

Scrutiny & Overview Committee – 26 March 2024

Feedback from Violence against Women & Girls themed Community meetings

As part of its annual review of crime and disorder matters in Croydon, the Scrutiny & Overview Committee has chosen to include a deep dive on the work undertaken to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG) across the borough. In order to inform this item, members of the Committee attended a VAWG themed community meeting held at Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA) on 8 March. A meeting was held on 20 March to hear from community and voluntary organisations who are working to tackle violence against women and girls. The Committee will also be meeting with victims of violence on 25 March to learn from their own first hand experiences. This document summarises the feedback from those meetings.

Community Meeting held at CVA – 8 March 2024

The meeting held at the CVA on 8 March was attended by the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Scrutiny & Overview Committee. The meeting featured contributions from a wide range of residents and representatives of community organisations. From the discussion at the meeting, the following was noted: -

- The introduction of facial recognition technology in West Croydon was welcomed as it was an area where women felt particularly scared to walk.
- There was a need to work with school to educate young people on what to expect in a relationship and how to behave. It was important for young people to understand that violence was not acceptable. This education should be supplemented by engaging with community organisation to establish links within specific communities.
- There needed to be support for schools to better equip staff to identify and engage with young girls who may be at risk of violence, particularly for girls who may be disruptive, where more work was needed to understand the reasons for this behaviour rather than the pupils being penalised.
- There was intersectionality with race and how certain demographics were depicted. Some cultures would need a different approach to tackling violence against women and girls.
- There was a role for the Council to provide leadership and to empower community groups through helping to access funding and providing an overarching link across the borough.
- It was important that the conversation on violence against women and girls was focussed on tackling the male perpetrators and not reliant on women adapting their behaviour as a solution.

- There needed to be ongoing conversations and engagement with male community leaders about tackling violence against women and girls.
 - There needed to be a protocol developed to support young women who may be affiliated with a gang. There needed to be different mechanisms introduced to reach out to girls involved with gangs who were unable or unwilling to engage with authorities.
 - A scheme to raise awareness amongst shop keepers and business owners should be considered, including identifying those willing to provide a safe space for women at risk.
 - There needed to be a clear, coherent strategy for disseminating information relating to violence against women and girls. Given its reach, there could be significant benefit in reaching out to Crystal Palace FC, to discuss how they could help to spread VAWG messaging.
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Meeting held with representatives from the Community and Voluntary Sector Organisations

The online meeting held on the 20 March 2024 saw members of the Committee meet with representatives from a number of different community organisations whose work focussed on supporting domestic abuse survivors and tackling violence against women and girls. The purpose of the meeting was to hear from these groups about their experiences of working with statutory community safety partners, what works well in the current approach and any possible improvements. From the discussion held at the meeting, the following was noted: -

- There was a lot of great work in Croydon, but people were unaware what was available. Other boroughs better publicise services and signposting to support. The Council should be providing a centralised resource setting out what was available and run campaigns to raise awareness of this.
- It was questioned how the priorities in the Croydon VAWG Delivery Plan would be aligned with those of the London Mayor?
- Most of the organisations in attendance had found that Council staff were did not seem to be equipped to understand the challenges facing someone fleeing domestic abuse, which could result in a victim returning to a dangerous situation. It was recommended that the Council should set up a team with a specific speciality in dealing with domestic abuse.
- This lack of understanding was particularly an issue for people seeking support with housing and could lead to victims returning to the domestic situation they were fleeing.
- It was important for any VAWG Plan to take account of a wide range of behaviour, as domestic abuse was not the only issue for young people, with

other issues such as public harassment and low level stalking increasingly prevalent. It was highlighted that boroughs, such as Lewisham had added these behaviours to their VAWG Strategies.

- Action to tackle VAWG often focussed on partner on partner violence, but it was important not to overlook other forms such as sibling on sibling and child on parent violence.
- There needed to be much better joined up working between statutory partners and the community and voluntary sector (CVS) in providing support to survivors. It was often found that survivors were referred to CVS sector without any information to detail the support required.
- There needed to be a more coordinated provision of safe spaces for women and girls, and campaigns to raise awareness of their availability.
- Advice and guidance for young girls experiencing violence should be informed by victims. Community groups should also be engaged in the design of any guidance.
- There needed to be more preventative engagement with schools to educate young people about violence against women and girls, and healthy relationships.
- It was highlighted that there may be a lack of awareness of the potential issues amongst some school leaders, that would also need to be addressed.
- Although the Probation Service had a duty of care working to work with survivors and perpetrators, there was a view that it was not as effective as it could be in engaging with local community organisations.
- The Council should be holding its statutory partners to account, including ensuring that their key people supporting victims are well trained.
- There was a general view that the statutory partners were not effectively using good practice to inform service delivery or reviewing what wasn't going well and adapting delivery accordingly.
- There needed to be improved cross borough working, as victims could often lose their support networks if they needed to move out of the borough.
- Services had a lack of awareness of coercive control, with perpetrators using their children, social services and the police to leverage control over their victims.
- Victim blaming is still prevalent, for instance in schools where disruptive behaviour was often penalised without any support to understand the underlying causes.
- Training should be considered for businesses such as hairdressers and barbers to raise awareness of the signs of domestic violence and where to signpost potential victims.

- There was a general view that there needed to be more work done with perpetrators.
- When engaging with perpetrators, there needed to be clear guidance provided to clearly evidence what is not acceptable behaviour.
- Financial abuse was another form of abuse that was often not recognised, such as husbands taking out loans in a partner's name without their knowledge.
- It was highlighted that authorities often did not have an awareness of cultural sensitivities such as honour based abuse, which made it difficult for victims to approach authorities.
- There was an issue with hospitals not allowing children to stay with mother while she was receiving hospital treatment. Without a support network it could lead to children returning to the abusive parent.
- It was highlighted that children were largely overlooked as victims of domestic abuse. Support was provided while staying with their mother in a refuge, but this was no longer available when they moved back into the community. The availability of trauma informed support for children under 11 was non-existent.
- The cost of living and particularly housing was a barrier to victims fleeing domestic abuse. This included the quality of emergency and temporary accommodation that was available.
- The Police were good at looking at the issue of county lines, but not as good at looking how it overlapped with VAWG. A lot of services tended to be compartmentalised, when there needed to be a wider, overarching approach.