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MP for Chelmsford



Groups who do unglamorous work of helping women and girls in crisis

HERE'S a shocking statistic: on average, a woman is killed by a man once every three days in the UK.

It's also important to note that according to the Office for National Statistics, women are far more likely to be killed by a partner, ex-partner, family member or acquaintance than by a stranger.

The Government's new Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy, published late last year, promises a "whole-system approach" to tackling VAWG, aiming to halve these crimes within a decade.

It all sounds very reassuring and promising until you start asking who, exactly, is in the system and whether they're resourced to do more than absorb the responsibility.

At its best, the strategy recognises what frontline workers have been saying for years: that VAWG is not a niche issue, nor a matter of individual misfortune, but a structural failure that touches policing, housing, health, education and the courts.

It acknowledges the need for prevention, early intervention, and long-term support. It talks about cultural change, perpetrator accountability, and the importance of listening to survivors. All of this is welcome, and overdue.

But strategies are only as strong as the people tasked with delivering them. And last week, sitting around a table with several charities who do the daily, unglamorous work of supporting women and girls in crisis, I was reminded - again - that the real engine of the VAWG response isn't a ministerial foreword or a glossy PDF.

It's the organisations who pick up the phone at 2am. The advocates who sit through court hearings that drag on for years. The outreach workers who coax trust from women who have every reason to withhold it. The volunteers who keep services running when funding cycles lurch from one uncertainty to the next.

The Government's strategy may

Marie Goldman MP's meeting with representatives from domestic abuse and VAWG charities working in Chelmsford
MARIE GOLDMAN MP



set the direction, but these charities are the ones walking the road - often uphill, often without a map, and often carrying far more than their share of the load.

■ **CARA: Holding space when the system doesn't:**

The first organisation around the table was CARA — the Centre for Action on Rape and Abuse. They are one of those charities that quietly carry an astonishing amount of the VAWG system on their shoulders, even though they never describe it that way. Their work spans therapeutic support, advocacy and long-term recovery, delivered with a steadiness that belies the emotional weight of what they hear every day.

CARA's new chief executive spoke with the calm precision of someone who has spent years navigating both trauma and bureaucracy.

She outlined the breadth of its services - specialist counselling, ISVA support, outreach for young people and tailored help for those facing additional barriers.

But what stayed with me most was the warning about the sharp rise in the complexity of mental health needs among survivors. When statutory mental health ser-

vices are stretched to breaking point, the fallout lands on charities like CARA.

Survivors are presenting with deeper trauma, more acute distress and far more intersecting needs than even a few years ago.

■ **Safer Places: Safety as a starting point, not an endpoint:**

If CARA's work is about helping survivors rebuild their inner world, Safer Places is focused on securing the outer one.

Operating across Essex and Hertfordshire, they provide refuge accommodation, outreach support, specialist services for children and tailored help for survivors who are facing additional barriers - from disabled women to those with no recourse to public funds.

What struck me was how Safer Places talks about "safety" not as a destination but as a baseline. Leaving an abusive relationship is rarely the end of the story.

The team described the long tail of domestic abuse: financial control, housing insecurity, coercive control that continues long after separation, and court processes that can retraumatise rather than protect.

Like CARA, they are seeing increasingly complex cases. Women arrive with multiple unmet needs - mental health crises, substance misuse, learning disabilities, or long histories of trauma that statutory services have

never fully addressed.

Safer Places often ends up stitching together the support that should already exist. It does it with compassion and competence, but also with a clear-eyed understanding that this patchwork approach is not what survivors deserve.

■ **Skylark Church: early intervention and 15 years of showing up:**

Also at the table was a community pastor from Skylark Church, whose contribution was a reminder that the VAWG response isn't confined to specialist services.

Skylark's work stretches both within and beyond its congregation, offering counselling to victims and survivors and practical support to families in crisis.

But its most striking contribution is its long-standing work in secondary schools across Chelmsford. For 15 years, it has run the Flourish course - a programme designed to build self-esteem and emotional resilience among girls.

It runs in five local schools, creating space for young people to talk openly about identity, relationships, pressure, and the quiet insecurities that often go unnoticed.

Since Covid, demand has surged, with teachers reporting more anxiety, more social withdrawal and more girls struggling with confidence. It is now expanding its services to programmes for boys too - something it describes as being very wanted, needed and asked for by the schools it works with.

Hardly surprising given the recent

drama 'Adolescence' and other documentaries such as 'Inside the Mansphere'.

■ **The Next Chapter: rebuilding lives, not just escaping harm:**

The chief executive of The Next Chapter spoke candidly about the pressures facing its domestic abuse service: rising demand, increasingly complex cases and the constant challenge of securing sustainable funding.

Its work spans refuge accommodation, outreach, specialist support for children, and advocacy for those navigating the courts or housing system.

What distinguishes them is their commitment to long-term, trauma-informed recovery. They understand that leaving an abusive relationship is not a single act but a series of difficult steps requiring stability, patience, and practical help. Their work is holistic — supporting women to rebuild confidence, autonomy, and a sense of possibility.

■ **Advance: standing with women the system often forgets**

Finally, Advance brought us into a part of the system too often overlooked: women in contact with the criminal justice system. Its new centre in Essex supports women whose offending is frequently a symptom of trauma, abuse or exploitation.

Advance's advocates work with women at every stage - police contact, court hearings, probation and post-sentence support - helping them access safe housing, mental health services, and specialist domestic abuse advocacy.

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