

Question to the PCC from The Partnership of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Organisations across Dorset

A group of organisations who represent equality and safety for women and girls has today (10th June 2024) sent an Open Letter to the Chair of the Police and Crime Panel, the Police and Crime Commissioner, the Chief Constable, and the two CEOs of both Dorset and BCP Councils about prioritisation of action to reduce violence against women and girls following the recent wave of violent crime in Dorset including the tragic murder of Amie Gray. The group believes the increase of violent crime in recent months and the publicly reported rapes, the murder of Amie Gray and knife threat to a woman warrants an emergency meeting of the Police and Crime Panel. The organisations are seeking a response.

Response from the PCC

Chair, thank you for the opportunity to address this matter at the outset.

On June 10th, an open letter was sent to the recipients mentioned jointly on behalf of Soroptimist International Bournemouth, BCP Unity Promise, One Voice My Choice CIC, FoxStrut Campaign, Dorset Women CIC, Acts Fast and Safe Space Consultancy – a variety of groups providing service and advocacy for women and girls, and calling for in their words, the ‘immediate prioritisation of the safety of women and girls in Dorset.’

A substantive joint response to the letter has been sent back, which sets out that as a partnership, we are all committed to working and investing across the county of Dorset to maintain community safety and proactively prevent crime and disorder.

This delivery takes place through dedicated community safety partnerships, a multi-agency safeguarding hub, and both adult and child safeguarding boards for example – which enable a clear, joint focus on the importance of ensuring the safety of our communities, and in particular the priority of women and girls, which remains paramount.

As Members will be aware – it is important to say that no one agency should, or does, work in isolation in achieving this goal. That said, we recognise though that there is significant work to be undertaken to raise public confidence in relation to the joint work underway and to our joint response to the open letter.

Chair, I do not intend to get into the detail of what that collaborated delivery looks like – save to say that the letter lists over a dozen strategies, plans, programmes, and initiatives that are being jointly delivering across the county, and that you have been copied into our response, which I believe has been or will be shared with Members.

I am also very aware that Members have considered papers on VAWG previously, and indeed have regular updates on the work undertaken in this area by my office as part of the quarterly monitoring report, and so – if I may Chair – I will cover off that detail later in the agenda, save to say for now that just last week I had the honour of delivering the opening address at an OPCC conference dedicated to tackling VAWG.

Organised by my office, the event for education professionals included teachers, childcare staff, and those in the sector, and was focused on keeping our children and young people safe, with a particular emphasis on early years children (aged 0-11 years old).

In my role scrutinising the work of Dorset Police, I have set-up a VAWG Scrutiny Panel which reviews the handling of public contact relating to VAWG cases such as rape, stalking and domestic abuse to ensure these reports are being handled appropriately.

I have also commissioned victim services including Victim Support, the Dorset Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC), and STARS Dorset to ensure high quality care for all victims of these distressing crimes. I have also allocated significant Safer Streets funding to provide further support for initiatives to tackle VAWG across Dorset, building upon the work already being carried out by partners.

Finally, before I return to the letter, Members may be aware that VAWG has been added to the national Strategic Policing Requirement – recognising it as a national threat alongside terrorism, serious and organised crime, and child sexual abuse. Yesterday, the National Police Chiefs Council published a statement on VAWG which sets out its assessment of the issue, what policing has done to date to tackle it, and what its intentions are for the future.

I welcome this approach. A national whole-system approach is entirely welcome, particularly as I have always believed this issue goes much further than simply robust enforcement from the police. A consistent, well-defined, and managed partnership strategy will ensure early intervention and better opportunities for safeguarding, efficient communication and importantly, vital progress in fighting these despicable crimes.

In relation to the open letter then, I will just cover off the request made for the – and I quote – ‘urgent convening of a meeting of the Police and Crime Panel to assure the public that there is purposeful accountability of associated strategies...’

Of course, Members will know that the role of the Police and Crime Panel is to scrutinise the actions of myself and my team only, and that it has no remit to scrutinise other strategies including those produced by Dorset Police, BCP Council or Dorset Council.

As a meeting of the Police and Crime Panel would not be able to accomplish the outcome being sought in the letter, this remedy has not been pursued. Chair, I imagine that you might want to say a little more on this point in a moment.

Just before you do, in closing I would want the public across Dorset to be very clear that those agencies charged with community safety and crime reduction work in strong, clear alignment with each other and also with the wider community and voluntary sector, and we all share an absolute resolution to tackling these abusive, destructive offences. I will continue to work with any group that wants to make Dorset a safer place for women and girls. Their safety is, and will continue to be, a key priority for all partners across our county and I am fully committed to delivering on this for the people of Dorset.