more likely to face increased levels of caring responsibilities, unemployment and financial hardship than men; • WCYP with protected characteristics may face increased barriers to recovering from the pandemic and accessing support with financial, employment, health and social needs.
Mitigating actions local authorities and other community planning partners may wish to consider during periods of lockdown and other restrictions	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Undertake local strategic needs assessments to understand the impact the pandemic has had on WCYP experiencing VAWG and ensure this learning is used to shape local recovery and renewal plans 12. Ensure specific risks to women and children affected by VAWG are included in relevant integrated risk registers being developed by relevant Chief Officer Groups (COGs) to support wider recovery and renewal planning 13. Adopt a whole-systems, child-centred approach to working with WCYP experiencing domestic abuse & ensure children are involved in decision-making about their lives, where possible and appropriate 14. Work in partnership with specialist VAWG services to ensure the needs of children experiencing domestic abuse are prioritised as part of recovery strategies being developed by Children Services and Education teams 15. Ensure local workforces have capacity and capability to provide trauma-informed support and services for all WCYP who require it 16. Ensure perpetrators are held to account through robust use of criminal justice process and resumption of programmed interventions, including use of flexible newly accredited 1:1 delivery methods, if groupwork support remains impractical 	

17. Work in partnership with specialist VAWG services and universal services to identify anticipated levels of demand for crisis, recovery and other support in the coming year, and ensure resources are available to meet these
18. Explore opportunities to lever additional resources to support systems and services to respond to increased levels of demand
19. Regularly consult with WCYP with lived experience of VAWG and ensure that the recovery systems and services put in place locally recognise and respond to their specific needs, including WCYP with protected characteristics and/ or complex needs
20. Ensure that the inequality of outcomes that women have experienced during the pandemic are recognised and addressed in local recovery and renewal strategies, as well as in specific strategies relating to employability and economic recovery and poverty and welfare.

LONG-TERM: AS PARTNERS WORK TO 'BUILD BACK BETTER'

Area of risk	Effects of COVID-19 pandemic response
Long-term effects of crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incidents of VAWG could go undetected/unreported for many months and years • Economic crisis could exacerbate WCYP's experiences of VAWG • Gender inequality could be further entrenched in social and economic systems
Mitigating actions local authorities and other community planning partners may wish to consider during periods of lockdown and other restrictions	
<p>21. Continue to encourage multi-agency, collaborative working and promote strong engagement with VAW Partnerships at a local, strategic level</p> <p>22. Ensure a whole-systems, gendered approach to tackling VAWG is embedded as part of wider recovery, renewal and transformation responses</p> <p>23. Promote commitment to tackling VAWG and gender inequality at a leadership level</p> <p>24. Ensure there is an emphasis on tackling gender inequality and embedding early intervention and primary prevention approaches in all relevant policy areas</p> <p>25. Continue to capture both good practice and areas for improvement throughout the pandemic and ensure this learning is used to shape all policy and practice moving forward.</p>	

Collecting, Analysing and Sharing Data in Order to Inform Strategic Planning

Timescale	Why capture data on WCYP experiencing VAWG?	How can data be collected?
Short term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To help monitor the impact of local and national COVID-19 responses on the safety and wellbeing of WCYP, in order to identify and reduce any risks of unintended harm. Identify if and how the pandemic and restrictions is compounding existing risks and inequalities for WCYP, in order to support future planning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilise data currently being collected by key statutory organisations including Police Scotland, COPFS, NHS, Social Work Scotland and the Scottish Prison Service to help increase understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on WCYP affected by VAWG Maximise use of data collection processes agreed by SOLACE and COSLA, which include Public Protection datasets Review data being collected in other relevant community planning areas such as housing and homelessness, problem drug and alcohol use, community justice, employment and poverty and welfare to identify issues that are disproportionately affecting women and girls during the pandemic Work in partnership with specialist VAWG support services and equality groups to agree a process for sharing information and data on the trends they are identifying locally in terms of WCYP's support needs, including any additional needs being experienced by WCYP with protected characteristics Ensure WCYP with lived experience of VAWG have meaningful opportunities to share their learning and experiences of the pandemic on an ongoing basis, to help inform future policy and practice <p>When collecting data, it is important to note that many frontline services are currently being asked for information from multiple partners. In order to avoid duplication of effort and reduce demands being placed on specialist VAW services and equality groups at a time when they are under significant pressure, it is recommended that a coordinated, strategic approach to data collection should be adopted wherever possible.</p>

Timescale	Why capture data on WCYP experiencing VAWG?	How can data be collected?
Medium and long term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopting a robust and consistent approach to data collection will help ensure risks for WYCP in local communities are identified and responded to at the earliest possible stage Collecting data on gender inequalities will help partners understand the long-term impact of COVID-19 on WYCP and support a shift towards preventing VAWG in the future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revisit mechanisms for collecting and analysing data to identify any areas for improvement Develop systems in partnership with VAW Partnerships & Equality Leads Integrate VAWG data collection with broader recovery data and intelligence systems currently in development Ensure the highest standards of ethical data collection & storage, given needs for sensitivity and anonymity around VAWG data

Promoting Consistent Messaging to Highlight Support for Women, Children and Young People (WCYP) in Local Response to VAWG

KEY MESSAGES LOCAL AUTHORITIES CAN PROMOTE TO SUPPORT WOMEN, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE (WCYP) DURING ALL PHASES OF SCOTLAND'S ROADMAP TO RECOVERY

1. WCYP experiencing VAWG are not alone and a range of specialist support services are available to access locally and nationally during all phases of the pandemic;
2. The pandemic is not an excuse for perpetrating abuse and perpetrators will be identified and held to account for their behaviours by Police Scotland;
3. Tackling VAWG is everyone's business and professionals across a wide range of local workforces have a key role play in safely identifying and responding to risks that WCYP may be experiencing
4. VAWG is a cause and consequence of gender inequality. As Scotland looks to 'Build Back Better' there is a need to ensure that promoting women's equality is prioritised in policy and practice to support a decisive shift towards preventing VAWG.

KEY AIMS OF COMMUNICATION PLANS LOCAL AUTHORITIES CAN SUPPORT AS PART OF THEIR WIDER STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Raise awareness of impact of pandemic and restrictions on WCYP experiencing all forms of VAWG including domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, commercial sexual exploitation, FGM and forced marriage.	Promote national VAWG helplines and websites that WCYP can access for support and information with VAWG	Raise awareness of the range of specialist VAWG services that WCYP can access in their local community, either virtually, by phone or in person
Encourage women affected by all forms of VAWG to seek specialist support as soon as it is safe for them to do so	Highlight that women are disproportionately being impacted by the pandemic and the importance of ensuring promoting gender equality is mainstreamed in strategic responses to the pandemic.	Ensure professionals are aware of the dynamics of domestic abuse and coercive control and the range of tactics perpetrators might use during the pandemic to increase their control and abuse of WCYP.
Emphasise that VAWG will not be tolerated and perpetrators of abuse will be identified and held to account for their behaviours	Ensure that women with no recourse to public funds can access support and are supported to do this	The Domestic Abuse Awareness Raising Tool (DAART) has been developed by SafeLives to support professionals across different local authority policy agendas with this task.

Identifying and Responding to Increased Levels of Risk to Women and Children During Periods of Lockdown and Other Social Restrictions

Local authorities, in collaboration with specialist third sector and public sector partners, have a key role to play in identifying women, children and young people who are experiencing VAWG at an early stage and ensuring effective safeguarding measures are put in place. However, there will likely be increased challenges in both identifying women, children and young people at risk of VAWG during periods of local lockdown, household quarantines and other social restriction measures and in ensuring that women, children and young people who need support are able to access it at the earliest possible stage it is safe for them to do so.

This section of the guidance highlights heightened risks that women, children and young people affected by different forms of VAWG may experience during periods of local lockdown and other social restrictions. It also identifies actions that key decision-makers within local authorities may want to consider taking to help mitigate these risks, as part of their wider strategic response to COVID-19.

Increased risks to women, children and young people during periods of lockdown and other social restrictions

Domestic abuse

Even prior to the pandemic, home was not a safe place for women and children experiencing domestic abuse in local communities across Scotland. Women already faced complex decisions and a wide range of barriers preventing their ability to safely escape an abusive partner. During periods of local lockdowns, household quarantines or other social restrictions when mobility is constrained and vulnerabilities increase, challenges facing women in escaping abusive partners will increase.¹⁰

10 <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/0441-Domestic-Abuse-guidance-V1-003.pdf>

Perpetrator behaviour

Perpetrators may feel more confident in increasing levels of control, violence and harassment during periods of lockdown and household quarantines with the belief that they are less likely to be detected and held to account. Perpetrators may use local lockdowns, household quarantines and other social restrictions as an opportunity to increase surveillance of, and control over, women's and children's access to phones, internet and communication with family, friends and professionals. Many survivors may also need to change their safety plans because of changes to perpetrators' behaviour, service responses and family circumstances.

Migrant women with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) or spousal visas may face additional risks during the pandemic, as perpetrators may attempt to use their immigration status to control their partners. EEA nationals may face similar challenges if their entitlement to access welfare benefits derive from their partner.

There are also heightened risks for women, children and young people who do not live with the perpetrator. Periods of local lockdown and quarantines mean that perpetrators know where survivors are and that they will be unable to move outside, or far from, that location so there is a risk that online and in-person harassment/ surveillance from ex-partners may intensify during these periods. Perpetrators may use and manipulate the lockdown restrictions as a tactic to keep children and young people with them and away from their mother, interfering with child contact arrangements, citing health/quarantine reasons.¹¹ Perpetrators may also use virtual means of child contact as another tool for surveillance and harassment of the non-offending parent.

Changes in perpetrators' patterns of abuse can directly impact on children and young people and make it even more challenging for the survivor to parent. In some cases, the perpetrator's behaviour may result in an increase in poor mental health amongst the survivor parent and potentially lead to them using alcohol and other substances as a coping mechanism. It is vital that professionals are able to identify and assess the wide range of tactics used by perpetrators and the impact this can have on women and children.

Perpetrators may also use lockdowns or other social restrictions as tactics to increase their control over their ex/partner's economic situation. This may involve interfering with her ability to work either within the home or externally or insisting the mother is solely responsible for childcare. The perpetrator may force his ex/partner to spend less money on essentials, assume the full financial burden of household costs, take out new forms of credit/run up debt in her name, prevent her accessing income from work and/or benefits,

11 The Lord President has issued [guidance on compliance with contact orders](#) during the pandemic, which covers both court ordered contact arrangements and more informal arrangements.

misappropriate that income themselves or prevent her from accessing financial support, such as rent/mortgage holidays.

Women experiencing abuse in their home will find it more difficult to leave their abuser if they are living in poverty, and the economic uncertainty created by the pandemic will exacerbate these difficulties for many women.¹²

Impact on children and young people

During periods of local lockdowns or other social restrictions, schools and early years settings may not be able to operate as normal, meaning children and young people experiencing domestic abuse will be less visible to statutory and third sector agencies and may be increased risk of abuse and harm from the perpetrator. Perpetrators may limit, remove or monitor use of technology for children and young people, making it harder for them to access support. Children may also find themselves left in the unsupervised care of the perpetrator if their mother becomes ill due to the virus. Children and young people are likely to be spending more time online during the pandemic, and therefore may be exposed to more risks including online harassment, abuse and exploitation.

Accessing support

The ability of women, children and young people living with domestic abuse to disclose and access support from specialist and universal services may be dramatically reduced during periods of local lockdown or other social restrictions. For women and children living in rural communities, there may be few/no neighbours or volunteers to seek support from, further exacerbating isolation and risk. Women and children with protected characteristics may face additional barriers to accessing support. For example, women and children with disabilities may face challenges with accessing support if information is not provided in a way that is accessible to people who are deaf, visually impaired or have learning disabilities. Additionally, women and children who do not speak English may have difficulty accessing support if information is not provided in a range of different languages and trained interpreters are not made available where required. Some BME women may also face barriers in accessing services, because of cultural pressures and/ or a lack of specialist BME services being available in their locality.

Sexual violence and abuse

Periods of local lockdown and other social restrictions also present increased risks for women and children experiencing sexual violence and abuse.

¹² As women are more likely to be in precarious and low-income work than men, they are particularly vulnerable to falling into poverty due to the labour market disruptions caused by COVID-19.

During these periods, survivors may be unable to seek support from their regular face-to-face support services and may also struggle to access telephone or online support if they do not have a private space in their household to do so. The normal coping mechanisms that survivors have put in place to help them deal with their trauma may not be available to them during these periods, leading to increased levels of stress and anxiety. Delays and uncertainties in being able to access justice through the court system are also likely to compound women, children and young people's trauma and anxiety during this time.

Women and children living in households with sexually abusive family members or other household residents are at particular risk of harm during periods of local lockdown and other social restrictions, with perpetrators being able to take advantage of their increased isolation and vulnerability. Due to the increased time they are likely to be spending online during the pandemic, children and young people may also be exposed to more risks from online predators.¹³ This may include online harassment, grooming and intimate image abuse.

Women involved in selling or exchanging sex and other forms of Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

Women who are at high risk of poverty, homelessness and destitution may face increased risks of sexual exploitation, coercion and violence during periods of local lockdown and other restrictions.

As a result of COVID-19, women in local communities across Scotland may already have been forced to sell sex at vastly reduced prices because of financial desperation, and in many cases will have had no recourse to emergency financial support from the government. Feedback from specialist CSE support services¹⁴ has highlighted that many women involved in prostitution reported being put under pressure from pimps or clients to meet in person as soon as Scotland moved into phase 2 of the recovery roadmap, despite the increased risks of COVID-19 infection and other safety concerns during this period.

Increased demand for women in the online industry while social distancing measures continue to be in place put single mothers, unemployed women, students without income, women being released from prison, and migrant and refugee women at particular risk of being targeted. They are also at risk of stalking, blackmail and harassment, which incurs further risks as men could use contact information in the future to pressure women for direct physical sex.

13 See [“Children, Young People and Families COVID-19 Evidence and Intelligence Report”](#)

14 See [“Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls during Phases 1, 2 and 3 of Scotland's route map”](#)

Women entering prostitution since the pandemic started may not be known to local services and be unaware of how to access support through services available locally and nationally. These women may experience/ perceive stigma when accessing non-specialist support and may not feel comfortable in disclosing their involvement in selling sex if accessing support for other reasons such as housing, sexual health, addiction and/ or mental health. They may also struggle or not wish to access benefits, including Universal Credit.

Women involved in selling sex may also be at higher risk of poor mental health, problem alcohol/drug use and suicide. Women who have been involved in the sex industry and want to exit or seek alternatives during periods of lockdown and other social restrictions are faced with the prospect of further reduced opportunities or reduced routes out of the sex industry at this time.

Forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM)

Forced marriage

While the impact of COVID-19 on forced marriage in the UK is not yet known, evidence from other emergencies indicates that when basic services and social networks are restricted, incidence of forced marriage increases. While national lockdown may have prevented some forced marriages from taking place, there may be an increased incidence of forced marriages since restrictions have been lifted. In addition, some perpetrators may have, or be planning to, take the opportunity of international flights resuming to travel abroad to carry out a forced marriage while schools and other universal services are undergoing significant periods of change.

FGM

Perpetrators often wait until school holidays to commit FGM. The closure of schools over the last 5 months has provided increased opportunities for perpetrators to commit FGM undetected in the home and despite schools now re-opening, there remains heightened risks to children during any local lockdowns, household quarantines and whilst other social restrictions remain in place. Support for girls who have experienced FGM is normally triggered by a change in behaviour observed in schools, but teachers' ability to detect these signs may be challenged given the competing pressures they are managing.

Future closures of schools during local lockdowns may make it harder to identify and support young survivors, while in turn also making it harder to prosecute perpetrators. Adult survivors of FGM may also struggle to access specialist support services and treatment for the physical and mental health in the coming months.

Women, children and young people with complex needs¹⁵

Women, children and young people experiencing VAWG who also have multiple, complex needs (including physical or mental health issues, problem drug or alcohol use or a history of offending behaviour) already faced additional risks and challenges prior to the pandemic and are likely to experience increased risks and difficulties in accessing support during periods of local lockdowns and other social restrictions. It is likely that the effects of social isolation may exacerbate any existing mental health issues for women, children and young people who are experiencing or have experienced VAWG. Survivors of past trauma could find that lockdowns trigger stress and anxiety at a time when it is more difficult to access support. Perpetrators' behaviours may cause or exacerbate problem alcohol/drug use or mental health issues amongst survivors and/ or perpetrators may prevent women from accessing specialist support for these issues.

In terms of reproductive health, research highlights that risks of domestic abuse increase while women are pregnant and during early maternity.¹⁶ Given access to universal services may be reduced both during and after periods of lockdown, there is potentially a higher risk of abuse going undetected and women and babies unsupported. Control over women's reproductive and sexual health is often part of a perpetrator's course of control. However, with reduced access to reproductive health, sexual health services and vital abortion healthcare during the pandemic, women may be at heightened risk of unwanted pregnancy and STIs.

Women in the criminal justice system are disproportionately likely to have complex needs and histories of trauma and abuse. Imprisonment during the crisis may have exacerbated some women's trauma and mental health issues, while early release because of the pandemic may see women prisoners re-entering the community with reduced access to support, money and safe/secure permanent housing. When released, women could be forced to return to places of trauma and abuse, which increases their safety risks and could affect their long-term outcomes.

While offenders with a history of perpetrating domestic abuse will not have been eligible for early release during the pandemic, women and children may still have faced increased harm from men released as part of this process if their previous abusive offending history had not been identified through the criminal justice system. Additionally, there may have

15 Where someone has additional support needs, it is important for practitioners to consider whether they are an adult at risk of harm in terms of Adult Support and Protection. Practitioners are advised to follow their local Adult Protection Committee guidance with regard to making decisions in this regard.

16 For more information on risks to women during pregnancy see [Scottish Government: Equality Outcomes - Pregnancy and Maternity Evidence Review](#)

been, and continue to be, less supervision of perpetrators on a scheduled release from prison since the pandemic due to competing demands being placed on social work services. There may also be ongoing challenges in ensuring perpetrators remain engaged virtually with behaviour change programmes which cannot be delivered in person and in monitoring compliance with community order requirements restricting and supervising perpetrators' movements and conduct.

Some perpetrators may continue to use the pandemic to avoid challenge, justify non-compliance or to reinforce a tendency to blame or criticise their partners.

Responding to the risks for women, children and young people experiencing VAWG during lockdown

Despite the challenging period that local authorities and other key community planning partners are currently operating in and the multiple priorities they are managing, it is vital that:

- Local authorities and other community planning partners continue to ensure a joined-up, strategic approach is taken to safeguarding women, children and young people affected by all forms of VAWG within local communities across Scotland, and this is embedded within local resilience responses;
- All staff that come into contact with women, children and young people during the pandemic are aware of the vital role they can play in identifying those affected by VAWG and ensuring that referrals are made to specialist services safely and effectively;
- A robust and sustainable approach to tackling VAWG and supporting specialist VAWG services is embedded in local authorities' responses to COVID-19 at a strategic and operational level across all relevant departments; and
- Meaningful engagement and partnership working with specialist VAWG services and Equality Groups is embedded in decision-making processes and that relevant Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessments are undertaken when developing new policies/ responses to COVID-19 to help reduce any unintended negative consequences to women, children and young people experiencing VAWG.

Specific actions that local authorities may want to consider taking during periods where local lockdowns and other restrictions are in place include:

Promoting a joined-up approach for improving outcomes for women, children and young people across different community planning areas

Since March 2020, a significant amount of guidance has been issued to, and by, local authorities to inform their strategic responses to the pandemic. This has included guidance for social workers, housing providers, education leads and child protection and public protection groups. Much of this guidance has the potential to have a significant impact on how local authorities respond to women, children and young people affected by VAWG while restrictions are in place, and it is vital that wherever possible partners across different areas of community planning work continue to work together to ensure an informed and consistent approach is taken to meeting women and children's safety and wellbeing needs.

Local authorities can play a key role in ensuring this happens by encouraging all thematic community planning areas (including adult protection, child protection, community justice, education, health services, housing, financial inclusion and community safety) to work in close collaboration with VAW Partnerships over the coming weeks and months.

Ensuring robust processes are in place to identify and protect women, children and young people affected by VAWG who are at greatest risk of harm

Local Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs), alongside other multi-agency arrangements in place locally have, and continue to, play an increasingly important role in ensuring that women, children and young people at the highest risk of harm during the pandemic can be identified by partners at an early stage in order for safety plans to be put in place. Local authorities and other key community planning partners have a vital role to play in ensuring these arrangements continue to function while social restrictions are in place, in order to prevent additional lives being lost to domestic abuse during the pandemic. [Guidance for multi-agency forums](#) (including MARACs) on responding to the challenges posed during COVID-19 has been developed by SafeLives, which outlines key actions that local authorities and other partners may want to consider in relation to: (i) responding to staffing issues; (ii) holding meeting via virtual platforms; (iii) identifying and managing risk to women and children; and (iv) developing safety planning that maximises opportunity for safe communication between vulnerable families and service providers and recognises and documents perpetrators' patterns of behaviour.

Ensuring local domestic abuse housing policies meet the needs of women, children and young people affected by VAWG

Local authorities have a key role to play in ensuring local housing policies meet the needs of women and children affected by VAWG, and that people at risk of domestic abuse are able to move to safety. This includes putting in place a local response to the [CIH and SWA housing guidance](#), continuing with the allocation system to minimise voids, ensuring a flexibility with refuge voids and ensuring Women's Aid groups are not penalised for void rates. This message was reinforced with a joint letter from the Minister of Local Government, Housing and Planning and the COSLA Community Wellbeing spokesperson sent to the housing sector on 29 May 2020. Under the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2020, local authorities are also required to ensure that women and children are not placed in temporary accommodation for longer than 7 days during the pandemic.

Supporting the work of local specialist VAWG services

Specialist VAWG organisations, including local women's aid and rape crisis centres, play a critical role in supporting women, children and young people who are experiencing VAWG. In response to the pandemic, many specialist services have rapidly and agilely transformed their delivery models to offer critical support via telephone and digital platforms. Local authorities have a key role to play in supporting the capacity of these services and the frontline workers within them. Where specialist VAWG services are funded by local authorities, local authorities should ensure grant-holders know that wherever possible, this funding can be used flexibly during the pandemic to enable services to better respond to the changing needs of women, children and young people. In order to avoid placing added pressure on specialist services at a time when they are continuing to deliver vital support to women and children in local communities, local authorities may also want to explore opportunities to delay undertaking service reviews or putting services out to competitive tender, where possible.

Supporting women, children and young people migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

As part of their wider statutory social work and public health duties, local authorities have key roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding women, children and young people experiencing VAWG who have NRPF. This may include providing emergency accommodation to women, children and young people with NRPF who are homeless or 'rough sleeping' during the pandemic, as well as ensuring they can access financial support, food, health services, childcare and other emergency assistance. COSLA has developed a

[framework for local authorities on supporting people with NRPF during COVID-19.](#)

Maximising capabilities of social media and digital tools

Many local authorities and other key partners have significantly increased their use of social media and digital tools in their responses to the COVID-19 crisis, and there are opportunities to build on this to help ensure women, children and young people affected by VAWG are able to access information and support while social restrictions are in place. Specialist services are quickly adapting their delivery models to provide support remotely and there are a number of apps survivors can use to safely document abuse and access support. Much of the additional guidance being issued to local authorities around public protection highlights the need to use digital technology to ensure concerns and risks are dealt with early and effectively. Local authorities and key community planning partners have a vital role to play in encouraging flexible, digital communication to support safeguarding processes where appropriate. Social media remains a key method to communicate with local communities about available services and support and raise awareness of the increased risks of VAWG to women, children and young people.

However, given that many women, children and young people experiencing VAWG may not have access to devices or the internet because of availability of provision, poor signal, affordability and/or because of perpetrator control, local authorities and partners should consider how to provide practical support for families in this area. In assessing vulnerability and need for technology in delivering educational materials, local authorities should also be aware of and plan for the possibility that some households may prioritise some children over others based on gender, age and/or other characteristics. Wherever possible, local authorities should also seek to ensure that information is being communicated in a way that is accessible to women and children who are deaf, visually impaired, have learning disabilities and/ or do not speak English.

Identifying and Responding to Increased Levels of Risk for Women and Children as Restrictions are Lifted and we Move Towards Recovery

Local authorities, in collaboration with specialist third sector VAWG services and public sector partners, have a key role to play in ensuring the needs of women, children and young people experiencing all forms of VAWG are identified and addressed when restrictions are lifted and partners move towards recovery and renewal. Consultation with specialist VAWG services¹⁷ highlights that there may be a significant increase in the numbers of women, children and young people requiring support due to experiences of VAWG and trauma once restrictions are lifted. It is vital that local authorities and other partners begin planning now to ensure systems and services are in place locally to respond to this anticipated increased demand.

This section of the guidance aims to highlight particular challenges that both women, children and young people affected by VAWG and the organisations that support them may experience as Scotland moves towards the recovery and renewal phases of the pandemic. It also identifies actions that key decision-makers within local authorities may want to consider taking to help mitigate these risks, as part of their wider strategic response to COVID-19.

Identifying risks to women and children experiencing VAWG during recovery

While it is likely that incidences of VAWG will continue to be significantly under-detected and under-reported in Scotland and other parts of the world for the foreseeable future, it is widely expected that the numbers of women, children and young people requiring crisis and recovery support with VAWG will increase as restrictions are lifted. Research highlights that women, children and young people experiencing domestic abuse are at highest risk of

17 See [“Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls during Phases 1, 2 and 3 of Scotland’s route map”](#) for more information on anticipated demand for support services as social restrictions are lifted.

serious physical harm and murder when they leave the perpetrator, with it being anticipated that a number of women will be waiting until social restrictions are lifted to do so.¹⁸

Existing mental health issues, particularly those caused by experiences of VAWG, may have been exacerbated during the pandemic. Consultation with specialist service providers has highlighted that many women, children and young people have experienced prolonged, intense trauma, isolation and other health-related harm during the lockdown. Not having access to high-quality, person-centred support could impede women, children and young people's recovery and have a serious long-term impact on their health, wellbeing and future outcomes.

Women, children and young people who benefited from the special measures put in place to protect them during the pandemic may also find themselves in a vulnerable position as these measures begin to be lifted as Scotland moves towards recovery and renewal. For example, migrant women with NRPF who were accommodated and supported by local authorities during the early phases of the pandemic on the base of public health emergency may find themselves faced with street homelessness and destitution if those public health grounds no longer apply.¹⁹

It is likely that community planning partners will face increased challenges in meeting demand as social restrictions are lifted and more women and children seek to access support. There is a risk that both universal services and specialist VAWG services may not be able to cope with increased demand because of both their own finite capacity and the added pressures of having to operate within a radically different delivery landscape. This may result in lengthy waiting lists and a lack of person-centred support for women, children and young people. In particular, women, children and young people with protected characteristics and/ or multiple, complex needs may face additional barriers in accessing support. Future local lockdowns may add to the negative impact of the national lockdown, as services will still be managing the additional demand from earlier restrictions, leading to an accumulative effect, which if not planned for will likely lead to further significant strain on services.

Specific actions that local authorities may want to consider taking to ensure high-quality systems and services for women, children and young people are in place as restrictions are lifted include:

18 See [Scottish Women's Aid, Crisis and Resilience: the impact of a global pandemic on domestic abuse survivors and service providers in Scotland](#)

19 For more info on particular risks to BME and migrant women see [SafeLives: Safe at Home Scotland Briefing - BME & migrant survivors](#)

Undertaking local strategic needs assessments to understand the impact the pandemic has had on WCYP experiencing VAWG and ensuring this learning is used to shape local recovery and renewal plans

Local authorities and other community planning partners can play a key role in ensuring robust pathways are in place locally that identify and respond to the specific support needs that women, children and young people experiencing all forms of VAWG are likely to have as pandemic restrictions continue to be lifted. To support this task, it is vital that strategic needs assessments are undertaken within local authority areas to better understand the impact that the pandemic has had on the lives of women and children in local communities, the support women and children are likely to require now and in the future to address the negative outcomes they have experienced and the extent to which local systems and services are currently equipped to respond to this demand. To support this task, decision-makers should seek to:

- Review relevant quantitative and qualitative data that has been collected throughout the pandemic to understand any trends that are being identified locally;
- Consult with, listen to and action feedback from both women, children and young people who have experienced VAWG and the specialist VAWG support organisations supporting them on the effectiveness of current systems and services; and
- Review the pathways and processes in place locally across both universal services and specialist VAWG services to assess the extent to which they currently meet the needs of women and children (including those with complex support needs), and identify opportunities for different community planning partners to work more closely together to support the development of holistic, person-centred pathways of support moving forward.

It is crucial that local needs assessments and recovery plans are inclusive and recognise the different ways in which women, children and young people's identities will affect their experiences of VAWG and the type of support they require. For example, ensuring close engagement with BME-led organisations, and projects working with BME communities, including newly-settled communities, will be key to ensuring that the needs of women and children affected by FGM is fully understood and that appropriate pathways can be put in place to ensure that the people in local communities who most need support are able to access it.

Work in partnership with specialist VAWG services to ensure the needs of children experiencing domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG are prioritised as part of recovery strategies being developed by Children Services and Education teams

Local authorities and other community planning partners can play a key role in ensuring children and family teams, education leads and VAW Partnerships work together to ensure risks to children and young people who have experienced trauma or abuse are identified and are able to access appropriate support as schools re-open.

[National guidance](#) has been developed to support local authorities with schools reopening, and local education professionals and specialist VAWG services may want to explore opportunities to work together to ensure a joined-up approach is taken to identifying and responding to the trauma and wellbeing needs of children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse and other forms of abuse during the pandemic.²⁰ Where appropriate, this may include exploring opportunities for children and young people to access support from specialist VAWG services outwith the school campus, while restrictions are in place to limit the number of adults who are working in and around schools.

There may also be opportunities for increased collaborative working amongst these stakeholders moving forward to ensure that robust processes are in place to enable children and young people experiencing domestic abuse to access places in local education hubs where available, should schools have to close again in the future.

Ensuring that trauma-informed systems, practices and workforce support are embedded at a local level

At a time of increased risk of trauma for women, children and young people, local authorities and other community planning partners have a key role to play in ensuring that workforces understand the impact of trauma and abuse and have the skills and confidence to respond in a trauma-informed way that reduces the likelihood of further harm. The [National Trauma Training Framework](#), and accompanying e-learning modules, have been developed to support professionals working within local authorities and other key organisations with this task.

As local authorities and other community planning partners move towards recovery and renewal, it is also crucial that they develop plans to both strengthen workforce wellbeing and mitigate the negative impacts of increased workloads and reduced staff numbers due to stress, illness, vicarious trauma and bereavement.

²⁰ [Additional guidance](#) has been developed by Education Scotland and Scottish Women's Aid to support educators with this task.

Adopting a child-centred, rights-based approach to working with families experiencing domestic abuse

Despite added pressures that are likely to be placed on both public sector and third sector partners over the coming year, it is vital that local authorities continue to support professionals within child protection, adult protection and criminal justice social work to adopt a domestic-abuse informed, child-centred approach when working with WCYP experiencing domestic abuse and dealing with/ challenging perpetrator behaviour. This approach should be underpinned by a commitment to improving outcomes for women, children and young people affected by domestic abuse, ensuring perpetrators are held to account for their harmful behaviours and ensuring practitioners have the capacity and capability to work with survivors, perpetrators and children.

Consultation with children and young people has routinely highlighted that is imperative that children are listened to, informed and involved in decision making about their lives, and that local authorities and partners support children and young people to express their views about their experiences of multi-agency responses during and following the pandemic.²¹ The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland has developed a [framework](#) to help ensure that engage with children and young people happens in a meaningful, ethical and rights-based way. Meaningful engagement is especially important when WCYP are engaged with the civil and criminal justice systems, to ensure that CYP are appropriately supported to make decisions around engagement with this process and to fully engage where they wish to do so, particularly in child contact proceedings and when giving evidence.

Supporting universal and specialist VAWG services to scenario plan for the future

A number of specialist VAWG services were already operating waiting lists in local authority areas across Scotland prior to the pandemic and the challenges of responding to increased levels of demand from women, children and young people as social restrictions are lifted have been highlighted above. Local authorities have a key role to play in helping specialist VAWG services to identify anticipated levels of demand for information, advocacy, crisis and recovery support in the coming months and where possible, supporting VAWG services to lever in additional resources to ensure they are able to adequately respond to increased demand.

21 For more information on children and young people's experiences of the pandemic, please see [Improvement Service and Scottish Women's Aid Briefing, Covid-19 & Domestic Abuse: Support & Recovery for Children & Young People](#)

Ensuring the Safety and Wellbeing Needs of Women, Children and Young People Affected by VAWG Continue to be met as Scotland Looks to 'Build Back Better'

Recovering from the social and economic effects of COVID-19 and mitigating the long-term effects of trauma and abuse experienced by women, children and young people during the crisis will require the engagement of the full range of community planning partners. Adopting a whole-systems, gendered approach to tackling VAWG and gender inequality at a local authority level will help to ensure that individuals and organisations/ strategic partnerships understand the role and responsibility they have for improving outcomes for women and children as Scotland works to 'Build Back Better'.

Strengthening multi-agency partnership working at both an operational and strategic level

Since March 2020, local authorities have overseen a rapid period of transformation in terms of how systems and services respond to people and communities facing the highest levels of risk in Scotland and it is important that both learning about good practice and areas for improvement that have emerged over recent months are captured and built upon in the years to come.

Crucially, this period has highlighted the importance of local third sector and public sector partners working closely together to better meet the needs of women, children and young people affected by VAWG and it is vital that this commitment to multi-agency partnership work sits at the core of all activities moving forward.

While local VAW Partnerships are the key driver of this multi-agency approach locally, close collaboration and buy-in from senior decision-makers including Public Protection Chief Officer Groups (COGs) and Integrated Joint Boards (IJBs) will be essential to ensuring the

importance of this work continues to be understood and prioritised across all community planning agendas as local authorities work to 'Build Back Better.'

Leadership

Leaders and senior decision-makers have a key role in ensuring that improving gender equality and ensuring a gendered approach to tackling VAWG is mainstreamed in their local authority's strategic response to COVID-19 recovery, renewal and transformation. It is crucial that these stakeholders continue to communicate their commitment to supporting women, children and young people experiencing all forms of VAWG in their local communities. This may include:

- Highlighting the need for joined-up approaches for responding to the specific challenges and risks the crisis has created for women, children and young people;
- Encouraging individuals, organisations and multi-agency partnerships to collaborate and work toward wider system change in tackling VAWG and gender inequality both during the current crisis and beyond; and
- Communicating the benefits of embedding trauma-informed policy and practice.

Supporting a decisive shift towards primary prevention and early intervention

At a local level, no single agency, organisation or community planning partner is solely responsible for delivering primary prevention work and tackling gender inequality. Embedding gender equality and eradicating VAWG requires the engagement of the full range of partners including local authorities, Police Scotland, the NHS, the civil and criminal justice systems, social work, housing, education, third sector organisations, individuals and communities.

All community planning partners have a key role to play in promoting and embedding primary prevention work. As a first step, community planning partners should aim to ensure that all strategies, policies and services put in place locally to respond to the social and economic impact of the pandemic adopt a gendered lens. This means actively exploring opportunities for gender equality to be positively advanced through policy and practice in a wide range of areas including early years, education, employment, health, housing and welfare as well as ensuring that policy and practice do not have a negative impact on women and girls.

Ensuring that Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessments are undertaken when developing any new policies or services will be key to ensuring that the systems that are put in place as local authorities 'build back better' fully meet the needs of women and girls.

Collecting, Analysing and Sharing Data in Order to Inform Strategic Planning

Local authorities and other community planning partners have a key role to play in ensuring appropriate data is captured at all stages of the pandemic response in order to understand the impact of the crisis on local communities and ensure responses meet local need. As the pandemic progresses it is clear that while anyone can be at risk of catching COVID-19, it is disproportionately impacting on some communities and, in particular, highlighting and compounding existing risks and inequalities women, children and young people experience.

Collecting data to understand the impact of COVID-19 in the short term

One consequence of the public health measures to suppress transmission of COVID-19 has been increased risk of VAWG for women, children and young people.

At a national and local level, a significant amount of work has taken place to track the immediate impact of COVID-19 restrictions on women, children and young people experiencing VAWG, with statistics being collated from police, victim/ survivor organisations and other key partners. For example, data sharing arrangements have been developed by Community Justice Scotland and the Scottish Prison Service to assist with local planning for people being released from prison. Additionally, there are efforts across government and statutory agencies to identify the impact of COVID-19 across people and communities experiencing risk more generally, to highlight where there are gaps in evidence and to support strategic development to recover from the crisis. Ensuring that gender and VAWG are embedded into such efforts is a prerequisite of effective planning.

At a local level, mitigation measures have been put in place to address homelessness, destitution, increased poverty and unemployment, poorer mental health and problem alcohol/ drug use. Alignment with data collection processes that have been agreed by SOLACE and COSLA to support local resilience and recovery planning responses to COVID-19 is essential, particularly in relation to datasets that have been agreed within Public Protection.

Collecting data to understand the impact of COVID-19 in the medium and longer term

As local authorities move to the recovery and renewal phase of their COVID-19 responses, it is crucial that a gender and equalities perspective is embedded in local data collection and analysis processes.²² This will help partners to better understand the longer-term impact of COVID-19 on women, children and young people and support future strategic planning. Wherever possible, data should also be collected on, and analysed by, ethnicity, disability and other protected characteristics to help identify heightened risks that different people and communities may be experiencing.

Local authorities may want to revisit existing mechanisms for collecting and analysing data to identify any shortcomings in accessibility and utility of agency data in order to determine if/ how these might be improved upon in the future. It is important to recognise that no single agency will be able to collect all of the data elements required, and partners may wish to consider setting up systems that will combine data from a number of sources (e.g., health, police, social work, welfare records, etc.) using a relational database. Developing a consistent approach to data collection, which allows for local flexibility but contributes to a wider national picture, will assist local authorities in ensuring risks for women and children are identified and responded to at the earliest possible stage. Ideally, these data collection systems should be developed in partnership with VAW Partnerships and Equality leads and should be integrated with data and intelligence systems being developed more broadly to support long-term recovery, renewal and transformation.

It should be kept in mind that repeated requests for data, particularly from different partners to the one agency may result in “data fatigue.” Members of VAW Partnerships should therefore work together to agree a coordinated, strategic approach to data collection to avoid duplication of effort and reduce demands being placed on specialist services, particularly at a time when they are under significant pressure. These systems must meet the highest standards of ethical data collection and storage given the need for anonymity and confidentiality around VAWG.

22 <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Covid-19-Gathering-and-using-data-to-ensure-that-the-response-integrates-womens-equality-and-rights.pdf>

Promoting Consistent Messaging to Highlight Support for Women, Children and Young People in Local Responses To VAWG

During all stages of the pandemic, local authorities have a vital role and responsibility to promote key messages to support women, children and young people, including:

1. Women, children and young people experiencing VAWG are not alone and a range of specialist support services are available locally and nationally during all phases of the pandemic;
2. The pandemic is not an excuse for perpetrating abuse and perpetrators will be identified and held to account for their behaviours by Police Scotland;
3. Tackling VAWG is everyone's business and professionals across a wide range of local workforces have a key role to play in safely identifying and responding to risks that women, children and young people may be experiencing; and
4. VAWG is a cause and consequence of gender inequality. As Scotland looks to 'Build Back Better' there is a need to ensure that promoting women's equality is prioritised in policy and practice to support a decisive shift towards preventing VAWG.

To support this, local authorities may want to consider including clear messages about VAWG as part of any local campaigns in response to COVID-19. Key aims of campaigns could include:

- Raising awareness for staff, agencies, local organisations and the public of the types of abuse, that women, children and young people may be experiencing due to the pandemic and the overall increased risk of VAWG intensifying due to lockdown/ social distancing measures. VAWG includes: domestic abuse, sexual violence, forced marriage, child sexual abuse, FGM, exploitation through prostitution and CSE, stalking and harassment and other forms.
- Highlighting that home is not always a safe place, reminding WCYP that support services are still available despite pandemic restrictions and encouraging women to seek support when it is safe and appropriate for them to do so, despite the social restrictions in place. This includes promoting information on how to access appropriate and safe crisis/emergency accommodation;

- Identifying perpetrator behaviour, emphasising it will not be tolerated and how to report to police;
- Ensuring professionals are appropriately trained in a gendered understanding of dynamics of domestic abuse and coercive control and are aware of the tactics perpetrators might use during the pandemic to increase their control and abuse of women, children and young people. The [Domestic Abuse Awareness Raising Tool \(DAART\)](#) has been developed by SafeLives to support professionals across different local authority policy agendas with this task.
- Highlighting where specialist support for women, children and young people experiencing VAWG is available locally and nationally and signposting how this can be accessed;
- Highlighting that survivors of trauma, violence and abuse may experience adverse effects of social isolation, such as increased anxiety, control and violence, and the increased challenges in accessing support
- Ensuring that women with no recourse to public funds can access support and services without safety concerns and know where to seek support; and
- Supporting a response to vicarious trauma and the wellbeing of frontline workers during and after the pandemic.

Local authorities can also help to ensure that information on key national helplines available to women, children and young people affected by VAWG is promoted locally, alongside details about local services/ support that are available. Key national helplines include:

[Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline](#): 0800 027 1234

[Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline](#): 08088 01 03 02

[Childline](#): 0800 11 11

[CliCK Helpline](#) (for women selling or exchanging sex): 0300 124 5564

A full directory of the national support services available to women, children and young people experiencing all forms of VAWG is available on the [Scottish Women's Right Centre](#) website.

A toolkit of resources that can be used locally to raise awareness of support available to survivors of domestic abuse and intimate image sharing is available on the [Safer Scotland website](#). A [series of animations](#) co-produced by young survivors of domestic abuse are also available to view.

Appendix 1 – Other Relevant Guidance to Support Community Planning

Adult Protection and Child Protection

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): adult support and protection guidance](#)

[Supplementary Child Protection guidance](#)

[Children’s Hearings Update & Coronavirus practice guide for panel members](#)

[Scottish Association of Social Workers: Domestic abuse and child welfare: A practice guide for social workers \(including COVID-19 preface\)](#)

Domestic Abuse

[Safe Lives guidance for multi-agency forums, including MARACS](#)

[Safe and Together Model COVID-19 Quick Guide](#)

[National procurator fiscal for domestic abuse](#)

[Scottish Courts guidance on complying with family court orders](#)

[Scottish Government COVID-19 guidance: safe and ethical social work practice](#)

[Scottish Government COVID-19 guidance: domestic abuse](#)

Housing and Homelessness

[Guidance for social landlords – domestic abuse and COVID-19](#)

[COVID-19 Allocations Advice and Information for the Housing Sector](#)

Poverty and Inequality

[Poverty, Inequality and COVID-19](#)

[COVID-19 Response Planning: Supporting Migrants with no Recourse to Public Funds](#)

[Child Poverty and COVID-19](#)

Community Justice

[Prisons guidance](#)

Caledonian Guidance [Notes 1 and 2](#) & [Caledonian Advice for areas without Caledonian](#)

Caledonian: Technology, tips and techniques for working safely with women (please contact Community Justice Scotland to access)

[Community Justice Scotland: Working with men who abuse their partners in the context of the COVID-19 crisis](#)

[COPFS Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): information for those due to attend court](#)

[Guidance notes for Criminal Justice Social Workers in relation to domestic abuse prisoners being released during lockdown](#)

Education

[Scottish Government: school and early learning closures – guidance about key workers and vulnerable children](#)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance on preparing for the start of the new school term in August 2020](#)

[Domestic Abuse: Information for Educators](#) (Education Scotland and Scottish Women's Aid)

National COVID-19 Framework

[Scottish Government COVID-19 Decision-Making Framework](#)

Appendix 2 - Other Useful Resources

COVID-19 Research and Evidence Briefings

[SOLACE and Scottish Government 'Vulnerable children report'](#)

[Scottish Government 'Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Domestic Abuse and other forms of Violence Against Women and Girls Evidence Report'](#)

[Scottish Government 'Coronavirus Children, Young people and Families - evidence and intelligence report'](#)

[Scottish Government 'Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Justice Analytical Services data report - June 2020'](#)

[Scottish Women's Aid 'Crisis and Resilience: the impact of a global pandemic on domestic abuse survivors and service providers in Scotland'](#)

The Gendered Impact of COVID

[Engender 'Gender and Unpaid Work: the impact of COVID 19 on Women's Caring Roles'](#)

[Engender and Close the Gap 'Gender and Economic Recovery'](#)

[Close the Gap 'Disproportionate disruption: The impact of COVID-19 on women's labour market equality'](#)

Data Collection and Analysis

[Engender 'COVID-19: Gathering and using data to ensure that the response integrates women's equality and rights'](#)

Other

[Safe & Together Friends and Family Ally Guide](#)

[Safe & Together Choose to Change Toolkit](#)

[Violence Against Women and Girls: Primary Prevention Guidance for Community Planning Partners](#)

[Children and Young People Commissioner Scotland 'Independent Children's Rights Impact Assessment on the Response to Covid-19 in Scotland'](#)



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