

15 March 2024

Tackling the issue of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)

Background

1. At the last meeting of the Panel on 2 February 2024, I undertook to report to this meeting on the work that my office and I have undertaken to address the issue of violence against women and girls.
2. At the meeting itself, a member of my team will give the Panel a more detailed presentation of some of the excellent initiatives I have commissioned working in partnership with agencies across Cheshire. However, in advance of that presentation, I thought it might be helpful to give a brief overview of some of the key aspects of my work in this area.

Scrutiny

3. Protecting vulnerable and at-risk people is one of the six priorities detailed in my Police and Crime Plan. A key element of this priority relates to addressing violence against women and girls. As a result, it has been a key focus for my commissioning activity, and I am pleased to report that in my current term I have been able to secure £15.1 million of grant funding to support vital work in this area. You will hear more about these projects in the presentation.
4. One of my key roles is to hold the Chief Constable to account for the effective delivery of policing across Cheshire. I undertake this through several means, and I have set out below just a few of the ways that I have challenged the Chief Constable on the VAWG agenda:
 - At my quarterly performance scrutiny meetings, I review the performance of the Constabulary across a range of crime categories. Given that VAWG is one of my specific objectives, I regularly review performance in the areas of stalking; harassment; domestic abuse (including the response times to grade 1 and grade 2 DA incidents) ; rape and sexual offences;
 - As well as my regular quarterly scrutiny meetings, I have held two specific scrutiny sessions on VAWG, undertaking a deep dive into the work being undertaken by the Constabulary to address violence against women and girls. A joint focus with the Constabulary has led to a dramatic increase in the number of arrests for crimes committed against the person (particularly in relation to VAWG offences), as follows:
 - Action taken for domestic abuse - 19.8% in 2023 (11% in 2021)
 - Action taken for stalking - 16.5% in 2023 (8.5% in 2021)
 - Action taken for rape offences - 13.7% in 2023 (6.8% in 2021)

- Action taken child sexual abuse offences - 29.2% in 2023 (10.5% in 2021)
- I have tasked the Independent Ethics Panel to consider the Casey review into culture in the Metropolitan Police, to identify whether there are lessons that could be learned in how policing is delivered in Cheshire, particularly in relation to VAWG issues;
- I have been a keen advocate of encouraging my Youth Commission to challenge tried and tested ways of delivering policing and a number of suggestions from this Group have been adopted more widely, particularly in how I engage with young people;
- As Chair of the Local Criminal Justice Board, I meet regularly with colleagues from across the criminal justice service to identify ways we can work smarter to address blockages in the victim's journey. One of the sub-groups that reports into the Board is focused on violence against women and girls and domestic abuse;
- I have reinvigorated the Out of Court Disposal Panels to help identify how we have dealt with standard and medium risk alleged first time domestic abuse offenders, and my office has worked tirelessly to ensure that this process is underpinned by commissioned services that not only support the victims, but also work with perpetrators to address their offending behaviour.

Specific VAWG initiatives

5. My team will outline in a little more detail at the meeting the work I have driven to address this important issue, but a brief summary of that work includes:
 - Secured funding from the Safety of Women at Night Fund for GoodSAM technology that allows vulnerable women and girls to livestream with the Force Control Centre – This facility is now used for follow-up appointments with victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault where appropriate, instead of a phone call.
 - Secured funding in multiple rounds of the Safer Streets Fund to:
 - Launched the 'No More Excuses' campaign – Calling upon the public to challenge and call out the worrying cultural acceptance of sexual harassment towards women and girls.
 - Provided sexual misconduct liaison training in schools and universities and educate secondary school pupils on recognising harmful attitudes towards women and girls and how to challenge them.
 - Provided safety buses to give vulnerable women and girls a place of refuge in the night time economy.
 - Partnered with the Hollie Gazzard Trust to encourage women and girls to use the Hollie Guard App, enabling them to alert trusted contacts and the police if they are in danger. The Constabulary has

been issuing vulnerable women and girls with licences for the enhanced version of the app.

- Developed an educational victim support programme in sectors where women and girls are more likely to feel comfortable to disclose their experience of sexual crimes e.g. the beauty and hair sectors.
- Partnered with Savera UK to uncover the extent of 'honour'-based abuse and harmful practices in Cheshire and support the currently hidden victims.
- Secured funding for Perpetrator programmes in Cheshire's custody suites to reduce reoffending and protect victims through changing the long-term behaviour of domestic abuse perpetrators. A keen focus of mine since being in office is a project called CARA (**C**autioning **A**nd **R**elationship **A**buse) which has proven to drastically reduce domestic abuse reoffending in some areas. Having seen the success of this elsewhere I have been very keen to bring this to Cheshire. I am pleased to say that plans are now underway to roll this out in Cheshire.
- Invested in Engage & Reset work, providing whole family engagement support for DA perpetrators and their families to change behaviours and introduce early intervention programmes to educate teenagers round DA
- Secured funding to expand the work of Cheshire's Harm Reduction Unit – Embedding specialist prosecutors within the unit to speed up the criminal justice process for victims and aim to improve conviction rates, allowing them to focus on their recovery.
- Secured funding to increase the number of Independent Sexual Violence Advisers and Independent Domestic Violence Advocates and support their work.
- Commissioned Victim Focus to carry out an independent, anonymous survey of women and girls to find out their views on how safe they feel in Cheshire, what the police need to do to better tackle VAWG, and to identify any barriers to reporting crime.
- Worked with fellow PCCs to establish www.sexualviolencesupport.co.uk and North West Sexual Violence Awareness Week.

Conclusion

6. I hope that the Panel has found this information helpful in advance of the meeting, which will of course be supplemented by a presentation on the day, after which my team and I will be more than willing to respond to any questions the Panel may have.

John Dwyer
Police & Crime Commissioner for Cheshire
5 March 2024