Communications Charter

on the responsible reporting of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Hertfordshire

The United Nations defines VAWG as “Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.

VAWG remains a critical issue due to its disproportionate impact on women and girls, as evidenced by research and statistics. While anyone can be subjected to violence, and it is important to acknowledge that men and boys can also be victims, the focus on Violence Against Women and Girls is based on evidence and policy that recognises the gendered nature and disproportionate impact of this issue.

By signing up to the Charter you are committing to report stories or incidents relating to VAWG, responsibly and sensitively. You will seek to raise the voices of survivors and not give a platform to perpetrators.

When reporting on instances of VAWG, you commit to using words and phrases that convey empathy and respect. Content should be written with the understanding that survivors, including those currently subjected to abuse, may be reading. Care should be taken to avoid causing further harm or distress.

In cases where a life has ended, you will treat those who have died with dignity; avoiding the sharing of graphic details that compromise the dignity of the deceased person or their surviving family members.

1) **Consider terminology:** Choose words and phrases that convey empathy and respect for people who have been subjected to VAWG. It’s important to use language that is respectful, empathetic and builds trust. For example: asking the individual whether they want to be referred to as ‘survivor’ or ‘victim’ or if not possible to ask, then use both i.e. ‘victim survivor’ and saying ‘subjected to’ the abuse instead of ‘suffering from’. Where a case has been through the court process avoid referring to people as “cases”, as this can feel dehumanising.

2) **Use language that reflects the severity and impact of abuse.** Be aware of using language that minimises or downplays the severity of harm, or which trivialises or dismisses the abuse or harm that a person is subjected to. Do not shift responsibility away from the perpetrator. Use active rather than passive language and focus on the perpetrator’s actions. For example, instead of ‘a woman was raped’, use ‘a man raped a woman’. To avoid minimising abuse, it is crucial to use clear, direct, and non-judgmental language focusing on the actions of the perpetrator.

Tackling Violence against Women & Girls

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3) **Avoid language that suggests that the survivor is at fault.** Do not use subjective terms such as 'provoked', or language that implies fault/responsibility. Avoid using language or additional context that can serve to excuse or minimise the actions of the person who is being abusive. Be clear that abuse is never the individual's fault; victim-blaming can be as harmful as the abuse itself.

4) **Consider imagery:** Protect the identity of people at risk of abuse. If you want to include a photo alongside an article, contact the individual, their family or next of kin via appropriate avenues, such as police press offices, before running it to seek their consent and approval. If consent hasn't been sought, best practice would be to not publishing a picture. Do not publish the perpetrator's photo next to an image of the victim.

5) **Use quotes to tell the story:** Where possible, raise the voice of the survivor– this makes a huge difference to both readers who have been subjected to abuse in the past, and those living with it now and deciding if anyone will believe them if they seek help. This can help others feel seen and heard. If part of a victim survivor's experience is being shared, allow them to read the story beforehand and give approval. Similarly with using quotes, ensure consent and approval is given for these before publishing.

6) **Monitor commentary:** Monitor comments on online articles and social media posts closely. Ensure those who have a right to anonymity are not identified in comments – either directly or indirectly. Recognising the significant impact comments can have on survivors and loved ones, react quickly to hide any inappropriate or abusive comments. Where moderation is not possible, comments should be disabled.

7) **Include a reference to local, Hertfordshire based support** at the end of the article, so readers know where to seek help. The most up to date information can be found at: www.hertssunflower.org and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) | Hertfordshire Constabulary

Further guidance can be found at:

The Right Words Project

Dignity for Dead Women – Media guidance produced by Level Up

Zero Tolerance – Media guidance for VAWG

Children's Society – Language guide around child exploitation and abuse

This Ends Now – Guidance developed in collaboration with Gloucestershire Constabulary and Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC)

VAWG Communications Charter addendum

Herts DA Coproduction Panel

The following dos and don'ts have been independently developed by the Hertfordshire Domestic Abuse Co production Panel.

Hear directly from survivors, in their own words, about reporting below.

DOs and DO NOT's: Language and Framing in Reporting Domestic Abuse

DO NOT:

- Use a survivor's behaviour to imply justification for abuse (e.g. references to affairs, being "busy," or "not giving attention")
- Use phrasing that implies responsibility for remaining in the relationship (e.g. "she stayed," "she didn't leave")
- Portray male survivors as weak or diminish their experiences
- Include character endorsements of perpetrators (e.g. "he was a lovely neighbour")
- Rely on commentary from individuals with no direct knowledge of the relationship (e.g.neighbours)
- Publish unnecessary identifying details (e.g. workplace, address, specific locations) that could endanger survivors
- Frame abuse as a momentary loss of control or the result of external stressors (e.g. job loss, alcohol use)
- Use parental or domestic roles to define victims (e.g. "mother of two," "stay-at-home mother") unless directly relevant
- Present mental health conditions or substance use as explanations or excuses for abuse
- Use language that implies hindsight blame (e.g. "warning signs were there," "I told you so"
- Include irrelevant medical or health details about those involved
- Report on pregnancy, particularly in early stages, unless clearly relevant and in the public interest

DO:

- Focus on the actions and accountability of the perpetrator
- Provide context about patterns of behaviour, including coercive control and any known risk factors
- Use precise, non-blaming language (e.g. "man charged with murder following reports of domestic abuse" rather than "woman killed after refusing to leave")
- Reflect the complexity of abuse, including barriers to leaving (e.g. fear, financial dependence, children, risk of escalation)
- Consider how factors such as race, disability, sexuality, and immigration status may shape experiences of abuse
- Use "domestic abuse" rather than "domestic violence" to reflect the full range of non-physical abuse
- Ensure survivors are treated with dignity and humanity, not reduced to statistics or case studies