



Beijing+30 National Narrative

The response of the Government of the
United Kingdom to the United Nations on
the implementation of the Beijing
Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)
between 2020-2024

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Foreword

This narrative reflects the action undertaken over the last five years to promote gender equality and accelerate women's empowerment by successive United Kingdom (UK) governments between 2020 - 2024. A new UK government was formed on 5 July 2024, following a general election, and where relevant, the narrative sets out some of the commitments it has made. The UK is committed to making women's equality a reality and the blueprint outlined in the Beijing Platform and Declaration for Action remains an invaluable tool in this endeavour.

The UK's devolution settlement means that the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland take primary responsibility for observing and implementing the UK's international obligations in areas of responsibility which have been devolved to them. Where responsibility has been devolved to the individual administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, their developments have been included alongside those of the wider UK government. The Northern Ireland Assembly was restored in February 2024 with the formation of a new Northern Ireland Executive and appointment of Ministers. References to Northern Ireland contained in this response remain subject to review and agreement by Ministers with responsibility for the issues concerned.

Chapter 1: Introduction

As we approach the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the landmark Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the UK reaffirms its proud commitment to gender equality, women's empowerment and the full realisation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its underpinning promise to 'Leave No One Behind'. We believe that every woman and girl, whatever her background, should have the freedom, choice, support and protection to achieve her full potential.

Based on the questionnaire issued by UN Women, this narrative sets out UK action largely undertaken by previous UK governments¹ to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action since 2020, the year of the 25th milestone anniversary of the declaration and of the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In the years since the Fourth World Conference on Women, and indeed over the last five years, there have been advancements in the UK's campaign for gender equality. However, no country in the world, the UK included, has yet achieved gender equality. The newly elected UK government is putting women's voices at the heart of their mission-driven agenda and will make the changes needed to help women's equality become a reality.

Not only is gender equality essential in and of itself, but it is vital if we, as a global community, are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The UK wants all women and girls globally to be empowered to make informed choices and play an active part in all aspects of society.

¹ On 5th July 2024, the Labour Party formed the new government following the General Election that took place on 4th July 2024.

Chapter 2: Priority Areas for Accelerating Progress Over the Past Five Years

This chapter presents key areas of action for the UK government over the past five years. These areas for accelerating progress are discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters, along with summaries of our engagement with civil society and our national processes and machinery for gender equality.

Women's economic empowerment in the UK

Women's equality in the workplace continues to be held back by barriers such as bias around pay and promotion, significant issues within workplace cultures, discrimination in the workplace and tensions between balancing work with care.

Previous UK governments have taken steps to tackle barriers to women's economic empowerment including narrowing the gender pay gap. Over the last decade the gender pay gap fell from 19.8% to 14.3% and the percentage of women in employment has gone from 67.5% to 71.6%. In 2017, legislation was introduced requiring large employers to publish the differences in average salaries and bonuses for men and women every year.

The newly elected UK government is clear that women's equality and economic growth go hand in hand and is committed to harnessing the talent, creativity and brilliance of every woman in the UK. It has set out a plan to 'Make Work Pay²' that will transform the lives of working women everywhere, including LGBT+, Black, Asian and ethnic minority, and disabled women. It will strengthen rights to equal pay and provide protections from maternity and menopause discrimination and sexual harassment.

Eliminating violence against women and girls

Gender-based violence and harmful practices are pervasive, dangerous and must be eliminated. The scale of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the UK, including that which takes place online, is intolerable and the UK government is treating it as the national emergency that it is.

In July 2021, the then government published the Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy and in March 2022, this was followed by the Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan. Both strategies were informed by the Violence Against Women and Girls Call for Evidence which ran in 2021 and received over 180,000 responses.

The newly appointed UK government has set out an unprecedented aim to halve VAWG within a decade. The government has committed to overhauling every aspect of society's response to these terrible crimes, starting with policing and the criminal justice system: ensuring there is specialist resource in every force, taking swift action to save lives when reports are made and providing sustained support for survivors throughout the criminal justice process.

Women's Health

Women spend a greater proportion of their lives in ill health when compared with men and face obstacles when it comes to getting the care they need. Not enough focus is

² [Labour's 'Make work pay'](#)

placed on women-specific issues such as miscarriage, menopause, closing the Black and Asian maternal mortality gap and tackling women's under-representation when it comes to important clinical trials.

The Women's Health Strategy for England³ was launched in 2022 under a previous UK government, setting out changes to support the health and wellbeing of women and girls, and for improving how the health and care system engages and listens to women.

Women's health will be at the heart of the new government's commitment to reform the National Health Service.

Empowering women and girls throughout the world

Poverty, conflict, insecurity and humanitarian crises worsen gender inequality and cause long term societal harm on an international, national and community level: women and girls are twice as likely to be malnourished as men, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) remains widespread and increased reliance on humanitarian, peacekeeping and security interventions put women and girls at particular risk of aid-related sexual exploitation, abuse, and sexual harassment (SEAH).

The UK's first International Women and Girls Strategy (2023-2030)⁴ launched in March 2023. It set out the then UK government's thematic priorities: 'Educating Girls, Empowering Women and Girls and championing their health and rights and Ending Gender Based Violence'. The UK also ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2022 and is committed to upholding it.

Tackling gender inequality on a global level is a priority for the newly elected UK government who have committed to renewing expertise and focus on priority areas for international development, including empowering women and girls.

³[GOV.UK: Womens-health-strategy-for-england](#)

⁴[GOV.UK: International-women-and-girls-strategy-2023-to-2030](#)

Chapter 3: Women's Economic Empowerment in the UK

Overview

Women are a vital part of the UK workforce. There were 16.06 million women in the UK aged 16 and over in employment between October to December 2023⁵. The number of women in work was 75,000 more than the same period a year before and 1.8 million more than the decade before, even with the impact of the Covid pandemic⁶. To ensure women's contribution to the economy is fully used, the UK recognises that gender equality in employment is needed to tackle:

- inequality in economic structures and policies, in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources;
- inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision making at all levels; and,
- insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women.

There have been a number of legislative changes and policy initiatives to improve gender equality in the workplace over the past five years. These initiatives have focused on tackling the barriers to women's economic empowerment, such as the gender pay gap, maternity discrimination and sexual harassment.

Where relevant, specific action undertaken by the Devolved Administrations to advance women's economic empowerment, are also reflected below.

England: Women's Economic Empowerment Policy

Gender Pay Gap (GPG) Reporting

Over the last decade the UK's GPG has fallen from 19.8% to 14.3% and the percentage of women in employment has gone from 67.5% to 71.6%. In 2017, legislation was introduced requiring large employers to publish the differences in average salaries and bonuses for men and women every year. An evaluation⁷ of the legislation was published in 2023 and found that there was insufficient evidence to prove a link between the legislation and the reduction in the national GPG. The next evaluation is due in 2027 and will benefit from 10 years of evidence.

The newly elected UK government is committed to taking further action to reduce the GPG and to identify and tackle the drivers behind it. Plans include introducing mandatory action plans on closing the pay gap, supporting people managing menopause symptoms at work and further increasing employee protections. Plans are also underway to introduce legislation to require employers to report on ethnicity and disability pay gaps.

Gender Pensions Gap

The gender pensions gap is a complex issue tied to the labour market, the pensions system and demographic differences. The UK government has delivered pension reforms including Automatic Enrolment (AE) in 2012. AE improved pension participation rates among eligible women in recent years, with rates in the private

⁵[Research Briefings: Women and the UK economy](#)

⁶[House of Commons Library: How has the coronavirus pandemic affected women in work?](#)

⁷[Gender pay gap implementation review](#)

sector rising from 40% in 2012 to 86% in 2022 - equal to men eligible for AE in the private sector.

‘Returners’

Taking time out of work or a career break, often for unpaid care work which is disproportionately performed by women, can have a big impact on pay and progression.

Previous governments delivered 25 returner programmes across the public and private sectors to provide training and return-to-work support and launched best practice guidance and a toolkit to help employers⁸ run their own effective returner programmes, as well as a toolkit for returners⁹ with advice and support on returning to the workforce. The most recent pilot has focused on women in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) based careers.

In 2020, women only made up 29.4% of the STEM workforce in the UK. The STEM workforce is vital to UK economic growth and we want research in the sector to draw from as wide a talent pool as possible. The lack of representation in these sectors also affects the gender pay gap as science and technological careers often have higher salaries.

The STEM sector has, therefore, been a priority sector for successive governments’ work to advance gender equality in the workplace.

On International Day of Women and Girls in Science last year (11 February 2023), the UK government launched the STEM ReCharge¹⁰ pilot to support women in transitioning effectively back into STEM roles to ensure the careers of talented women are not held back or downgraded because of time away from work, and to help meet the demands of today’s workforce. The pilot’s findings are due to be published in Autumn 2024 and the learnings will be incorporated into wider work on changing the culture of the workplace.

Managing the menopause in the workplace

In the UK, women over the age of 50 represent the fastest-growing segment of the workforce. Women in this age group are likely to face the challenges of managing menopausal symptoms which can have a significant impact on working life. Research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development¹¹ found that two thirds (67%) of working women between the ages of 40 and 60 with experience of menopausal symptoms said they have had a mostly negative impact on them at work.

The government has made a commitment that it will introduce the requirement for employers with more than 250 employees to produce menopause action plans that set out how they will support employees through the menopause, and it will publish menopause workplace guidance to help women working for small and medium-sized businesses.

Combatting sexual harassment in the workplace

⁸ [GOV.UK Employer Toolkit](#)

⁹ [GOV.UK Returner Toolkit](#)

¹⁰ [Stem ReCharge](#)

¹¹ [CIPD: Menopause Workplace Experiences](#)

The previous UK government supported the passage of the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023¹² which strengthened protections for employees against workplace sexual harassment.

The Act contains a duty on employers to take 'reasonable steps' to prevent sexual harassment of their employees which will come into force on 26 October 2024, one year after the Act received Royal Assent. This is to ensure that there is sufficient time for employers to be fully prepared for the change before they take effect.

Tackling and preventing sexual violence in the workplace is a priority for the newly elected UK government which has committed to strengthening the legal duty requiring employers to take steps to prevent sexual harassment at work and ensuring this duty applies to contracted interns and volunteers as well as employees.

The Devolved Administrations: Women's Economic Empowerment Policy

Wales

The Welsh Government's Programme for government outlines the commitment to celebrating diversity and eliminating inequality in all of its forms. This means creating a society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances, and an inclusive workforce that reflects society and Welsh communities.

The Plan for Employability and Skills¹³ sets out a range of action taking place across Welsh Government to promote economic equality, which is one of the key priorities of the Plan. This includes adopting approaches to increase participation and outcomes for underrepresented groups, including women, supporting individuals from all communities to start and develop their own business, improving participation by women, Black Asian and Minority Ethnic and disabled individuals.

It also includes exploring legislation to address pay gaps based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, and other forms of discrimination. In addition, there is a commitment to improve fairness in the workplace through the delivery of equality, diversity and inclusion commitments and priorities set out throughout the Plan, including the Gender Equality Review, Disability Task Force and Race Equality Action Plan.

Scotland

In Scotland, under Regulation 7 of the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland), public authorities with 20 or more employees must publish gender gap information and statements on equal pay. The Scottish Government is currently working to update the 2012 regulations to bring in disability and minority ethnicity into pay gap reporting. In December 2022, the Scottish Government launched a refreshed Fair Work Action Plan: Becoming a Leading Fair Work Nation by 2025. The aim of the plan is to take an intersectional approach, where possible, to tackling the structural labour market barriers faced by priority groups in Scotland's labour market. This includes women, disabled people, Black, Asian and ethnic minorities and the over 50's workforce, who

¹² [Worker Protection \(Amendment of Equality Act 2010\) Act 2023](#)

¹³ [Wales Gov: Plan for Employability and Skills 2022](#)

often face intersectional barriers in the workplace.¹⁴ The plan includes taking action to reduce Scotland's gender pay gap and supersedes their 'A Fairer Scotland for Women: gender pay gap action plan', published in 2019.¹⁵

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 2016 introduced an obligation on employers to report their gender pay gap. Following the resumption of the Northern Ireland Executive, their Minister is considering future work to improve the gender pay gap. The most recent statistics for Northern Ireland published in October 2023 shows the gender pay gap for all employees (regardless of working pattern) was in favour of males. Median hourly earnings (excluding overtime) for females (£13.75) was 7.8% below those for males (£14.92). This is slightly wider than the 2022 gender pay gap (7.5%) but is lower than rates prior to 2020 and lower than the gap recorded in the UK in the last three years (between 14% and 15%).

UK Business engagement

An important way to deliver gender equality in the workplace is to encourage and support the business community to develop industry-led solutions that can help drive change without the need for legislation. Many of the UK government's recent initiatives have been in collaboration with a range of sectors and some of these are outlined below.

Women's Business Council

The Women's Business Council (WBC)¹⁶ is a government-backed, business-led group that reports to the Minister for Women and Equalities.

A previous UK government established the WBC in 2012, to advise on maximising women's contribution to economic growth. The WBC's chair, members and terms of reference have changed several times since then to ensure it reflects the best of British business and meets the government's aspirations for gender equality in the workplace and beyond.

Mary Macleod, Chief Executive of Business in the Community, is the current chair.

The WBC's members are senior business leaders who are passionate about empowering women in the workplace. The Council believes that gender equality can boost productivity, innovation and competitiveness.

The WBC works with businesses, policymakers, supply chains and other stakeholders to identify and remove the barriers that women face at different stages of their lives and careers.

In 2019, the Council relaunched to focus on industry sectors that have the most significant gender pay gaps and or underrepresentation of women, at a national level. As part of this, it launched '100 Ways to Work Flexibly', to showcase the many working patterns available for men and women. Building on its successes at a national level,

¹⁴ [Gov.Scot: Fair Work action plan: becoming a leading Fair Work nation by 2025](#)

¹⁵ [Gov.Scot: A fairer Scotland for women: gender pay gap action plan](#)

¹⁶ [GOV.UK: Women's Business Council](#)

the Council broadened its strategic approach to incorporate regional and international activity to improve women's economic potential and share best practice.

The following are examples of some of the insights and workplace equality initiatives from the companies represented by Members of the WBC:

The supply chain as a means of promoting diverse entrepreneurship

Latham & Watkins, the global law firm, has their Global Sourcing & Procurement design procurement strategies to offer equal opportunities to businesses owned by women, ethnic/racial minorities, veterans, LGBT+ individuals, and disabled people. They track progress quarterly to identify growth opportunities and to develop an inclusive supply chain that reflects the values and communities we serve.

Childcare provision

JLR, the makers of the Jaguar and Land Rover marques, offer onsite pre-school/nursery facilities to employees and a membership with the National Childbirth Trust, giving them access to support services and educational sources.

Actions to close the Gender Pay Gap

Willmott Dixon, a construction company, has been reporting their gender pay gap (GPG) since 2017 and also publish a supplementary report detailing plans to reduce their GPG.

Work to reduce the GPG has led to a 17.5% improvement between 2017-2022. These actions have included:

- targets to recruit 50/50 men/women each year into their management trainee programme -set in 2018;
- establishing a women's leadership programme;
- use of AI to check job descriptions and adverts for wording so they are equally attractive to women as men; and,
- publishing salary ranges on job boards for transparency and making the provision of applicants' salary history optional.

Supporting returners to the workplace.

Willmott Dixon provide workshops for maternity returners, who attend in the lead up to their return, which covers practical tips for juggling work and parental responsibilities; and on coming back - updates on what to expect and what has changed, and what internal resources and support are available.

Key issues highlighted by WBC member Jane Portas OBE include the need for enhanced data collection; a key requirement of business regulators. There are also opportunities to improve: the gender balance across the Fintech sector in the UK where there remains significant gaps, particularly for those returning to the workplace following a break; customer rights across the financial sector; representation of women in senior leadership roles in these industries; and more

to be done on preventing financial abuse of women to increase economic independence and empowerment.

There is a recognition that it can still be difficult for women across the UK to find investment when starting their own businesses and have welcomed the new Taskforce established in 2024 to address the funding pipeline but have highlighted that more needs to be done in the field of education- to better equip young people on the financial impact of their life and career choices.

Women Entrepreneurs

In 2018, the then government asked Alison Rose, then CEO of NatWest Group, to lead an independent review of female entrepreneurship. The Rose Review was published on 8 March 2019¹⁷. It highlighted the barriers faced by women starting and growing businesses and made recommendations on how to support these entrepreneurs.

In response, the government announced its aim to increase the number of female entrepreneurs by half by 2030, equivalent to nearly 600,000 additional women-led businesses.

The 2023 Rose Review Progress Report¹⁸ found that, in 2022, women in the UK established over 150,000 new companies – more than twice as many as in 2018, before the Rose Review was launched. The report also found that 16 to 25-year-old women founded nearly 17,500 businesses in 2022, a figure that's more than 22 times greater than in 2018, and that all-female-led companies represented 20% of all businesses in the UK in 2022, up from 16% in 2018.

The Women-led High-growth Enterprise Taskforce¹⁹ was established in May 2022 to identify ways to increase the number of women-led high-growth businesses. Although initiated by the government, the taskforce was independent and business-led. Its Chair was Anne Boden, the first woman to found a UK bank, Starling.

The women-led high-growth enterprise taskforce was tasked to:

- identify the main barriers women experience in accessing high-growth capital;
- suggest areas to stimulate regional opportunities based on robust data and engagement; and
- raise the profile of women-led high-growth entrepreneurship

The final report²⁰, launched in February 2024, details the:

- gaps in funding female entrepreneurs experience, and the challenges they face in becoming entrepreneurs; and,
- recommendations on how to remove these barriers and encourage more women to become high-growth entrepreneurs.

¹⁷ [GOV.UK: The Rose Review 2019](#)

¹⁸ [GOV.UK: The Rose Review Progress Report 2023](#)

¹⁹ [GOV.UK: The Women-led High-growth Enterprise Taskforce](#)

²⁰ [GOV.UK: Women-led High-growth Enterprise Taskforce Report](#)

In March 2024 the Rose Review was replaced by the Invest in Women Taskforce²¹, which has the aim of:

- launching a funding pot of £250m for female-powered businesses;
- increasing angel investment for female-powered businesses and encouraging more women to become Angel investors; and,
- boosting micro-funding, to increase access to finance for women.

Leaders as Change Agents

In 2018, the Women’s Business Council launched its Men as Change Agents Toolkit²² calling on senior business leaders and CEOs in FTSE 350 and other important UK businesses to champion gender equality in the workplace by:

1. Taking personal responsibility for ensuring 33% of executive level business leaders are women by 2020.
2. Sponsoring 1–3 women within their organisation with the potential to secure an executive role within 3 years.
3. Being an active and visible change agent and being part of the wider business conversation to achieve gender balance.

This work led to the creation of the Leaders as Change Agents Board²³, a volunteer business-led government-sponsored expert committee which operated between April 2019 and December 2023. The board was co-chaired by Emer Timmons OBE and Denis Woulfe OBE.

The Board’s work was focused on championing diversity, inclusion, opportunity, and fairness. The Board produced a range of material to help CEOs, business leaders, employers and employees improve organisational performance by fully embracing fairness and inclusivity at work.

Women in Finance Charter

In 2015, the then government asked Dame Jayne-Anne Gadhia to lead a review into the representation of women in senior managerial roles in financial services, focusing on the talent pipeline at the executive population below board level.

“Empowering Productivity: Harnessing the talents of women in financial services” was published in March 2016. The review found that in 2015, women made up only 14% of Executive Committees in the Financial Services sector. In response to the recommendations in that review, HM Treasury launched the Women in Finance Charter²⁴.

The Women in Finance Charter is a pledge for gender balance across financial services. Led by HM Treasury, this is a commitment by HM Treasury and signatory

²¹ [Invest in Women Taskforce](#)

²² [Men as Change Agents](#)

²³ [Leaders as Change Agents Board](#)

²⁴ [Women in Finance Charter - GOV.UK](#)

firms to work together to build a more balanced and fair industry. Firms that sign up to this Charter are pledging to be the best businesses in the sector.

There are now over 400 firms, covering 1.3 million employees, voluntarily signed up to the commitments of the Charter.

The independent Women in Finance Charter Board comprises representatives from financial services firms which are signatories to the Charter. It enables, through signatory engagement, the sharing of best practice to achieve the Charter commitments.

An annual review of the Charter is published. The most recent report was published in March 2024, and found that Charter signatories have increased female representation to 35% on average, up from 34% in 2022. This one percentage point average increase year-on-year has been slow and consistent since the Charter launched, and at this pace the signatory average should reach parity in 2038.

Women on Boards

In 2011, a government commissioned report by Lord Davies of Abersoch 'Women on Boards'²⁵ recommended a voluntary target that FTSE100 boards should have a minimum of 25% female representation by 2015. In October 2015, it was announced that this target had been met, and that 26% of FTSE100 board members were women.

The Hampton-Alexander Review on FTSE women leaders, which reported each year from 2016–2021 on women's representation in FTSE 350 firms, recommended in 2016 that FTSE 350 companies should aim for a minimum of 33% representation of women on their boards and in their senior leadership positions by 2020.

The final Hampton-Alexander report, which was published in February 2021²⁶, reported that FTSE 350 Boards met and exceeded the 33% target on average. The target for women in FTSE350 leadership roles however, fell short of the target, with 85 companies (30%) achieving the target.

The Hampton-Alexander Review was succeeded by the FTSE Women Leaders Review²⁷. This review has set new voluntary targets, including that FTSE 350 companies should reach:

- 40% representation of women on FTSE 350 Boards and leadership teams by the end of 2025; and
- FTSE 350 companies should have at least one woman in a key leadership role (Chair or Senior Independent Director role on the Board and/or one woman in the Chief Executive Officer or Finance Director role) by the end of 2025.

UK Future Priorities

The new UK government (formed July 2024) has set out that it will improve the lives of working women by:

²⁵ [Women on boards - GOV.UK](#)

²⁶ [The Hampton-Alexander Report](#)

²⁷ [The FTSE Women Leaders Review](#)

- strengthening rights to equal pay;
- strengthening protections from maternity and menopause discrimination and sexual harassment; and
- acting to reduce the gender pay gap.

Since taking office, the new government has reiterated that women's equality is central to their priority missions. As part of King's Speech, which announces the programme of government, they announced the intention to introduce an Employment Rights Bill²⁸. Aimed at establishing a new partnership between business, trade unions and working people, it will represent the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation. This includes measures which will specifically benefit women in work, including: making flexible working the default from day-one for all workers; strengthening protections for new mothers; and taking steps to ensure fair pay. This signals the new government's commitment to putting women's voices at the heart of their ambitious agenda.

Chapter 4: Family Friendly Policies

Overview

Family friendly policies are critical to fostering an inclusive and diverse workplace. Policies such as flexible working, parental leave, and childcare provisions, enable more equal sharing of work and childcare between men and women so that both can fulfil their career potential. The UK recognises that family friendly policies are also good for businesses, helping to attract and retain talent and improve productivity.

Where relevant, family friendly policies in the Devolved Administrations are also reflected below.

UK: Family Friendly Policies

Childcare in England

Affordable, quality childcare is the key to unlocking women's economic participation. Childcare is a vital enabler for parents to work, especially women, but childcare is also one of the biggest costs families face. This is a problem that impacts women in particular, as they are more likely to put their careers on hold and this contributes to the gender pay gap.

In the UK, all 3- and 4-year-olds are eligible for 15-hours free childcare regardless of their parents' circumstances. This is to help children to develop social skills and prepare them for school. Families in England receiving some forms of additional support, such as income support benefits, can qualify for 15 hours free early education for 2-year-olds.

In Spring 2023, the then government announced plans to increase government-funded childcare with the new entitlements being implemented in phases. The new UK government will announce plans to reform the childcare system in due course.

²⁸ [GOV.UK: King's Speech 2024 background briefing July 2024](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/king-s-speech-2024-background-briefing-july-2024)

In early 2024, the Equality Hub (see Chapter 10 for an explanation of the Equality Hub's functions) delivered a series of roundtables with employers to raise awareness of the support available to parents, including government funded childcare entitlements and employer led initiatives.

Maternity Leave

In the UK, employees are entitled to 52 weeks' Maternity Leave if they suffer a stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy or give birth. It is a 'day one' right, meaning mothers qualify from their first day of employment with a new employer. Maternity Leave can start up to 11 weeks before the expected week of childbirth and must start the day after the mother gives birth. Maternity Leave is a legal requirement and mothers have to take at least two weeks (four weeks if they work in a factory or workshop) after giving birth. This is due to health and safety: mothers need time off work to recover from childbirth, bond with their baby and establish breast-feeding (where they choose to do so).

Statutory Maternity Pay

In the UK, Statutory Maternity Pay is a separate entitlement to Statutory Maternity Leave. To qualify for Statutory Maternity Pay it is necessary to meet certain eligibility criteria which include having been continuously employed by their employer for at least 26 weeks up to any day in the 'qualifying week' i.e. the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth. Statutory Maternity Pay is paid at an "enhanced" rate of 90% of their average weekly earnings for the first six weeks, and then paid at the statutory rate (currently £172.48) or 90% of average weekly earnings (whichever is lower) for the remaining 33 weeks.

Maternity Allowance

In the UK, mothers who are or have been recently employed or self-employed and who do not qualify for Statutory Maternity Pay may be entitled to Maternity Allowance if they meet an employment and earnings test. Maternity Allowance is paid for a maximum of 39 weeks at the lower of either the standard rate (currently £184.03) or 90% of their average weekly earnings. The lowest rate of Maternity Allowance payable is £27.00 per week. Maternity Allowance is a parental benefit open to self-employed parents. This is for the health and safety reasons set out above.

Paternity Leave and Pay

In the UK, employed fathers or partners may be entitled to two weeks of Paternity Leave and Pay in the first eight weeks after the child's birth. They must have been continuously employed by their employer for at least 26 weeks up to any day in the 'qualifying week' (the same qualifying week as for Statutory Maternity Pay) and meet an earnings test. Statutory Paternity Pay is paid at the statutory rate (currently £172.48 a week).

Shared Parental Leave and Pay

Shared Parental Leave allows eligible parents to share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay between them. The actual amount depends on how much maternity or adoption leave and pay (or Maternity Allowance) the mother or their

partner takes. If the mother or their partner are eligible they can:

- take less than the 52 weeks of maternity or adoption leave and use the rest as Shared Parental Leave (SPL)
- take less than the 39 weeks of maternity or adoption pay (or Maternity Allowance) and use the rest as Statutory Shared Parental Pay (ShPP)

To be eligible for Shared Parental Leave in the UK, a mother must curtail either maternity leave, pay or allowance to create a pot of shared parental leave, which can be flexibly allocated between the parents. The requirement for this curtailment will not apply in the event of the death of the mother.

Both parents must also meet other eligibility criteria including that they have been employed continuously by the same employer for at least 26 weeks at the end of the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth and stay with the same employer until they start their Shared Parental Leave. They must also meet an earnings test to qualify for Shared Parental Pay.

Flexible working

Flexible working can be crucial to opening up employment opportunities to people regardless of their gender, age, health condition or location. The right to request flexible working from the first day of employment²⁹ was introduced in April 2024; previously employees could only do so after 26 weeks' continuous service, meaning that an additional estimated 2.2 million people would be able to request changes to their hours, times, or place of work.

Supporting carers

The Carer's Leave Act came into effect on 6 April 2024 introducing a new entitlement to one week of carer's leave as a 'day one' right. This is available to all employees who are providing care for a dependent with a long-term care need. Eligible employees are now entitled to one week of unpaid leave per year. The Act covers employees in England, Wales and Scotland.

The Devolved Administrations: Family Friendly Policies

Wales

The Welsh Government's Childcare Offer for Wales is providing 30 hours of government-funded early education and childcare for working parents of 3 and 4 year olds for up to 48 weeks of the year. It is intended to support families in Wales by helping parents, particularly mothers, return to work or increase their hours of employment.

Flying Start provides fully funded quality childcare which is offered to parents of all eligible 2–3-year-olds for 12.5 hours a week for 39 weeks a year. The Welsh Government has a commitment to deliver a phased expansion of early years provision to include all two-year-olds, with a particular emphasis on strengthening Welsh language provision.

²⁹www.gov.uk/flexible-working

The Welsh Government's Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014³⁰, gives all carers of any gender, age, ethnicity or protected characteristic the right to have their needs as a carer assessed if they wish to and it is appropriate. A fundamental principle of the Act is that, for the first time, carers have an equal right to an assessment to see whether they need support to carry out their caring role and, if they do, to have that support provided.

The Charter for Unpaid Carers³¹, launched in 2021, will be revised this year. The Welsh Government will do this in partnership with their stakeholders throughout the health and social care sector and will ensure that the voice of the unpaid carer is intrinsic to the development of the new strategy. As part of this work, they will consider how they can engage older unpaid carers, carers from Black and minority ethnic communities, and carers from the LGBT+ communities most effectively. The Welsh Government wants to ensure that they are recognising and celebrating diversity within the Welsh carer population, and that information and resources fully reflect this diversity and thereby maximises impact.

Scotland

In Scotland, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014³² has been amended to increase the statutory entitlement to fully funded early learning and childcare for all 3 and 4 year-olds to 1,140 hours per year since August 2021. All 3 and 4 years olds benefit regardless of the working status of their parents and carers. Around a quarter of 2 year olds are also eligible, which includes those with a parent in receipt of certain benefits or income support, and those with experience of care.

The Scottish Government Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination Working Group (2016-20) created guidelines for employers to ensure best practice and improved access to guidance for pregnant women and new mothers. The group's final report was published on the Scottish Government's website in 2021³³.

Pregnancy and maternity issues continue to be represented on the Scottish Government Fair Work Ministerial Oversight Group.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the Pre-School Education Programme is funded by the Department of Education to provide one year of non-compulsory preschool education for children (age 3-4) in their immediate pre-school year. Part-time places under the pre-school programme offer a minimum of 12.5 hours per week and full-time places provide a minimum of 22.5 hours per week. It is the intention to standardise provision over a period of time to offer a minimum of 22.5 hours per week for all target aged children.

The Northern Ireland Executive has agreed a budget of £25m for 2024/25 financial year to deliver a package of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) measures to stabilise and support expansion of the sector; to commence standardisation of the

³⁰ [Wales Gov: Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act 2014](#).

³¹ [Wales Gov: Charter for Unpaid Carers](#)

³² [Scot Gov: Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#)

³³ [Pregnancy and Maternity Working Group Final Report – 2021](#)

current pre-school education programme to offer all eligible children 22.5 hours per week pre-school provision; reduce the costs of childcare for working parents and build the evidence base necessary to inform development of the longer-term strategy

The Northern Ireland Executive has agreed that the focus over the coming months should be on implementation of the ELC measures announced for 2024/25. Evaluation of these measures and analysis of the data due to be collected from parents and providers in 2024/25 will inform the development of the longer-term Strategy, the budget required and a feasible timeline to deliver it.

Northern Ireland Executive's Supporting Carers Workstream is focused on carers' specific issues and actions which can be taken to improve support for them; including developing options to improve information for Carers, evaluating the implementation of the Department of Health's Strategy for Carers, improving awareness of the role of unpaid carers and exploring potential options to further develop a Carers Register.

UK Future priorities

The UK government has committed to introducing an Employment Rights Bill³⁴ which will include measures which will specifically benefit women in work, including: making flexible working the default from day-one for all workers; strengthening protections for new mothers; and taking steps to ensure fair pay in the adult social care and school support staff sectors (both large employers of women).

The new UK government has also set out its commitment to reforming the early years system and delivering change that works for children, that supports and empowers women, and that works for the UK's early years workforce.

Chapter 5: Eliminating Violence Against Women and Girls

Overview

Violence against women and girls remains one of the most prevalent and pervasive human rights violations in the world. Globally, an estimated 736 million women — almost one in three — have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both, at least once in their life. In the UK, successive governments, and the Devolved Administrations, have taken action to eliminate violence against women and girls over the past five years. These actions and policies are outlined below.

England: Eliminating violence against women and girls

The UK recognises that gender-based violence remains a pervasive and dangerous feature of our societies. In July 2021, the former UK government published the Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy and in March 2022, this was followed by a complementary cross-government Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan. They were informed by the Violence Against Women and Girls Call for Evidence which we ran in 2021 and which received over 180,000 responses in total.

Gendered online abuse and stereotyping

³⁴ [GOV.UK: King's Speech 2024 background briefing July 2024](#)

Online interactions play a major role in our daily lives. While most people have positive experiences online, for many women and girls life online can be an extension of harmful gender dynamics that exist in wider society.

The Online Safety Act 2023 will hold social media companies to account for abuse meted out on their platforms. It offers a ‘triple shield’ of protections for adult users online. Social media companies in scope of the Act will need to tackle and remove illegal content, take down material in breach of their own terms of service, and provide adults with greater controls over posts they may not wish to see. All companies in scope of the Act will have duties to proactively tackle priority illegal content, such as hate crime, and will need to prevent their services from being used to facilitate or commission these offences.

Tackling VAWG globally

In November 2023, the former UK government announced a new package of support to tackle violence against women and girls internationally. Up to £18 million was allocated in new support for grassroots women’s rights organisations across 70 countries to tackle gender-based violence in communities, focusing on the most marginalised as part of the UK’s biggest ever funding boost to the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women.

The Devolved Administrations: Eliminating violence against women and girls

Wales

In Wales, the *Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015*³⁵ seeks to bring about an improved public sector response to violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence. The Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence strategy 2022 to 2026³⁶ sets out the overarching objectives that the Welsh Government will deliver in partnership with stakeholders to progress the purpose of the Act. The six objectives in the strategy were designed to facilitate compliance with the Istanbul Convention. Unlike Scotland and Northern Ireland, crime and policing is not devolved in Wales, meaning that the provisions of the Domestic Abuse Bill apply to Wales.

The Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV): blueprint high level action plan³⁷ was published on 31 March 2023 followed by a Progress Report³⁸, published in October 2023, highlighting the work of the six workstreams: Gender-based harassment in public spaces; Workplace Harassment; Children and Young People; Older People; Perpetrator and Prevention and Sustainable Whole-System Approach. The Welsh Government works in partnership with specialist services to raise awareness of the inequality and safety issues faced by women and girls, and to end all forms of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, and with Welsh police forces, Police and Crime Commissioners, public safety boards and the Crown Prosecution Service to instil confidence in victims to report incidents of abuse and violence when they occur and to hold those who abuse to account.

The National Survivor Voice Scrutiny and Involvement Panel enables survivors to continue to feed into the approach.

³⁵ [Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence \(Wales\) Act 2015](#)

³⁶ [Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence strategy 2022 to 2026](#)

³⁷ [Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: blueprint high level action plan](#)

³⁸ [The VAWDASV Blueprint Progress Report](#)

The LGBT+ Action Plan for Wales sets out actions to target violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence among LGBT+ Communities.

Scotland

Scotland has a policy and legislative focus on combating violence against women and girls. In 2014 (updated in 2016) the Scottish Government published *Equally Safe*, Scotland's national strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against girls. *Equally Safe* recognises that violence against women and girls is a fundamental violation of human rights and sets out a vision to prevent violence from occurring in the first place, to build the capability and capacity of support services, and to strengthen the justice response to victims and perpetrators. The strategy was refreshed in 2023³⁹ to account for changes in the social and legislative landscape, without moving from the aims and objectives of the strategy that stakeholders value. This included a greater focus on technology-facilitated violence against women and girls, intersectionality, and a further embedding of the primary prevention approach to violence against women and girls.

The *Equally Safe* strategy is supported by a delivery plan to ensure that the overarching ambitions of the strategy are rooted in practical delivery that makes a real difference to the lives of women and girls. In November 2017, the Scottish Government published its *Equally Safe Delivery Plan* which promotes a collaborative approach that recognises the different roles and experience of organisations working in the sector. An updated delivery plan will be published in August 2024. The *Equally Safe Delivery Plan* (August 2024) will include specific actions aimed at tackling online violence against women and girls and its harms, as well as actions that will tackle the conditions that structures and attitudes that enable it, with a focus on primary prevention, data collection, education and awareness raising.

Northern Ireland

The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 came into operation on 21 February 2022. The Act has allowed us to recognise and criminalise wider abusive behaviours – so moving beyond violence to recognise under the law that domestic abuse is often a course of behaviour taking place over time and which may be non-physical in nature. The new domestic abuse offence under the Act allows for these behaviours to now be prosecuted when they occur on two or more occasions.

The Act also recognises the impact and psychological damage that can be inflicted on someone through coercive control and criminalises patterns of behaviour by a current or former intimate partner or family member which are threatening, controlling, coercive, violent, or abusive – whether that be psychological, virtual, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional – it's all captured there. It also recognised the impact of domestic abuse on children and the offence includes aggravators that apply and that can result in increased sentencing, either where the primary victim is a child, or where a child sees or hears or is present during an incident of domestic abuse.

The 2021 Act sets a very clear marker down, recognising that the damaging impact of domestic abuse goes beyond physical violence and that such abuse, regardless of the form it takes, is a crime and will not be tolerated.

³⁹ [Equally Safe 2023](#)

Preventing violence against women and girls in schools

All children and young people must be treated fairly. There is no place for hate or prejudice in the UK education system. Under the Equality Act 2010, schools must not discriminate against a pupil in a number of respects because of any of the characteristics⁴⁰ protected by the Act.

All schools are legally required to have a behaviour policy with measures to prevent all forms of bullying, including prejudice-based and discriminatory bullying. We expect schools to take quick and decisive action if any incidents do occur.

Previous UK governments provided over £3m of funding, between 10 August 2021 and 31 March 2024, to five anti-bullying organisations to support schools to tackle bullying. This includes projects targeting bullying of particular groups, such as those who are victims of hate-related bullying and homophobic, biphobic and transphobic based bullying.

The Devolved Administrations: Preventing violence against women and girls in schools

Wales

In Wales the statutory safeguarding guidance Keeping Learners Safe⁴¹ is applicable to local authorities and governing bodies of maintained schools (including maintained nursery schools), voluntary-aided and foundation schools, and further education institutions, under section 175 of the Education Act 2002 and independent schools under section 157 of the 2002 Act. The purpose of this guidance is to help all education settings ensure they have effective safeguarding systems in place. Where a child is not attending a maintained setting (e.g. educated at home), the section 175 duty applies to local authorities in respect of those children.

The guidance is for everyone working in an education setting, whether employed by the local authority or otherwise, who meets children and their families have a role in safeguarding children.

In January 2024, Wales also published its Peer-on-Peer Sexual Harassment in Education Settings: Action Plan⁴² to prevent and respond to peer-on-peer sexual harassment in education settings.

Scotland

The Scottish Government is currently updating its national anti-bullying guidance *Respect for All: National Approach to Anti-Bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People*. It is expected that updated guidance will be published by the end of 2024. This guidance helps everyone involved in the lives of children and young people to identify and address bullying, including prejudice-based bullying, whether it happens online or offline. The national anti-bullying guidance has links to other areas of work, including the current development of guidance on a whole-school approach to preventing and responding to racism and racist incidents in schools. The Scottish Government also

⁴⁰ The Equality Act 2010 protects people from discrimination based on nine characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership (only in employment), pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation

⁴¹ [Wales Gov: Keeping Learners Safe](#)

⁴² [Wales Gov: Peer on Peer Sexual Harassment Education Settings Action Plan](#)

continues to fund *respectme*⁴³, a national anti-bullying service, to build confidence and capacity to address all types of bullying effectively.

Northern Ireland

The Department of Education in Northern Ireland has provided specific guidance⁴⁴ to schools and other education settings about identification and management of harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children and young people. This sits alongside all other statutory safeguarding and child protection guidance/requirements already in place.

UK Future Priorities:

The new UK government has made it clear that tackling violence against women and girls will be treated as the national emergency that it is, setting out a mission to ‘take back our streets’ and halve violence against women and girls within a decade. Policy priorities will include:

- introducing specialist rape and sexual offences teams in every police force, and offering free independent legal advice to all rape victims;
- introducing specialist rape courts, working with the judiciary to fast-track rape cases, driving down waiting times for the victims and survivors of these abhorrent offences;
- putting domestic abuse experts in 999 control rooms, and strengthening the use of protective orders;
- ensuring schools address the issue of misogyny, which is a root cause of VAWG, by teaching pupils about healthy relationships and consent;
- tackling online misogynistic abuse, including image-based abuse; and.
- strengthening stalking prevention orders, giving women the right to know the identity of online stalkers, and toughening laws on spiking.

Chapter 6: Women’s Health

Overview:

Women’s health is fundamental to achieving gender equality. The UK government is clear that women’s health will be prioritised as we build an NHS fit for the future, and women’s equality will be at the heart of the UK government’s missions. This includes work across the Devolved Administrations, who have taken action to improve the healthcare outcomes for women and girls wherever they live.

England: Women’s Health Strategy

⁴³ [respectme](#)

⁴⁴ [NI: Circular - 2022/02 - Children Who Display Harmful Sexual Behaviour](#)

The Women's Health Strategy for England was launched in 2022 under a previous UK government, setting out changes to support the health and wellbeing of women and girls, and for improving how the health and care system engages and listens to women.

The government is committed to prioritising women's health as we build an NHS fit for the future. The government is considering how to take forward the Women's Health Strategy for England. Childbirth should not be something women have to fear or look back on with trauma, but too many are being failed today. This government will ensure that trusts failing on maternity care are robustly supported into rapid improvement, and train thousands more midwives. The government is also committed to closing the Black and Asian maternal mortality gap and will be taking action to address this key manifesto commitment.

Women's Health Ambassador for England

Professor Dame Lesley Regan was appointed as Women's Health Ambassador for England in June 2022. Dame Lesley has focused on raising the profile for women's health and supporting implementation of the strategy.

Mental health

Women suffer disproportionately from mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety, and dissociative disorders associated with sexual abuse. Under the previous government, the call for evidence⁴⁵ underpinning the Women's Health Strategy found that mental health was in the top 5 topics selected by respondents for inclusion in the Women's Health Strategy (selected by 39% of respondents) and this was consistent across every age group.

Tackling period poverty

In the UK, a number of steps have been taken to ensure that period products are available and affordable for all who need them, including scrapping value added tax (VAT), and rolling out free period products to colleges, schools and hospitals.

Since January 2020, a Department for Education scheme provides free period products in schools and 16-19 education institutions in England. 97% of secondary schools, 92% of post 16 organisations and 68% primary schools have made at least one order since the scheme began in January 2020. Since 2019 the NHS has offered free period products to every hospital patient who needs them (including long-term in-patients).

The Devolved Administrations: Women's Health

Improving Women's Health - Wales

The Welsh Government published the Women and Girls' Health Quality Statement in July 2022⁴⁶. This was the first step in transforming the care received by women in Wales. The quality statement sets out what the NHS in Wales is expected to deliver to ensure good quality health services to support women and girls through the course of their lives. This includes those conditions specific to women and girls such as

⁴⁵[Women's Health Strategy Call for Evidence](#)

⁴⁶[Wales Gov: Quality Statement for Women and Girls' Health 2022](#)

endometriosis, but also those areas where there are gender inequalities in the care provided and the outcomes achieved.

In December 2022, the NHS published the discovery phase of the NHS Women's Health Plan which has been developed with significant input from women in Wales. The discovery phase report presents the state of the nation for women's health in Wales, combining an evidence review of women's health with the voices of women and girls in Wales. Following the consultation of over 3,800 women, this report seeks to build the foundations for the development of a Women's Health Plan for Wales.

The NHS Executive in Wales is establishing a National Strategic Clinical Network for Women's Health. A National Clinical Lead for Women's Health has been appointed and will lead the network in developing a 10-year Women's Health Plan. The Plan will detail how NHS Wales intends to realise the ambitions set out within the Welsh Government's Quality Statement for Women's and Girls' Health. The plan aims to address any existing inequities in provision or barriers to access, taking a life course approach to ensure the provision of good quality health services for women throughout their lifetime. It is intended that the Plan will be published by the end of 2024.

Women's Health Plan – Scotland

Scotland published a Women's Health Plan⁴⁷ in August 2021. The Plan sets out 66 actions to ensure all women enjoy the best possible health, throughout their lives. The plan aims to improve access to health care for women across their life course and reduce inequalities in health outcomes for girls and women. The Plan takes an intersectional and life course approach, recognising the importance of identifying opportunities to prevent disease and promote health at key stages of life whilst acknowledging that the social determinants of health shape our health and wellbeing throughout life.

Scotland's Women's Health Plan has brought tangible change, for example since the publication of the plan:

- a Women's Health information platform has been established on NHS Inform⁴⁸;
- a Women's Health Leads Network has been established with a dedicated lead in every NHS Board, focussed on driving change at a local level;
- every mainland health board has a specialist menopause service and a 'buddy' support system in place for the Island health boards;
- a menopause and menstrual health workplace policy for NHS Scotland is in place;
- a National Menstrual Health Network has been established for health care professionals, to provide peer support, share expert clinical advice and support further learning opportunities;
- a £250,000 endometriosis research project with the charity Wellbeing of Women that is looking at a non-hormonal drug in the management of endometriosis-associated pain has been funded;

⁴⁷ [Women's health plan - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/women-health-plan)

⁴⁸ [Women's health | NHS inform](https://www.nhs.uk/women-health)

- the choices that women have to access contraception at community pharmacies have increased; and,
- Professor Anna Glasier, OBE has been appointed as Scotland's first Women's Health Champion, working with partners in the NHS and across the public and third sectors to drive forward actions in the Women's Health Plan.

Women's Health - Northern Ireland

Following the restoration of the Devolved Assembly in February 2024, the Department of Health in Northern Ireland is currently developing the first Women's Health Action Plan for Northern Ireland, which will set out the key actions for delivery during the current Assembly mandate (2022-27) to improve awareness and outcomes for all women and girls throughout their life course and across a range of services. This will pave the way for a longer-term comprehensive Women's Health Strategy in the future.

To support this work, the Department is also supporting an initiative by the community and voluntary sector and academic partners to undertake a large-scale public listening exercise on Women's Health in Northern Ireland ensuring that women's voices are heard to help shape how healthcare services are delivered in the future.

The Devolved Administrations: Mental health

Wales

The Welsh Government has recently undertaken a formal consultation on a draft Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2034, with a final strategy and delivery plan to be published late 2024/early 2025. The strategy is cross governmental and covers all ages. Its overarching vision is that people in Wales will live in communities which promote, support and empower them to improve their mental health and wellbeing, and will be free from stigma and discrimination.

The implementation of the Welsh Government's published strategy will take a rights-based approach to ensuring that everyone has the best mental health possible. There will be a connected system of support across health, social care, third sector and wider, where people can access the right service, at the right time, and in the right place. Care and support will be person-centred, compassionate and recovery-focused, with an emphasis on improving quality, safety and access. Care and support will be delivered by a workforce that feels supported and has the capacity, competence and confidence to meet the diverse needs of the people of Wales.

Scotland

The new *Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017-27*⁴⁹ was published - jointly with the national membership organisation for Scottish Local Government - in June 2023 and the *Delivery Plan*⁵⁰ and *Workforce Action Plan*⁵¹ in November 2023. The Delivery Plan lays out actions which are designed to make substantial progress towards tackling mental health inequalities. As with the Women's Health Plan, it acknowledges that an intersectional approach should be taken, recognising that people are multi-faceted. Support, services, care and treatment that are person-centred and gender sensitive are

⁴⁹ [Scot.Gov: Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#)

⁵⁰ [Scot Gov: Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Plan](#)

⁵¹ [Scot Gov: Workforce Action Plan](#)

needed. Since 2019 a substantial amount has been invested in Perinatal and Infant Mental Health services. In the financial year 2023/24 over £9 million has been invested in NHS Health Boards to fund community perinatal mental health, infant mental health and maternity neonatal psychological interventions.

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Mental Health Strategy 2021-31⁵² sets out actions to improve the mental health and wellbeing of the population across three themes: promoting mental wellbeing across society; providing the right support at the right time; and introducing new ways of working. Actions are also in place to ensure that groups disproportionately affected by mental ill health, who often struggle to access services, are considered. Through the Strategy, community perinatal mental health teams are now in place within each Trust providing support and treatment to women in the perinatal period.

The Devolved Administrations: Relationships and sex education

Wales

*The Curriculum for Wales*⁵³ which was launched in September 2022 includes mandatory Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), which plays an important role for the safeguarding and protection of all learners in Wales. One of the four purposes of the new curriculum is to support all young people to become healthy, confident individuals, and this includes being able to form appropriate relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

The published RSE statutory guidance and Code provides detail on the core developmentally appropriate learning and legal considerations. Promoting and supporting healthy relationships is a key part of the Welsh Government's approach to ending Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV). The VAWDASV strategy, together with the mandatory RSE Code and statutory guidance, underpins learners' rights to enjoy fulfilling, healthy and safe relationships throughout their lives. RSE will support learners to develop the knowledge to recognise all forms of discrimination, violence, abuse and seek help and advice where appropriate.

Scotland

The Scottish Government's ten year Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2017-27) commits to undertaking a national review of personal and social education and the role of guidance in local authority schools and also a review of services for counselling and their evidence base for children and young people. The Scottish Government published updated guidance for teachers on Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education in 2014. The Scottish Government hopes to publish an updated version of this teaching guidance by the end of 2024.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring all pupils receive high quality RSHP education. RSHP education is an integral part of the health and wellbeing area of the school curriculum in Scotland. It focuses on equipping children and young people with the knowledge, skills and values to make informed and positive choices about their

⁵² [NI: Northern Ireland Mental Health Strategy 2021-31](#)

⁵³ [Wales Gov: The Curriculum for Wales](#)

bodies as well as forming relationships. This aspect of the curriculum is intended to enable children and young people to build safe and positive relationships as they grow older and should be presented in an objective, balanced and sensitive manner within a framework of sound values and an awareness of the law.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland the Department of Education requires each school to have in place its own written policy on how it will address the delivery of RSE. The curriculum should, where possible, reflect the values, culture and priorities of an increasingly diverse society. Pupils are entitled to a curriculum that meets their needs, is relevant to their lives and provides pathways through appropriate learning experiences. A relevant and empowering curriculum should develop knowledge, understanding and skills as well as nurturing attitudes that can be progressed through lifelong learning. It is the responsibility of the Board of Governors of each school to ensure that a comprehensive and age-appropriate programme is taught and that the standardised minimum content is covered which reflects the school's ethos

The Devolved Administrations: Tackling period poverty

Wales

The Welsh Government published the *Period Proud Wales Action Plan*⁵⁴ in February 2023. This plan aims to eradicate period poverty and ensure period dignity for women, girls and people who have periods by 2027.

Welsh Government's vision for achieving period dignity involves ending any sense of stigma and shame associated with periods; increasing understanding of periods and confidence to discuss them, whether you have them or not, and considers the impact of periods across a person's life course and lifestyle.

Scotland

In August 2022, Scotland became the first country in the world to protect in law the right to access free period products for anyone who needs them. *The Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021*⁵⁵ (the Act) places duties on Scotland's local authorities and education providers to make period products available free of charge, as and when they are required. Products must be easily obtained, in a way that respects people's dignity, and a range of products must be made available.

The Act built on the existing voluntary provisions in place in Scotland since 2018, when the Scottish Government began to fund access to free period products across all schools, colleges and universities. This was extended in 2019 to cover a range of public settings and community groups supporting people on low incomes. In total, since 2018, the Scottish Government has invested over £47 million to fund access to free period products across a range of settings including schools, colleges and universities and wider public spaces.

The Scottish Government has also run an anti-stigma marketing campaign challenging the stigma around periods and encouraging more people to talk openly about them. Improved resources for schools when talking about menstrual health have also been

⁵⁴ [Wales Gov: Period Proud Wales Action Plan](#)

⁵⁵ [Scot Gov: The Period Products \(Free Provision\) \(Scotland\) Act 2021](#)

made available and the Scottish Government has funded the development of the 'PickupMyPeriod'⁵⁶ and *myperiod.org.uk*⁵⁷ website to help people identify locations where period products can be accessed for free in Scotland and provide resources for businesses and employers to become period friendly organisations.

Northern Ireland

The Period Products (Free Provision) Act (NI) 2022⁵⁸ requires that free period products are made available to all who need them. This legislation became operational from 12 May 2024 and will assist in promoting period dignity, tackling the stigma around menstruation as well as contributing to the eradication of period poverty. The Executive Office has partnered with the Northern Ireland Libraries Authority (NILA) to provide free period products throughout their network of static and mobile libraries. A number of other public service bodies, which will be specified in regulations, will also provide free products for those who need them, while in their premises. In the education sector, a pilot programme has, over the past 3 years, successfully delivered free period products to pupils in all 1,000 Northern Ireland schools.

UK Future Priorities

Women's health will be a priority in the UK government's reform of the NHS. The government has committed to cut NHS waiting times with 40,000 more appointments every week, double the number of cancer scanners, introduce a new Dentistry Rescue Plan, recruit 8,500 additional mental health staff and ensure the return of the family doctor.

The UK government will introduce a Mental Health Bill which will give patients greater choice, autonomy, rights and support, and ensure they are treated with dignity and respect throughout their treatment. This Bill, along with wider plans to tackle the mental health crisis, will help deliver the government's mission to see people living healthier for longer, including reversing the rising trend in the rate of lives lost to suicide.

Chapter 7: Empowering Women and Girls Throughout the World

Overview

In March 2023, the former UK government launched the International Women and Girls Strategy⁵⁹ which committed to mainstream gender across the work of the department by putting women and girls at the centre of the UK's foreign, security and defence policy. The International Development White Paper (2023)⁶⁰ further committed the UK to 'promot[ing] inclusive and sustainable resolution to conflicts, champion[ing] women peacebuilders, and work[ing] with partners and the UN to improve international stabilisation efforts'.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Women Peace and Security team (WPS), works with five UK government departments and two devolved administrations to implement the UK's fifth WPS National Action Plan (NAP),

⁵⁶ [Scot Gov: Pick Up My Period App](#)

⁵⁷ [Scot Gov: My Period website](#)

⁵⁸ [NI: The Period Products \(Free Provision\) Act \(NI\) 2022](#)

⁵⁹ [GOV.UK: International Women and Girls Strategy 2023-2030](#)

⁶⁰ [GOV.UK: The International Development White Paper \(2023\)](#)

integrating WPS to diplomatic, development, defence and security policy across government, and developed in close consultation with civil society. This builds on the UK's successful implementation of its fourth WPS NAP between 2018-2022.

Leadership and participation in conflict prevention and resolution

Women, Peace and Security

Both the UK's fourth and fifth WPS NAP have focused on putting women's meaningful participation into action. This has been delivered through various channels which include:

- Supporting mediators' networks, such as the 'Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth', a group of 50 conflict mediators who are actively engaged in conflict prevention – for example, members from West Africa are working with women and communities in Niger, leading innovative solutions to stop conflict before it starts.
- Providing bespoke support to specific country contexts, especially when conflict breaks. For example, following the outbreak of conflict in Sudan and its devastating impact on women and girls, we prioritised women's meaningful participation in the peace process. In September 2023, the then Foreign Secretary met with Sudanese women peace builders to identify opportunities to engage women in the conflict response and the peace process. The UK has also provided technical expertise on gender inclusion to the main civilian political coalition as part of our support to Sudanese civil society.
- Programmatic support - through the Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), the UK is empowering women's rights organisations around the world, recognising their vital role in sustaining conflict prevention and resolution efforts, as detailed in their latest Annual report. In particular, its Gender, Peace and Security Portfolio promotes innovative approaches to deliver inclusive and transformative change in conflict environments. It prioritises the security of people alongside states, recognising that the two are intertwined.

Engagement with International Women's Rights Organisations

Recognising the critical role of women's rights organisations (WROs) in achieving progressive change, the UK has a growing number of partnerships with diverse WROs across our programme portfolio. From support to grassroots groups to national and regional WROs and women's funds, these partnerships are critical as part of work to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, achieve sexual and reproductive health rights for the most marginalised, and advance inclusive security and stability.

It is important to create spaces to listen to and amplify women leaders and WROs priorities and voices, such as the UK's Minister for Women and Equalities and Development meeting with women-led organisations to discuss the response to gender-based violence during a visit to South Sudan in August 2024.

Chapter 8: Civil Society Engagement

Overview

The UK government has set an ambitious programme to deliver its five key missions and women's equality is central to this. Therefore engagement and consultation with women's organisations and civil society will be a key vehicle for policy development.

The Devolved Administrations have established their own mechanisms for engaging with civil society which is set out below.

UK Civil Society Engagement on Beijing Platform and Declaration for Action + 30

In preparation for the UK's review on its implementation of the BPfA over the last five years, women's organisations across the UK were invited to share their views on what progress has been made so far, and highlight their priorities for consideration for the next five years. The format of this engagement included participation via an online roundtable or a short questionnaire sent via email to a wide range of women's organisations.

Civil society assessment on progress made

Overall, civil society welcomed efforts made to tackle violence against women and girls and cited the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 which included provisions to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence otherwise known as the "Istanbul Convention" in July 2022. The Convention came into force in the UK on 1 November 2022.

In Scotland, the creation of the Equally Safe at School Programme was welcomed. This is a whole school approach to preventing and responding to gender-based violence at school. The rollout of the Mentors in Violence Prevention Programme, a bystander programme where young people become mentors and teach their peers how to intervene in situations of violence and harassment.

The introduction of the National Living Wage has seen a positive impact on women's wages. From 1 April 2024, the National Living Wage increased by 9.8% to £11.44 an hour for eligible workers. Women were among those more likely to benefit from these increases.

The introduction of the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023 which is due to take effect in October 2024 will amend the Equality Act 2010 to require employers to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace signals a step in the right direction.

Civil society also noted that the newly elected parliament includes 264 women. This figure represents 42% of members of the lower chamber and builds on the previous record of 34.2% in 2019. Women are not just on the backbenches, but also hold a number of senior frontbench roles including the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister.

The expansion of childcare support, including more affordable childcare provision and flexible working has been welcomed. Civil society highlighted that these initiatives were central to supporting parents, to improve access to work, education and training.

Civil society in Wales, championed the focus on making equality and inclusivity a central part of their relationship and sexuality education for all learners.

Civil society highlighted the UK International Women and Girls Strategy 2023 to 2030 as a demonstration of the UK's commitment to advancing gender equality worldwide and includes a provision to fund women's rights organisations. This has led to increased investments in flexible funding to women's rights organisations in the global South.

Civil Society proposed priorities for the next five years

Civil society reflected on the challenges experienced by women and girls over the last five years due to the COVID pandemic, cost of living challenges and climate crises and conflict. A number of proposed priorities for the next five years were put forward to ensure accelerated progress is made to advance women's empowerment both domestically and internationally.

Overall, civil society is keen to see efforts across all Four Nations to tackle poverty. They have also called for increased engagement with governments and a strengthened institutional mechanism to deliver on implementing both the BPfA and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The UK government's ambitious agenda will include a comprehensive programme of stakeholder engagement to support delivery of its five missions, details of which will be set out in due course.

Other priorities proposed included: flexible funding for domestic women's organisations; action to eradicate misogyny in family courts; the need for more female peacekeepers in conflict situations; the lack of disaggregated data in relation to age and other protected characteristics; utilising existing robust data to inform policy development to improve the outcomes for women and girls; and, examining the use of language in media reporting on violence against women and girls.

The Devolved Administrations: Civil Society Engagement

Wales

In 2018, the Welsh Government announced a rapid review of its gender equality policies. The Gender Equality Review recommendations covered all policy areas controlled by the Welsh Government. These include health, education, skills, poverty, welfare reform, employment, childcare, transport and violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence. There were also recommendations focussed on embedding equality across Welsh Government. Following the review, an Advancing Gender Equality in Wales plan ran from March 2020 to 2023. Programme during that time frame and beyond, is overseen by the Gender Equality Forum and reported on the Forum's page on the Welsh Government website.

The Gender Equality Forum was formed in 2022. Prior to this it was a subgroup of the Strengthening and Advancing Equality and Human Rights Group. The Gender Equality Forum is chaired jointly by the Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for equality and senior Welsh Government officials. It brings together stakeholders working on gender equality issues across Wales. The Forum oversees implementation of the Gender Equality Plan. It also offers advice and expertise to the Welsh Government on issues that impact gender equality in Wales.

Members of the Forum consult with their networks and wider membership to help identify and understand pressing and emergent barriers to gender equality.

Scotland

The First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (NACWG) was formed in 2017 as a catalyst for change to address gender inequality in Scotland by providing independent strategic advice to the First Minister. The NACWG understand that gender inequality is complex and harmful and it affects everyone – not just women and girls – and it affects us collectively as a country. The NACWG's vision is of a Scotland which is recognised for its action towards realising an equal society where all women and girls can reach their true potential.

The NACWG's focus is creating systemic change that will make the difference for generations of the future. Phase One of the NACWG ran from 2018 – 2021, with the NACWG producing several reports and recommendations around attitudes and culture change; policy coherence; and gender sectional architecture for the Scottish Government to implement. Phase Two of the NACWG will run from 2021 to 2026, with the NACWG carrying out specific focuses of scrutiny throughout this period.

Northern Ireland

The Gender Equality Strategy, currently under policy development, has to date involved a significant amount of engagement with both internal and external stakeholders. Strategy development adopted the principle of Co-Design and included an Expert Advisory Panel, a Co-Design Group (made up of representatives from across Civil Society, including many women's organisations) as well as a Cross Departmental Working Group and Ministerial Steering Group.

Chapter 9: Participation and Accountability

England: Women's participation in public life

Diversity in political representation

The UK currently has the most diverse Parliament in its history. The newly elected Parliament includes 263 women out of 650 Members of Parliament (40% of the lower chamber).

As of March 2024, there were 228 female peers in the House of Lords, representing 29% of the house (781 sitting peers). There is a lower proportion of female peers in the House of Lords than the House of Commons.

The UK government has committed to enact Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, which will ensure that all political parties publish diversity data of their candidates.

The Devolved Administrations: Women's participation in public life

Wales

The Senedd Cymru (Electoral Candidate Lists) Bill was introduced to the Senedd on

11 March 2024. This is part of a package of reforms for the purpose of making the Senedd a more effective legislature that is better able to serve the people of Wales. The Bill delivers on the recommendation of the Special Purpose Committee (SPC) on Senedd Reform that the Senedd should be elected with integrated statutory gender quotas and the legislation prescribes rules about the proportion and placement of women on party lists. Under the legislation, currently undergoing scrutiny by the Senedd, political parties would be required to ensure that at least 50% of candidates on any list are women and that women are in first position on at least half of their lists throughout Wales.

In addition, The Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Bill (as passed) includes a duty on the Welsh Ministers to issue guidance aimed at political parties to encourage them to publish diversity information on Senedd candidates and develop and publish diversity and inclusion strategies in relation to all Welsh elections. The guidance will be published by May 2025 and is intended to encourage political parties to consider how they may be able to attract and retain more diverse candidates and elected members, including more women.

Scotland

Of the 11 Scottish Government Cabinet members, eight positions are held by women. The Cabinet is supported by 13 Ministers, six of whom are women, including the first woman of colour to serve as a Scottish Government Minister. The roles of Lord Advocate and Solicitor General are also currently held by women. Since the 2021 Parliamentary Election, women account for 46% of MSPs, with two women of minority ethnic background for the first time in history, and in the Local Government elections held on 5 May 2022, the percentage of women councillors increased to 35% from 29% in 2017.

The Scottish Government is providing funding to Engender to progress the Equal Representation project. The project will work with political parties to increase the representation of diverse women, and to progress a second phase of work with the Equal Representation Coalition which in its first phase of work developed a toolkit for political parties. This grouping of national equality organisations brought together stakeholders working for BME, LGBT+, women's, and disabled people's representation.

Women's representation at a local level remains also low, with women accounting for only 35% of councillors. This is why the Scottish Government is also funding a post in the national membership organisation for Scottish local government (CoSLA) to March 2025 to support the work of the Cross Party Barriers to Elected Office Special Interest Group. The group involves elected members from each of CoSLA's Political Groups, and seeks to identify changes in culture and practices, and support the ambition to deliver greater equality and diversity within local democracy.

It is also providing funding to Elect-Her, who work to support and equip women in all their diversity to stand for political office, through hands-on workshops and peer-support circles. 54 women were supported by Elect-Her in the 2022 Scottish Local Authority Elections, with 27 women winning their elections. 79 women were also supported by Elect-Her in the 2024 UK General Election.

Northern Ireland

Under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 all public authorities have a statutory duty to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and without prejudice to this regard to the desirability of promoting good relations. The Local Government (NI) Act 2014 refers to this duty in relation to community planning and economic well-being. Tackling longer term issues will be assisted by the community planning process. It provides an opportunity to consider equality more cohesively through linking existing equality programmes with physical planning projects, economic development, tourism and leisure, within the framework of community planning.

Chapter 10: National Processes and Machinery for Gender Equality

Ministers and parliamentary scrutiny

The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP was appointed Minister for Women and Equalities in July 2024 under the new government. She holds this post in conjunction with her role as Secretary of State for Education. The Rt Hon Annelise Dodds MP, Minister for Development in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Minister of State for Women and Equalities is deputy head of the wider equalities ministerial team, with responsibility for gender equality policy and women's rights. The Ministers are held to account on progress by the UK Parliament, where they are called every six weeks to answer questions about any of their policies, alongside relevant Ministers from across government.

Wales

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Social Justice, Trefnydd and Chief Whip has responsibility for Equality and Human Rights issues. Cabinet Secretaries answer questions in the Senedd Cymru, the Welsh Parliament, every four weeks on policy areas within their remit.

Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers are also held to account by relevant Senedd Committees. The Equality and Social Justice Committee was set up to scrutinise policy and legislation and to hold the Welsh Government to account in specific areas. These areas include equality and human rights, fair work, community cohesion and safety, tackling poverty, and implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015. The Committee has six Members who come from the different parties represented in the Senedd.

Scotland

Shirely-Anne Somerville MSP is the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, having served in this role since March 2023. Her diverse portfolio of responsibilities includes working to deliver the recommendations of the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls, alongside the First Minister. She is supported by the Minister for Equalities, Kaukab Stewart MSP. Having been appointed to the role in May 2024, she supports the Cabinet Secretary to deliver gender equality. The Cabinet Secretary and Minister are held to account on the progress of gender equality by the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament scrutinises the work of the Cabinet Secretary and Minister through parliamentary questions and appearances at parliamentary committees, such as the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice

Committee.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the Minister for Communities has responsibility for gender equality policy on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive. The Minister is accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly through its scrutiny processes.

Women and Equalities Select Committee

The Women and Equalities Select Committee was established by the House of Commons in 2015 to examine UK government expenditure, administration and policy related to equalities. It holds the government to account on equality law, including the Equality Act 2010. It also scrutinises the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Similarly, the Joint Committee on Human Rights consists of twelve members, appointed from both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, to examine matters relating to human rights within the United Kingdom.

Office for Equality and Opportunity

The Office for Equality and Opportunity brings together the expertise of the Disability Unit, Women and Equalities Unit, Race Equality Unit and the Social Mobility Commission.

The Office for Equality and Opportunity in the Cabinet Office will cover the overall framework of equality legislation in the UK, including disability policy, ethnic disparities, gender equality and LGBT+ rights.

Implementing CEDAW

The UK government is committed to fulfilling its obligations under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) We take our responsibilities in this area seriously, and we look forward to outlining the UK's progress in this area in our next report.

In line with the CEDAW Committee's recommendations to the UK in 2019, in 2021, the UK extended its ratification of CEDAW to Jersey which means that all 50,000 women in the dependency have human rights equal to men.

Wales

The Programme for Government 2021-2026 contains commitments to incorporate into Welsh Law two of the core United Nations Conventions, CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of Disabled People. An expert stakeholder group, the Legislative Options Working Group, is currently scoping how we might do this. The Programme for Government 2021-26 contains commitments to incorporate

Scotland

The Scottish Government remains committed to embedding further international standards into Scots Law. This includes incorporating CEDAW into Scotland's

domestic legal framework, within the limits of devolved competence. The Scottish Government is continuing to work with stakeholders including civil society groups to develop its plans for incorporation.

Northern Ireland

In line with CEDAW's recommendations, on 22 October 2019, the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 was introduced by the UK government, decriminalising abortion, and placing a duty on the UK Government to introduce regulations to ensure that recommendations in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the report of the UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) are implemented in Northern Ireland.

The Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No 2) Regulations 2020 were subsequently introduced by the UK Government on 31 March 2020 providing a CEDAW compliant legal framework for abortion in Northern Ireland.

Following the collapse of the NI Executive in February 2022, the UK Government introduced further regulations on 20 May 2022 - The Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2022 - removing the legislative requirement for NI Executive agreement under the Ministerial Code for abortion services to be commissioned and conferring new powers on the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to act in this matter.

On 2 December 2022, the Secretary of State used this power under the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2022 and instructed the Department of Health to commission and fund abortion services in line with the agreed commissioning framework and service specification for 2022-2025. This had been developed by the Department of Health following extensive engagement with Health and Social Care Trusts to understand the full requirements of providing CEDAW-compliant abortion services in line with legislative requirements and included enhanced access to contraception services. It was signed off by the Department's Project Board in December 2021 and subsequently endorsed by the Northern Ireland Office as being compliant with the recommendations in the CEDAW report, leading to the instruction by the Secretary of State.

Abortion services are now available in all five hospital Trusts in Northern Ireland which enables the majority of demand to be met locally. Safe Access Zones were introduced at all health service locations providing abortion services across Northern Ireland from 29 September 2023, under Assembly legislation to protect women and girls accessing abortion treatment services, information, advice, and counselling, and to protect staff working at these locations.