

VAWG and Women's Safety Strategy 2024-2029

Summary version



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The epidemic of violence against women and girls exists in all communities and sadly Tower Hamlets is no exception. Upon being elected Mayor in 2022, I made tackling the issue a top priority. Already, we have taken significant steps towards making the borough a safer place for women and girls – from organising successful digital women's safety walks, to bringing forward the development of a brand-new Women's Resource Centre. Our new strategy was developed through months of detailed consultation with women from across the borough.

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I want to thank officers and stakeholders who put so much effort into ensuring this document accurately reflects the complex and ever-evolving needs of our residents. I am proud to note that we were able to more than double the consultation sample from our last needs assessment, as well as conduct a number of specialised focus groups with some of our most under-served and marginalised communities.

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I'd also like to thank our partners in the NHS and police, who have worked with us to address the appalling rates of gender-based violence in this borough over recent years. Thanks to these partners, Tower Hamlets has managed to secure the highest rate of rape convictions in London, provide trauma-informed support to hundreds of domestic abuse victims a year, and provide pathways to safety for victims of exploitation who would otherwise fall through the cracks. While these early successes are laudable, we still have a long way to go.

Tower Hamlets continues to rank highly in domestic and sexual violence statistics – a blight on our wonderful borough and its communities.

Remedying this situation will require comprehensive and long-term engagement. It will require hard work from all sectors of society; from the Council and from our partners. Fortunately, I believe we have the commitment and cooperation required to face this challenge. More than this, I believe we have put together a strategy that is truly groundbreaking in the way it places the safety and promotion of women and girls at the heart of all aspects of our council services, as well as spotlights the unique needs of the most marginalised women. It also centres the need to bring about wider cultural change around misogyny in our society.

In the coming years, I look forward to seeing this strategy unfold, helping to transform this borough into one where no woman – regardless of ethnicity, class, religion, or sexual orientation – has to feel unsafe in the streets or in their home.

Lutfur Rahman
Executive Mayor of Tower Hamlets



Introduction

Our vision of a safe Tower Hamlets

As a worldwide issue of epidemic proportions that has a significant impact on the lives of our residents, Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is recognised at all levels as a council-wide priority.

Data suggests that 1 in 3 women in the United Kingdom will be victims of gender-based violence at some point in their life. For this council that is fundamentally unacceptable, and it is a top priority to ensure that no more women in Tower Hamlets be victimized in this way. We are committed to making serious investments in protecting women's safety. We are looking at a variety of new support services, enforcement initiatives, and targeted engagement projects to ensure that all Tower Hamlets residents can walk through our streets and sleep in their homes without fear of suffering gender-based violence. We must also look at changing cultures that lead to gender based violence, providing specialized support to our most marginalized residents, and putting a stop once and for all to Violence Against Women and Girls.

This strategy sets out the role we can all play in tackling VAWG as part of a coordinated community response, building on the sector-leading and award-winning work that has been happening within our borough since the launch of our first VAWG strategy in 2012.

What is VAWG?

VAWG covers a range of unacceptable and deeply distressing crimes, including rape and other sexual offences, stalking and harassment, domestic abuse, modern slavery, so-called 'honour'-based abuse (including female genital mutilation, forced marriage and 'honour' killings) and image-based sexual abuse, among others.

VAWG is a term used to refer to a range of crimes which disproportionately affect women and girls. In common with others who are working to tackle violence and abuse and support those affected, we use the term 'VAWG' to ensure that we do not lose sight of those who are most affected. However, we recognise that people of any sex or gender can experience violence or abuse of this nature and the consequences affect everyone in our community.

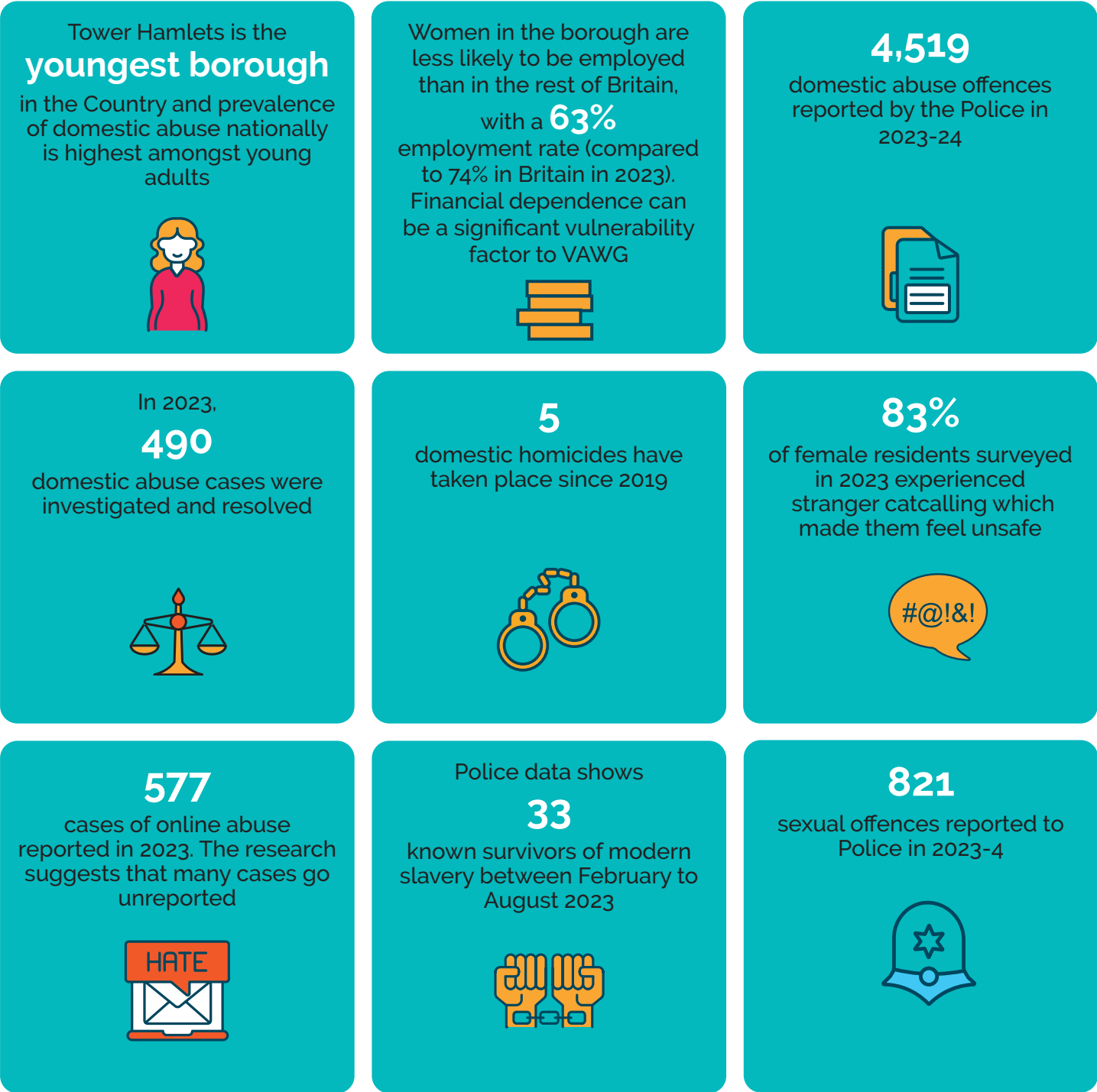
Safety in public spaces

For the first time this strategy will include a broader focus on women's safety in public spaces, considering how our streets, parks and public spaces affect women and girls and what improvements need to be made to make the borough feel inclusive, welcoming and safe. This strategy will also encompass work to address behaviours such as sexual harassment, catcalling, and the treatment of women in the nighttime economy through our Don't Cross the Line campaign, gender-inclusive design action plan, women's safety walks and making use of resources such as local enforcement officers and CCTV.

Intersectionality

It is also important to recognise that different forms of disadvantage are compounded by certain protected characteristics (e.g. race, faith, age) and by combinations of them. For example, the barriers faced by a young, black transgender woman may differ from those experienced as an elderly, Asian cisgender man. We seek throughout this strategy to apply an intersectional lens to VAWG and understand the additional vulnerabilities faced by some of the members of our community.

Why do we need a VAWG and women's safety strategy in Tower Hamlets?



What are we doing to tackle VAWG and public safety?



Our priorities

We have three overarching priorities that capture the wide range of work we will be doing around gender abuse and public safety. These are:

Preventing Harm and Promoting Safety



Supporting Victims and Survivors



Responding to Perpetrators



More about our approach and the actions we'll be taking is provided on the following pages and in the action plan to be published which will sit under this strategy document.

Our principles



VAWG is everyone's business



Recognise intersectional vulnerabilities



Take a public health approach



Being trauma informed



Involve people in decisions that concern them

What is our approach?

Preventing Harm and Promoting Safety

"We will prevent violence and abuse through early intervention and education"



WHAT WE HAVE ACHIEVED SO FAR	WHAT WE WILL DELIVER	HOW WILL WE KNOW WE'RE MAKING A DIFFERENCE
577 training and outreach activities training 9817 people in a range of topics (including coercive control, adult family violence, economic abuse, intimate partner violence, domestic abuse awareness) 275 VAWG Champions have been trained and over 2,000 staff have been trained to be trauma informed along with pilot projects to apply trauma informed practice in real-world settings such as hostels, employment services and maternity services. - Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) education sessions delivered to over 955 residents and 483 FGM survivors supported	- Deliver a package of VAWG awareness training with bespoke programmes tailored to individual services, enabling professionals to spot the signs of abuse and respond safely, regardless of their working environment - Deliver a tailored programme of public-facing campaigns and culturally relevant communications, which raise awareness of abuse in all its forms and educate on how to get support from local and national services driven by data to focus on specific locations and populations - Embed gender-inclusive design principles to parks and public spaces and empower local women and girls to feel ownership of those spaces - Make reporting of anti-social behaviour that makes women feel unsafe quicker and easier - Work with the local community and partners to build respectful shared cultures on streets and public spaces - Develop a toolkit for primary and secondary schools to strengthen their delivery of healthy relationships education as part of the RSE curriculum, including to give them the confidence and skills to discuss issues of VAWG and domestic abuse. - Expand and strengthen the male allyship programme to support a more appropriate culture and behaviour that is healthy and empowers women.	- Professionals who encounter VAWG report that they understand what to look out for and how to direct residents to services - Greater awareness of VAWG services (and website) and support available amongst local community and professionals - Community groups are more confident to report abuse; and demonstrate increased trust in VAWG services - Increased number of VAWG champions in the community who are confident and better equipped to spot the signs of abuse and respond safely. - Greater resource of educational programmes and campaigns based on better understanding of wider determinants, risk factors and signs of VAWG - More schools and teachers engaged with VAWG training and supporting local campaigns - Higher footfall and organised activities in parks and open spaces for women and girls - More men taking part in allyship programmes and campaigns that support a healthier attitude towards women and girls.

Support Victims and Survivors

"We will provide support that keeps individuals and their families safe from harm"



WHAT WE HAVE ACHIEVED SO FAR	WHAT WE WILL DELIVER	HOW WILL WE KNOW WE'RE MAKING A DIFFERENCE
- Tower Hamlets Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA) Provision received 6382 referrals with a 96% satisfaction rate and 93% feeling safer post support and includes culturally appropriate services such as Somali specific caseworkers and a dedicated Sylheti speaking IDVA - Tower Hamlets provide accommodation support via the Sanctuary Scheme project, which provides free, tailored security for the homes and conducted 333 2673 highest risk cases were discussed at multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs) ensuring a coordinated multi-agency response to safeguard victims and survivors. - An increase in VAWG reporting has been reflected in referrals to MARAC, driven in part by the pandemic, but also accompanying efforts to increase reporting in the borough	- Achieve DAHA accreditation within our housing services - Continue to commission a community-based specialist VAWG service. Support will be provided across all strands of VAWG - Deliver a brand-new women's centre that will provide outreach programmes, workshops, and create a safe space for women in Tower Hamlets, including a Domestic Abuse one-stop-shop - Use victims and survivors' voices as well as women's networks to shape our approach and services, including seldom heard groups in this space such as the LGBT+ community. - Ensure that women involved in prostitution and hidden sexual exploitation do not fall through the cracks - Work in partnership across health and community services to ensure that victims and survivors facing additional barriers to accessing help, such as those identifying as LGBT+, can get the support they need - Develop tools and a checklist for ASC staff and other professionals to support clear pathways and strengthen the approach in which victims and survivors are supported and feel safe. - Trauma-informed approaches are embedded across agencies in Tower Hamlets working with individuals and families affected by abuse.	- Tower Hamlets residents know where to go to get help if they are experiencing violence and abuse, at the earliest opportunity - Family, friends, and communities can recognise abuse in all its forms, and more residents report knowing how to direct victims and survivors to support - Children and young people in Tower Hamlets receive appropriate education on safe and healthy relationships and understand that violence and abuse is not normal or accepted - Victims and survivors have timely access to integrated VAWG services that take a whole-person approach in meeting their needs - Increase the provision of refuge, safe spaces, and resources available to support victims and survivors - Through improving commissioned services, enable high-quality services that meet the cultural needs of residents from diverse groups - Partners take ownership for the elements of the pathways within their areas and ensure there are suitable arrangements in place - Professionals working in agencies across Tower Hamlets have a shared understanding of criterion, provision, and processes in relation to VAWG - Victims and survivors have access to evidence-based programmes to support recovery following abuse, including for children who witness or experience VAWG.

Responding to Perpetrators

“Holding perpetrators to account whilst providing opportunity for change and support”



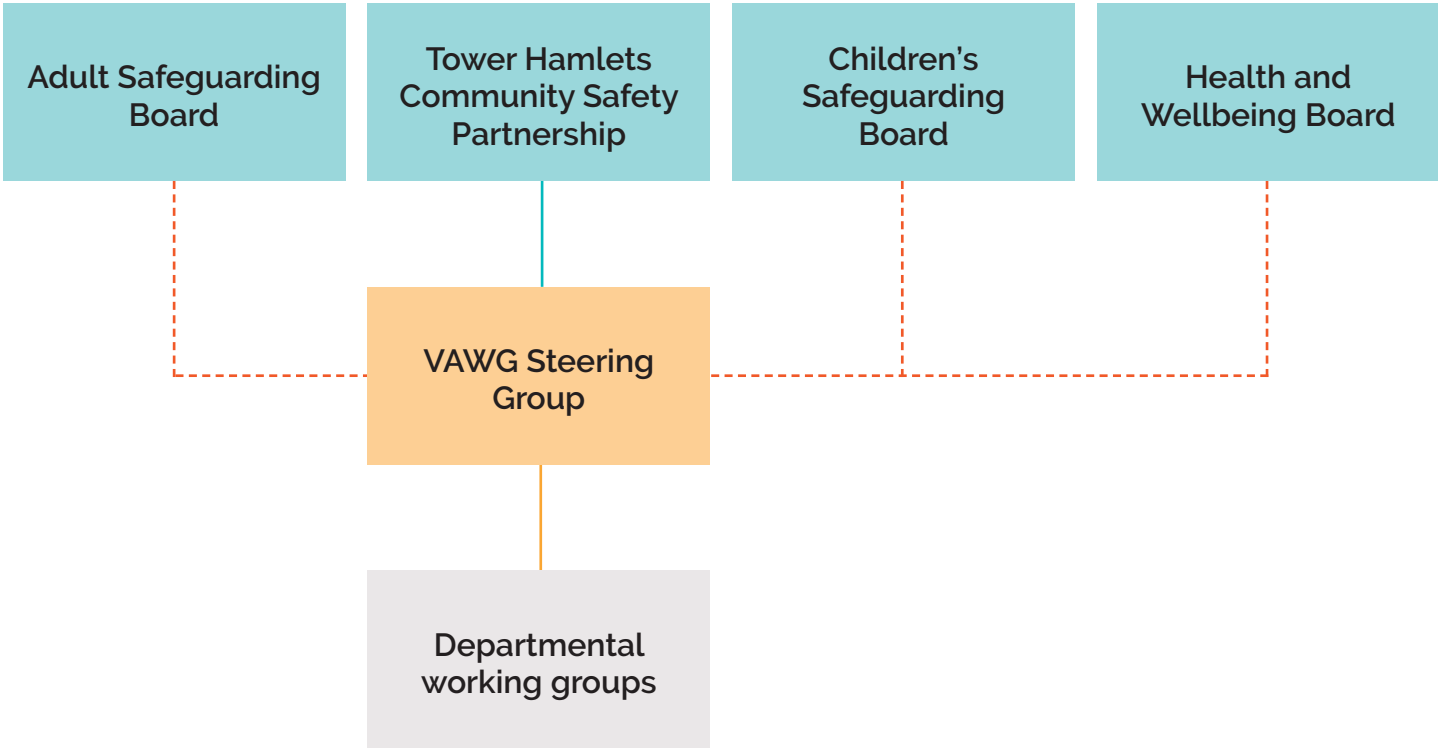
WHAT WE HAVE ACHIEVED SO FAR	WHAT WE WILL DELIVER	HOW WILL WE KNOW WE'RE MAKING A DIFFERENCE
● Tower Hamlets were one of the first boroughs to set up a Specialist Domestic Abuse Court (SDAC) over 15 years ago which included of a domestic abuse Best Practice Framework Plan to help those who experienced domestic abuse to access the criminal justice system, improve experiences of the court process, and increase the proportion of successful outcomes such as satisfaction rates, witness attrition rates and prosecution rates. The conviction rate at SDAC in Tower Hamlets was 71% in 2022-23. Unfortunately, as of April 2024, the SDAC no longer exists due to resourcing challenges within the Criminal Justice System agencies post-Covid. ● Launched two new perpetrator programmes, the Culturally Integrated Family Approach (CIFA) Programme and the Positive Change Service (for a total of three in-borough perpetrator programmes). Provision is available for those who are not parents as well as specialist streams for female perpetrators and same sex intimate partners, and uses a culturally sensitive, integrated, whole family approach.	● Limit perpetrator's ability to abuse and victimise by increasing the use of protection orders, including Domestic Violence Protection Orders, FGM Protection Orders and Forced Marriage Protection Orders. ● Establish an advisory hub for staff to discuss their cases with specialist practitioners to provide them with the skills and confidence to work with perpetrators ● Develop a toolkit for non-specialist staff focusing on engaging and working with fathers and partners, including in substance misuse and homelessness services ● The use of tenancy enforcement tools, such as injunctions, breaches, and orders, to remove the perpetrator from the victim's home, and create safety using Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) accreditation principles	● Victims and survivors are satisfied with the support they receive ● Perpetrators know that their behaviour is unacceptable and will not be tolerated by their community. ● Perpetrators are engaged with programmes that are effective at changing their behaviour and preventing further harm to others. ● Victims and survivors receive independent support from commissioned services whilst they navigate the Criminal Justice System when reporting VAWG. ● Where appropriate and safe to do so, ensure parents who are perpetrators of intimate partner violence or abuse are considered within child safeguarding processes and decision-making ● Everyone's rights are respected and upheld throughout the management of VAWG cases. ● The council works through its partnership arrangements to ensure that residents feedback is taken into account to improve the experience of victims and survivors seeking justice. ● Support higher rates off prosecution of VAWG perpetrators by utilising intelligence to cross reference domestic abuse offences with other violent offences.

Who is responsible for delivering our strategy?

The delivery of most parts of the VAWG and Women's Safety Strategy will be overseen by the Tower Hamlets VAWG Steering Group, the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) and other key Tower Hamlets governance boards as outlined and illustrated in the diagram below. Working in partnership with public sector and voluntary and community sector stakeholders, the VAWG Steering Group aims to prevent VAWG in Tower Hamlets and reduce the emotional and physical harm it causes to individuals and to the community.

The VAWG Steering Group is responsible for developing the detailed action plan for the majority of elements of this strategy and will report to the CSP on progress quarterly. This action plan will be published as an appendix of the VAWG strategy available on our website or as a future update to this document. The action plan will be a dynamic, live document that will be managed by the group throughout the life of the strategy.

Where there are actions managed elsewhere, for example those arising from our Gender Inclusive Design Review or the Tower Hamlets Women's Commission which will be managed under the Local Plan, Corporate Equalities Board and the associated governance arrangements. However, they will also provide updates on progress to the VAWG steering group as part of regular reporting to align the work we're doing in those areas and ensure that the group has a view of activity across the whole system.



Where to find more information and access support



In an emergency you should always call **999**. If you are in danger and unable to talk on the phone, call **999**, and then press **55**. This will transfer your call to the relevant police force who will assist you without having to speak.



For additional advice and support services on all VAWG areas, please see the Tower Hamlets VAWG [Service Directory](#) on our website. Specialist VAWG support is available via the Service Directory for:

[Disabled people](#)

[Male victims and survivors](#)

[Those from ethnic minorities](#)

[LGBT+ people](#)

[FGM, forced marriage and "honour" based abuse](#)

[Children and young people](#)

For domestic abuse support contact Solace. They provide a free and confidential support for women and men in Tower Hamlets affected by abuse.



020 3795 5064

Open: Monday – Friday 9am-5pm

For access to 24/7 Rape and Sexual Abuse Support line:



0808 500 2222

or start an online chat by going to



247abusesupport.org.uk

where you can find more information.