

# Ascolto

Personal and Organisational Development

## Thurrock

### Violence Against Women Alliance:

#### Analysis and Development Planning for the Future

This report was supported by funding from the  
Home Office Crime Reduction Programme

Kris Bush MSc CPsychol  
11<sup>th</sup> December 2001

## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

Thurrock was successful in securing Home Office funding for two projects under the Crime Reduction Programme Violence Against Women Initiative in 2000. It was recognised at an early stage by the co-ordinators of the projects that improved multi-agency working was key to the success of these projects and for the future.

In 2001 Thurrock established a Violence Against Women Alliance (VAWA) to replace its Domestic Violence forum. This move was made in line with UK Government agenda on violence against women which recommended by 2002 domestic violence forums should be replaced by violence against women forums, as per the 1995 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

The VAWA was introduced with a new three group structure, a Practitioner Group, an Advisory Group and an Executive Group. The VAWA is chaired by the Chief Executives of the Local Authority and the Primary Care Trust and has a clearly defined link into the Crime and Disorder Leadership Team.

This study analyses the process of development of the VAWA to date and indicates the areas for development in the future.

### **Findings**

The information from face to face interviews and workshops was analysed and six emerging themes were identified:

- Structure of the VAWA;
- Relationships and links with other groups;
- Awareness and understanding;
- Commitment and resources;
- Mainstreaming, sustainability and continuity, and;
- Gaps and issues for development.

The introduction of the VAWA and its three group structure was seen to be a positive and innovative development. Although it was often cited to be early days in the development of the VAWA, the new structure had brought about changes which had made a difference. The clear link into the Crime and Disorder Leadership team was seen as a strong and important link that the VAWA had made. The development of the Violence Against Women Joint Investment Plan (VAW JIP) was considered to have brought people together in a more integrated and focussed way. There were however more links that the VAWA identified that needed developing with other groups.

The Home Office funded Education and Prevention project had built on the experience of South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre and had helped to raise the awareness of the issues surrounding violence against women in Thurrock. But it was widely acknowledged in this study that there was still work to be done. Some of this work included the need for awareness raising for people involved in the VAWA and the development of guidance on the VAWA. Other work comprised of wider

awareness raising to agencies not currently involved in the VAWA and public awareness raising.

High levels of commitment to the work of the VAWA were expressed from all the agencies. However, there a need was identified for some of the work of the VAWA to be financed to a level whereby the work generated from the VAWA was not picked up by default, through goodwill but formally through planned budgeting.

The development of the VAW JIP and the inclusion of a violence against women section in the Crime and Disorder Strategy was seen as a positive step forward in mainstreaming and ensuring the sustainability of the work for the future.

The VAWA in short period of time has set a solid foundation for future work. The high levels of commitment expressed by people in the interviews and workshops will ensure that this foundation is built upon. Several areas for review and development were identified and are summarise below.

### **Areas for review and development**

- The development of a system for improved information flow between the three groups, Practitioner, Advisory and Executive, to include a feedback, monitoring and evaluation system for the work of the VAWA.
- The development of a system for improved information flow between the VAWA and other groups and the proposed Local Strategic Partnership.
- The dedication of resources to finance the work and operation of the VAWA, for example, co-ordination, managing minute taking, agenda items, facilitating sub groups, distribution of minutes and other work generated from the VAWA structure as a whole.
- Clarification of the potential role of VAWA to other groups such as Drug Action Team, Youth Offending Team, Thurrock Healthy Alliance, Diversity Leadership Team, Women In Thurrock and to the Local Authority. This may also include any potential consultative role to other projects and initiatives.
- More focused information and training to assist people to understand the work of the VAWA and the issues relating to violence against women and gender. For example, brief, specific guidance for members of the VAWA and information on gender impact assessments. This may also include regular presentations to all three groups of the VAWA to enable discussion and debate to address any 'knowledge' gaps.
- Review the work in progress to increase awareness amongst the agencies involved in the VAWA about the role and characteristics of partner agencies in Thurrock.
- Review the work in progress to increase the understanding of the role and potential of the Crime and Disorder Strategy and Local Strategic Partnership on the VAWA.

- Review ways in which the VAWA can develop a themed approach with agencies which do not, as yet, have representation on the VAWA.
- The work already initiated to mainstream violence against women should continue, so that issues are supported in a systematic and organised manner rather than by taking an ad hoc approach. This work should also include continued development work on shared data collection and development to make the understanding and interpretation of definitions of violence against women clearer.

## **Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1-2</b>
<b>Interviews</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Workshops</b>	<b>3-4</b>
<b>Findings</b>	<b>5-11</b>
Structure of the VAWA	
Relationship and links with other groups	
Awareness and understanding	
Commitment and resources	
Mainstreaming, sustainability and continuity	
Gaps and issues for development	
<b>Areas for review and development</b>	<b>12-13</b>

## Introduction

In 2000, two projects under the Home Office Crime Reduction Programme Violence Against Women Initiative were funded in Thurrock. A police lead project, examining domestic violence interventions was funded with £100k. An education and prevention project, lead by South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre (SERICC) and Zero Tolerance Trust 'Respect' Campaign, focussing on rape and sexual assault was funded with £421k.

Before 2000, multi-agency working had been identified, locally, as a key component and critical success factor when planning and running interventions that directly affect the lives of women who have experienced or are experiencing violence.

As a result of the SERICC Home Office funded project, work started with partners to build an improved forum to address violence against women, in the most broadest and inclusive manner. This included multi-agency meetings, consultations and a seminar on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2001, '*Joined Up Responses to Complicated Lives*' with Professor Liz Kelly CBE, from the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, of North London University. In early 2001, all this work lead to the restructuring of the domestic violence forum and the establishment of the Thurrock Violence Against Women Alliance (VAWA).

The main aim of the VAWA was agreed to ensure that the services provided to women and girls were appropriately coordinated and consistently delivered to agreed standards to meet the individual needs of women and girls experiencing violence. The terms of reference were agreed and circulated.

The VAWA decided to adopt the Home Office definition of domestic violence and the 1995 UN Declaration (on the Elimination of Violence Against Women) definition of violence against women. It states that:

*Violence against women means any act of gender based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether in public or private life. This includes: sexual abuse of female children, dowry related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women. Violence occurring within the general community including: sexual harassment, intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution, physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs.*

The UK Government is a signatory to the Declaration and it has also recommended in its own agenda on violence against women that domestic violence forums become Violence Against Women Forums by 2002.

All the research carried out for this work has indicated that Thurrock is the first place to adopt this new structured approach in developing a violence against women forum to replace the domestic violence forum. Thurrock may therefore be seen to be leading the way in developing the new approach and ahead in the learning that they have experienced and gained.

With this broad, inclusive approach came a new structure that sought to improve the working of the Alliance. An innovative, three group structure was adopted with representatives from the statutory and voluntary sectors. The new structure took into consideration the need for issues to be discussed in a way in which attendees could take responsibility and be accountable for the decisions made. The three groups formed were the Practitioner Group, the Advisory Group and the Executive Group.

The Practitioner Group consists of front line staff involved with face to face service delivery. They identify issues and flag them up to the Advisory Group. The issues the Practitioner Group have identified have formed the basis of the 'Needs Assessment' element of the Violence Against Women Joint Investment Plan (VAW JIP). This has also been added to by key members of the Advisory Group over the Summer and Autumn of 2001. The Development Plan element of the VAW JIP is currently being worked on.

The Advisory Group consists of mainly middle managers from relevant agencies and two elected councillors. The Group identifies issues and develops appropriate responses and presents them to the Executive Group for discussion and decision making.

The Executive Group consists of the main chief officers from the relevant agencies. It has a clear link into the Crime and Disorder Leadership Team where most of the Executive Group sit. From the outset the Chief Executive of the Local Authority agreed to be the Chair of the VAWA. This position is now a shared responsibility between the Chief Executives of the two main statutory agencies in Thurrock, the Local Authority and the Primary Care Trust.

Both Home Office funded projects have regularly provided feedback to the whole of the VAWA. From working with the Home Office funded projects, it was considered by many agencies in Thurrock that the VAWA had been a turning point for multi-agency working. The VAWA had acted as a catalyst for change and improved multi-agency working had been achieved through the new VAWA.

This study set out to analyse the current working of the VAWA at an early stage in its existence. The focus of the analysis was the Advisory Group and Executive Group. The study charts the views and perceptions of people involved in the VAWA or connected with the VAWA. It also identifies issues and areas that the VAWA needs to monitor and develop in the future.

## Interviews

The following people were invited to one to one interviews during the months of October and November 2001.

Eric Nath (Chief Executive Local Authority)  
Terry Sheern (Divisional Commander Police)  
Vi Wagner (Chief Executive Primary Care Trust)  
Chris Paley (Director Social Services)  
Ian Stratford\* (Deputy CE Local Authority)  
Jean Imray (Manager Children & Families Social Services)  
Sheila Coates (Manager South Essex Rape & Incest Crisis Centre)

Kym Jennings (Manager Thurrock Women's Refuge)  
Alan Dawkes (Head of Strategy for Neighbourhood & Housing)  
Cllr Carl Morris\* (Deputy Leader)  
Cllr Peter Maynard (Neighbourhood)  
Cllr Val Liddiard (Environment & Transport)  
Cllr Nigel Barron (Chair Diversity Leadership Team)

Only two people were unable to attend an interview or be interviewed over the telephone (as marked \*).

The information provided in the interviews was recorded and content analysed. The information was cross referenced and classified as emerging issues under six broad subject headings:

- Structure of the VAWA;
- Relationships and links with other groups;
- Awareness and understanding;
- Commitment and resources;
- Mainstreaming, and;
- Gaps and issues for development.

The emerging issues were then used as outline agendas for the workshops.

## Workshops

The workshops were held in November 2001. The first workshop consisted mainly of members of the Advisory Group and the second workshop of key people connected with the VAWA and/or supporting the VAWA but not members of it. The final workshop was attended mainly by members of the Executive Group of the VAWA.

The following forty people were invited to attend workshops:

Eric Nath (Chief Executive Local Authority)  
Vi Wagner\* (Chief Executive Primary Care Trust)  
Chris Paley (Director Social Services)  
Neville Baldwin (Director Neighbourhood & Housing)  
Terry Sheern\* (Divisional Commander Police)  
Linda Daysh\* (Community Safety)  
Tessa Webb\* (Probation Service)  
Mark Gurrey\* (Social Services)  
Sally Morris\* (Director Strategic Planning SEHA)  
Cllr Andy Smith (Leader)  
Natalie Warren (Director Thurrock CVS)  
Steve Beynon\* (Director of Education)  
Nickki Richardson\* (Deputy CE SEMH&CC Trust)

Cllr Nigel Barron (Chair Diversity Leadership Team)  
Sheila Coates (Manager South Essex Rape & Incest Crisis Centre)  
Mick Allen (CID Police)  
Kym Jennings (Refuge)  
Alan Dawkes\* (Head of Strategy for Neighbourhood & Housing)  
Pete Mangan (Senior Officer Probation Service)  
Mike Rawlings\* (Manager CAB)  
Jean Imray (Social Services)  
Annie McKinney (Director Sure Start)  
Arthur Welsh\* (Victim Support)

Brenda Stannard\* (Education)  
Steve Currell\* (Police)  
Lee Eggleston (Chair of VAWA Practitioner Group  
SERICC )  
Allison Campbell (Police)  
Cllr Val Liddiard (Environment & Transport)  
Cllr Peter Maynard (Neighbourhood)  
Ian Stratford\* (Deputy CE Local Authority)  
Colin Slasberg (Social Services Policy)  
Marion Canavon (Policy Local Authority)  
Kathy Hostettler (Policy Local Authority)

Cllr Carl Morris\* (Deputy Leader)  
Steven Weigel\* (Customer Services)  
Eve Braidwood\* (Health Promotion SEHA)  
Keith Ireland (Personnel Local Authority)  
Cllr David Hooper (Chair of Scrutiny)  
Cllr Graham Timms\* (Health and Social  
Services)  
Miriam Greenwood (Primary Care Trust  
Development & Partnership)  
Sandra Doockeran\*\* (SEHA)  
Janet Davidson\*\* (Community Safety)

Twenty four people attended the workshops (marked \* were unable to attend, marked \*\* attended in place of named invited people).

The discussions from the workshops assisted in validating the issues that had been identified as emerging issues from the interviews. It also raised other new issues for discussion and consideration.

## Findings

The information gathered from the interviews and workshops was collated and analysed. The main issues emerging were categorised in the following way:

- Structure of the VAWA;
- Relationships and links with other groups;
- Awareness and understanding;
- Commitment and resources;
- Mainstreaming, sustainability and continuity, and;
- Gaps and issues for development.

### Structure of the VAWA

The three group structure of the VAWA was virtually unanimously viewed as a positive way forward to 'get work done'. It was seen by the majority of people as the only way to ensure that the 'appropriate people' discussed and decided the issues at the 'right level' and were then accountable for the decisions made. One Councillor stated:

*The new structure is a great development and it really means people can start to see when and where the progress has been made and where the potential blockages might be. It fits into the work of the Diversity Leadership Team and the Alliance will have an active part to play in that agenda.*

The VAWA was seen as a positive replacement to the domestic violence forum. These comments summarise the views of many people who are members of the VAWA:

*It has been far better than the Domestic Violence Forum. The discussion has been right for the work I do on a day to day basis. It is worth me attending the meetings, as I know I have a contribution to make and a difference can be made by me attending.*

*I can see where I need to raise things and that has been helpful.....The discussion is engaging and relevant. It is more inclusive.*

*It is innovative, creative, pushing at the boundaries and it has been good to see the openness with which people have embraced this change.*

*I think it is active problem solving at its best, with the development of practical solutions.*

*It is easier to understand what some of the other agencies do and where their work fits with mine.*

Any less positive comments about the three group structure usually related to the newness of the structure and that it was still 'evolving and finding its way'. For example, the comments were often along these lines:

*We haven't yet realised the full benefits of what we have put in place. It is still forming but you can see that it is going to improve the way things are done.*

*It is early days and there is so much for us to learn.*

It was often pointed out that the remit and role of the Practitioner Group seemed to be relatively clearly understood by all VAWA Groups. There was, however, less understanding of the role and remit of the Advisory Group and Executive Group. This was mainly explained, where it was explained at all, by the intense work carried out on the VAW JIP over the Summer and the Autumn. This work was widely recognised as a '*critical step forward to addressing the issues that had been raised by the Practitioner Group*'. It meant however that the role and remit of the Advisory and Executive Groups had not developed to the same extent as the Practitioner Group. A minority of Advisory Group members did not necessarily see the extent of the '*solid foundation work*' that they had undertaken in the VAW JIP. The Executive Group also felt that they had been '*waiting for the JIP*' and that its submission would start the '*real*' work for them.

These comments illustrate the main views expressed about the emerging role and remit of the Advisory Group and the Executive Group.

*It is early days for the Executive Group and we are waiting for the JIP which will really start to task us and make us act. This work will form the remit and responsibilities.*

*The role and remit are still developing but it feels right so far.*

*The development of the JIP has formed our role and remit to date (Advisory Group) and now we need to implement and deliver the JIP.*

It was also felt that at this stage the communication between the Groups was still developing and that the VAW JIP would act as a '*means to really get the dialogue going*'. It was also considered by a number of people that this was the right time to look at the feedback and monitoring systems that needed to be developed to encourage more wider communication and interaction between the groups. It was also suggested that regular presentations to all three groups of the VAWA would enable discussion and debate to address any '*knowledge*' gap and to ensure the understanding of a '*women centred*' approach.

The benefits of wider joint training were also illustrated in the recent 'Violence Against Women by Known Men' multi-agency training. As part of the Home Office funded 'Respect' SERICC project, members of the Practitioners Group and other practitioners in Thurrock attended this multi-agency training. The feedback provided showed that the training was well received and has already changed some key, front line working practice. It was suggested that the availability of this focused joint training needed to be increased.

There was a consensus that the lack of dedicated resources for the VAWA did not encourage improved communication and that there was a need for the work involved in and resulting from the VAWA to be appropriately resourced. As one person explained:

*There does not seem to be any formal minute taker and I am not sure how to get an item on the agenda. It seems far less formal and less resourced than other Council meetings I attend, yet it in comparison it is so more important, as the work has the potential to change the lives of so many in our community, women, girls, families and men.*

It was widely agreed that the structure for the VAWA would need to be reviewed in the future to ensure that it remained innovative and flexible to meet the needs of the work that had to be undertaken. There was wide and strong commitment expressed by all the key agencies that violence against women 'would remain on the agenda'. In the future, the structure of the VAWA would respond appropriately to ensure that violence against women remains a central feature of the work undertaken by agencies.

### **Relationships and links with other groups**

It was widely expressed that the VAWA had assisted in developing 'improved joined up working and a more integrated approach to violence against women'. The development of the VAW JIP was often cited as a huge step forward to the progress made in working together. It was also considered to be a robust method to mainstream and recognise the work that was being achieved in Thurrock.

The structure of the VAWA had linked the work into the Crime and Disorder Leadership Team. However, many people considered that the close link still had to be developed further in practice. The VAW JIP was viewed to have provided a solid base for the Violence Against Women Section in the Crime and Disorder Strategy. Although a number of agencies in the VAWA had not seen a draft of the Strategy when others had. This meant that those agencies felt they had not had the opportunity to make a contribution. These selected comments reflect the main views expressed:

*The link to Crime and Disorder was an important one to make and the wider links to other groups.*

*I am not sure we have made the most of our connection to the Crime and Disorder Team. Maybe we could have been more closely involved in the audit and the strategy.*

The VAWA was seen to have equal standing with other groups in Thurrock such as Thurrock Healthy Alliance, Youth Offending Team and Drug Action Team. However, many people thought that there could be increased liaison between these groups, as the issues being discussed at the VAWA had implications for the work being carried out by these other groups. A considerable amount of interest was also raised in the Local Strategic Partnership which will be launched in January 2002 and the way in which it might affect the VAWA in the future. These comments illustrate some of the views expressed about the workings of the VAWA:

*The VAWA cannot work in a vacuum, it hasn't to date, it has to continue to relate closely with other groups and respond to changes. The launch of the Local Strategic Partnership will have an affect on the way we all work and that has to be a consideration for the VAWA.*

*There are so many meetings to attend that I often think there needs to be some streamlining of the meetings, as there is so much that maps onto the work of other groups.*

Many people considered that the VAWA had 'developing' links with other groups and initiatives in Thurrock such as the Diversity Leadership Team, Diversity Initiatives, Women In Thurrock, Social Justice and Inclusion. Many people connected to the VAWA, yet who were not members could see the potential of the VAWA for wider work in Thurrock. There was particular interest in the idea of gender impact assessments for certain initiatives and areas of work in the Local Authority. These examples show some of the links that people made:

*The VAWA needs to be linked into Social Justice and Inclusion in the Council – it could be so useful. (Councillor)*

*The VAWA have the expertise on Gender Impact Assessments, we need to consider this on the initiatives we undertake, from transport, street wardens, education, housing...*

*I had never realised that there were these resources for women in Thurrock, we need to put some of them on the Intranet, so that our staff can access them. (Local Authority employee)*

*Does the VAWA have a role for assisting us in the consultation required under Best Value or for the planning of service provision?*

## **Awareness and understanding**

The VAWA was widely considered to have increased the understanding and awareness of the work carried out by other agencies on violence against women. There was also a greater understanding of the role, remit and capacity of the other agencies. The VAW JIP had also increased the opportunities for more integrated, joint work and this was considered to be the favoured approach for the future. The way the VAWA had been structured also made clear links to the Crime and Disorder Leadership Team and people expressed that they now had a 'greater understanding of the Crime and Disorder strategy and where it fitted'.

It was recognised by some people (mainly self recognition) that there was still work to be done to raise awareness and understanding of the issues surrounding violence against women to members of the VAWA and to other agencies not involved with the VAWA. There was a perceived need to increase and reinforce people's understanding fairly promptly. As these selected comments illustrate:

*It would be good if there was a brief Thurrock guide to the VAWA and the issues. (Executive Group member)*

*I am not sure I have a full understanding of the issues and I wish there was something straightforward and easy to read to bring my level of understanding up to that of other people. (Executive Group member)*

*The understanding of the issues is still patchy, we don't feel confident that we have all the information and we don't want to say the wrong things.*

*There is a real lack of understanding here in the Council, we are working hard to raise the issues internally and the JIP has provided a means but we need to do more.*

*People are still struggling with the definition of violence against women and it hasn't become part of their everyday language and it needs to be, to be fully inclusive. (Councillor)*

It was also considered that the VAWA should dedicate some time to fully understand the definition and the use of the term violence against women. By taking time to ensure there is a clear and shared understanding, and interpretation of violence against women, appropriate and adequate service delivery developments could be made. These developments could then truly affect the quality of life of women and girls who have experienced or are experiencing violence.

There was also recognition that there was a role for the VAWA in raising the issues surrounding violence against women more widely externally and publicly. These comments illustrate some of the view points raised:

*Violence against women has to become as unacceptable as drink driving has become- we have along way to go. We need to have similar campaigns as have been undertaken for drink driving.*

*It is so difficult to truly know the extent of violence against women and that is the frightening thing. If we did know, we would have to re-organise our services and resources to meet the need. We need to think quite differently about the effect this hidden violence is having on women in the community and their families and the wider quality of life indicators.*

*It is so difficult to get people to talk about the subject, or acknowledge it exists or is so widespread in our community, the school project has started to break the barriers down. (Councillor)*

It was felt that the VAWA, and SERICC's 'Respect' education and prevention project in particular, had increased people's understanding of the issues related to violence against women. The increased awareness had made them think wider about the impact of the violence. As this comment illustrates:

*It sounds naive but I became aware that the problem was everywhere and that it was having a huge affect on over 50% of the community and on their children and on the people that they meet.*

Examples were given of the effects increased awareness was having on the way agencies responded to situations. It was considered that some agencies were only just beginning to make the important link between violence against women and the work that they were facing on a day to day basis. This was neatly illustrated by the link that had been made in the area of mental health, where it was recognised that they were treating the symptoms of violence against women on a regular basis.

## **Commitment and resources**

There was a high level of commitment to and support for the VAWA evidenced in the interviews and the workshops. This came from all groups across the Crime and Disorder Partnership and from other agencies in Thurrock. However, as already discussed, there was a perceived need for some dedicated resources to finance the work of the VAWA. One Councillor stated, *'There is so much commitment to get the work done. But we must acknowledge the work done by the voluntary sector and be prepared to pay them for what they do.'*

The Chiring of the VAWA was a subject raised by many people. The decision by the Chief Executive of the Local Authority to chair the VAWA was seen to be a message of strong commitment to the work of the VAWA by the Chief Executive. The development of the chiring responsibility as shared between the Chief Executive of the Local Authority and the Primary Care Trust was mostly recognised as a positive move, as these comments illustrate:

*Eric Nath stamped his commitment to the work by agreeing to be Chair of the VAWA. That shows his concern for this violence that still remains hidden.*

*It is good to see that both the Local Authority and the PCT are proactively engaged in this work, the Chiring by the lead agencies says a lot about the level of commitment in Thurrock.*

## **Mainstreaming, sustainability and continuity**

Many people stated that the VAW JIP had provided an opportunity to mainstreaming some of the work of the VAWA. The VAW JIP was viewed by many as an important step in formally documenting the need for the work and for progressing the work in the future. These comments summarise the main views expressed about mainstreaming the work and VAW JIP in particular:

*...It (VAW JIP) would not and could not have happened without the VAWA, and the drive, commitment and understanding from Social Services.*

*The JIP is the way forward to ensuring the work is mainstreamed and embedded into what we are all working for.*

*The work will continue, we have seen the benefits of the work in schools and its sustainability arises from the confidence that this is something we cannot abandon.*

*The work of the VAWA needs to be embedded in the planning process and the leadership team need to embed it into the organisational culture.*

*The Crime and Disorder strategy has a separate section on violence against women. It is a strong section.*

The work started under the Home Office funded projects was often cited as one of the main reasons that the work of the VAWA would continue. It was often expressed that the Home Office had allowed a *'clearer focus on violence against women than had ever been the case before and this opportunity had to be*

*developed and built upon and not lost*. It was also felt that there was some important work achieved by the projects themselves that would allow Thurrock to develop the work in the future and gain additional resources. The development of multi-agency, pooled data collection systems to improve the measurement of the extent and nature of violence against women was often given as an example. The need to develop the capacity for improved data collection and for a clearer understanding and interpretation of violence against women definitions, was seen as key to the success of future funding bids.

### **Gaps and issues for development**

In addition to the areas already covered, a number of other areas of improvement for the VAWA were identified. It was often mentioned that there was a perceived need for greater involvement from Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments. However, the nature of the involvement was not always clearly defined. Some people suggested that there was a need for a link with A&E rather than formal representation of A&E on the VAWA. Other people considered that there was a need for increased awareness raising and training of A&E staff. The same type of discussion took place on the degree of involvement required of General Practitioners on the VAWA.

Many people suggested that there should be closer links with the Crown Prosecution Service and other Criminal Justice bodies. Again, it was viewed that there was a need for awareness raising rather than a formal representative on the VAWA. These comments summarise the main view points expressed:

*There needs to be a balance of people on the VAWA. We need to ensure that the main groups are represented but we need to be careful not to make the attendance too wide and dilute the action and accountability. There is an argument for closer links and more training for some groups like A&E staff and GPs.*

*Representation is needed by Magistrates and Judges. There is so much awareness raising that needs to be done there so that the good work that is undertaken by agencies is reinforced by women's experiences at court.*

Whilst the link had been made with the work of the VAWA and the Diversity Leadership Team, it was widely recognised that the levels of representation of minority groups on the VAWA was not high, for example, of minority ethnic groups and of disabled people.

It was recognised that the work of the VAWA needed to be fluid, open to change and to new developments. This outlook, that was considered to be a strength of the VAWA, would assist in developing the work for the future and would ensure that opportunities are taken and any gaps addressed.

## Areas for review and development

The work of the VAWA has set a solid foundation for future work in Thurrock. The commitment shown by the people involved in this study illustrate the strength of the VAWA, even at this early stage of its existence. This strength and commitment of the VAWA will ensure that violence against women remains a priority issue in Thurrock. The work undertaken for the VAW JIP and the inclusion of violence against women in the recent draft of the Crime and Disorder strategy have set a clear agenda for future work and development.

It was clear from this study that people considered that the VAWA had a flexible approach to development work and they realised that the VAWA was and had to be open to change. The interviews and workshops offered people an opportunity to identify the areas the VAWA needs to review and develop in the future. These areas are summarised below and it is recommended that they are examined and implemented:

- The development of a system for improved information flow between the three groups, Practitioner, Advisory and Executive, to include a feedback, monitoring and evaluation system for the work of the VAWA.
- The development of a system for improved information flow between the VAWA and other groups and the proposed Local Strategic Partnership.
- The dedication of resources to finance the work and operation of the VAWA, for example, co-ordination, managing minute taking, agenda items, facilitating sub groups, distribution of minutes and other work generated from the VAWA structure as a whole.
- Clarification of the potential role of VAWA to other groups such as Drug Action Team, Youth Offending Team, Thurrock Healthy Alliance, Diversity Leadership Team, Women In Thurrock and to the Local Authority. This may also include any potential consultative role to other projects and initiatives.
- More focused information and training to assist people to understand the work of the VAWA and the issues relating to violence against women and gender. For example, brief, specific guidance for members of the VAWA and information on gender impact assessments. This may also include regular presentations to all three groups of the VAWA to enable discussion and debate to address any 'knowledge' gaps.
- Review the work in progress to increase awareness amongst the agencies involved in the VAWA about the role and characteristics of partner agencies in Thurrock.
- Review the work in progress to increase the understanding of the role and potential of the Crime and Disorder Strategy and Local Strategic Partnership on the VAWA.
- Review ways in which the VAWA can develop a themed approach with agencies which do not, as yet, have representation on the VAWA.

- The work already initiated to mainstream violence against women should continue, so that issues are supported in a systematic and organised manner rather than by taking an ad hoc approach. This work should also include continued development work on shared data collection and development to make the understanding and interpretation of definitions of violence against women clearer.