

By email: [VAWGStrategy2021@homeoffice.gov.uk](mailto:VAWGStrategy2021@homeoffice.gov.uk)

Thursday 25 March 2021

## ADCS response to the violence against women and girls' call for evidence

1. The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd. (ADCS) is the national leadership organisation in England for directors of children's services (DCSs) under the provisions of the Children Act (2004). The DCS acts as a single point of leadership and accountability for services for children and young people in a local area, including children's social care and education. ADCS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Home Office's call for evidence on a new violence against women and girls (VAWG) strategy.
2. Our understanding of the scale of violence against women and girls is formed from a patchwork of national statistics and data that largely fails to capture the experiences of, and impact on, children and young people. However, we do know that domestic abuse continues to be the most prevalent factor in children's social care assessments while research from the Children's Commissioner (2018) suggests more than 25% 0–15-year-olds live with an adult who has ever experienced domestic abuse, of whom 4% has been in the last year. Domestic abuse is also the most common factor (59%) in serious case reviews, which are carried out when a child is seriously harmed or dies according to the most recent triennial review (DfE, 2020).
3. In 2016 the Women and Equalities Select Committee looked into sexual harassment and violence in schools, finding that it is both normalised and a significant issue affecting a large number of children and young people, particularly girls, across the country. The Committee issued an urgent call for action alongside 38 recommendations, including the development of new guidance for schools focused on prevention and the creation of a coherent plan to ensure schools tackle the causes or consequences of sexual harassment and sexual violence.
4. In the autumn of 2017, the DfE rapidly developed and published new guidance on *Sexual violence and harassment between children in schools and colleges*, following a threat of a legal action by a group of parents for failing to act to protect children from sexual abuse and harassment by their classmates. Prevention is briefly covered in the guidance but definitions, legal duties and responding to reports of violence and sexual harassment are the core focus. Recent disclosures with regards to events in multiple independent schools suggests that this guidance may require further revision.
5. Teaching children about respect, tolerance and equality from an early age is so important; education is a powerful tool to raise awareness of abuse and to help children and young people to understand what healthy relationships look like, thus contributing to both preventative and protective aims. The *Children and Social Work Act 2017* placed relationships, sex and health education on a statutory footing, with a full rollout across all schools earmarked for the current academic year. The pandemic has disrupted this rollout, which is frustrating, but this delay offers the government a further opportunity to strengthen and embed these important life lessons via a 'whole school approach' and the provision of additional staff training, to ensure quality and consistency of access across all schools. ADCS understands a number of local authorities have received legal challenges with regards to such guidance and the DfE will need to reinforce its policy position or risk the guidance being weakened by legal attrition.
6. The 2016-20 VAWG strategy had four key pillars: prevention; provision of services; partnership working; and, pursuing perpetrators. Over this same period real-terms reductions in funding for public services, including local authorities, the police and schools, has drastically impacted on preventative efforts. Funding reductions in the voluntary and

community sectors have also impacted on the availability of support services for victims and their families. Both the previous VAWG strategy and the Domestic Abuse (DA) Bill recognise the importance of helping perpetrators to break the cycle of abuse but without urgent investment perpetrators will continue to perpetuate harm ([Ofsted, 2017](#)). New government funding for agencies and partnerships is increasingly allocated via a competitive bidding process rather than need. An equitable, sustainable funding package for all local authorities, indeed for all public services, is urgently required to turn the tide on this silent epidemic.

7. The DA Bill remains largely silent on support for children and young people yet we know that the trauma of growing up in a coercive or violent household can have a lifelong impact on children and young people's mental health, their educational attainment and the success of their own future relationships ([Early Intervention Foundation, 2016](#)). ADCS members firmly believe that greater focus is needed on children's rights and needs in the Bill and in the new VAWG strategy.
8. ADCS members are clear that a keen focus on prevention, protection and the repair of harm should be central to systematic efforts tackle violence against women and girls, including domestic abuse. A new [UN Women UK](#) survey suggested 97% of females aged 18-24 years have experienced sexual harassment, while 80% of women of all ages said they had experienced sexual harassment in public spaces. Given the scale and prevalence, a public health style approach is needed to affect meaningful change. A 2012 report by the Department of Health, '[Protecting people promoting health](#),' notes that the impact of violence on the health of individuals and the cost to the health care systems are similar to those for other major public health priorities e.g. smoking and alcohol.
9. Stopping abuse happening in the first place is the ultimate goal. Changes in policy and practice will not be enough unless we address the social, cultural and moral issues surrounding the root causes of violence, abuse and exploitation. This includes the casual acceptance of degrading and over sexualised representations of children, young people and women in our society. A wide-ranging public campaign to tackle the entrenched societal norms and pervasive public attitudes whilst deterring existing (or potential) perpetrators is long overdue. There is an increasingly urgent need to consider the rapid growth of online abuse and coercion which has sadly been exacerbated during the last year linked to isolation and more time spent online as a result of the pandemic, lockdowns and enduring social distancing restrictions. This needs to be promoted with the same intensity and challenge as previous campaigns against AIDS and homophobia.
10. It is important that the next VAWG strategy takes a holistic approach by drawing together myriad policies and funding streams across government as well as the development and/or implementation of new laws around domestic abuse and online safety for maximum impact. At present the Departments of Education, Health & Social Care and Work & Pensions, the Ministries of Justice and Communities & Local Government, the Cabinet Office and Home Office own different strategies, programmes and workplans in this space. The new VAWG strategy should clearly articulate the role of government departments in working together and in facilitating the work of local partnerships to make progress on this important agenda in homes, schools and communities across the country.
11. To discuss any of the points raised in this response, please contact the relevant ADCS policy officer in the first instance via [katy.block@adcs.org.uk](mailto:katy.block@adcs.org.uk). ADCS would welcome the opportunity to draw together a group of senior leaders in children's services to take part in a focused discussion as part of the next phase of this consultation.