

The Violence Against Women and Girls Scrutiny Panel

Annual Report 2022-2023



Contents

1. Background	Page 3
2. Purpose and Process	Page 3
3. 2022 Update from VAWG Tactical Lead	Page 4
4. Terms of Reference	Page 5
5. Summary of Violence against Women and Girls Cases Scrutinised 2022 – 2023	Page 6
6. VAWG Offences in Cumbria reported between 01 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 and 01 April 2021 to 31 March 2022	Page 6
7. VAWG Panel Meeting Summaries	Page 7
Stalking and Harassment cases – 4 th October 2022	Page 7
'Spiking' cases – 2 nd February 2023	Page 7
Black and Ethnic Minority Victims cases – 26 th April 2023	Page 8
Domestic Abuse with Weapons and Objects cases – 12 th July 2023	Page 8
8. Learnings from the Panel in the first year	Page 8
9. Outcomes	Page 9
10. Areas for Development	Page 10

Violence Against Women and Girls Scrutiny Panel Annual Report 2022 - 2023

1. Background

This work is part of a national and local strategy to reduce violence against women and girls. Whilst the Scrutiny Panel is commissioned by the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, it is fully supported by Cumbria Constabulary and set within the context of their work to transform the way they deal with violence against women and girls. This includes extensive training of new officers and supervisors, building better relationships with women's organisations in the county, working with the nighttime economy to make safer places, and many other interventions to change culture and attitudes to women and girls.

The first Violence against Women and Girls Scrutiny Panel meeting was held in October 2022. This is chaired and attended by the volunteer members of Cumbria Victims Charitable Trust, (CVCT) with attendance by members of the Cumbria Constabulary and the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner. (OPFCC)

The purpose of the Panel is to provide a victim centred review of how Cumbria Constabulary deals with violence against women and girls. Its scrutiny of cases aims to identify good practice and ways to improve the service Cumbria Police provides to victims, as measured against the Rights within the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime. For the public, including victims of crime, the aim is to provide transparency and accountability for the Police's handling of such incidents.

The Panel provides constructive independent scrutiny at both an organisational and an individual level, to promote best practice, identify potential policy or staff development needs and prompt more effective working practices. It works to ensure the voice of victims, including the lived experience of victims, is heard and provides challenge where it appears not to have been considered.

2. Purpose and Process

The purpose of the Scrutiny Panel is to independently review a selection of anonymised cases. The Panel has no referral or appeals capability, and it is not intended to re-judge cases. Its scrutiny of cases aims to identify good practice and ways to improve the service provided by the Police to victims, including providing the Rights within the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime.

Each meeting focusses on a specific subject area. A listing of cases within that specific subject is downloaded for the Chair of the Panel to make a selection of between six and eight cases. Cases are selected from each area of the County and victims of different age ranges are considered. Once the cases are chosen, these are given to the Constabulary Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Tactical Lead to distribute to the relevant officers for them to complete a case report. Case reports are returned and anonymised for presentation to the Panel at the meeting.

The meeting usually begins with a presentation from a subject matter expert from the Police, explaining relevant practice, research, and current thinking necessary to inform the Panel about the type of crime they will be scrutinising. The Panel then reads and reviews each case individually. There is the opportunity for Panel members to ask the VAWG Lead any questions. The Chair will ask for comments on positive practice and areas for improvement

which the Panel identifies in the case report, and the case is assessed and scored for the quality of victim's care.

In reviewing a case, the Panel discusses and agrees a categorisation against five options:

- A. Excellent victim care overall
- B. Good victim care overall but with some comments or concerns raised.
- C. Adequate victim care but with areas for improvement
- D. Poor victim care in most or all aspects considered.
- E. Narrative assessment for cases which do not easily translate into any of the above categories.

Scrutiny responses are returned to the Constabulary and recorded in the Central Repository for Scrutiny, for officers and sergeants to read and review any comments made.

At present the categorisation is appropriate and at every meeting we have reached a consensus on the cases.

3. 2022 Update from VAWG Tactical Lead

The VAWG Tactical Lead DI Belshaw has been in his role since July 2022, DI Belshaw provided an update on how the Constabulary is supporting the prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls.

The Constabulary now has over 90 police officers volunteering to be VAWG Champions. They are visiting the Women's Centres in the county on a regular basis, to create better relationships with the people attending the centres and gain a better understanding of the needs of the women and girls coming into the centres.

A training package has been created for New Starters in the Constabulary so that they will immediately contribute to a culture where Violence Against Women and Girls is recognised and challenged from the beginning of their careers. The training has been recognised regionally and recently Cumbria Constabulary won an award for this. Nationally the training has now been used by other forces across the country.

There has been a training focus on Supervisory staff, Sergeants, and Inspectors have also received training, and eventually all front-line officers will be trained too.

Vetting of police officers and staff in the Constabulary has been improved with more regular checks conducted.

Work is also being carried out with the Police Professional Standards Department so that if any officers feel that someone is behaving in an incorrect manner around this subject it can be reported to PSD.

The Constabulary in partnership with the Council and local University in Carlisle have created a "pop-up" Welfare Hub which operates most Saturday nights on Botchergate in Carlisle. This hub is available for all young people who are out in the nighttime economy to visit if they have perhaps lost their friends whilst out socialising or have perhaps had one too many or have been asked to leave a club or bar. This hub can help them to organise how to get home, try to locate friends or help them to contact someone to assist them. If necessary if something has gone badly wrong the Police or Emergency Services can assist persons at the hub.

There is now consideration being given to developing further hubs in South and West Cumbria to offer the same support on Saturday evenings.

There is now a Safe Streets App where any members of the public who have concerns around their personal safety can access this app and answer some questions and advise about their worries. This enables officers to then monitor any areas/places of concern and conduct regular visits to these locations.

Westmorland and Furness Council funded a play to be created and produced, aimed at raising the awareness of Year 6 Students to VAWG issues. Over 60 Schools have seen the play and further schools are hoping to see the play soon. The content of the play has been well received.

Rural Domestic Abuse is an area which DI Belshaw is looking to focus on in the future. In conjunction with IDVA's the VAWG Champions are looking to attend local GP surgeries in the Sedbergh and Kirkby Lonsdale area of Cumbria. They will offer access to support and advice to female victims of Domestic Abuse. This will be run as a pilot and if it proves to be a positive move then this idea could be replicated across the county.

4. Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference were reviewed by the Panel members at the first Panel meeting and approved. Some minor amendments have since been made to the Terms of Reference and the reviewed version will be presented to the Panel in January 2024.

5. Summary of Violence against Women and Girls Cases Scrutinised 2022 – 2023

Date of Panel Meeting	VAWG Focus Area	Numbers	Categorisation				
			A	B	C	D	E
4 th October 2022	Stalking and Harassment	6	3	2	1		
2 nd February 2023	'Spiking'	9	8		1		
26 th April 2023	Black and ethnic minority victims - black females	7 – 1 case withdrawn as not suitable	5	2			
12 th July 2023	Domestic Abuse with Weapons	9 – 1 case withdrawn as not suitable	5	3			

6. VAWG Offences in Cumbria reported between 01 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 and 01 April 2021 to 31 March 2022

VAWG Offence	01 April 22 to 31 March 23	01 April 21 to 31 March 22	Difference
VAWG Reported cases	9378	9118	+2.9%
Violence Against the Person Offences	5865	5700	+2.9%
Sexual Offences	1236	1264	-2.2%
Rape Cases	438	414	+5.8%
Criminal Damage	303	288	+ 6.3%
Hacking of Social Media and Email	10	7	+ 42.9%
Hacking of Personal Data	2	1	+ 100%
Fraud	36	43	-16.3%

7. VAWG Panel Meeting Summaries

Stalking and Harassment cases – 4th October 2022

The first Scrutiny Panel meeting looked at the subject of stalking and harassment. The meeting began with a presentation from a subject matter expert from the Constabulary. This included for example information about Restricted and Protection Orders that can be placed on the offender. They also discussed how perpetrators use cameras and microphones in their victim's properties to track their whereabouts and who they are talking to without their knowledge.

The presentation was well received by the Panel, and very informative. In reviewing the cases it was agreed that the level of victim care was good although there were areas for improvement. The Panel felt that some of the language used in the case reports by officers could be perceived as showing resentment towards victims who were unwilling to continue or co-operate with their initial report. How the victims were being contacted by officers was also highlighted, with concerns being raised around some updates to victims being made by text message. Overall, the Panel agreed that the victims had received good care and that most officers had shown empathy.

Some small tweaks to the case report forms were highlighted in this first meeting, and there was an agreement that the scrutiny process which had worked well on the day should continue in the same way in the future. The Panel found it helpful to have the VAWG Lead present at the meeting, not only to discuss various aspects of stalking and harassment but also to explain how the investigation processes work with this type of crime.

'Spiking' cases – 2nd February 2023

At the second Scrutiny Panel meeting, the VAWG Lead from the Constabulary delivered a presentation on 'spiking'. The presentation was very informative and directly transferable to some of the Panel's own areas of work. It was useful to have one of the members on the Panel with a medical background, as they were able to provide additional information about types of drugs being discussed.

The Panel scrutinised nine cases in this meeting, eight of which received an A for Excellent victim care overall. The Panel found one case where the officer had shown particular care and attention to the victim despite the victim being very apprehensive about progressing the case.

This was another positive day with a lot of interaction from all the Panel members around the different areas of 'spiking' and perpetrator behaviour. Also present at this meeting were two of the OPCC's newest members of staff. They were invited to this meeting to help them to understand how the Panel worked. The two extra attendees from the OPCC helped to inform members with a different view of the night-time economy from their own personal experience.

Black and Ethnic Minority Victims cases – 26th April 2023

It was agreed to break down the demographics of this area of scrutiny to reflect the importance of the work within this category of victims, in recognition of the small number of black and ethnic minority people living in Cumbria. In the meeting the focus was on black female victims, with a view to setting aside a further meeting later in the year for additional scrutiny of victims from other minority groups.

The meeting began with the VAWG Lead delivering the subject matter expert presentation. This provoked a lively discussion in the meeting about the history and nature of hate crime and its existence in society. There was general recognition of the tricky nature of policing boundaries of behaviour in such crimes.

There were seven cases to scrutinise, although one was withdrawn as it did not meet the parameters of the Scrutiny Panel. The Panel found the cases interesting, and they helped to highlight the different types of incidents officers deal with daily. What was striking was the wide variety of incidents and the complex nature of the crimes in which they were involved.

The cases reflected well on the Constabulary, with the service offered to the victims being either good or excellent victim care. Due to the earlier addition of some extra questions to the case report, the Panel found it useful to read through the supervising officers' notes on how well victim care had been considered by the officer in the case, how the incident had been progressed and what decisions had been agreed.

This meeting was the third time the Panel had met. During these six months feedback had been passed directly to the officers in charge of the cases, with a wider summary shared on Force systems, thereby giving other officers the chance to learn. By this stage we could begin to see that the duty of care and attention to detail was really improving in the cases scrutinised. This indicates the positive impact of the work the Panel is undertaking.

Domestic Abuse with Weapons and Objects cases – 12th July 2023

This was a very specific issue for the Scrutiny Panel and the subject matter expert on Domestic Abuse attended the meeting to provide an in-depth presentation, which provoked a lively conversation and many questions. Also present for the first part of the meeting was the Detective Chief Inspector Lead for the Constabulary for Rape/Domestic Abuse. The Panel found her input into the meeting particularly useful from an organisational viewpoint.

There were nine cases to be scrutinised in this meeting, however again one case did not meet the criteria so was withdrawn. There was much discussion around one of the cases and the learning from the discussion was fed back to the officers. Overall, there were five

cases given an A for Excellent victim care overall, and three cases were given a B as the victim care was Good but with some reservations.

This was another informative meeting and the Panel agreed that the presentation provided by the subject matter expert had been valuable and insightful for the day's scrutiny. The cases were returned to the Constabulary's Central Repository for Scrutiny and the Constabulary VAWG Lead offered advice and feedback to officers and their line managers.

8. Learnings from the Panel in the first year

All Panel members have provided feedback on the learning from the first year, and there was a large degree of consistency. As individual members of CVCT we had all benefitted from a deeper awareness of current Police practice with victims, a more detailed knowledge of these offences, and a greater understanding of the Victims Code. This was through the presentations, discussions in the meetings with Police and OPFCC colleagues, and through reading the reports.

In return the wide variety of experience and backgrounds of CVCT Trustees have contributed significant additional value, through their knowledge and understanding of, amongst other areas, health, diversity and equality, criminal justice and lived experience. From the perspective of the Detective Inspector Tactical Lead for VAWG, it has been a revealing experience to hear the views of members of the public i.e., CVCT Trustees. Many of the cases have demonstrated how complicated and sensitive this work is, prompting the question 'what more could the officer have done in these circumstances' rather than adopting an overly critical response. It has been rich learning for the Panel over the past year.

As a Panel we have worked well together, promoting a spirit of partnership working and collaboration. One indicator of this has been how we have allowed our approach to be emergent, and how we have adjusted the process as we have reflected on what has worked well, and what could be done differently. The learning is how we have established a genuine commitment to improve the service to victims, in being open to challenge, being prepared to listen to each other's views and respecting uncomfortable truths. There is a clear shared endeavour to promote high quality victim care. As one member of the Panel says, "Each time we have met I have been more and more impressed about the dedication to improve VAWG cases including the actions taken when responses from officers have not been to the standard we would like".

In the wider context this learning and trust in each other has been of additional benefit. One of the Panel has become involved with training police officers in how to think under stress and has offered advice on a model of thinking about victim interaction. In turn the Trustees of CVCT, who are all involved in a broad range of activities across Cumbria, can bring their insight and confidence in the credibility of the Constabulary to a much wider audience.

Ultimately the test is whether this learning will benefit women and girls who are victims of violence. Whilst some of this will be covered later, the most important learning to come out of the work this year is that this is a multi-sided issue, and that the Police are only one part of the solution. Having said that, the presentations, and discussions that we have had demonstrate how the Constabulary is at the front line of changing perceptions and perspectives about the way that women and girls are treated. It has been impressive to see the seriousness with which this work is undertaken, supported by research, up to date evidence and practice.

9. Outcomes

Our individual and group learning and behaviours have had the outcome of creating a productive, positive culture of scrutiny, in which good victim care can be recognised and poor practice challenged appropriately. This is supported by the smooth organisation of the infrastructure of the meetings and help with selection of cases by the OPFCC Victims Quality Champion. The feedback also indicates that having the voice of lived experience in the meeting from one of the Panel has been instrumental in providing focus, insight, and balance to the scrutiny. Ultimately however the desired outcome is continuous improvement to the care of women and girls who are victims of violence.

In terms of outcomes there is a general agreement that we have seen change overall in the year and from meeting to meeting. The improvement can be seen in the way the forms have been completed, use of language, more detail in the reviews, greater attention to the Rights in the Victims Code, greater evidence of supervisory oversight and a better understanding into how decisions are made. We have had some examples of poor practice which have been addressed with individual officers, and many examples of excellent practice which have also been reported back. Focusing attention on the seriousness of these offences and the importance of the care of women and girls has served to bring this to the forefront of police work, and in turn we anticipate it will improve the quality of victim care to women and girls.

10. Areas for Development

There is a general agreement that the foundational work for the Panel is there, and that at this stage of the Panel's development it is working well, with not much needing to be altered. The feedback contains a couple of cautionary notes, that we need to guard against becoming complacent, being overly demanding, or an 'echo' chamber. In other words, we should continue to challenge our own expectations and assumptions, in much the same way as we expect when we scrutinise the cases and practice of the Constabulary.

There are suggestions for improvement to the process,

- Scrutiny of victim care in the cases that proceed to court.
- Indication from the victim of their satisfaction with the service received.
- A more direct alignment on the form with the Rights in the Victims Code
- There is a debate about whether we should expand the Panel, with some support in the feedback for expanding by one or two individuals, outside of the current membership, working directly with victims, for example an Independent Victim Advocate. However, the feedback also indicates that the meeting feels right at the moment in terms of skills, experience, and numbers, and that there might be a risk of it becoming too big and unwieldy. The key consideration is whether there are skills gaps, the closing of which might strengthen our work.

And suggestions which are more developmental

- Continue to expand the subject matter expert presentations to include a deeper understanding of the issues affecting violence against women and girls.
- Consider cases in more detail to identify developing skills around specific VAWG investigations.

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