

Home Office Victims' Experience Review

**WNC Report from Women's Discussion Groups,
September – October 2009**

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Sara Payne (Victims' Champion, and chair of the groups) and the consultation team: Davina James-Hanman (Home Office Specialist Advisor to the Violence Against Women and Girls Team and co-facilitator); Eleri Butler (WNC Violence Against Women Policy Manager and co-facilitator), and Sophie Howes (WNC Policy Adviser and co-ordinator of the groups).

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DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this report are those of the WNC and a record of the views expressed at the women's discussion groups. This does not represent Home Office or Government policy and this is not a Government document.

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Introduction

The Women's National Commission (WNC) is the independent advisory body on women's issues to government. The WNC partnership includes over 500 stakeholders from across the UK women's sector throughout England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which in turn represents around 8 million women.

The WNC has a long-established body of expertise on violence against women, for example:

- Since 2002, the WNC has facilitated a UK-wide Violence Against Women Working Group whose remit is to develop a powerful and effective voice to UK Governments on action needed to tackle violence against women. The Working Group currently has sub groups focussing on sexual violence, domestic violence, and on women's safety and the Olympics.
- In 2003, the Home Office commissioned the WNC to run consultation workshops throughout England and Wales with women survivors of domestic violence, to inform policy and legislative proposals prior to the introduction of the Domestic Violence Crime and Victims Act 2004 ('Unlocking The Secret', WNC, 2003, available at www.thewnc.org.uk).
- On 9 March 2009, the Home Office commissioned the WNC to speak directly to women and girls about what would make them feel and be safer, and also to talk to them about how they felt violence against women and girls could be prevented, in order to contribute to the cross-government consultation on how to end violence against women and girls.¹ Twenty-four focus groups were held with 300 women and girls across England, and a report of the findings was submitted to the Home Office in July 2009 ('Women's Focus Groups: Consultation Response, WNC, 2009).

In September 2009, Sara Payne (Victims' Champion) and the Home Office carried out a review of how to improve the criminal justice system response to rape victims, as part of the development of the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy. In doing so, the Home Office commissioned the WNC to develop and organise three women's discussion groups in England, targeting women who have been raped and who are in receipt of support from sexual violence services, and who either have not reported to the justice system; reported but had their case discontinued, or reported and had their case progressed through the court system.

The Groups were held in Essex, Coventry and London between September – October 2009, and attended by **36 women** in total. They were chaired by Sara Payne (Victims' Champion), co-facilitated by Davina James-Hanman (Home Office) and Eleri Butler (WNC) and organised by Sophie Howes (WNC), with the support of the following organisations:

¹ Home Office (2009) Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls: A Consultation Paper.

Focus Group 1 (FGi) - Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (CRASAC)

Since 1981 CRASAC has provided a confidential female only support and counselling service run by women for women and girls who have been raped, sexually abused or assaulted. CRASAC offer a range of services including a telephone helpline service offering support and information to survivors, their carers, their supporters and to professionals. They also provide counselling, run a support group and act as a signposting service providing information on other appropriate services and options for all including men and boys.

Contact: Sarah Learmonth - Sarah.learmonth@crasac.org.uk

Focus Group 2 (FGii) - South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre (SERICC)

SERICC provides a service to women and girls over 13 years old who have been raped, sexually assaulted, experienced child sexual abuse, sexual harassment or who have experienced any form of sexual violence or attempted sexual assault. After opening a telephone help-line in February 1984, for one afternoon a week, SERICC were receiving calls from women & girls who had been sexually assaulted either as an adult or child, far beyond their capacity. More than two decades on, SERICC is now able to offer women and girls a sexual violence counselling, support and advocacy service six days a week.

Contact: Sheila Coates/Lee Eggleston - sericc@sericc.org.uk

Focus Group 3 (FGiii) - Amina Project

The Amina Project is a support and befriending scheme for women who have been raped, sexually assaulted or abused at any time in their lives. The Amina Project pairs women on the scheme with specially trained volunteers – women who have experienced sexual violence in the past – who meet with them once a week in a community setting. These volunteers provide a listening ear and can help women talk about how they feel, access information about the effects sexual attacks can have, and access support services. Amina volunteers also support women during court proceedings and accompany them to appointments when possible.

Contact: Cat Whitehouse – cat.whitehouse@eaveshousing.org.uk

This report provides a summary of the issues raised and recommendations made by the women who participated in these discussion groups, in order to inform the forthcoming Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy for England.

Summary of issues raised at the women's discussion groups

Barriers to reporting rape to the police

Some women said they felt they would never report being raped to the police, because they had **fears about the way the justice system would treat survivors of rape, because of professionals' attitudes to rape victims.**

"When it happens, you get manipulated into thinking that if you tell someone you're not going to be believed, that everyone's going to judge you and think you're lying and think you're mad." (FGi)

"I didn't report, purely because of the stories I have heard, and the media, and the things women go through. I think I went through all of that. I need closure, I wouldn't be able to report, I haven't got the courage or the strength. I just know I wouldn't. Sitting here listening to these stories, I think it's absolutely disgusting that the police behave like they do. The person who abused me has got away with it, and he has got children, and I can't have children because of what happened to me. I just couldn't do it though; I couldn't sit there in court, with him staring at me, knowing what he did to me. Only one person in my life knows what happened to me, that is my husband. My family don't know. And there is no support for women like me. Except for from women's services. I'm not going to go anywhere else for help. And there's loads of women like me." (FGii)

"Usually it starts with telling someone close to you, and their reaction can determine what happens next, you have to think about can they handle what you have to say, because if not, if they react badly then you're unlikely to report it to agencies. If you've been raped, you're up against everyone, not just the perpetrator. Sometimes it's not even fear of reprisals from the perpetrator, its reprisals from friends and family. On a community or family level, especially if the perpetrator has status or influence, you will get people rallying around the perpetrator because you have to prove that it happened. Then you've got all the judging and blaming from agencies to deal with, if you eventually decide to report it." (FGiii)

"I didn't report, and I went through in my head all the things I had done that were 'stupid', all the things I did that could be used against me, or the things I didn't do that I should have. I completely talked myself into the fact that it was my fault. I had put myself in a situation that wasn't socially acceptable. I thought everybody else would have judged me on that. There are a terrifying amount of young girls who do things they don't want to do, to 'fit in' and be accepted." (FGiii)

"I never reported it [partner rape] because police just viewed it as a domestic, they said there was nothing they could do, they told me to sort it out yourself. Slowly things are changing; it used to be that they would just let them out in two hours and they would come back to get you. I was told 'no one would believe you'." (FGii)

"There is a lot of fear about making a statement and going to court. If there was some way of telling women who have been attacked that making a statement

doesn't have to be traumatic, there can be a female officer, it's in your own time. More information should be available... I think the publication 'From Report to Court' (Rights of Women) should be much more available for women, I know women who have read it not wanting to report, and decided to report afterwards – it's having that knowledge and knowing about what steps will be taken." (FGiii)

"If you could have some confidence that you would get the same treatment wherever you lived, then perhaps more people would come forward... People who report to the police don't know what to expect, they are relying on them, they are relying on their integrity, and in our experience integrity is not there in many police forces in this country." (FGii)

"We need safe women-only services for women who've been abused; many women don't report to the police or won't ever go to health or other services. More women's services are needed so that these women can get help." (FGii)

Some women who had reported also said they **would not report rape or sexual violence to the police again, and would also advise others not to do so.**

"I pray to god it doesn't, but if it happened to me again, I would never, ever report. If it happened to my family or any of my friends I would advise them not to report. I have suffered more as a result of reporting, I wish I had never reported. I would have tried to deal with it on my own." (FGii)

"If anybody touched my daughter, I wouldn't go to the police; I would rip their heart out and shove it up their arse because that's all they deserve. I have never had a good experience of the police. I had so many incident numbers, it took 4 years, then they wrote me a letter to tell me they weren't taking it any further." (FGii)

A few women said they were pleased that they had chosen to report being raped to the police, even though at the time the experience had been traumatic:

"I feel differently, I feel I don't live a lie anymore, I have lived a lie from when I was that high, with a brother that sexually abused me until I left home. Now that I have reported, I'm not living a lie... I have lost a lot because of this, I've lost my mum, my sister, my brother, all because I took it to court. But I would still do the same again." (FGii)

Some women said they wanted statutory services to understand that a girl or woman may only feel able to report to the police and feel strong enough to support a case to court long after the rape happened, and after receiving support from a specialist service.

"It's the validation that's important if you've been raped. I have thought about going to court, and I know now that I am at the stage where if the case didn't proceed I would be ok; I would be doing it for my own personal sense of justice, to be able to shout at the top of my voice, they did this and it was wrong, that would be enough for me. If I took my perpetrator to court back then when it happened, I don't think I would have been able to handle it, if one single person had disbelieved me it would have made me doubt everything about myself. I only

feel stronger after a lot of support and time; it would be quite hard to feel like that straight after an incident has just happened.” (FGiii)

“We need to take the evidence and then leave it until a time when the victim is ready. My experience was within the family, so there was no way I was ever going to report at the time. There should be a consideration of the impact on the child, the child will want to protect the family but there is no reason why you couldn’t take the evidence at the time and it could be used later, and the time span shouldn’t prejudice the case.” (FGiii)

Improving the responses of frontline police officers

Women said that if they are not treated with dignity when first reporting violence it is unlikely they will continue to support the prosecution. Women clearly stated that the **attitudes and responses of police officers need to change and rape needs to be treated more seriously, and they wanted a greater investment into ensuring police provide a more believing, sensitive and consistent response** to women who have been raped.

“I was kept in the dark when it happened to me, and I couldn’t go to the toilet, so I had to poo and wee and lie in it because they locked me up. Afterwards, when I was found, an officer told me that I stank. I was sitting in the hospital and the liaison officer came in and told me that I stank too, I felt humiliated.” (FGii)

“There is no prioritising of women’s safety by the police. It was the rape trained response officer, a police woman, who knocked my daughter back after she’d been gang raped, she persuaded her not to give evidence, said she had been drinking so no-one would believe her. And she was trained!” (FGii)

“I was in the situation where my husband was raping me for years, I tried to report it, and they said he was my husband, so I had no proof.” (FGi)

“My Sapphire Liaison Officer, when she came to the hospital, she was finishing shifts when she came to see me. The detective asked her to drive me around the area to see if I recognised anything. She drove me around a bit and then said ‘it doesn’t look like we’ll find anything in the dark, we’ll come back in daylight.’ They never ever turned up and took me back.” (FGii)

“It’s not specialist officers going out to women, it’s PCs who are going out to women who have been sexually assaulted, and some of them aren’t very tactful...they make it obvious they don’t believe and victims can tell. It’s not just PCs, it can be Investigating Officers as well, I had one case where the officer pretty much said it was a one night stand the victim regretted. It’s the attitude of the police that needs to be addressed.” (FGi)

“[My daughter] was raped by my ex partner 2 weeks before her 9th birthday. The minute she told me he was out. I was told he had been put on bail...I phoned the police and told them he was breaching his bail conditions, nothing was done. Then I found out he was parked down the road from my house, I rang them again

and asked them why they hadn't picked him up. I said I felt like a statistic, they said they are doing their best." (FGi)

"My daughter is a 5'1, she's size 6, there's nothing of her. She got away from 3 men, I'll never know how she did it, she ran through a house, over a fence 8 foot high. She was in a terrible mess. The police did a cursory drive around, they knocked on two doors, and then said they were never going to find them. Their attitude is, it's a university town, if we worked on all of these things we would never stop working on suspected rape cases. My ex husband went down to Kent, 3 days running and knocked on every door. He has picked up witnesses, who saw my daughter screaming in the street, who saw the men driving off and picking her back up again, and dragging her back into the car. Other than that there wouldn't be a case because the police have done nothing." (FGii)

"There is a real inconsistency in the quality of forensics, by the police and SARCs; they don't take the right samples. Then the CPS turn around months later and say they can't pursue a case because the police didn't collect the right evidence, where is this ignorance coming from? ... I went to court last week and the defence was that he was on drugs when it happened, and they didn't take a drugs test on him. Even the judge looked confused. They are not collecting the appropriate evidence at the time of reporting." (FGi)

*"My liaison officer, she had sat with me in the hospital, and I said, this must be hard for you, and she said, you're not my family so it's not... I'm making a complaint now, they have lost my clothes, my DNA evidence, I'm going to make them f**ing pay for what they have done to me, it's hard for me to do this, but those bastards are walking the streets because of the police. They need training, they don't care about us. My other investigating officer came into the hospital and asked me in front of all my family, 'were you raped?' How dare he ask me a question like that in front of all my family. Why aren't they trained in how to deal with women who've been raped?" (FGii)*

"There was quite a big gap between her reporting and anything happening, they didn't make an arrest or tell her, it seemed like it was when it was convenient for him. It was a big enough gap for you to change your mind and get scared. It was 3 weeks or something, they said they were going to wait until they took action... When they did finally arrest him, the detective spoke to her and said, 'he seems all right', which is obviously completely the wrong thing to say. The other negative was that she didn't have a consistent SOIT officer, her officer kept changing, she got a call from the detective who didn't have very good people skills, and she just wanted her SOIT officer to call her and for it to be the same one... knowing that there was someone there who was on her side, or representing her." (FGiii)

"I have had two clients who have had completely different experiences with the police. One was remanded immediately, the case went straight to trial; she was treated really well. The other case was historical, and she was treated really badly. It seemed like in the one case where there was a lot of evidence she was treated really well, and in the other where there was less evidence she was treated really badly. Her treatment was terrible, really terrible... she had different officers turning up at her house, mostly male, pressuring her to report, at one

point they said if he raped someone else it would be her fault. They made her show them where the guy was living, but she did it all under duress, she didn't want to do it. They were even slipping notes under her door, when she stopped answering the door, she didn't want to go out because she didn't feel safe...She was hounded by the police. We phoned up to get some advice and they actually started harassing staff to try and find out the name of the woman involved. Then they said if she wanted to retract the statement she would have to go on tape to say it was a lie, she couldn't just pull out" (FGiii)

Many women spoke of feeling a **loss of control once they had reported rape** to the police:

"It's their pace, not your pace. There is a lack of control. It should be the other way round, you're the victim, it's happened to you, it should be at your pace. It's crucial that sense of control. I didn't feel in control at any point. At any stage." (FGiii)

"I felt there were all of these officers telling me what was going to happen, what I should do, there was no option to say stop, can I have a break? I felt that I was being swept away; I was going through with it whether I liked it or not." (FGiii)

Some women who had received a poor service from police said they would like to have the **opportunity to complain about agency responses**, in a way that does not jeopardise their case.

"We offered to help these women make a complaint; all three of them [who had had problems with the police] were too scared. We offered to do it anonymously, so we could offer feedback that way to Sapphire via our organisation, they said no. There is this incredible fear, if I make a complaint will the police come and get me, will it bias what they say about me." (FGiii)

"I had a client who wanted to complain but didn't want to jeopardise the case, she didn't want to be seen as a troublemaker." (FGiii)

In one group, **there was unanimous support for women's services to be trained to interview and take statements from women, which should then be admissible in court.**

"When it comes to interviewing women, women's services are better at it. They should train women who already support women to be trained in PACE interview techniques so they can get statements from women in a more comfortable environment." (FGiii)

Of those who had reported sexual abuse to the police, only **a minority of women had received a positive police response:**

"The turning point for me, after seven years of abuse from aged 9 to 16, was when I wrote down every time he had done something to me, and I had to turn the paper over, and it hit me, I had to do something. I got my family round, and I made them listen to me and it made sense. It was only after contacting [rape crisis] that I felt strong enough to report. I reported it to the police, they took my

video statement, and then they arrested him and charged him with 7 offences. He was refused bail. The police kept me updated, but I also got a lot of help from CRASAC [Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre], I could phone up whenever I needed to, the police can't be there all the time.” (FGi)

“I reported in Hackney where my sister lives, 2 PCs came out and they thought it was just domestic violence, and I told them what happened and then they called someone else out from Waltham Forest where it happened. Two policemen came out and they stayed with me the whole time, I reported at 7pm, and they were supposed to finish their shift at 9pm and they stayed with me until 2am. They drove me to the Sapphire unit, they made sure I got in, the lady who met me at the unit was brilliant as well, she asked me some questions and then she drove me back to my sister's at 4am the next morning.” (FGii)

“I had a woman PC with me when I was examined by a doctor and she was really nice. She held my hand. The doctor was really horrible and the PC had to have a word with the doctor, told them to go easy on me, because I was a 15 year old girl.” (FGiii)

Mandatory training for professionals

Women wanted **compulsory training on rape, sexual violence and other forms of violence against women for all criminal justice services and partnerships** including police officers, prosecutors, the judiciary, probation officers and other professionals (like health, housing and social services). This training should not only include providing a professional and supportive response but should also educate staff about available services and the needs of specific groups of women. Women felt this training should include survivor's voices and ensure the participation of stakeholders and service users in its monitoring and review. In particular women also wanted **all professionals who work with children and young people to be trained in identifying and responding appropriately to childhood sexual abuse.**

“I want mandatory training for all law enforcement officers. So at least they have an inkling, if there is a rape they have some knowledge of how to go about it. They fuff about, you are already depressed, you are already terrified.” (FGii)

“Every police force should have the same procedure and have compulsory training, it should be nationalised so that all women know what to expect from the police if they report rape”. (FGii)

“Judges are a concern; they need to get more of an understanding about what happens, and training in the victim experience. They are not above everything, they don't know everything. They need training from people like ISVAs who work with victims every day.” (FGi)

Women also spoke of the importance of health services being trained to document a woman's disclosure about rape accurately and without judgement, otherwise inaccurate or misleading medical records might impact on the outcome of the case during a trial.

“I went to my GP and he wouldn’t believe me. He even wrote ‘raped’ in inverted commas on my doctor’s note. What if I needed my medical records at court?” (FGi)

Specialist sexual violence services: Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (ISVAs) and Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs).

Women who reported rape said they ***need immediate access to independent sexual violence advocacy services (ISVAs) located in the women’s voluntary sector***, and they spoke very highly of the support they had received from ISVAs, where they existed.

“The person who went with my daughter when she reported her rape was made to leave the room. She was left on her own at one of the most vulnerable times in her life to deal with loads of questions. If somebody had been with her, perhaps they wouldn’t have told her that nobody would believe her because she had been drinking, and asked whether she really wanted to poked and prodded for hours on end. Perhaps they would have said, hang on, don’t talk to her like that. There has to be some way of making sure the victim knows that what is happening to them is normal or not. Women need a specialist women’s service to support them when they report. I and my daughter have never had any experience of this, until now from getting support from rape crisis.” (FGii)

“There has to be help along the way, we need help immediately, from specialist women’s services, not just a phone call in 6 months to say the case has got to court. There has to be more done for the women and children too, because they are victims as well, but the court don’t see it like that.” (FGii)

Women also noted however that there was significant ***inconsistency in the availability of specialist sexual violence support services for rape victims*** across the country.

“I just think it’s a lottery depending on where you live. I was lucky, my doctor was very supportive, he referred me to SERICC [South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre]. SERICC were the one’s who actually reported it to the police for me, with my permission. But my brother and sister have had no support, just 6 weeks of counselling. They have had nothing ... Out of 5 victims, only one of us has had support, and that is because I live in this area and they live in another.” (FGii)

Women who had used Sexual Assault Referral Centres in London also ***spoke very positively about the service they had received from ‘The Havens’ (SARCs)***:

“The Haven, they were brilliant, when I got raped the first time Haven wasn’t in place. My statement was written down and I had quite a lot of cuts because he used a knife. But they sent a male doctor; I wanted to see a female doctor so I had to wait 6 hours. The second time round when I was raped again I went to the Haven, they were fantastic, they made me tea, took my statement, gave me clean clothes, let me have a shower. I think Haven is the best thing. I was taken to Whitechapel, the doctor that examined me was perfect, brilliant, she was female, she was fantastic.” (FGii)

“The Haven gave my daughter her dignity back. She was so demoralised. We were there from 6pm in the evening to 3.30am the next morning; by the time we got home I felt she had got a little bit of herself back. To have someone to say ‘I’m so glad I met you, I wish it had been in different circumstances, I believe you.’ She didn’t get anything like that from the police, but the staff at The Haven in London were brilliant. I couldn’t fault them.” (FGii)

“The Haven is the best thing, it makes you feel so much better as a victim, at the police station you are shut in a tiny little room, but there, you feel safer, more at home, more comfortable.” (FGii)

“I was taken to Whitechapel, the doctors were lovely, the assistants were lovely, they treat you like a human being. They treat you with a bit of respect. You can have a shower, it’s really nice and comfortable.” (FGii)

“The waiting rooms are for the whole family, there are toys for the kids, tea and biscuits, and private rooms. It caters for all different age groups. Somebody has sat down and thought about it basically. They have really nice toiletries, I know it sounds stupid but things like that matter to a woman.” (FGii)

“My partner and family were there, and I was in there for quite a while, and they kept checking up on them and making them tea and coffee, so I didn’t have to worry about them, they were brilliant.” (FGii)

“My mum came with me, and the lady from Sapphire, who was lovely, she sat with my mum to make sure she was ok. Being able to have a shower, and nice toiletries, and they chat to you about your kids, it just makes it less of an ordeal. It should be available for everyone. I think it’s the best thing that has happened for rape victims.” (FGii)

However, **women also spoke of an inconsistent service provided by SARCs** across the country. In Coventry, for example, women’s experiences of using SARCs (which they said were police-led without health involvement) were very different to women’s experience of The Haven in London.

“Coventry needs a SARC and we don’t have one. It’s a 50-minute drive at least. If they have no one to go with, they are in a car with 2 male police officers. An ideal SARC would have crisis support at the centre of it, so somebody there to support the victim from the get go. You would have appropriately trained female doctors. The whole process needs to be detraumatizing for victims, the start of a process where you are supported. Instead of how it is now, where it is a horrendous journey and you have to really really want it to pursue a prosecution.” (FGi)

“Why doesn’t Coventry have a SARC? I had to be shipped off to Walsall at 4 in the morning to a rape suite because Coventry doesn’t have a SARC.” (FGi)

Access to pre-trial counselling

Many women spoke about the **difficulty they experienced accessing counselling and support services if their case was going to court, and said they wanted pre-trial**

counselling so that women are not forced to choose between counselling or going to court.

"I had to go to a refuge, 4 kids in tow, they have had to wait months to go to school. The manager of the refuge said that they had counselling in place for me and the kids but it would have to wait until the case went to court, because otherwise they will use it against me in court. So we were left suffering for 5-6 months until the case went to court. It really needs to change." (FGii)

"My friend was told if she took her daughters to counselling after they'd been raped then she should forget going to court. She was told it would contaminate the evidence. She had this huge dilemma between getting the help her daughters needed and letting him get away with it, he was still working with children, perhaps he would do it to someone else." (FGii)

"SERICC offered me counselling but I couldn't take it because of the court case, his barrister would use it against me, so where am I supposed to get support from while waiting to get to court?" (FGii)

Discontinuing a case

Women said they wanted **clarity about the decision making process between the police and CPS, when deciding whether the case should proceed to trial**. Some women told us they did not understand why the CPS decided not to proceed with a case, when they had been advised by the police that it was a strong case.

"The standard the CPS make their decisions on is questionable and should be reviewed. So many rapes are not in a public place, they happen in secret. The CPS look at a case, and say the case isn't strong enough, there's no other evidence, or it might have been consensual. But this kind of attack is personal, so it shouldn't be thrown out on the basis that it took place between two people in private. A crime has still been committed so the case should go ahead." (FGi)

"I [ISVA] have seen such awful decision making. The police are saying it is a strong case with a credible witness, and a CPS lawyer, who has never met the victim, turns around and says no, the evidence isn't good enough. There is some really good guidance nationally and there is an assumption that it is getting filtered down but it isn't." (FGi)

Some women also felt that more should be done to investigate why a woman withdraws her statement.

"One of my clients, she was gang raped; there was a witness. Statements were taken and it was going to go to court. But the witness withdrew and the case collapsed, they didn't investigate why the witness withdrew, whether they were intimidated or had been given money. The men were never found or charged although they were known to the police. They just let it go." (FGiii)

With any form of sexual violence, being believed is crucial, yet many ***spoke about the decision to discontinue the case by the CPS as being interpreted as disbelief in the victim.*** Women described the often devastating impact that discontinuation of the case had had on them:

“He got arrested because he went on the run and he was in custody for about 4 weeks and then they just dropped it. I went through depression, I tried to commit suicide ... He got away with it.” (FGi)

“It’s the case of we’re going to hound you night and day, and then the moment there is no evidence they drop you and you feel insignificant. You go from being at the centre of something to nothing, because you’re of no use anymore. It compounds any feelings of insignificance.” (FGiii)

“I came home from school and the police were there with my social worker and she said, ‘I’m really sorry but he has been let out’...it rips you apart, you just think after all that, and he’s still out there, he isn’t on the sex offender register or nothing.” (FGi)

“He was there with all his family. The judge decided that he wasn’t going to hear the case on the basis of abuse of process and his family were outside the court, cheering, and hugging. Me and my sister had to sit in that back room, hearing all this, knowing he got away with what he did to us for 6 years.” (FGi)

“Mine didn’t get to court; my emotions are all over the place...The police were crap. They sent me a letter to tell me that the case wasn’t going to court. Two police officers came, and read me the letter; I had no idea who they were. I was sat there; they were saying all these things. They don’t actually treat you like a person. The only person who the CPS bother to talk to is the guy that did this to me. They got his side of the story; it was a biased letter. It was a stupid crap letter.... If somebody had talked to me and explained to me why this isn’t going to court, someone who was actually working on the case it would have been so much better... That letter made me feel so small and demeaned, like I was a waste of time, I got nothing from it. There was no point in me going to the police, he got away with it.” (FGi)

“My client often had to call in to see how the case was going, she felt misled and misinformed. Even when they arrested him, they didn’t tell her. When the CPS decided to discontinue the case she wanted a meeting with them to find out why, for her that would have been really important in terms of being taken seriously. For a sense of procedural justice, she didn’t get that meeting; they took a long time to respond. She felt that if she had had that meeting it would have helped.” (FGiii)

“The police were fantastic, completely supportive, and you build up that relationship with them, and then they had to tell us that it wasn’t going ahead because a judge would rather go out and play golf, he was in his 70’s, he hadn’t got a clue about the real world, about the real experiences of women, that we are too frightened to talk about it ... It’s a trigger for something, if something that painful happens to you as a child, it’s a trigger and for me it was bulimia, I ended

up bulimic and seriously ill. It wasn't until I went to my doctors for treatment for that, that it all came crashing out. It causes self hatred doesn't it?" (FGi)

"They dropped the case. I had to break it to my daughter, that he wasn't going to go to jail, and the things we hoped would happen aren't going to happen, and she took it on the chin, as long as she never had to see him again. Then they came back for another go. Another judge had looked at the case, and they asked if 'E' would be ok to go to court, they trooped her around court and put her through that, only to say no again." (FGi)

"I am a survivor of abuse as a child, and my brother and sister were also abused. When we were adults, my brother decided to go to the police, when it went to court it was just the most awful experience in the world. It was a really old judge who decided that for 3 children to become adults and not have said anything before that it couldn't have happened. To be actually told by a judge, even before they had heard us, that this could not have happened because one of us or all of us would have said something before - we were in our 30's by this point - it was just awful." (FGi)

"If I had had one contact who kept me informed, that would make a difference. The Police officer said he was going to call me at a certain time. He never did. He said he would come round after I received the letter, he never did. It took 2 weeks for the letter to arrive telling me they were going to drop it ... It's just not good enough. After everything you have gone through, the pain, the police coming round, the medical table, everything. It just takes the piss." (FGi)

"What annoys me is that he wasn't named and shamed for it. He has just got away with it completely...I nearly went to a mental hospital over this; they didn't think I was right in the head. I tried to commit suicide and I was self harming and all that, they kept me in hospital." (FGi)

Access to support at court and consistent use of special measures

Women said they wanted to be able to **access support in court, from whoever they wanted, to enable them to feel more confident when giving evidence.**

"SERICC actually came to court with me to give me support, it made me feel more confident and helped me feel like I could get through the ordeal. But his barrister kicked up a stink and threw SERICC out." (FGii)

"I got cross examined, the court room was packed with his supporters. I was giving evidence via video link and I wanted my ISVA to sit next to me so I had someone that I knew. They wouldn't allow it, they made this woman from witness protection I didn't even know sit next to me and she gave me really bad advice. She told me to get through it as quickly as possible and not to show any emotion. I felt like she just wanted to go home." (FGi)

Women also complained about the inconsistent provision of special measures at court, and wanted **special measures to be available routinely for women who have been raped.**

“The police were great right up until the court case; then I felt like I was a villain and he was the victim. They asked my sister not to have screens round on the day we went to court. She is quite fiery, they said it would look better if she didn’t have screens up. I said it’s not a circus.” (FGii)

“Women are supposed to have special measures, but it is decided on the day by the judge, it shouldn’t be like this. I had one client, special measures had been appointed, but the judge didn’t want to rearrange the court room and the defendant had already been brought in, so they said on this occasion, she will just have to not look at him.” (FGi)

“I was lucky, I had support in the court from a women’s service and they were lovely. I wasn’t brought through the main entrance, I was brought in the side entrance, which meant I didn’t risk bumping in to him, or anyone connected to him, which was good. It was a closed court. I had a screen up, I said I’ll give evidence but I want a screen. I went into the court first and then he was brought in, and then he left and then I was brought out. But my sister had to face him give evidence in front of him and he started taking the piss out of her. The judge warned him, and told his barrister to tell him to stop. She should have been given the option of a screen.” (FGii)

Some women felt the criminal justice system was inherently biased against supporting the victim, and wanted to see **separate legal representation for victims.**

“In Ireland you are appointed a legal representative, so you can check whether things are being done properly. You are seen as your own legal representative. There should be a written down standard that is given to each victim, I know you’re not in the right state when it happens, but if they have to follow a standard and you have your own advocate....we didn’t have any of this.” (FGii)

“The perpetrator often gets treated better than the victim. He could see his solicitor anytime, whereas I couldn’t. I wanted to be familiar with the barrister representing me, whereas he was dictating to his barrister what to say. I had a 2 minute meeting with my barrister on the day of the trial. I think some people want to be familiar with the person that is representing you, you feel that they won’t care which way it goes, they are just doing their job. You’re not familiar with them. It’s not fair.” (FGi)

“X had previous mental health issues and substance misuse issues. That was all she was thinking about, was her part in it, and how the police and the courts would use that against her. There is no one to explain that they won’t ask her about certain things, it’s a minefield if you don’t know. She was terrified about going to trial, and them pulling up her past. If she had had someone there, a legal counsel to advise her, it would have made all the difference.” (FGiii)

“You have 5 minutes before you go into court to get to know that person who is supposed to represent you. They know nothing about you, all they have is the

papers but they don't know you as a person. How could he stand up to that judge and say, hang on, you need to listen to these people. He couldn't." (FGi)

"There is a big fear of the trial amongst victims; we need to demystify the trial. We need expert witnesses and victims should have their own lawyer, a system like they have in the States. It's been shown in America that a woman having their own lawyer helps in sending rapists down. It's only fair and right that a woman should have her own lawyer. The woman is up against a jury with their own prejudices, the press, only a lawyer can help the jury see the reality." (FGiii)

"The woman doesn't have a solicitor, a barrister; she has no rights to information. You don't feel in control, something is happening to you. You have to phone in to see if anything has happened, if anyone has been arrested. You need to feel in control of what's happening instead of feeling like a witness in your own case." (FGiii)

Sentencing

Many women spoke about the need for **perpetrators to receive sentences appropriate to the crime committed**, and felt that in cases of rape and sexual violence, sentences were too lenient.

"My dad interfered with me for years from 6 months old, my dad got 3 years, he served 18 months. I've got a lifetime." (FGii)

"In my experience, we were 5 victims, he was found guilty and he got 5 years, it's not enough." (FGii)

"They need to review the sentencing. You go through years of abuse. You get 10 years for fraud. Are our lives worth less than money?" (FGii)

"A sentence should be a sentence, you shouldn't be allowed to get out on good behaviour, and given new identities." (FGii)

Impact of getting a conviction - women need support long after the trial

Even though some women had been to court and got a conviction, for them this was not the end of their trauma and **for several women a conviction was practically irrelevant to their healing process**.

"Despite that bad advice, after a weeks trial they found him unanimously guilty. He was sentenced to 13 years, he has to serve 7 years and as soon as he gets released he is going to be deported. That's such a positive result, but I don't feel victorious, but I would feel worse if he had got off... you need to let it be known. Even though it was positive I still need a lot of help, it's not made me happy. You need aftercare support, whatever the result is; you need someone there who is understanding, someone there to talk to, like CRASAC." (FGi)

“He didn’t get parole because he was showing no remorse. He has threatened to kill us all when he comes out. The probation officer got him re-arrested. When he is released, I’ve still got to watch my back.” (FGii)

“I was terrorised by my husband who also abused my children. I would like to ask the person who decides why they get their sentence halved for ‘good behaviour’ when I’m serving a life sentence for what he did to me and my children. I would like to sit in front of them and ask ‘why?’ I was raped and beaten for years, I don’t get time off for good behaviour, I have lost my job, my house, my car. Yes, I’m still alive, but that is only because of CRASAC, who have helped me when I have hit rock bottom.” (FGi)

“My uncle abused me as well, I didn’t tell anyone until I was older he used to threaten me... Finally, he went to court for abusing his girlfriend’s children, and strangers on the street. I had cancer at the time so I didn’t have the strength to go to court, I wasn’t prepared for it. He got 7 years but he was out after 2.5 years. He abused his girlfriend’s children and 4 other children. He is allowed to walk these streets. He won’t change, he will do it all again.” (FGii)

“They are protected [in prison], who is protecting us? We have to go back out there and face it.” (FGii)

Some women also spoke of the trauma of hearing that the perpetrator has decided to appeal the decision, and of the **need of ongoing support throughout the appeal process, which women felt was often overlooked.**

“There is an issue with the appeals process, after court. The trial is over, everything is done. Then he appeals and the victim gets dragged through that rollercoaster again, and I don’t know if there is any support for victims because the trial is done, it’s finished. But she has to start it again.” (FGiii)

Women also spoke of the **lack of an integrated approach between criminal and civil justice systems**, which impacted on their own and their children’s safety and well-being.

“Everyone has talked about criminal proceedings but what about family courts, how can a known abuser still have access to their kids? I do the best I can for my children, he doesn’t provide for them, and he will probably get some kind of access.” (FGi)

“My ex partner gets access to my daughter, not his child, even though he has abused me and he has been accused of abusing her, he still gets unsupervised access to see her. I can’t stand it, after everything that has happened, it baffles me. My daughter is going through hell, she has self harmed, and I have been accused of somehow colluding with it, how am I colluding with him, they are the ones granting access?” (FGi)

Criminal Injuries Compensation

Women who had applied for compensation (Criminal Injuries Compensation) wanted the **process to be simpler and the rules to be more transparent in how decisions are made, so that decisions are clearly linked to the crime for which the compensation is being sought**, rather than being based on whether or not a victim is believed, or on their behaviour.

“When survivors make claims for compensation, there is no continuity in the system and the amounts being awarded are not proportionate to the physical and psychological harm that has been caused. I had a friend who went through the criminal justice system at a similar time to me, and because her case ended in a conviction and mine didn’t, she got compensation and I didn’t. That’s just awful.” (FGi)

“The compensation forms are really difficult to fill out, it’s like, if he touched you there, you get this amount, but sometimes they don’t get the full story, or they don’t believe you, so they turn you down. And they talk about ‘injuries’ you’ve had, which gets confusing in cases like mine, how can you prove your injuries?” (FGi)

“I went through the criminal injuries appeal process. They said on the grounds of probability I was not abused. So I appealed again, and again until eventually I got in front of a panel. Do you know what that panel said to me? The panel said to me, we absolutely believe this happened to you, but we still can’t award you anything.” (FGi)

Other issues that impact on women’s willingness to report to the police

Availability of women-only support services

Although not directly in the scope of the review, all women who attended the focus groups spoke about the crucial role specialist women’s services had played in providing them with therapeutic individual and group support, which they said aided their recovery from the abuse by addressing women’s self-esteem and empowerment. Women said that **access to women’s sexual violence support services is a significant factor in enabling women to report rape and sexual violence to the police and to support the case through to court.**

In particular, women said they valued services provided by women’s organisations which are accessible; safe and which respond holistically to their needs, and provide support beyond a crisis, and for as long as women need it to recover from the abuse. Women wanted more women-only services and greater access to specialist counselling services for survivors of rape and sexual abuse. Women also wanted increased availability of longer-term, independent advocacy services that allow women to access support outside of office hours and at weekends.

“My dad abused all three of us. My middle sister got the worst of it; he used to kick the shit out of her, like a football...He locked me in the house for 2 years,

from when I was 11, until I was 13. He brought us over to my uncle's house to abuse us...I tried to kill myself a couple of times when I was younger, I've had no help to get over this. The kids' dad nearly destroyed me as well when I got into domestic violence, and I thought no, you're not going to destroy me this time sweetheart, no way. I've got 5 kids, I'm not being destroyed. It was women's services that helped me get through. I went to a women's refuge, then got support from SERICC." (FGii)

"In Asian communities, it's really shut away. There is this idea that you can deal with rape in the community ... If we're going to work within communities we need to be sensitive, disbelief is common. There needs to be somewhere to go, like a refuge, specialist women's services. It's not safe leaving it with family members or reporting to the police, women end up committing suicide because they haven't got access to specialist women's services and BME women's services." (FGii)

"The Amina Project is a one to one support service from women who have been through it, which is really important. We're trained in support, but it's the fact that we have been through it that's important. We're not an authority figure, one person on the other side of the desk. We're not from a statutory agency; it's more of an equal relationship, we can act as a mentor for other women." (FGiii)

"If it wasn't for SERICC I think I would have killed myself. Nothing has been done, I reported it, I got kicked out of my nursing training, I was suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, nobody asked why, nobody supported me." (FGii)

"My brother and sister, who were also abused, aren't coping. They haven't had access to support like I have, they haven't been able to cross the threshold yet. With myself, I've moved on, but it was only because I got the support from CRASAC, that I've managed to get through, without their support I don't think I'd have made it. They've helped me go to an eating disorder clinic to deal with my bulimia. CRASAC have been a lifeline for me." (FGi)

Women also spoke about it being much easier to report rape and sexual violence and to seek help, e.g. in health or the justice system, if they had **access to female staff to speak to**.

"I think it would be easier to report if you knew you would be reporting to a female. My doctor was male, but I refused to see him. I have to go to the doctors quite often because my burns keep getting infected because of the area they are. I request a female doctor; my burns need to be examined by a female because of where they are. My doctor is good, he makes sure there is a female doctor for me to see, but they should be the same everywhere. You should have that choice. That's why we also need support from specialist women's services, from other women." (FGii)

"There really could be females all the way through. It's simple things like, a male liaison officer returned my clothes, I don't particularly want them but he knocked on the door. There he was, holding up my underwear, ticking it off. It was awful. Females all the way through the system are desperately needed." (FGii)

Access to specialist counselling services

Women wanted **counselling services for women and children to be more accessible, to be available immediately and in the long term**, for as long as women need them, instead of being crisis-focussed or short term.

“Six sessions of counselling is not enough. We need safe women-only services for women who’ve been abused, many women don’t report to the police or won’t ever go to health or other services. More women’s services are needed so that these women can get help.” (FGii)

“So many rape victims suffer from post traumatic stress disorder; the same as veterans of war or torture victims, rape is torture. There should be free NHS therapy; psychotherapy or counselling, I think I was given 6 sessions of counselling. It wasn’t enough for me...why have I got to pay myself, I spent a lot of money getting myself back on track.” (FGiii)

“Therapy for women needs to be tailored...My therapy was very limited; they didn’t know how to talk to me. They need to know how to counsel in that particular area, it’s really crucial the first time. If you get a negative response you might not go back. The more access there is, the quicker we can deal with it, otherwise it takes longer and longer. You feel isolated and you just get on with it and then things start to fall apart. Help women to help themselves get back and be a part of society again, that’s what we need.” (FGiii)

Improving responses to rape by other statutory services

The importance women place on access to women’s support services needs to be considered in context, because **many women spoke of the failure of other statutory services in responding to their needs**.

“I wasn’t going to report...Then my mum said ‘don’t let him get away with it’. I approached the police eventually, but I didn’t receive any support. Social services were shit, absolute shit, too. They threatened to take the kids off me, never mind trying to give me any support. They wouldn’t let me go back to my house. I had no help from housing. I stayed with a friend in Hackney, and I had to chase them instead of them chasing me. It was women’s services that I eventually got support from.” (FGii)

“My social worker said I should have a confrontation with ‘F’ (the perpetrator) in a room...she said I think I have a way that would give you closure, would you be prepared to sit in a room with ‘F’ and have it out with him? I was like, are you mad? Why would I want to sit there in front of him, I never want to see him in my life. She still went ahead and arranged it, my mum rang me and told me it had been arranged for the following week, and she would be there and I didn’t have anything to worry about. I said, you can’t make me do it.” (FGi)

“I’m sorry if I cry I find it all quite emotional. I was sexually abused by two men from a baby until I was nearly 15 years old. ...I didn’t have to go to court, because my dad admitted what he had done to me and my sister. The police and

social services were called ...But I didn't get any help. Later I tried to commit suicide, they wanted to put me in a mental health ward but I refused to go...I didn't get any help when I was raped again when I was 24. The police were quite good on this occasion...But I was never offered any kind of help afterwards. Two years ago I was abducted and raped and I wasn't offered any kind of help then either. Victim support refused to help me...I went to my GP, who had an in house counsellor, but they refused to help me because they weren't specialised in the area I needed support. I went back to the Haven and begged them to help me...but they could only help me temporarily. I needed a women's service to offer me support, I wish I'd had this support from the first time, I'd feel stronger now and better able to cope...I started coming here, and if it weren't for SERICC, I don't know what I would do." (FGii)

"There's no support out there for you. They gave me a bloke counsellor after everything that happened, I tried to talk about what had happened and my CAMHS counsellor told me not to talk about it with him, he felt uncomfortable." (FGi)

"There is nobody out there who wants to help, when the bailiffs are knocking on the door, because you've been raped and you can't work any more. You have to live in the same house, that you were raped and beaten; your kids have to sleep in the same beds that they were beaten in. I rang the DC and begged him to help us move, and he said you can go into a hostel and your kids can go into care. He gets his stripes and his brownie points for putting another monster away, but what do we get?" (FGi)

One young woman pointed out that at 15, she would have preferred an independent support worker with her instead of her mother, when she relayed her experience to police:

"I was warned not to withdraw, they said if I withdrew and later wanted to press charges it would be very difficult. There would be loads of paperwork...I was only 15 at the time...Somebody should have talked to me alone. My mum was always there and very emotionally involved because of what had happened. I think my mum should have been taken out of the room, given a nice cup of tea, and someone professional should have sat with me. She was so emotionally involved, it was intense. I had to describe the physical aspects of the abuse in front of her. I didn't want to; I would have preferred a stranger to be there. I needed someone independent supporting me. I felt embarrassed and humiliated describing this stuff in front of my mum. That was horrible." (FGiii)

Some women also said that **sexual violence should be recognised as much of a priority as domestic violence for housing services**, so that women feel able to stay safely in their own homes if that is their choice.

"I asked for a security button and bars on the windows after he got out last year ... I was completely banned from going to London for about 4 months. My sister went to my house to pick up my post and it was smashed up. I asked for help so I could stay in my own home, they said if you don't move, your kids are gone. It's like I've done something wrong. They wonder why you don't report. It's not just

the police, it's all of them, social services, housing, it's the whole response. I couldn't get any safe housing because I'd been raped." (FGii)

"I wrote a letter to the housing association explaining everything, in order to move on I want to be somewhere new and different. I got letter back telling me I'm fine where I am, he's in prison, they just keep saying you're safe now, they don't understand the psychological effect. I moved into that house because of what he did to me and I don't want to be determined by him anymore, I want to be my own person." (FGi)

"I was told by my psychiatrist that there was an emergency phone you can have fitted if you're experiencing domestic violence. My psychiatrist fought for me to have this phone. I was told last week I couldn't have it because I didn't live in the right area and I'm not a victim of domestic violence. You're on a list and the police are supposed to respond quickly. Why isn't this available for everyone, I think it's disgusting." (FGii)

Publicity and media campaigns

Women said there needs to be **more awareness and publicity about what help there is available in local areas, and how agencies will respond if they report they've been raped. Women also wanted information available for partners and family members**, to help them support women if they disclose rape.

"If the general public knew what help there was out there, and what to expect from the police then it might be a different matter. You and all your friends and your family should have this knowledge, we all know to sneeze in a tissue and put it in the bin, but if you get raped or abused as a child or as a woman, you don't know what to do because nobody tells you, you don't know what the police will do, you don't know what help there is out there. Why aren't we all told this from a young age?" (FGii)

"There should be more copies of 'From Report to Court' [Rights of Women publication] available, every woman who accesses sexual violence services should get a copy. They are in short supply because of funding. It tells you everything, what your legal options are, where you can access support. It's written in a nice language, it's really accessible, women have found it really helpful. Women can take it home and it gives a point of information, it's invaluable as a first point of call, and it gives women options by knowing what your options are." (FGiii)

"The whole community needs to not feel ashamed talking about it, there needs to be information for partners too. If your partner tells you they were raped, how would you deal with it? How do you access help for yourself as well as for your partner, it's a big step to tell someone so it's important their response is helpful." (FGiii)

"It needs to be advertised, there are services out there, but I didn't know about them. I didn't know about CRASAC, I didn't know there would be support for

people like me. I know some people don't like talking about it, but I'm afraid it's tough luck for them; you have to acknowledge that this does happen.” (FGi)

However any publicity needs to ensure support services are resourced to effectively meet the increased demand for the service.

“At Uni there was some information about Rape Crisis, posters and flyers and stuff. But although there was quite a lot of awareness that Rape Crisis exists as an organisation, the service and the help available is limited and is actually in crisis itself. When I tried to phone them through their helpline there was no one there to speak to. I found it quite difficult to get help.” (FGiii)

Women said they wanted to see national and local **media campaigns to challenge social attitudes about rape and sexual abuse**, the secrecy that surrounds it, and that responsibility for rape lies with the perpetrator.

“Rape is such a taboo for so many people to talk about. You start talking about what has happened in your family, and then all of a sudden it comes out; people tell you these stories, people who haven't told their parents, who have carried it with them for 30 odd years. Why is it like this, why can't we talk about it, as a society why are we sweeping it under the carpet like it doesn't exist?” (FGi)

“If we used the term male violence in a national advertising campaign, we have the anti smoking, the obesity campaigns, now we have the don't take drugs, why can't we have something about not going out raping women, you won't get away with it. The advertising we have had so far puts all the onus on the victim, it's 'don't go out and get drunk, you might get raped'. The onus needs to be on the man, to stop women feeling shameful. So they have the confidence to go out into the world and say I've been raped, and you're not going to get away with it, and I'm not ashamed to say it.” (FGiii)

“Personally my experience was 30 years ago, these recent experiences are so similar, it's sad that nothing has changed, or so little has changed. You often see screaming tabloids about attacks on men, women and children from a stranger but you very rarely see a headline about violence from a family member or someone in the home.” (FGi)

“There are no messages around us saying male violence against women is wrong. It's great that we are encouraging women to report, but it's also about teaching men that they are not entitled to women's bodies, being violent is not acceptable. That's what is going to work in the long run” (FGiii)

“Much more education and public awareness is needed. We need to break down the myths and stereotypes about what rape and sexual violence is, and a national advertising campaign; alcohol doesn't rape women, men do.” (FGiii)

“I'm now a grandmother, my mother had an experience, I had an experience, my daughter had a negative experience, I'm trying to stop it happening to my granddaughter who is only a baby, but you need to break it, you need to let men very clearly know that they can no longer get away with it.” (FGiii)

In particular, women said they wanted **education in schools from a young age through to colleges about preventing rape and sexual violence, and the help available.**

“Education, we need to teach girls it’s not ok and boys it’s not acceptable, my son is in middle school and there was an incident where one of the girls said one of the boys raped her in the school toilets and she got pregnant. I only found out from someone else, so my son is wandering round school not knowing what rape is, whilst this news spreads like wildfire. Schools just don’t want to touch it, but kids are exposed to these words and they don’t know anything about them, about what they mean and the consequences.” (FGiii)

“We need to teach children from a very young age that their bodies are their own – they belong to themselves. They didn’t belong to their mummy or daddy, they belong to themselves. Why can’t we talk to our children like this? We can’t eradicate what has happened to us but we can try and protect the next generation. So these children don’t end up in bad relationships, and they listen to their instinct.” (FGi)

“Stop calling it sex education, people get scared off by that. It’s nothing to do with teaching them how to put a condom on; it’s about teaching boys not to be violent and girls that being a sex object isn’t the only way to be validated.” (FGiii)

“If somebody had come to me then when I was 9 and said ‘ this should not be happening, this isn’t normal’ maybe I would have realised that it wasn’t just happening to me, and told someone... Within 3 weeks of my dad passing away my uncle started abusing me, that went on every day for 7 years... At 16, and I left home, in the worse possible way, with someone I had known for about a week and a half... I felt really down, tried to commit suicide and it was only years later after I went to the doctor and he referred me to CRASAC that I thought about reporting... it’s so important to do something in schools, so that these kids might tell someone at an earlier stage, and they won’t wait until they are 29 like me.” (FGi)

“There are gaps in information, we need national advertising, you can’t easily access this information unless you’re interested in women’s issues. Rape still comes down to being a woman’s issue. We need police going into schools and colleges and saying you know, rape is wrong, it’s happening in teen relationships, but there is help available.” (FGiii)

Conclusion: If you could change one thing ...

This report reflects the views and recommendations made by the 36 women who attended these discussion groups held as part of the Home Office review into victims’ experiences, to inform the development, implementation and review of future strategy and policy to end violence against women and girls.

What follows provides a summary of the key recommendations made by women who participated:

- Provision of safe women-only services whether or not women chose to report to statutory agencies – this was highly valued by women survivors of rape.
- Support from an independent specialist service at the point of reporting, and consistency in provision of women’s support services across the country. All survivors should be offered support before, during and after the court case from specialist sexual violence services.
- More support for girls aged 13-16, e.g. sexual violence advocate.
- Support for family members who are supporting victims.
- Free specialised therapy/counselling for survivors of sexual violence, and long term support for women after the court process, for as long as they need it.
- Emotional support and advocacy from an independent professional who can be there from beginning to end.
- Consistency of effective response from the criminal justice system across the country in response to rape and sexual violence.
- National standards for police, prosecutors and the courts, accompanied by protocols for agencies to adhere to, which victims should have access to, to know what to expect and what their rights are.
- Mandatory training on rape, sexual violence and violence against women, for all police officers; the focus should be on improving attitudes of police officers.
- More effective training of specialist officers – rape trained officers still responding poorly to cases of rape.
- Sensitivity, a believing approach and immediate action/evidence collecting by the police when a woman reports. A good first response is so important – a bad one can make women reluctant to engage with any services again.
- A consistent contact in the police, who liaises with the victim and her advocate.
- Access to pre-trial counselling so that victims are not forced to choose between counselling or going to court.
- Consistent provision of special measures and supportive people in court for the victim if they need it; women should have the right to choose who they want to support them in the court room.
- Women to have the choice of speaking to female staff at every stage of the reporting process – e.g. female photographer to photograph injuries. Women

- should have the right to request a female officer and that request must be respected.
- Training for health professionals to accurately record disclosures and injuries on medical notes that will be admissible in court.
 - Multiple assault / sexual assault should count as multiple crimes and be charged accordingly.
 - More information about the reporting process should be available to women, and the Rights of Women publication 'From Report to Court' should be much more widely available to women.
 - CPS should keep the victim better informed at all stages of the case.
 - CPS to explain their decisions not to continue with a case more thoroughly to the victim to ensure it doesn't get interpreted as disbelief, and for victims to get a sense of procedural justice.
 - Use of expert witnesses in sexual violence cases.
 - Legal representative for the victim at court; victims should be assigned their own lawyer.
 - Train women with experience of supporting women in PACE interview techniques, so they can take statements from women.
 - A clear complaints procedure should be in place to allow women to complain about bad practice, without jeopardising their case.
 - Cases should be 'victim led' so that victims feel in control of what is happening.
 - Tougher sentencing and rehabilitation for perpetrators.
 - More stringent approaches to cases involving girls aged 13-16 – consent should not be used as a defence.
 - Introduce a way of gathering evidence and then leaving it until the victim is ready to prosecute, without jeopardising the case.
 - A review of the appeals process to avoid victims getting dragged through the court process again.
 - A more transparent decision making process for awarding criminal injuries compensation.
 - Equal access to therapeutic support for survivors, at the point of need and for as long as women need it.

- Provision of safety measures in the home for rape survivors, and access to sanctuary schemes so that women can stay in their own home if that is their choice.
- Sensitive work with BME communities and provision of specialist BME women's services so BME women have somewhere to go.
- National advertising campaign on sexual violence, targeted at perpetrators and which does not blame women for their behaviour (e.g. alcohol use).
- Information and advertising to tackle sexual coercion of young women.
- Public awareness campaigns on the realities of sexual violence – make it less of a taboo, and everyone's issue. Public awareness campaigns should also address how to support somebody who has experienced sexual violence – education of whole communities.
- Education on violence against women in schools.
- Information about support services needs to be more readily available.
- Education of journalists and action taken against irresponsible reporting that reinforces rape myths.
- Joined up working between agencies in response to rape and violence against women, similar to the Every Child Matters framework.

Appendix A

Methodology and protocol used for discussion groups

An introductory letter containing background information about the review and a protocol for the discussion group were sent out to the agencies that agreed to make contact with women and to encourage their attendance at groups. Equality monitoring forms were used at the end of each group, asking women to anonymously record information about their age, their ethnicity, their gender identity, their sexuality and their religion and belief.

Women's safety before, during and after the groups was of paramount concern to us. We ensured that women who attended groups were in contact with local support services, should they need support during or following the group discussion. All the groups were women-only, and ground rules were negotiated at the start to maximise women's feeling of safety in the group. For example, women were encouraged to only use first (or any) names, and there was an opportunity to take time-out from the discussion at any time, if women needed to do so.

Facilitators made it clear at each group that all contributions would be non-attributable and treated as confidential, and that feedback would only be reported in an anonymous manner to the Home Office. The discussion was recorded in writing and, with prior agreement by attendees, recorded on a digital tape recorder for the purpose of cross-referencing with handwritten notes, to ensure the final report was an accurate reflection of the discussions. As stated in the protocol, all tapes and notes were held securely until their disposal after completion of the report.

In recognition of the importance of women's experience and the time they had taken to participate in the group, we reimbursed every woman who participated in a discussion group for their time and to cover any incidental expenses they might have incurred, by offering them a token of thanks in the form of high-street vouchers. We also ensured that women's services that supported us in the organising of these events (for example, by providing venues or refreshments) were reimbursed accordingly so that the financial and administrative burden on women's services was minimal.

Finally, we made a commitment to women attending that feedback from each group would be sent back to those services that helped us organise the group, so that they could see what information we had recorded to inform the Home Office review.

Protocol used for the women's discussion groups:

1. Purpose of the group

Sara Payne, the Victims' Champion, would like to meet with women who have experienced rape, as adults or children, to discuss their support needs, their experience of reporting rape and of the criminal justice system, and to consider the needs and

experience of those who chose not to report to the police. The aim is to explore what factors influence a victim to report, what factors influence a decision to withdraw from the process, what factors influence confidence and satisfaction, and to also consider the experience of those who choose not to report.

2. Purpose of this protocol

To provide information on what can be expected from the group discussion and to ensure those wishing to attend are not harmed or endangered in any way as a result.

3. Contacting women to attend the groups

The WNC will use its existing contacts with specialist services in order to gather the names of women who have voluntarily expressed an interest in attending these discussion groups.

The WNC will hold these names in its office and will not, under any circumstances, share these with any other agency or use them for any future consultations, unless express permission is provided from an individual woman. If so, the WNC will only do this in the way that is dictated as safe by that woman.

4. Who will be at each women's group

These are women-only groups. At each group there will be:

- (Approximately) 8-10 women; and
- Sara Payne, the Victim's Champion, who will be chairing the group; and
- Two facilitators, to guide the process and ensure women get a chance to contribute to the consultation; and
- Up to two additional staff members (from Home Office and/or WNC) to record and transcribe proceedings and to oversee the logistics of the group.

All of these people listed above are committed and bound by this protocol.

5. Format for the women's group

The groups will last for approximately 2 - 2.5 hours. Refreshments will be available on arrival and where appropriate lunch will also be provided. Each group will broadly follow a programme such as that outlined below and will include time for a comfort break, although groups will be sufficiently flexible in response to women's needs and circumstances:

<i>Approx. times</i>	
<i>30 minutes</i>	Welcome / introductions / about the consultation
<i>90 minutes</i>	Discussion – feedback on women's experience and use of the criminal justice system (including comfort break).
<i>30 minutes</i>	Round-up and close

A verbal outline of what is being discussed will be provided, and all additional content will also be verbally presented and collected. There will be no requirements for women to read or write unless they wish to.

Should any of those women who attend the groups offer advice on how the groups might work better, the WNC will consider this and alter it where necessary.

The groups have not been designed to act as a 'support group' for the women in attendance. However, the WNC has ensured that women who attend are in contact with local support services, should they need support following the group. The facilitators will also have on hand a list of agencies which can offer support and guidance following each event.

6. Access to the consultation

The WNC will only book venues for the groups which are accessible. Signers and interpreters will be provided where necessary.

To assist with the costs that may be incurred, the WNC will be providing women attending the groups with some form of reimbursement, in the form of supermarket or high-street vouchers as appropriate.

The WNC aims to hear the views of women from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Women attending will be encouraged to complete equality monitoring forms after each event (this will be voluntary) in order for the WNC to make sure we invite all women to attend and participate – not just those who can easily make their voices heard.

7. Recording and storage of material collected at the groups

In order to accurately reflect women's views, the WNC will need to record key issues arising from the groups. Information will normally be recorded in written form although if necessary, and only if agreed by all attendees, a back-up in the form of a digital tape recorder may be used. It should be noted that any tapes made of proceedings will only be used to cross-reference any written material. Should any of the women in attendance specifically object to this, written recording only will be used.

There will be ground rules for 'no use of surnames' in order to allow the women to feel more comfortable in sharing their information.

The WNC will use the feedback from the groups to inform Sara Payne's work on victim experience, which will contribute to the cross-government Violence Against Women and Girls strategy development and implementation. A written summary of key issues arising from each group will be provided to the Home Office, based on the written material and tapes produced from the groups.

All written material and tapes will not, under any circumstances, be shared with any other agency, nor will it be used for any other purpose than to feed in to the work on the rape review and the cross-government's VAWG strategy. The WNC will retain this information until the Home Office accepts feedback from the final group. Following this, the material will be destroyed.

8. Use we will make of the consultation material

The WNC will be producing a report for the Home Office after the groups containing key issues and quotes raised throughout the discussion. Women who attend these groups will not have the opportunity to comment on the report submitted to the Home Office due to the tight consultation schedule.

Thank you very much for your help.

Please contact the WNC by emailing [Sophie.Howes@communities.gsi.gov.uk](mailto: Sophie.Howes@communities.gsi.gov.uk) or [Eleri.Butler@communities.gsi.gov.uk](mailto: Eleri.Butler@communities.gsi.gov.uk), or by calling 0207 944 0585, if you have any questions about the enclosed information.