BEYOND WORDS: ENDING THE VIOLENCE

Response to the WNC Strategy on Domestic Abuse and Violence Against Women and Girls

It's the right of all people to feel safe at home and on the street. Yet for many women the reality is the opposite. And for many the risks are greatest at home and from their partners. In the context of a national epidemic of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls, the Labour Group on West Northamptonshire Council welcomes the council's strategy.

This paper brings together insights from two stakeholder discussions on the strategy, involving Labour Group members and individuals with direct experience of supporting women affected by domestic abuse and violence, as well as people for whom it forms part of their lived experience. These discussions provide this paper with a grounded perspective on how the proposed strategy is likely to operate in practice, particularly in relation to community engagement, prevention, and frontline service delivery.

The Council's strategy comes on top of the welcome focus by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner on violence against women and girls, and Government policy, and it's important that these are all integrated. For the Council to sign up to the Northamptonshire Women's Charter would be an important step.

However, while the strategy represents an important opportunity to shape local provision for the next three years, our discussions highlighted some weaknesses and omissions that could impair the effectiveness of the approach and limit its delivery for women and the wider community.

This paper therefore:

- Highlights key issues emerging from our discussions
- Reflects complex community concerns about implementation; and
- Sets out some recommendations to build the effectiveness of the strategy.

It is informed by current national government priorities including the need to make violence against women and girls a key public safety priority, with earlier intervention, more support for victims and survivors through all public services, and – crucially – building community trust.

KEY ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Strategy vs Reality: Reflecting lived experience

A central concern was that the WNC strategy risks remaining theoretical rather than operational. The action plan for the strategy will be crucial, and the action plan needs to take a "whole-system" approach, with implementation through all areas of public service, especially housing, education, safeguarding and the justice system.

There was a strong warning that: "It's good to have a policy in place… but if it's not working on the ground… it's just a document."

Practical examples were raised of the disconnect on the ground:

- When those affected by domestic abuse were relocated for safety they were often unable to maintain children's schooling due to rigid transport

and other local service policies.

- A lack of coordination across Council departments and services. There's a commitment to this at a strategic level – it must be the reality on the ground.

Community Engagement: Lack of trust, fear and silence

The most powerful theme across our discussions was the difficulty of reaching women affected by domestic abuse and violence within all communities.

Participants were clear about the need for consistent, in-depth engagement with communities to overcome fear and mistrust:

- Many women affected by domestic abuse and violence will not come forward, even when services exist.
- Fear, stigma, and cultural pressures can prevent disclosure.

Trust in statutory agencies—particularly police—can be low. The position has been made worse by recent disclosures about Northamptonshire Police.

One contributor explained: "Nobody's going to come up and say 'I need help'… they are scared… they don't know who to talk to."

Another highlighted a critical flaw in current approaches: Agencies "Come, ask questions, get feedback… and disappear… nothing happens."

There was strong agreement that:

- **One-off consultations are ineffective.**
- Engagement must be consistent, long-term, and relationship-based.
- Communities need to see **visible outcomes** to build trust.
- Careful engagement was needed with community leaders.

There was also a need for consistent messaging from local agencies at every level to ensure that every woman affected by domestic abuse and violence can feel assured that she will be listened to and supported. Negative language, including on social media posts, that appears to condone abuse of women can undue years of good work.

Fragmented Community Voice

A key structural issue identified was the **lack of coordinated community representation**.

- Community leaders operate independently rather than collectively.
- This weakens influence and allows inconsistent engagement by authorities.
- Some groups are repeatedly consulted, while others are excluded

One participant described active efforts to address this by bringing together community leaders to create "one voice" and ensure equal representation. Overall the emphasis was on the need for **structured and representative engagement mechanisms**, not ad hoc consultation.

The Hidden and Complex Nature of Abuse

Discussions highlighted how domestic abuse often remains **deeply hidden**, particularly in certain contexts:

- Long-term abusive relationships where victims feel unable to leave.
- Cultural or familial pressures to remain silent.

Cases were given of victims actively disengaging from support when they recognised familiar community contacts.

Early Intervention and Prevention

There was a strong welcome for the strategy's

emphasis on early intervention. However, our discussions highlighted the need for this to be very early and very focussed. Key points included:

- Children's understanding of relationships form at a very young age, often by the age of eight years.
- Exposure to domestic abuse normalises harmful behaviour among children.
- Prevention must begin in **primary school and early years settings. Family hubs have a key role to play.** Yet they are missing in some key areas, especially in Northampton.

Participants stressed: "If you don't start early, you're trying to undo something that's already set."

Perpetrator Focus: Targeting resources

Our discussions also supported a targeted approach in directing resources to where they would have the most impact on perpetrators. This meant focusing especially on younger perpetrators:

- Younger perpetrators are more likely to change behaviour.
- Abuse is often learned and repeated across generations.
- Interventions with older perpetrators have lower success rates.

As one participant said: "If resources are limited, you have to put them where they make the most difference."

Police and Justice System Concerns

There was significant concern about inconsistent and sometimes inadequate responses, and some weaknesses were highlighted in existing practice, including:

- Some victims reported receiving differential treatment depending on how they present.
- More assertive or distressed victims may be dismissed.
- Victims not being separated from perpetrators in all areas of court buildings, including in family courts.
- Lack of confidence in safeguarding processes.
- There was a major need to rebuild trust locally.

Gaps in Support Services

Participants identified several service gaps:

- Reduction in refuge capacity.
- Lack of sustainable funding for community-led support, especially the Sunflower Centre and other women's groups.
- Support services for older women.
- An emphasis on professionalisation of services, when sometimes more informal support was needed – at an earlier stage.

One contributor explained: "Sometimes all someone needs is to be heard… before things escalate."

Key Recommendations

1. Establish a Formal Community Partnership Structure for the Long-Term

The strategy sets out a complex governance structure that incorporates tiers of local government agencies and officials. There is a need to strengthen community engagement by:

- Creating a **standing community advisory group or sounding board.**
- Ensuring representation across diverse communities.

- Meeting regularly with wider stakeholders over the long term, not just at consultation stages

2. Commit to Annual Goals and Benchmarks

The strategy includes some goals to be achieved by 2030 and key performance indicators which are often internally-referenced and bureaucratic. For public transparency and building trust, the action plan will also need:

- Goals and benchmarks that are visible, relatable and measurable to be achieved in the intervening years so the community can see and be engaged in monitoring progress.
- Named community liaison roles.
- Measurable indicators of trust and participation.

3. Strengthen Early Intervention and Prevention

Expand the strategy's prevention elements by:

- Embedding domestic abuse education in primary schools and early years settings.
- Integrating work with children into **family and neighbourhood services.**
- Aligning early intervention and prevention work with youth and safeguarding strategies.
- Prioritising investment in perpetrators' programmes on the under 25s.

4. Protect and Expand Community-based Provision

Community engagement is essential for building trust and reaching women who have more difficulty in accessing services. But a commitment to work with the community lacks credibility when key organisations are being cut. We urge WNC to:

- Allocate funding to grassroots organisations and CICs and restore funding to key organisations, such as the Sunflower Centre.
- Support outreach work taking place within communities.

Conclusion: Beyond Words

The WNC strategy represents a welcome step forward in tackling the epidemic of violence against women and girls, and the problems of domestic abuse. However, success will lie in the delivery, not the intent. Commitment has to be more than words.

The key message from stakeholders is straightforward:

- Communities must be heard continuously, not occasionally.
- Policies must be visible in practice, not just on paper.
- Trust must be built over time, it cannot be assumed.

The Labour Group recognises that there are many different types of families, and that further work is needed on developing strategies and services to ensure that all people can be safe at home.

The Group will be very willing to engage in the further discussion, development and implementation of the Council's strategy, and deploy our particular expertise in community engagement to ensure that the voices of all can be heard.

The Labour Group welcomes your views and input on this paper, or on the West Northamptonshire Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Strategy. You can make your views known to the Group Leader, Cllr Sally Keeble at sally.keeble@westnorthants.gov.uk