



WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH TO TACKLING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN & GIRLS (VAWG): MAKING GOVERNMENT COMMITMENTS A REALITY

This briefing has been created by the Whole-School Approach Working Group established and facilitated by the [End Violence Against Women Coalition](#) (EVAW). The working group is made up of experts from the VAWG sector, academics specialising in VAWG prevention, teacher unions, and the PSHE/ RSHE sector. For more information please contact - Annie Poland, Head of Policy and Research, EVAW - annie.poland@evaw.org.uk.

CALL TO ACTION TO GOVERNMENT:

1. **Guidance and implementation:** a whole-school approach (WSA) should become an explicit expectation on schools (both primary and secondary) and colleges by 2029 in line with the government's timeline for a credible RSHE offer for all students. This must include a monitoring and evaluation framework for its implementation, and be accompanied by government guidance.
2. **Resourcing:** government must resource its commitment to a whole-school approach as laid out in their VAWG strategy, this resourcing must match need.
3. **Monitoring:** the Department for Education should collect, monitor and report on disaggregated data relating to the prevalence of VAWG in schools, and monitor the implementation of a WSA (including children's access to RSHE) and its impact.

4. **VAWG sector and expert engagement:** the Department of Education to establish a VAWG stakeholder group to ensure their work is guided by relevant expertise and ensures the department meets its commitments in the VAWG strategy.

THE ISSUE AND URGENT NEED FOR ACTION

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is endemic in our society. Schools and colleges are a critical site for the protection of children and young people, and present the best opportunity to challenge attitudes which condone abuse and transform the long-term likelihood of abuse in adult relationships. However, there are also alarming levels of rape, sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence in our schools and colleges, and the scale of online harms amongst young people continues to swell at a terrifying rate. These realities impact everything from attendance and attainment, to the curtailment of girls and young women's freedoms,¹ and physical and mental wellbeing.

- 16-19-year-olds experience the highest rates of domestic abuse of any age group²
- nearly half (49%) of 13-17 year olds have experienced violent or controlling behaviours from their partner³
- 68% of girls have changed their everyday behaviour to avoid sexual harassment, and 1 in 10 girls have missed school to avoid sexual harassment⁴
- 69% of boys aged 11-14 have been exposed to online content that promotes misogyny⁵
- only 9% of girls reported feeling safe in online spaces⁶
- one in 10 teachers is aware of students at their school creating "deepfake, sexually explicit videos" in the last academic year.⁷

These facts are well known and have been for some time - from the Women and Equalities Committee reports in 2016⁸ and 2023,⁹ to mass testimonials from young people via the Everyone Invited movement in 2020¹⁰ and the subsequent Ofsted Review.¹¹ However, despite what should have been key watershed moments that led to meaningful change, young people continue to be harmed en masse. This was brought into stark focus with the recent harrowing case in Fordingbridge, when two girls were raped by a group of boys who filmed and shared

¹ Professor Fiona Vera-Gray, Professor Clare McGlynn, Jo Lovett, Dr Vicky Butterby (2026) [Freedom under threat: New data reveals high levels of sexual exposure \(including cyberflashing\) and significant impacts on women's freedom](#)

² Office for National Statistics (2025) [Domestic abuse victim characteristics. England and Wales: year ending March 2025](#)

³ Youth Endowment Fund (2024) [Children, violence and vulnerability 2024: How do boys and girls experience violence?](#)

⁴ Girl Guiding (2025) [Girls Attitudes Survey](#)

⁵ Vodafone (2024) [AI 'Aggro-rhythms'](#)

⁶ NSPCC (2025) [Targeting Girls Online](#)

⁷ Weale, S. (2025). [The rise of deepfake pornography in schools: 'One girl was so horrified she vomited.](#) The Guardian

⁸ Women and Equalities Committee (2016) [Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools](#)

⁹ Women and Equalities Committee (2023) [Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings](#)

¹⁰ Everyone's Invited: <https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/about>

¹¹ Ofsted (2021). [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#). Department for Education.

videos of the rapes online,¹² and criminal justice bodies have stated this case is not an outlier. This reality must serve as a wake up call for the government to finally make their commitments around prevention, including a whole-school approach to VAWG, a reality and act upon the recommendations laid out in this briefing.

GOVERNMENT COMMITMENTS AND INACTION

The government committed to halving VAWG over the next ten years, and in their 2025 VAWG strategy state that it must be a 'truly national endeavour that prioritises prevention...we must stop violence before it starts...through early intervention and prevention – protecting young people, disrupting dangerous attitudes and stopping harmful behaviours escalating'. The government's VAWG strategy goes on to describe a whole-school approach (WSA) in the accompanying action plan,¹³ alongside a series of pilots and commitments to support schools in the implementation of the new RSHE guidance, guidance which again references a whole-school approach.¹⁴

We welcome these commitments, but now need to see tangible action from government to deliver these changes. We need to see more support for schools than the small scale RSHE pilots currently planned, particularly noting the new RSHE guidance came into force this September. In addition, we know that gendered stereotypes are ingrained by the age of 10,¹⁵ therefore greater focus is needed on primary schools, and more urgency from government on delivering their commitment to extend mandatory RSHE to 18 considering the prevalence of partner violence in this age group.¹⁶ Whilst this briefing aims to support the development of more tangible actions relating to the whole-schools approach described in the government's VAWG strategy action plan.

As those working in the VAWG and education sector, we recognise the challenges of implementing the work needed to truly tackle VAWG among young people, both in schools and across society. We also recognise the considerable pressures schools and teachers are under, including wider funding constraints and increasing demands on staff time and resources. We have been working tirelessly for many years to overcome these challenges and have a proven track record in implementing WSA projects at a local level,¹⁷ alongside learning from the

¹² EVAW (2026) [62 VAWG organisations write to Education Secretary about Fordingbridge rapes](#)

¹³ The [government's VAWG strategy action plan](#) includes the following action which describes what is akin to a whole-school approach to VAWG: "Support schools to integrate learning about positive relationships and VAWG across every part of a child's school life. This means that learning about these issues is not confined to RSHE but that schools foster a culture where harmful attitudes and behaviours are consistently challenged, VAWG is understood within the context of other subjects, such as history and geography, gender equality is encouraged, and everyone, from leadership to pupils, plays a role in creating a safe, inclusive environment".

¹⁴ Page 5 of the [government's RSHE statutory guidance \(2025\)](#) it states: '**Whole school approach.** The curriculum is best delivered as part of a whole school approach to wellbeing and positive relationships, supported by other school policies, including behaviour and safeguarding policies'.

¹⁵ The Global Early Adolescent Study: [An exploration of the factors that shape Adolescence, Journal of Adolescent Health](#) 61:4 October 2017

¹⁶ <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/kings-speech-vawg-and-ai-regulation-largely-missing/>

¹⁷ Example WSA projects and reports: [UK Feminista](#); [Ascent Prevention Partnership](#); [Lucy Faithfull Report](#); [The Centre for Expertise on CSA - Implementing a whole school approach to CSA](#); [Whole-school](#)

progress made in the devolved nations in conjunction with Rape Crisis Scotland and Welsh Women's Aid,¹⁸ and the government's own WSA to mental wellbeing.¹⁹ We continue to offer this expertise to the government to help put their commitments into action. However, we must see more engagement and urgency from the Department for Education on the matter if we want to see government commitments make any meaningful impact on the way in which VAWG plays out in the lives of young people every day, often with devastating consequences.

WHAT WE NEED TO SEE FROM GOVERNMENT:

We have four topline asks directed at national government to help move the dial on the national implementation of a whole-school approach to VAWG.

Topline asks:

1. **Guidance and implementation:** a whole-school approach (WSA) should become an explicit expectation on schools (both primary and secondary) and colleges by 2029 in line with the government's timeline for a credible RSHE offer for all students. This must include a monitoring and evaluation framework for its implementation, and accompanied by **government guidance on embedding a whole school approach**, developed in partnership with the specialist VAWG sector, education specialists and academic researchers with expertise in VAWG and education. The guidance should emphasise the need to take a gender-sensitive, intersectional, and equalities and human rights approach; outline the scope of a WSA (from training to school policy, culture, and curriculum content), and cover all key WSA actors (from student voice, to teachers, school leaders, governors and whole school staff team, the local authority, Ofsted, and local specialist VAWG services).
2. **Resourcing: government must resource its commitment to a whole-school approach as laid out in their VAWG strategy.** This resourcing must be long-term and be sufficient to ensure high quality and on-going teacher training and support for all schools, enable sufficient teacher and curriculum capacity, external support from specialist sectors, funding for community services to support children and young people affected by VAWG, and research and evaluation of effective practise and implementation.
3. **Monitoring and accountability: the Department for Education should collect, monitor and report on disaggregated data relating to the prevalence of VAWG in**

[SCARF - England](#); [Tender Reset](#); [EVAW About Time Report](#); [National Education Union model - preventing sexism and sexual harassment](#); [University of York and York Council current project](#); [University of York narrative review of WSA to preventing GBV](#); [Lifting Limits impact reports](#); [End Sexism in Schools - Sexism in the Eng Lit curriculum](#); [Gender Action](#); Durhams University's [Beyond Referrals](#) (which was implemented in other youth settings as well as schools); NSPCC [Talk Relationships: A Whole-School Approach to Healthy Relationships](#)

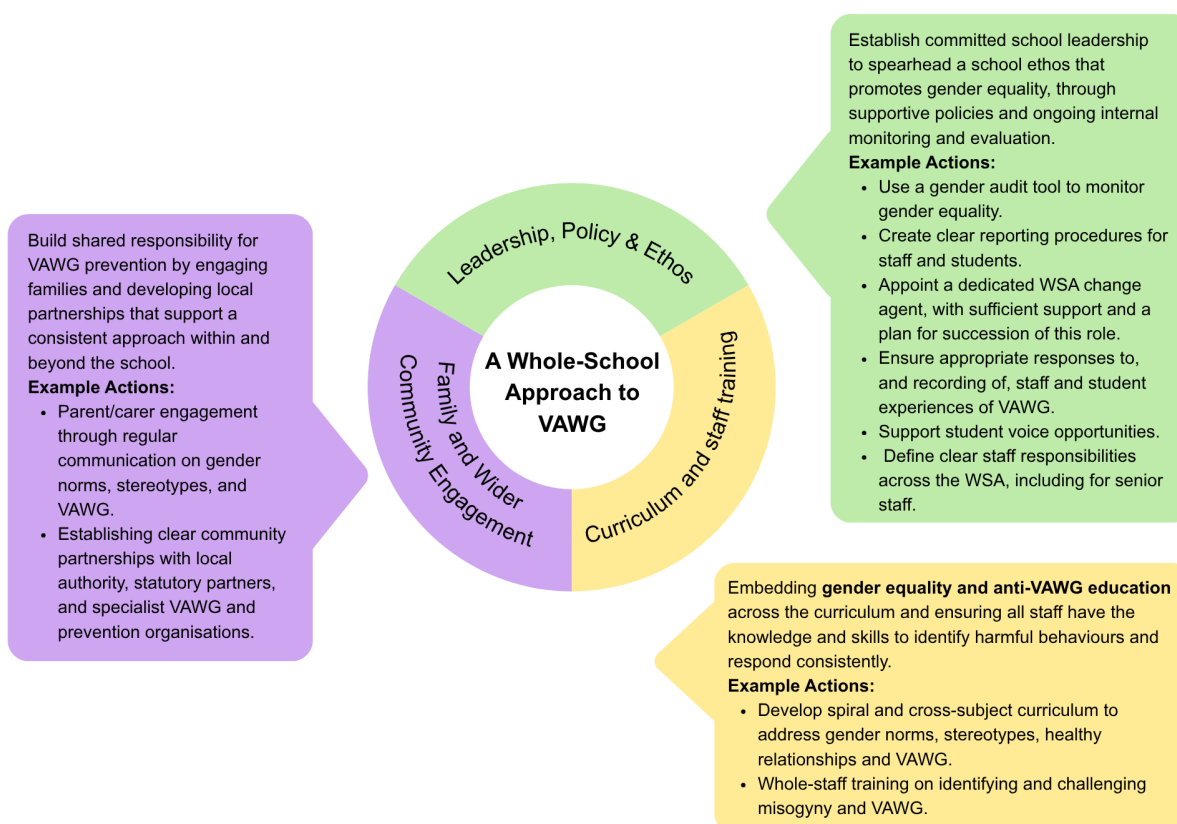
¹⁸ [Equally Safe at School](#) in Scotland - ESAS included in the Scottish Government [Equally Safe Delivery Plan](#), requiring all secondary schools across Scotland to sign up and complete 1 core component of the model with the aim that they will be asked to do further components in years to come; and Welsh Government and Welsh Women's Aid (2015). [Good Practice Guide: A Whole Education Approach to Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse & Sexual Violence in Wales](#)

¹⁹ Department for Education (2021) [Promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. A whole school and colleges approach](#). Public Health England/Department for Education.

schools, and monitor the implementation of a WSA (including children's access to RSHE) and its impact. The government must do more to track VAWG experienced within our schools and between young people, and develop sufficient plans to monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions mapped out in their VAWG strategy. The framework and measures for this should be developed in consultation with the specialist VAWG sector and ensure compliance with the Equality Act, the Human Rights Act, and the Istanbul Convention.

4. **VAWG sector and expert engagement:** the Department of Education should establish a VAWG stakeholder group to ensure their work is guided by relevant expertise and ensures the department meets its commitments in the VAWG strategy.

THE DETAIL: WHAT IS A WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH AND THE EVIDENCE



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Whole-school approaches are well established tools for tackling various public health issues, and in recent years have been increasingly applied to VAWG prevention. This model broadly aims to create systems change within the school through actions including all members of the

²⁰ This diagram has been created by the Whole-School Approach Working Group who authored this briefing.

school community (e.g. students, staff, parents), and the policies and structures of the school itself.

It is well-recognised that a primary cause of VAWG is gender inequality²¹, and that organisations with high levels of gender inequality are fertile environments for the proliferation of violence.²² Thus, in order to tackle VAWG, schools must first address the gender inequality that underlies the perpetration and acceptance of VAWG. This includes the ways in which school environments may inadvertently be reproducing gender inequality through everyday interactions, organisational structures, policies, and practices.²³ If school policies, or staff attitudes uphold stereotypical views of gender roles and behaviour, then sexual harassment and violence may be more easily normalised or dismissed²⁴ and consequences for those causing harm may be ineffectual.²⁵ Schools can therefore be considered not only as sites where VAWG happens, and purposive sites of VAWG intervention, but also as contexts that are conducive to VAWG and intersecting inequalities.²⁶ Therefore, a whole-school approach that addresses gender inequality throughout the school – in its systems, social norms, and culture – is necessary to tackle the endemic issue of VAWG in schools. Notably, whilst this model is focused on school settings, a whole-systems approach may also be adaptable to other youth organisations and institutions. However, the evidence base in this area is less developed.

In order to address the whole-school system, a whole-school approach must include sustained interventions across the following three domains:

- 1) **Curriculum and Staff Training** - Curricula interventions are a core component of an effective WSA. Whilst fundamental to developing an effective WSA, curricular interventions alone may fail to address the systemic and structural drivers of gender inequality within the school environment, and as such, must be contextualised within a whole-system approach. Evidence highlights the importance of learning that moves beyond student's individual attitudes and behaviours to adopt a 'gender transformative'

²¹ Professor Rachel Jewkes, Dr Michael Flood and James Lang (2015). ["From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: a conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls."](#) The Lancet 385 (9977):1580-1589.

²² Professor Liz Kelly (2016) ["The conducive context of violence against women and girls."](#) Discover Society 1 (30).

²³ Catherine Donovan, Geetanjali Gangoli, Hannah King, and Ayurshi Dutt. (2023). ["Understanding gender and sexuality: The hidden curriculum in English schools."](#) Review of Education 11 (3):e3440.

²⁴ Nicole Conroy. (2013). ["Rethinking Adolescent Peer Sexual Harassment: Contributions of Feminist Theory."](#) Journal of School Violence 12 (4):340-356.

²⁵ Elizabeth Meyer. (2008) ["Gendered harassment in secondary schools: Understanding teachers' \(non\) interventions."](#) Gender and Education 20 (6):555-570.

Katja Gillander Gådin (2012). ["Sexual harassment of girls in elementary school: A concealed phenomenon within a heterosexual romantic discourse."](#) Journal of Interpersonal Violence 27 (9):1762-1779.

²⁶ Dr Abby Gilsenan and Professor Vanita Sundaram (2025). ["What do we mean by a whole-school approach to gender-related violence prevention?"](#) A critical exploration of existing models. *Gender and Education*, 37(7), 741–759.

approach.²⁷ This approach necessitates critical reflection on gender inequality and violence as systemic rather than individual issues. A gender transformative approach should be adopted across the curriculum to ensure gender stereotypes and norms are challenged in all subjects, not only in PSHE or RSE.

Staff-focused interventions that support the delivery of curricular interventions, challenge harmful gendered norms and support responses to disclosures are also an essential component of a WSA. Many existing WSA models include some version of staff training, largely directed at teachers delivering curricular elements of the programme. However, adopting a whole-staff approach to include administrative and facilities staff is essential to ensuring a consistent approach.²⁸

Actions in this domain may include:

- Developing lesson plans and resources examining gender norms and stereotypes, including how rigid stereotypes about masculinity may encourage misogynistic ideas and behaviours in boys
- Whole-staff training on identifying and responding to misogyny and VAWG, and training for those delivering VAWG education.

- 2) **Leadership, Policy, and Ethos** - Committed and sustainable school leadership is found to be critical to the success of effective WSA, allowing for ongoing oversight of policies and gendered practices within the school. Evidence suggests several components are vital in this domain: establishing the school ethos or culture, the championing of change in the school, creating a supportive environment for staff, and internal monitoring and evaluation.²⁹

Actions in this domain may include:

- Using a 'gender audit' tool to monitor gender equality across different areas of the school.
- Creating clear and accessible reporting procedures for both staff and students to disclose experiences of sexism and VAWG.
- Identifying a 'change agent' - a member of staff who will spearhead the WSA work and lead gender equality actions, with sufficient support and a clear plan for succession of the role to support intervention sustainability.

²⁷ Robert Morrell, Debbie Epstein, Elaine Unterhalter, Deevia Bhana, and Relebohile Moletsane. (2009) [Towards gender equality: South African schools during the HIV and AIDS epidemic](#). University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

²⁸ Annette Brömdal, Agli Zavros-Orr, Lisa Hunter, Kirstine Hand, and Bonnie Hart. 2021. ["Towards a Whole-School Approach for Sexuality Education in Supporting and Upholding the Rights and Health of Students with Intersex Variations."](#) Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning 21 (5):568-583.
Maree Crabbe and Michael Flood. 2021. ["School-Based Education to Address Pornography's Influence on Young People: A Proposed Practice Framework."](#) American Journal of Sexuality Education 16 (1):1-37.

²⁹ Paludi, Michele A. [Praeger guide to the psychology of gender](#). Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2004.
Dr Abby Gilson and Professor Vanita Sundaram (2025). [What do we mean by a whole-school approach to gender-related violence prevention?](#) A critical exploration of existing models. *Gender and Education*, 37(7), 741–759.

- Define clear staff responsibilities across the WSA, including for senior staff.
- Ensuring appropriate responses to, and recording of, staff and student experiences of VAWG.
- Supporting student voice opportunities (i.e. student led campaigns, consulting student councils).

3) **Family and Wider Community Engagement** - Engaging families and the wider community is particularly important in the context of VAWG prevention as harmful gendered norms are not solely proliferated in school.³⁰ The family itself is a potentially conducive environment for VAWG,³¹ and therefore direct and sensitive communication with parents about the nature of VAWG and the scope of WSA interventions is therefore a foundational step for tackling the issue.

Further, a preventive school environment is also contingent on multi-agency buy-in and involvement within the local community. Therefore, establishing clear community partnerships with local authority, statutory partners, and specialist VAWG and prevention organisations ensures a consistent approach both within and outside of the school. This has been well-evidenced in the Australia context in the state of Victoria, whereby the state government has provided significant funding and policy support to encourage the uptake of a WSA.³²

Actions in this domain may include:

- Parent/carer focused communication and training sessions on gender norms and VAWG, and how these topics will be addressed throughout the school.
- Mapping community partnerships with local authority and third-sector organisations who can support WSA delivery.

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³⁰ Thabani Nyoni, J. J. Steiner, M. Okumu, E. Orwenyo, B. C. Tonui, K. Lipsey, and C. Mengo. 2022. "[The Use and Effectiveness of the Whole School Approach in School-Based Interventions Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Systematic Review](#)." Trauma Violence & Abuse:14.

³¹ Professor Liz Kelly (2016) "[The conducive context of violence against women and girls](#)." Discover Society 1 (30).

³² Jill Blackmore, Jane Kenway, Sue Willis, and Leonie Rennie. 1996. "[Feminist dilemmas: an Australian case study of a whole-school policy approach to gender reform](#)." Journal of Curriculum Studies 28 (3):253-279.

Amanda Keddie, and Debbie Ollis. 2021. "[Context "Matters": The Take up of Respectful Relationships Education in Two Primary Schools](#)." Australian Educational Researcher 48 (2):211-225.