



# UNITED AGAINST VIOLENCE

An all-Scotland approach to  
tackling domestic abuse

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# Introduction

Foreword by Pam Gosal MBE MSP



My mum is my inspiration in so many aspects of life. She is the reason I am determined to tackle the scourge of domestic violence that is destroying too many lives and families in Scotland.

When I was young, she had a shop on Argyle Street in Glasgow. I would see women there in distress. Sometimes in tears, sometimes bruised, sometimes bleeding.

At that time, I didn't understand what was happening. Only years later did I learn that these were women suffering domestic abuse and violence.

I'm very proud that my mum was there for those victims. Since I became an MSP in 2021, her example has motivated me to focus on how we can better support victims of domestic violence.

There's no doubt we need to act boldly. In recent years, the number of domestic abuse incidents has increased to record highs - and those are just the cases we know about. Sadly, so many women still suffer in silence as they feel unable to come forward.

We must make sure that everyone who needs help can get it. We must give every survivor of abuse the power and the support to come forward. We must build a justice system that is firmly on the side of victims, not criminals.

We should all aspire to make Scotland a world-leader in tackling this abhorrent crime. We must be ambitious and set a target, backed up by clear and purposeful actions, to drastically cut the number of domestic abuse cases.

This paper hopes to start a national conversation about how we can achieve that. It sets out a number of recommendations we could adopt for the police, for the justice system, and for society to start an 'all-Scotland' approach towards tackling domestic abuse incidents and supporting victims.

In the decades since my mum was helping women in a wee shop on Argyle Street, not enough has changed. We now treat domestic abuse much more seriously as a society - but there remains an appalling number of incidents of violence in the home.

We need a new, united approach that delivers the change that victims deserve.

**Pam Gosal MBE MSP**

**Deputy Chair of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party**

# OUR 12 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

## CREATE A VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN UNIT

Police Scotland has introduced a Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), which has won worldwide praise for its game-changing approach to tackling knife crime. A new Violence Against Women Unit could have similar levels of success by building on the work of the current Police Scotland Domestic Abuse Task Force and taking it to another level by matching some of the approaches of the VRU.

## TREAT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMAN AS A NATIONAL THREAT

Violence against women is now classified as a 'national threat' in England & Wales, and will now be treated as seriously as terrorism, organised crime and child sex abuse. Police Scotland should be ordered to treat the crime on this level too.

## ROLL OUT THE 'ASK FOR ANI' SCHEME MORE WIDELY

ANI (Action Needed Immediately) is a codeword scheme that enables victims of domestic abuse to discreetly ask for immediate help in numerous community locations. We are calling for this scheme to be expanded across Scotland.

## PROVIDE PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS WITH DOMESTIC ABUSE TRAINING

We believe every public-facing public sector worker should receive mandatory domestic abuse training, so they understand how the crime develops and who is most at risk. The more people who can identify and help victims of abuse, the better.

## IMPROVE ACCESS TO DOMESTIC ABUSE SERVICES

Data suggest that underreporting of domestic abuse is more common within certain minority communities. We believe that by reaching out to these communities, they will have a better understanding of the issue, domestic abuse will become less of a taboo subject, and it will encourage more people to engage freely with domestic abuse campaigns.

## DELIVER A DEDICATED WOMEN'S OFFICER FOR EVERY LOCAL AUTHORITY

We believe there is a strong case for Police Scotland to appoint a dedicated women's officer for every local authority and to increase the number of female officers. With designated women's officers in each local authority, this would hopefully persuade more victims, and potential victims, to reach out and engage with the police and the wider support network around domestic abuse.

## **LAUNCH A FEMALE OFFICER RECRUITMENT DRIVE FOR POLICE SCOTLAND**

As with having dedicated women's officers in every area of Scotland, we believe that higher overall numbers of female police officers would persuade more victims to be confident in reaching out towards the police. Police officers have a key role to play in the fight against domestic abuse and are often the first point of contact for victims, so it is vital that victims do not hesitate to reach out for help whenever they need it.

## **TREAT COERCIVE BEHAVIOUR ON A PAR WITH PHYSICAL VIOLENCE**

The UK Government has promised that those serving a sentence for "controlling or coercive behaviour" will be placed on a par with those convicted of physical violence. We would look to introduce similar measures in Scotland.

## **INTRODUCE A DOMESTIC ABUSE REGISTER BILL TO THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT**

My Domestic Abuse (Prevention) Bill would implement a host of new measures to take the fight to domestic abusers, and introducing a new Domestic Abuse Register is a key part of this. Those who commit certain domestic abuse offences would be placed on a register managed by Police Scotland and would be forced to update the police whenever their circumstances change, meaning the police will be better equipped to keep victims safe.

## **ROLL OUT THE ASSIST SYSTEM ACROSS SCOTLAND**

The ASSIST (Advocacy, Support, Safety, Information Services Together) programme was launched in 2004 by Glasgow City Council and has since been expanded to include other councils. The service helps victims of domestic abuse through criminal court proceedings by employing specialist workers to navigate victims through the legal processes, as well as provide other forms of support. We would look to expand this across the whole of Scotland.

## **END THE SCANDAL OF SURVIVORS TRAPPED IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION**

We would bring in guidance to encourage local authorities and social housing providers to ensure that survivors of abuse are prioritised for housing. This should give victims the confidence and certainty to leave an abusive home, knowing that they will soon have settled accommodation.

## **EXPAND FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS LEAVING ABUSIVE HOUSEHOLDS**

Financial barriers can mean that victims are prevented from fleeing an abusive relationship. The Scottish Government has introduced a pilot for a 'Fund to Leave' scheme, which provides victims with financial support when leaving an abusive home. We would commit to expanding this scheme to the whole of Scotland, and increasing the funding to match similar schemes elsewhere in the UK.

# United Against Violence

This policy paper is titled **United Against Violence** to reflect the central idea behind it, that we need a new 'all-Scotland' approach to tackling domestic violence which brings together different organisations and diverse communities towards the same goal.

**United Against Violence** aims to increase police resources for tackling domestic abuse, increase the reporting of domestic abuse crimes across all communities and faiths, and encourage more victims to access support services.

The following policy proposals include ideas to give the police greater freedom and powers to target offenders, plans to increase the number of public sector workers able to identify signs of domestic abuse and support victims, and ways to help the justice system work more effectively for victims.

The three main focuses of this paper are: 1) proposals to improve how public services detect and handle domestic abuse cases, 2) proposals to aid Police Scotland's detection of domestic violence crimes, and 3) proposals that would strengthen the justice system for the benefit of victims.

The ideas contained within it have been developed over many months following discussions with victims of abuse, organisations, and experts.



# Domestic abuse in Scotland

Incidents of domestic abuse recently increased to record high levels in Scotland. The number of incidents has reached 65,000 per year<sup>i</sup>. On average, police are called to an incident every nine minutes<sup>ii</sup>. The most recent statistics from the Scottish Government indicated that 64 per cent of cases were repeat offences.

The official figures reflect the growing number of incidents but they do not tell the whole picture. Dr Marsha Scott of Scottish Women's Aid said recently that: "The number of reports to police around domestic abuse does not show the full scale of abuse across Scotland."<sup>iii</sup>

Although anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse, violence is overwhelmingly targeted at women. The Lord Advocate, Dorothy Bain KC, said at the end of 2022: "It is a stark and undeniable fact that the vast majority of these reports feature a male accused. These accounted for 87 per cent of all charges with a domestic abuse identifier last year."<sup>iv</sup>

Recently, the Scottish Government brought in the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018<sup>v</sup>. It was passed with the support of every party in Scotland. The Bill created a new offence of engaging in an abusive course of conduct against a current partner or an ex-partner. It also made any "associated statutory aggravation", where children are involved or affected, an offence. It also sought to make sure that the victim is not subject to further abuse by the offender after passing sentence, and told courts to always consider making a non-harassment order against a person convicted of a domestic abuse offence.

Although the 2018 Act was a step forward, a report by the Scottish Parliament Justice

Committee in May 2023 found that progress on implementing the law has been too slow. Professor Michele Burman of the University of Glasgow, said: "There needs to be greater understanding and improved implementation of the legislation."<sup>vi</sup> In response to the report, the Scottish Government even conceded that "there is still more that needs to be done to improve the justice response to domestic abuse and we will work with justice agencies to consider the recommendations."

We should not be complacent and believe that the 2018 Act is all that is necessary to reduce domestic abuse incidents and give victims all the support they need. There is still a need to unite all of Scottish society on the same mission to end domestic violence, particularly when it comes to preventing repeat offences of this crime.

That's why I introduced a proposal for a Domestic Abuse Register Bill, which I outline in more detail on page 12. The consultation for that proposal closed in November 2022 and I was delighted that 23 organisations have already voiced support for it. The proposal received the backing of more than 90 per cent of respondents. It also received an overwhelming amount of cross-party support in the Scottish Parliament with 41 MSPs from the Scottish Conservatives, SNP, Labour, Liberal Democrats and Alba supporting it.

Domestic violence is a rare issue where every politician and almost every political party in Scotland appears to agree that more action is required. We believe this is an issue where a cross-party consensus can be achieved with more constructive work across political divides than usually takes place in the Scottish Parliament.



# A new, all-Scotland approach to tackling domestic violence

While Police Scotland will always be on the frontline of the effort to end domestic abuse, officers cannot do it alone. Tackling domestic abuse requires wider societal change. It requires an ‘all-Scotland approach’ with everyone United Against Violence. As Detective Chief Superintendent, Sam Faulds, Head of Police Scotland’s Public Protection Unit, said in late 2022: “Policing alone is not the answer to tackling gender-based violence. Prevention and education, with all statutory and support agencies working in partnership, has to be the starting point if we are to turn the tide against domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence.”<sup>vii</sup>

This **United Against Violence** paper seeks to build an approach that could mobilise all of Scottish society, including every possible organisation and community, towards the goal of ending domestic abuse.

I believe this must begin with the **Scottish Government designating violence against women as a ‘national threat’**. **Following violence against women receiving this designation last year in England & Wales, this crime will now be treated as seriously as terrorism, organised crime and child sex abuse<sup>viii</sup>**. **We believe Police Scotland should be ordered to treat the crime on this level too.** This would be far more than a superficial change. By regarding domestic abuse as a national threat, tackling violence against women will be upgraded to one of Police Scotland’s foremost priorities and more resources will be allocated towards the prevention of these crimes and targeting of abusive offenders. Domestic abuse must be treated as a top priority so the appropriate level of resources are allocated to helping victims and cutting down on these crimes. The UK Government has ordered police forces to treat domestic abuse as a ‘national threat’ and Scotland should do the same.

**We also believe there should be a national expansion of the ‘Ask for ANI’ scheme.** This scheme is already in operation at over 5,000 pharmacies across 88 villages, towns and cities across the UK. Ask for ANI (Action Needed Immediately) is a codeword scheme that enables victims of domestic abuse to discreetly ask for immediate help in participating pharmacies,

including many Boots, Lloyds and community locations<sup>ix</sup>. When a victim uses the codeword in the pharmacy, a member of staff will take the victim to a private room (‘Safe Space’) where they can help them call the police, domestic abuse helpline or a family member, friend or perhaps even a solicitor. The scheme, which is now managed by Hestia’s ‘UK Says No More’ campaign, has recently been expanded to include pilots in 18 Jobcentres and Jobs and Benefits Offices across the UK<sup>x</sup>. **The Scottish Government should look at other locations where this scheme could be piloted.** It would be much easier for survivors to seek help if they can safely do so at as many locations as possible. This is particularly important to reducing domestic violence because we know more than half of these crimes are repeat offences. If survivors are able to receive help at the earliest opportunity, before they are attacked on multiple occasions, lives could be saved.



Expanding the ‘Ask for ANI’ scheme could be complemented with **an expansion of the ASSIST programme to every local authority**, so that victims have the help and support they need and deserve. The ASSIST (Advocacy, Support, Safety, Information Services Together) programme was launched in 2004 by Glasgow City Council and has since been expanded to several local authorities, including Dumfries and Galloway in March 2023. The service helps victims of domestic abuse through criminal court proceedings by employing specialist workers to build trust with service users and help them to assess risk, safety plan and navigate an often



confusing and complex court system. Advocates also work closely with other professionals in the community to make sure victims and their children have all the support they need to safely move on with their lives. The service will later offer tailored support to children who are cited as witnesses, making sure families can safely come through what can be a difficult experience with as much information and reassurance as possible. Trained ASSIST staff support victims where a current or ex-partner has been charged, or is likely to be charged, with a domestic abuse related crime<sup>xi</sup>. The apparent success of this scheme merits its expansion across all of Scotland so that victims have the care and support they need to move forward in their lives.

Expanding on the all-Scotland approach, **all public bodies should introduce a zero-tolerance policy on domestic abuse.** Recently, West Dunbartonshire Council became the first social landlord in Scotland to introduce a zero tolerance policy on domestic abuse within its properties, which will include providing victims with “immediate access to practical help and specialist legal assistance and support following any incident”<sup>xii</sup>. That policy will use anti-social behaviour powers and housing legislation to ensure that victims will be able to remain at home while criminals will be removed. We believe every council in Scotland should adopt a similar policy. There is no excuse for domestic abuse, so there should be proper punishments for those who offend. By introducing a blanket zero-tolerance policy, that will send a clear signal to violent criminals and act as a strong deterrent.



We also believe there is an urgent necessity to end the scandal of domestic abuse survivors becoming trapped for months in temporary accommodation. Our research has found survivors of abuse often end up waiting hundreds

of days in temporary accommodation after fleeing a home where domestic abuse has occurred. We believe that, wherever possible, **women who have suffered domestic abuse must be at the front of the queue for accommodation.** Survivors of abuse may not leave a violent home if they feel they have no other option. They may be discouraged from leaving the home where abuse occurs if it means becoming stuck in temporary accommodation for so long. That may end up sending them back towards a violent and abusive partner, which will put them at risk of another attack or even, in the worst cases, death. Survivors must know that they will find safe and settled accommodation quickly in order to have the confidence to leave an abusive home. Therefore we would make sure **no survivor is left waiting in temporary accommodation for months on end.** We would bring in guidance to encourage local authorities and social housing providers to ensure that survivors of abuse are prioritised for housing. This should give victims the confidence and certainty to leave an abusive home, knowing that they will soon have settled accommodation.

Beyond Police Scotland, there is a role for other public workers to play in helping to identify the signs of domestic violence and knowing how to properly engage with victims. We believe **every public-facing public sector worker should receive mandatory domestic abuse training,** so they understand how the crime develops, who is most at risk, how to support vulnerable individuals, and the correct pathways to refer people who need help towards. The more people with a strong understanding of how to help victims of abuse, the more likely it is that repeat offences can be prevented. Although there does not appear to be an exact equivalent that exists in other jurisdictions, in England and Wales all Probation Service Staff are required to complete mandatory training on adult and child safeguarding, including on domestic abuse<sup>xiii</sup>. This was introduced partially due to evidence from the UK Government’s call for evidence on its Violence Against Women and Girls strategy, which found the most common reasons for victims not being able to access support was because they were unsure where they could access it, or if it even existed at all, so mandatory training would inform public-sector workers of the help that is available which can be relayed to victims<sup>xiv</sup>. Therefore, by expanding the number of workers with an understanding of domestic abuse, it will only help survivors to get the help they need.

Outside of the public sector, the **United Against Violence** campaign will seek to bring diverse communities together. As a person from a BAME background, I have seen first-hand that there are still many cultures in Scotland where speaking about domestic violence is seen as taboo. There are communities all over the country which can be hard to reach for traditional government campaigns, which are not catered to specific audiences. People from certain backgrounds, for instance many BAME people, do not readily engage with the domestic abuse services on their doorstep. **There needs to be more of a focus on improving access to domestic abuse services for BAME people and that must be accompanied by a domestic abuse awareness campaign in hard-to-reach communities.** According to the Intervention Alliance ‘data shows us that underreporting [of domestic abuse] is even more acute within minority communities<sup>xv</sup>. This is not about blaming any community or criticising any faith or set of beliefs, it is about uniting people behind the common shared value that violence against women is wrong. It is about understanding those communities and speaking to them, sometimes literally, in a language they will understand and engage with more freely than traditional campaigns. For instance, while Police Scotland’s ‘IsThatMe?’ media campaign, aimed at changing behaviour in men aged 18 to 25 years old, has been a success, it is important those campaigns are also replicated so they reach every community and each different culture across Scotland.

It is clear that financial barriers are still preventing victims from leaving abusive relationships in certain circumstances. Too often, victims fear financial repercussions from fleeing their abuser, particularly when they are not the main wage earner in their home, meaning they risk being left unable to support themselves financially. Domestic abuse organisations are often unable to assist in these circumstances, and there are very few organisations set up to deal specifically with financial domestic abuse, in which a partner deliberately uses a victim’s financial circumstances against them. Several UK banks have specialist services in place to support victims of domestic abuse, and can use measures such as quickly setting up new bank accounts, or even writing off debt in certain circumstances<sup>xvi</sup>. Unfortunately, these banks report that demand for these services is increasing significantly, and it is clear that more needs to be done on this issue. Last year, the Scottish Government announced a pilot scheme entitled the Fund to Leave, which

is being delivered in five local authority areas by Women’s Aid groups, and can provide victims with up to £1,000 to support them when leaving an abusive partner<sup>xvii</sup>.

**We would commit to expanding the pilot scheme to cover the whole of Scotland, in recognition of the fact that domestic abuse exists within communities of all kinds, across every part of the country. We would also increase the scheme’s funding so that victims can access the same support they can in England & Wales, where the UK Government’s scheme can provide victims with as much as £2,500 to help them secure a sustainable future<sup>xviii</sup>.**

Taking all these measures together, I believe this all-Scotland approach to tackling violence against women will put us on a world-leading path to ending this appalling crime.

Violence against women is not just something for the police to deal with – it is a responsibility that lies at all of our doors. By looking across society for other ways to tackle this issue, we can ensure it is challenged from all directions.

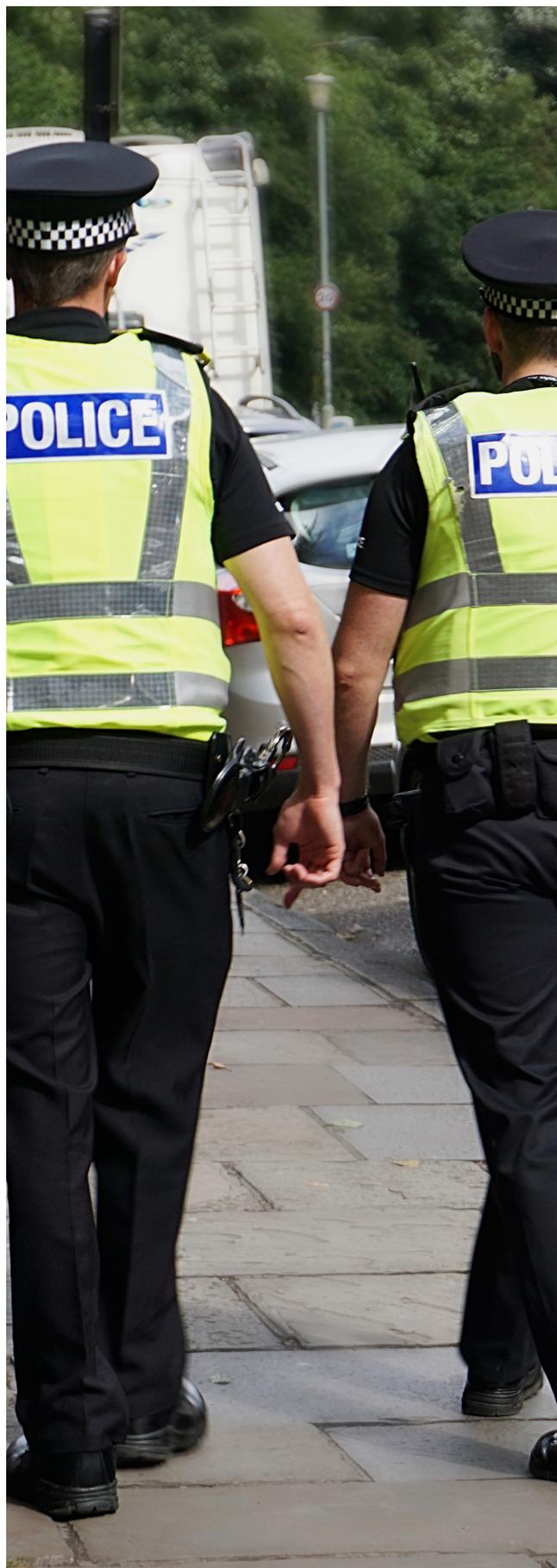


# Giving Police Scotland the powers to stop abusers

Police Scotland do fantastic work to tackle domestic abuse. However, the sheer volume of incidents risks overwhelming officers and leaving them without the time and resources they need to crack down on this appalling crime. Targeted resources could help the police to be even more effective at dealing with domestic abuse, not only in ensuring justice is done when a crime is committed, but in preventing offences from happening, especially repeat offences.

**There is a strong case for a Violence Against Women (VAW) Unit**, modelled on Police Scotland's successful Violence Reduction Unit (VRU)<sup>xx</sup>. The VRU has won worldwide praise and has been copied internationally for its game-changing approach to tackling knife crime. The results have been incredible, with knife violence in Scotland plummeting since the introduction of the VRU<sup>xx</sup>. A specialist VAW Unit could have similar levels of success by building on the work of the current Police Scotland Domestic Abuse Task Force and taking it to another level by matching some of the approaches of the VRU. The VRU was able to take a holistic view of how to tackle knife crime, backed up with the resources and freedom to take unconventional approaches. In its early days, it lobbied for changes to the law which proved successful in identifying reachable, teachable moments to stage an intervention with victims and potential offenders. Although all of its methods will not apply to violence against women, we believe lessons could be learned from this successful model, and a small, targeted increase in policing resources could help to reduce crime over time.

As part of a new VAW Unit, we also believe there is a strong case for **Police Scotland to appoint a dedicated women's officer for every local authority and to set a goal to increase the number of female officers**, supported by a new recruitment drive aimed at encouraging more women to consider policing as a career. We believe this would have a positive impact on reporting domestic abuse. Rape Crisis Scotland for example say that 'the single most common complaint' from victims of sexual crime is the lack of female doctors who are able to forensically examine them after the crime<sup>xxi</sup>. This strongly suggests that women would feel more comfortable reporting crimes if a woman is involved in the process and earlier reporting could help to prevent the number of repeat offences. We believe there is a need for more research to confirm if this is the same for survivors of domestic abuse when reporting crimes to the police and, if so, there is a pressing need to hire more female officers and appoint a dedicated women's officer in areas across the country.



# Strengthening domestic abuse laws



I have already started the work of how we improve the system for victims and more effectively target offenders by introducing a proposal for a **Domestic Abuse Register Bill** to the Scottish Parliament. The Bill received over 90 per cent backing from people and organisations who responded to the consultation. It won the backing of 41 MSPs from five parties in the Scottish Parliament and will come forward for debate in the chamber.

My Bill has four main aspects. Firstly, it would bring in a domestic abuse register, which would be similar to the sex offenders' register. That would give victims greater protection and expand the number of people aware of an offender's previous conviction for domestic violence. Secondly, it would increase education about domestic abuse, which would help to prevent violence against women in the first place and spread the word that victims will be treated with respect if they come forward. Thirdly, it would improve the rehabilitation of offenders, so they are better able to understand the nature of their crimes. Finally, it would impose an annual reporting and publication mechanism on the Scottish Government, which could enable the Scottish Government, Police Scotland, and other organisations to plan and distribute their resources in a more efficient and effective way.

To date, my Bill has received a very warm reception from across the political spectrum. I hope MSPs of all parties will continue putting politics to one side so we can build on the 2018 Domestic Abuse Act and develop further legislation to prevent domestic abuse, particularly repeat offences.

While my Bill would be a very important step towards reducing violence against women, it is not the only legislative change necessary to stack the justice system in favour of victims, not criminals. **There is also a strong case for treating coercive criminals the same as violent offenders, as the UK Government has promised to do.** Their plans would mean criminals handed a year or more in prison or given a suspended sentence for "controlling or coercive behaviour" being put on a par with offenders convicted of physical violence. It means they will be actively "managed" by the police, prison and probation services, who will have a legal duty to work together<sup>xxii</sup>. To enact this in Scotland, it would require a legislative change to the Sexual Offences Act. While this may be a long process, it could be effective in preventing many criminals from escaping monitoring. Considering the prevalence of repeat offences of domestic abuse, such a change could prove pivotal.

# Endnotes

- i Scottish Parliament, Domestic Abuse (Prevention) Bill Consultation, August 2022, [link](#)
- ii Police Scotland, [link](#)
- iii Scottish Daily Express, 12 December 2022, [link](#)
- iv COPFS, 19 December 2022, [link](#)
- v Scottish Parliament, Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill 2018, [link](#)
- vi BBC, 4 May 2023, [link](#)
- vii Police Scotland, December 2022, [link](#)
- viii The Guardian, 18 May 2023, [link](#)
- ix Hestia, 19 February 2023, [link](#)
- x Hestia, 19 February 2023, [link](#)
- xi Glasgow City Council, 11 August 2022, [link](#)
- xii West Dunbartonshire Council, No Home for Domestic Abuse, [link](#)
- xiii NSPCC, [link](#)
- xiv UK Government, Tackling Violence Against Women & Girls, July 2021, [link](#)
- xv Interventions Alliance, 23 March 2021, [link](#)
- xvi Lloyds Bank, [link](#)
- xvii Scottish Government, 17 October 2023, [link](#)
- xviii UK Government, 9 January 2024, [link](#)
- xix Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, [link](#)
- xx UK Government, A radical approach to tackling knife crime in Scotland, 4 July 2019, [link](#)
- xxi The Herald, 16 March 2020, [link](#)
- xxii UK Government, Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan, March 2022, [link](#)

