

## **Violence against Women and Girls: Presentation:**

In Scotland the Government considers the issue of violence against women and girls to be a priority and has set up a National Coordinator for this area and links the Improvement Service. There is a National Violence against Women and Girls network which, as part of its governance, reports regularly to COSLA, the Scottish Government and to local VAWG partnerships.

Each local authority area in Scotland has a VAWG partnership that meets to coordinate work in that area and to deliver the Equally Safe Quality Standards via the development of a local Equally Safe Plan. The Equally Safe Quality Standards are agreed at a national level and partnerships are required to send an annual return to the national body, showing how well they are meeting these.

The current Equally Safe Plan for Argyll and Bute is currently being reviewed and this process has been delayed by the Covid19 crisis. The current plan can be viewed on the Councils Domestic Abuse web page; a resource developed by the partnership to show the work of the partnership and, most importantly, act as a one stop shop for advice / services for those experiencing domestic abuse and other gendered violence.

<https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/domestic-abuse>

### **Argyll and Bute VAWG Partnership Developments:**

Over the past three years there have been a number of changes to the way in which the local VAWG partnership has been organised and run. Over 3 years ago it was decided that it would be advantageous to the functions of the partnership, for it to join with that of West Dunbartonshire and for one, unified Equally Safe plan to be created with some discrete elements for each area. This worked for a period but there were issues such as, policy differences, lack of clarity in the plan and meetings that were overly large and sometimes failed to function well. As a consequence, it was decided that the two partnerships would separate and produce their own plans; in 2019 Argyll and Bute returned its own Annual Return.

Since returning to being a single area partnership in 2019, we have developed our membership group and this now consists of some 21 individuals representing:

- HSCP Management
- Health
- Police
- Education
- Colleges and Universities
- MARAC
- Justice
- Community Justice
- Third Sector
- Child and Adult Protection
- Alcohol and Drug Partnership

**Following the separation from West Dunbartonshire**, it was decided that each area would have its own VAWG Partnership but that there would continue to be a single overarching Strategic Group

covering both areas. This operated for a few months and was chaired by the Police; however at the end of 2019 it was decided that this should be concluded. Policy and planning differences meant that separate strategic groups for each area were considered more appropriate. Before a strategic group could be set up for Argyll and Bute the Covid19 crisis arrived and it was decided that, for this period, the strategic function would be covered by the Chief Officers Group; Public Protection (COGPP) and this remains the case today.

**Under normal circumstances the VAWG partnership meets on a quarterly basis** with additional meetings taking place for subgroups relating to Training and Communications. Members have delivered training, including Awareness Raising and Human Trafficking. This remains an under resourced area and we hope to obtain funds to further develop Routine Enquiry and knowledge of Safe and Together. We will be seeking funds for a 3 year Training Plan via a Developing Equally Safe bid. Other groups just starting up are “Working with Perpetrators” and “Prevention”.

Meetings are chaired by a Coordinator (Mandy Sheridan) who also links to the National Partnership, manages and circulates information for partnership members, acts as a connection between partners, facilitates annual returns, plan reviews etc. and coordinates work on key areas such as the 16 Days of Action in November and December. Administration is assisted by meetings being minuted by the P.A. for the Head of Children’s Services. The Lead for the Partnership is Shona Williams, Senior Manager for Justice Services. Violence against Women and Girls comes under the heading of Justice Services, along with Community Justice, MARAC, ADP, Adult and Youth Justice.

**A development of major importance in the last two years has been the introduction of Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference’s (MARAC)** in the Argyll and Bute area; developed by Coordinator Tracy Watson. The main aim of the MARAC is to reduce the risk of serious harm or homicide for a victim of domestic abuse and to increase the safety, health and wellbeing of victims and their children. In a MARAC, representatives from local statutory and voluntary agencies will meet to discuss the highest risk victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse in their area. Information about the risk faced by those victims, the risk posed by the domestic abuse perpetrators, the actions needed to ensure safety and the resources available locally to do so are shared and used to create a risk management plan involving several or all of the partner agencies.

#### **The VAWG Partnership during Covid19:**

At the beginning of the covid19 emergency it was decided that partnership meetings would take place online, on a fortnightly basis. This allowed for:

- Members to share information and get updates from other members;
- The meeting to act as a conduit for information from the Council, Health Board, National Bodies (National VAWG Network, COSLA, Govt. etc.) to members;
- Link members together to work on key issues, for example how best to access emergency funding from the Scottish Government or matters relating to PPE;
- Link members together to help resolve key issues, for example Housing with front line services with regards to assisting people made homeless due to domestic abuse. In Argyll and Bute there is only one source of refuge accommodation, run by Women’s Aid. However this has shared facilities and hence, during covid19, could only be used by one family at a time;
- The development and putting out of media messages / posters etc. to ensure that women seeking assistance would know quickly how and where to source it;

- Linking the work of the partnership to other key groups such as COGPP and Caring for People;
- Mutual support and sharing.

This change in pace and way of working was effective and much was achieved; some things had to be put on hold such as Annual Returns, reviewing the Equally Safe Plan and preparing to make a bid for Developing Equally Safe funding. As things are slowly returning to normal some of these things are being re-visited. A partial Annual Return has been made, the Equally Safe Plan will be reviewed and a bid for Developing Equally Safe funds is being worked on in preparation for bids being invited, probably now at the end of the year.

**Some things have not returned to normal;** nationally and locally with lockdown easing, front line services such as Women's Aid, Rape Crisis and ASSIST have seen significant increases in referrals, often accompanied by higher than usual levels of trauma and mental health issues. Cases often require a higher degree of support and moving cases on to a conclusion is taking much longer, if possible at all. Locally both Women's Aid and Rape crisis have taken on more staff / allocated more staff hours and are working closely with other services such as Housing, Social Work, Health and the Police. ASSIST who support women through court proceedings are overloaded because courts have not been open and functioning normally for some time. Whilst they are now open, sometimes conducting trials online / virtually; it is anticipated that it will take years rather than months to overcome the backlog. However an undertaking has been given by the Crown Office to prioritise cases where vulnerable victims are involved. Justice services, who work with perpetrators, have also been effected by these issues.

Connected to the increase in domestic violence that has occurred during lockdown, is an increase in related, child abuse and reported child abuse cases where domestic abuse is a factor is increasing. It is anticipated that more will come to light now that children and young people are returning to schools. Domestic abuse / coercive control and child abuse issues are widely reported in connection with child contact.

**Conclusion:**

There have been several changes in the last few years in the ways in which the VAWG Partnership in Argyll and Bute both functions and is organised. However there is currently an active and diverse membership which is enthusiastic and works well together, as can be seen during covid19. Areas such as joint working, training, communication and engagement have developed and progress is being made on meeting the Equally Quality Standards.

Mandy Sheridan