

Scrutiny Review of Women's Safety in Tower Hamlets
Women's Safety in the Borough

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Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to present this report which focuses on how the Council and its key partners can improve the safety of our women and girls in this borough.

This scrutiny review offered Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) an opportunity to scrutinise the current and future provision of women's safety in Tower Hamlets. It provided a platform to hear from a range of witnesses and collate evidence on this subject. The evidence heard by Committee Members suggests that the Council, its delivery partners and other local stakeholders need to collaborate and have a stronger joined up approach to increase the safety of women and girls across the borough. This includes closer working with women's charities and local groups to improve women's safety and informing women of support that is available.

Data trends also suggests that Tower Hamlets has the 2nd highest number of reported domestic abuse in London. We must take action to reduce the level of domestic abuse in our community if we are to make Tower Hamlets a safer borough for women.

The Committee agreed seven recommendations for the Council to consider and advocates for stronger partnerships with the police and local community to drive forward the Council's policy approach to ensure the safety of all women in the borough.

The Committee encourages the Mayor and Cabinet to take forward the recommendations and work with OSC to ensure we have a safer borough for all women and girls.

Finally, I would like to thank all the members, officers, external partners, local voluntary groups and residents who attended and supported the discussions, provided valuable insights and helped to shape the recommendations of this report.

Cllr Abdul Malik

**Overview and Scrutiny Committee Member and Scrutiny Lead for
Environment and Community Safety**



Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1	Tower Hamlets Councillors to support and champion the ‘more male allies’ agenda and actively promote this across their work. More Male allies needed – Encourage elected members to become Champions and promote this at their member surgeries and joining on walkabouts that are focussed on women’s safety.
Recommendation 2	Increase capacity at schools on raising awareness of domestic abuse (DA) and support available.
Recommendation 3	The Council to review current funding arrangements and increase the capacity to support women’s groups that offer domestic abuse (DA) services to the community.
Recommendation 4	The council and partners to collaborate to improve the awareness of women of the programmes and help available directly that support women’s safety on the streets.
Recommendation 5	Improve self-defence access.
Recommendation 6	The Police/THEOs to actively target their recruitment and retention strategy for recruiting representative women from the community in Tower Hamlets.
Recommendation 7	The Council and Residential Social Landlord (RSL) partners should work closely to tackle women safety issues on RSL estates.

Reason for Enquiry

In appreciating the work that the Council had undertaken since developing the Violence Against Women Girls (VAWG) Strategy, it became evident that there was a need to review aspects of the strategy pertaining to women’s safety in the borough. London (including Tower Hamlets) as a region had significant challenges to women’s safety and this was further compounded by the high-profile cases in the wider media.

The strategy lends itself to meet the council’s commitments and strategic priority of ‘Empowering communities and fighting crime’ by setting three priority areas including:

- support and protection for victims,
- holding perpetrators accountable,
- engaging the community and challenging misogyny.

Methodology

This scrutiny review was chaired by Cllr Abdul Malik (Scrutiny Lead for Environment and Community Safety and Overview and Scrutiny Committee Member). This review was held over two distinct sessions, taking place on Monday 6th February and on Thursday 23rd February 2023.

Session one

The first session allowed the Committee to hear from the Cabinet Member for Safer Communities and council officers and several representatives from local women's voluntary sector groups.

The focus was domestic abuse and the scope set out the following key questions:

- What are the main barriers to tackling violence against women and girls?
- Do refuges meet the needs of women in the borough?
- What more can the council do to address domestic abuse?

Members in attendance:

Councillor Abdul Malik	Scrutiny review session chair and OSC Member
Councillor Musthak Ahmed	OSC Chair
Councillor Abdul Mannan	OSC Member
Councillor Maisha Begum	OSC Member
Councillor Bodrul Choudhury	OSC Member
Councillor Ahmodur Khan	OSC Member
Councillor Sabina Khan	OSC Member
Councillor Nathalie Bienfait	OSC Member
Jahid Ahmed	Co-opted OSC Member
Halima Islam	Co-opted OSC Member
Councillor Ohid Ahmed	Cabinet Member for Safer Communities

Evidence heard from council officers, witnesses and guests:

Ann Corbett	Director of Community Safety
Charles Griggs	Head of Community Safety
Menara Ahmed	Senior VAWG, Domestic Abuse and Hate Crime Manager
Ben Gladstone	Deputy Director of Commissioning of Older People
Rafiqul Hoque	Head of Housing Options
Mila Acharya	Solace Women's Aid
Safia Jama	Women's Inclusive Team

Session two

The second session focussed on women's safety in the public spaces in the borough.

The scope set out the following key questions:

- What are the key issues personal safety that women face when in or using public spaces;
- How are the public authorities addressing the women’s concerns and providing reassurance; and
- What are the gaps and what more could be/needs to be done

Members in attendance:

Councillor Abdul Malik	Scrutiny review session chair and OSC Member
Councillor Musthak Ahmed	OSC Chair
Councillor Abdul Mannan	OSC Member
Councillor Bodrul Choudhury	OSC Member
Councillor Ahmodur Khan	OSC Member
Councillor Sabina Khan	OSC Member
Jahid Ahmed	Co-opted OSC Member
Halima Islam	Co-opted OSC Member
Councillor Ohid Ahmed	Cabinet Member for Safer Communities

Evidence heard from council officers, witnesses and guests:

Keith Stanger	Head of Safer Neighbourhood Operations
Menara Ahmed	Senior VAWG, Domestic Abuse and Hate Crime Manager
Rafiqul Hoque	Head of Housing Options
Tom Lewis	Team Leader, Licensing Services
Sufia Alam MBE	Maryam Centre
Toni Meredith MBE	Account 3
Chief Inspector Jai Singh	Metropolitan Police
Jennie Savage	Public Realm Project Officer

Key Findings and Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Tower Hamlets Councillors to support and champion the ‘more male allies’ agenda and actively promote this across their work

More Male allies needed – Encourage elected members to become Champions and promote this at their member surgeries and joining on walkabouts that are focussed on women’s safety.

The Committee heard evidence from the Cabinet Member and council officers who outlined the safety issues experienced by women from the context of outcomes and service provision. The VAWG

strategy¹ is in year three and sets out the strands for tackling all forms of gender violence and sits alongside the manifesto commitments as well as the strategic plan and charter that the council has published.

The Committee considered the data from a national YouGov² Poll which suggests:

- Three quarters of women (76%) say men in society do not pull their weight in keeping women and girls safe. Men tend to agree (63%).
- Seven in ten women (69%) say the government's efforts are lacking, compared with 59% of men. A majority of women (62%) similarly feel the police are not doing enough, while around half of men (52%) agree.
- 85% of women and 77% of men believe better-lit streets could help improve safety for women, while increased CCTV coverage in public places is also regarded as effective (78% of women vs 65% of men).

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets (LBTH) Annual Residents' Survey also highlights that women feel significantly less safe after dark compared to men.

The Committee also heard evidence from council partners such as the Metropolitan Police on their efforts to improve women's safety and some of the challenges and pressures they faced. The Committee felt it was important to hold a robust discussion which included hearing evidence from the community and engaged representatives from the Women's Inclusive Team; Maryam Centre and Account 3, (local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations) that offer bespoke support to women in the borough. The Committee noted that the representative's feedback (based on their women services users) suggests a different perception and experience faced by women on feeling safe in public and that there is more work to do by the authorities. The Committee felt that all elected Members should support the council's actions on DA in becoming Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) Champions and committing to the educational and training seminars on the topic. Members should also be actively encouraged in joining organised walkabouts that are focussed on women's safety. The Committee also considered and felt that, members should actively promote to male residents (in their wards) to become 'male allies', encourage them to condemn DA within the communities and to challenge misogyny when they see it. Additionally, Members should use the opportunity to raise awareness on the issue when they hold their members surgeries. Finally the Council and its partners should look to improve communication of their commitment to women's safety, for example by advertising on billboards and social media. The Committee believe this would be an important step in building the trust of women in officers and elected members, whether they be men or women, and that public bodies are working to improve women's safety.

Recommendation 2

Increase capacity at schools on raising awareness of DA and support available

The Committee considered and recognised that at a place level, Tower Hamlets has very high levels of DA reports. Since statutory recording began in 2011 the borough has had 14 domestic homicides.

¹ <https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Community-safety-and-emergencies/Domestic-violence/VAWGStrategy2019-24.docx>

² [What would make the UK safer for women, according to women? | YouGov](#)

The Committee noted that there are on average 6000 DA incidents reported to the police each year and that Tower Hamlets was one of the first boroughs to have a DA forum campaigns, training and an extensive women's safety programme thus highlighting several examples of good practice in terms of strategies and approaches.

The national YouGov poll also indicated that 81% of women see value in schools teaching boys about acceptable and respectable behaviour towards women and that 69% of men see value in the initiative.

The committee heard evidence that children are often the "hidden victims" of domestic abuse as many agencies focus upon the needs of adults. However, evidence has shown that there are significant implications for children in the household, for example if a woman needs to be placed in a refuge this will often involve placing the children there as well and brings its own challenges for child. The Committee considered evidence that for many women, the school might be the only outlet they visit without their abusive partner and therefore it is important that schools offer a supportive and safe environment for women facing DA.

The Committee recommends that the education and information services being provided to schools and youth services be increased to ensure that young people are aware of DA so that they are able to report it and that they should educate boys and girls to prevent the cycle of violence from continuing to the next generation.

Recommendation 3

The Council to review current funding arrangements and increase the capacity to support women's groups that offer domestic abuse services to the community.

The Committee felt that priority needs to be given to tackling DA as Tower Hamlets has one of the highest levels of reported DA in London. The Committee recognised examples of the good work being carried out in the community by voluntary sector organisations and felt that that the council could and should do more to support local community organisations that offer services DA services. Examples of such services include, but are not limited to, the following

- Signposting to specialist services
- Targeted training, outreach and awareness
- Multi-lingual communications and focus groups
- Economic abuse programmes
- Moving outreach services to groups where women in the community feel safe – e.g. women's spaces mosques

The Committee also heard evidence from VCS organisations who indicated that in recent years women who are victims of DA value the safe space that the women's groups can offer. The Committee noted that many of the people who need this support the most, are often people considered as 'hard to reach' by statutory agencies such as the Council or the Police. These are often individuals or groups that find it difficult to use (or are distrustful of) these services, such as those with an impairment, language or different cultural norms. Another example that was highlighted to the Committee was during the National Government's lockdown policy cause by the pandemic, where women living with perpetrators of DA were unable to leave their home for counselling

sessions, that many women were more comfortable having telephone counselling sessions with VCS organisations rather than contacting authorities, with one group reporting that their counselling sessions increased from 176 in 2019 to 797 in 2020.

Recommendation 4

The council and partners to collaborate to improve the awareness of women of the programmes and help available directly that support women's safety on the streets.

The Committee noted that extensive work had been done in regards to welfare and vulnerability training for licensees and their staff operating in the night-time economy including schemes such as 'pub watch' that provide information on how women can stay safe while in the night-time economy environment. Despite this the Committee noted that some activities to raise awareness, like the 'walk and talk' event have had a low uptake.

The Committee recommends that more dedicated and consistent communications from the Council and its partners is needed to ensure the women of Tower Hamlets expand their awareness of available support. Also the Committee recommends that the Council engage third-sector organisations to improve the engagement of people from communities that are considered hard to reach.

Recommendation 5

Improve self-defence access to women and girls as a form of self-protection

A recent report by the Children and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee (CESSC)³ highlighted the concerns from a range of witnesses on women and girls' safety in public spaces being a barrier to their participation with sports borough wide. This Committee also heard evidence from a number of women's group witnesses that raised their concerns about women's access to self-defence classes to help them feel safer in public spaces. The Committee recommended that the Council works with local provisions in improving access to self-defence classes. The Committee also suggests that the Council could benefit from considering this alongside the proposed recommendations from the CESSC report on increasing women and girls' access and participation in sports.

Recommendation 6

The Police/THEOs to actively target their recruitment and retention strategy for recruiting representative women from the community in Tower Hamlets

The Committee heard evidence from the Metropolitan Police on the work they are doing to improve women's safety. This included:

A review by the police on the most effective way to police vice hotspots. The Committee noted that many women involved in selling sex on the street have complex vulnerabilities which make them more likely to be victims of crimes committed by men and may not to report these crimes. The "Pizza with police" initiative was set up as way for the women (who are residents at the Riverside Hostel) to build trust and confidence with police engagement.

Welfare and Vulnerability Engagement (WAVE) Training/Ask for Angela campaign - This training is recommended for those working in the licensed industry providing them a crucial awareness of people's vulnerability and their responsibilities towards people visiting their premises. It enables them to identify interventions that assist in preventing and reducing harm to vulnerable people in licensed premises and VAWG type offences such as drink spiking.

With Women We Run – is a partnership initiative by the police with Adidas who organise a women's-only running group on a Wednesday evening. The aim of the initiative is to increase women's confidence whilst running and this primarily targets individuals who call out remarks when women are running.

Walk and Talk - These are an opportunity for women to meet with their local officers and show them areas that they feel unsafe and talk about past experiences.

The Project Vigilant initiative is part of Tower Hamlets Police's response to concerns about the safety of women and girls. The police use this initiative to prevent and deter predatory offending in the night-time economy. Teams of uniformed and plain clothed officers will be working together to make the area a hostile place for predatory offenders.

The Committee noted these positive initiatives, however, the Committee expressed their concerns that many women in Tower Hamlets were just not aware of the 'Ask for Angela' campaign, or the other work being done. This raised questions on how effective the campaign had been. Furthermore, in light of several national high-profile incidents of police failing to protect women, both Members and women's group representatives raised their concern that there is a lack of confidence in the police from women that are victims of DA including women from communities that are not well represented in the local police force.

The Committee recommends that more active work needs to be and should be done to recruit women as police officer and Tower Hamlets Enforcement Officers (THEOs). They added that there should be a drive to particularly focus on recruiting women from communities that represent the demography of the borough and ensuring that women from Black Asian and Multi Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds are made to feel comfortable and at ease to report issues regarding both DA and their safety in public spaces. The Committee also felt that the Council should consider ways to support the police in their efforts demonstrate police accountability on transparency and restoring public

confidence in the Metropolitan Police, such as making the police service more representative of the community they serve in the borough.

Recommendation 7

The Council and RSL partners should work closely to tackle women safety issues on RSL estates.

Whilst funding remains available for improving street infrastructure and work is currently being done to improve the public spaces in Tower Hamlets the Committee scrutinised if residents are truly aware of how they can report in dangerous areas where improvements should be made. Examples of such improvements are:

- better street lighting;
- installing CCTV;
- designing areas in such a way as to enhance natural surveillance;
- not allowing street furniture to be positioned in a way whereby people can hide and removing unnecessary clutter; and
- safety improvement at public transport areas like bus stop, railway stations and crossing points on roads; and safety in public parks.

The committee also recommends that the Council works with RSL in implementing Recommendation 4 and that RSLs and the Council provide better information on how to report and suggest improvement to areas of estates that are potential places of danger to women.

Conclusion

This scrutiny review provided the OSC an opportunity to scrutinise women's safety in the borough. It is clear to the Committee (from the evidence heard) that women in Tower Hamlets still face various threats to their safety both from DA and in public spaces across the borough.

The Committee noted that in the main Tower Hamlets Council works well with the police, local business and community groups to ensure that women in Tower Hamlets are safe and secure. The Council has over the years implemented a range of initiatives to improve the safety of women, including improved street lighting, CCTV, the Safer Neighbourhood Teams and running campaigns to raise awareness around personal safety. The Council also has a good relationship and work closely with organisations such as Victim Support, Refuge and Women's Aid who provide crucial and timely advice and support to women in Tower Hamlets.

However, despite the above the Committee made seven recommendations and felt that more could and should be done to scale up the support for women in the borough on women's safety issues including the council working with the police and local stakeholders dedicating focus to improving access and developing services that meet the needs of women in our borough. The Committee hopes the Mayor and Cabinet take forward our recommendations and work with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to ensure we have a safer borough for women in Tower Hamlets.