**Statement from Stay Safe East**

**on the Government’s new Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy 2021-2024**

**Deaf and Disabled survivors let down by the Government’s new Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy and National Disability Strategy**

On July 21st 2021, the Government published its Tackling Violence against Women and Girls Strategy for England and Wales[[1]](#footnote-1). On July 28th, it published its National Disability Strategy[[2]](#footnote-2).

As the only user-led organisation supporting Disabled survivors of domestic abuse and other forms of violence, **Stay Safe East** welcomes the aim of a ‘whole system approach’ across all sectors of government set out in the VAWG Strategy. Unfortunately we do not see this reflected in either strategy, particularly when it comes to addressing the intersectional needs of Deaf and Disabled women, BAME, migrant women or LGBT communities. Disabled women and girls have been abandoned in the considerable gaps between the two strategy.

**The Violence against Women and Girls Strategy**

The VAWG Strategy takes a gender neutral approach and fails to address either the specific forms of abuse faced by disabled *women* who are at disproportionately high risk of gender-based violence, or the other

forms of inequality (including poverty, racism and other discrimination and institutionalisation) that further reduce disabled women’s and girls’ safety and ability to access help if threatened or victimised.

The VAWG strategy is over-focused on the criminal justice system, yet many disabled, Deaf, BAME and migrant survivors do not trust either the Police or the Courts. Disabled women who have experienced a lifetime of abuse or who live in institutions may not have any opportunity to speak out. There are no proposals to address the complex barriers we face to accessing safety, support services, justice and moving on with our lives after abuse. Deaf survivors are not mentioned at all.

The VAWG Strategy states that the National Disability Strategy will address the issues facing disabled survivors of violence against women. This, paired with their gender neutral approach further reinforces the marginalisation and exclusion of disabled women from a Strategy purportedly meant to protect ALL women. Stay Safe East is clear: the violence experienced by disabled women is inherently gender-based. Disability discrimination is a women’s issue.

Whilst we welcome the additional funding for ‘by and for’ services, including those run by and for Deaf and Disabled survivors, it is short- term and wholly inadequate to meet the needs of marginalized survivors for whom a ‘quick fix’ doesn’t work. Survivors need to know that the organization supporting them will be there in the long term, our staff need to know their jobs are secure so they can commit to often difficult and traumatic work.

**National Disability Strategy**[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Disability Strategy does include some general concrete proposals in relation to the Criminal Justice System, but equally fails to address violence against disabled women and girls – or indeed the intersectional experiences of disabled women, LGBT disabled people or disabled people from BAME communities. The section on ‘safety at home’ focuses on the forthcoming and very welcome review of abuse by paid and unpaid carers[[4]](#footnote-4), and acknowledges that domestic abuse rates for disabled women are higher than for non-disabled women. However there is not a single concrete proposal to address domestic abuse of disabled women (and men) by partners or family members, or wider VAWG issues such as the disproportionately high rates of rape against disabled women and girls, sexual harassment of disabled girls in education, or gender based violence against disabled women in institutions.

Stay Safe East will continue to work for lasting change for disabled survivors; we will continue to push for Government action on reducing the disproportionate levels of violence against Deaf and disabled women and girls and for equal access to support, justice and recovery.

**Disabled survivor’s voices will be heard. Nothing about Us Without Us!**

**Further information:**

For Stay Safe East’s comprehensive response to the VAWG Strategy Consultation and our proposals for action, please see <http://staysafe-east.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Stay-Safe-East-response-to-the-Home-Office-VAWG-Strategy-2021-25-14-pt.pdf>

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**Stay Safe East**

**Supporting disabled survivors**

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**Additional notes on the VAWG Strategy**

The VAWG Strategy aims to address all forms of violence against women and girls including rape and sexual violence, domestic abuse, harmful practices, misogynist harassment, trafficking etc. A separate Domestic Abuse Strategy is to be published later in the year.

Stay Safe East has reviewed the strategy document in detail. The VAWG Strategy fails Deaf and disabled and other survivors in its approach – these are some examples:

* There are no concrete proposals to address the institutional discrimination by the Criminal Justice System against Deaf and disabled survivors, which contributes to very low rate of prosecutions for VAWG related crimes - from not believing disabled women who disclose rape or sexual assault, to criminalizing disabled victims of cuckooing/county lines, or simple practical matters such as a delays in providing suitable BSL interpreters to disabled victims/witnesses or poor access to courts. The government previously rejected Stay Safe East’s amendment to the Domestic Abuse Bill which would have removed the ‘carer’s defence’ which allows abusers to claim they were acting in a victim’s best interest by controlling her.
* There are no proposals to address the access and organisational barriers for Deaf or disabled survivors wanting to access VAWG support services, refuges or other safe accommodation, counselling and other therapeutic services, helplines or support groups
* The strategy makes no mention of the paucity of research and data on violence against Deaf and disabled *women* and particularly young women and girls.
* Nor does it refer to the specific forms of abuse only experienced by disabled women (and some disabled men) e.g. non-family carer abuse, sexual violence not only in public places but in institutional care). The forthcoming government review of abuse of disabled people by non-family carers[[5]](#footnote-5) is not mentioned, pushing it firmly into an approach where violence against disabled people is a separate disability issue which is not part of Violence against disabled women and girls.
* Young disabled people are referred to as ‘vulnerable’ and having ‘special needs’, a medical model approach which shows a lack of understanding of the barriers for disabled young women and girls to safe relationships education. ‘Vulnerable adults’ are linked with children, further infantilized disabled people.
* The strategy fails to address the institutional failure of Adult Safeguarding to ensure the safety of disabled survivors of VAWG
* The specific barriers faced by migrant women are not addressed, including the [sharing of information between the Police and immigration authorities](https://stepupmigrantwomen.org/). Migrant and Black and minoritised women’s organisations will be commenting on the strategy.
* Stay Safe East and SignHealth are currently working with the Centre for Women’s Justice to challenge the accessibility of the Home Office’s consultation and engagement process on the Strategy.

Stay Safe East will be commenting further on the Disability Strategy.

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls-strategy> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-disability-strategy](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-disability-strategy%20published%20on%2028.7.2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. User-led disabled people’s organisation have questioned the credibility of the National Disability Strategy. The High Court has given four disabled people leave to challenge the legality of theigh Court has given consultation on the strategy. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jul/23/government-disability-strategy-risks-becoming-a-car-crash-says-tory-peer> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This review came about in response to Stay Safe East’s amendment to the Domestic Abuse Bill (now DA Act) on including abuse by non-family paid and unpaid carers as part of domestic abuse. The government rejected our amendment but offered the review as an alternative. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Stay Safe East August 3rd 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)