

SYNERGY

Providing rape and sexual abuse support
services across Essex

Male Sexual Violence and Abuse against Women and Girls Synergy Essex Briefing: April 2021

Background and current situation in Essex, Southend and Thurrock

SYNERGY Essex is the partnership of the three Rape Crisis Centres in Essex offering free, confidential specialist sexual violence and abuse counselling, Independent Sexual Violence Advocacy and support to adults, young people, children and their families across Essex. Over the last year, Synergy Essex provided services to just under 5,000 victims and survivors of sexual violence and abuse, 88% are women and girls and in 98% of cases, the sexual violence and abuse they have suffered has been perpetrated by men.

The demand for Synergy Essex's services has increased exponentially over the last five years and it is an ongoing struggle to maintain sufficient resources and capacity to respond to this rapidly increasing demand. We currently have over 1,350 victims and survivors waiting for our services, the events of the last few weeks have further increased referral rates and we are anticipating that some victims may have to wait for up to 9 months for some of our services.

The killing of Sarah Everard and the testimonies provided through the [Everyone's Invited](#) movement have sparked a national conversation and an outpouring of grief, distress and anger about the violence and abuse that women and girls experience daily. The level of attention we have seen on these issues in recent weeks is long overdue, this is a watershed moment.

We have serious concerns about the current response at an Essex-wide level to male sexual violence against women and girls. The understanding and acknowledgment of the often-complex needs of victims and survivors of sexual violence and abuse and the specific requirements of women and girls within all statutory agencies across Essex and Southend-on-Sea Unitary Authority is extremely limited and leadership is severely lacking in terms of implementing effective action. Whilst domestic abuse is, rightly so, recognised as being a concern, sexual violence and abuse against women and girls in all its forms remains totally marginalised in all key stakeholder policy and planning. Whilst not perfect in its approach, Thurrock Unitary Authority has a Violence against Women and Girls Strategy, a Sexual Violence and Abuse Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and contributions towards funding are made available to the Rape Crisis Centre based in Thurrock (SERICC) from the Local Authority, Children's Services, Housing and Thurrock CCG. Unfortunately, this is not the case in the rest of Essex or Unitary Southend. This ongoing situation means that services are significantly under-resourced and this is causing a 'post code lottery' of service availability for victims and survivors.

Synergy Essex has been working closely with the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner in Essex for over 5 years, attempting to encourage statutory partners such as Essex County Council and the CCGs to step up and take shared responsibility for this issue, alongside the PFCC. This has not happened.

Synergy Essex Recommendations

We write with six clear recommendations which must be central to the development of any future Essex-wide actions for addressing male sexual violence and abuse against women and girls.

1. We call on you to name the problem.

We urge you and your agency/team to state clearly in all your communications and strategies that male sexual violence against women and girls is an issue of importance, rooted in

sexism. This perennial problem must be named and tackled head on. We have seen the rise of 'gender neutral' language and responses to sexual violence and abuse, which fail to recognise the root cause of the problem and marginalise women and girls' experiences even further, ignoring the need for women-only recovery services.

2. We call on you to insist on the development of educational programmes that use strong messaging that challenges rape culture, ensuring that male sexual violence and abuse will not be tolerated.

Male sexual violence against women and girls is not inevitable, it is the result of structures, institutions and attitudes which perpetuate women's inequality in society. Changing this requires working with Synergy Essex and our service-users to challenge myths and stereotypes, equip communities to speak out about male sexual violence and abuse against women and girls and challenge perpetrator behaviour and provide children and young people with the knowledge and tools to recognise and speak out against men's sexual violence against women and girls.

3. We ask you to prioritise the systems change required to tackle men's sexual violence and ensure that tackling male sexual violence is identified as a clear priority in strategic planning across Essex.

The crime of rape suffers from such low prosecution rates that it appears to have been effectively decriminalised. Pushing women and girls to report sexual violence in this context or increasing sentence lengths are limited solutions. The [landmark report](#) by Centre for Women's Justice, the End Violence Against Women Coalition, Imkaan and Rape Crisis England and Wales provides a comprehensive set of recommendations to address the justice system's response to rape. We urge you to familiarise yourselves with this report and push for change at every level.

We also urge you to recognise that data from Essex Police and the Essex Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) does not represent the true number of women and girls who have experienced sexual violence and abuse, with only 1 in 6 women and girls currently reporting to the police. Together we must acknowledge that the criminal justice system is not the only solution and be cognisant of the fact that most women and girls do not report to the police for valid reasons. Victims and survivors who have not reported, however, do contact rape crisis centres for services.

A step change is required in the response to sexual violence and abuse, paying particular attention to effective solutions for women and girls. Sexual violence and abuse are not the sole responsibility of any one agency. All agencies have a vital part to play, including Community Safety Partnerships, Essex Police, the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, Mental Health services, the Essex Integrated Care System, Children's Services, Adults Services, Housing, Education, Local Authorities and the Voluntary Sector.

As part of recognising this shared responsibility, we urge you to support the development of a Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy for Essex and Southend, in line with the Thurrock Sexual Violence and Abuse JSNA. This strategy must include the rights and entitlements for specialist services for all women and girls, including minoritised women and girls.

4. We call on you to do all you can to secure the future of the specialist sexual violence and abuse services women and girls need, as evidenced by the current demand.

Our expert services continue to face a funding crisis due to insecure funding that fails to meet rapidly increasing demand. There is a need for a secure, flexible, multi-year funding settlement for rape crisis services across Essex, Thurrock and Southend that recognises that consistent, long-term funding is essential to plan effective service provision.

5. We urge you to encourage specialist sexual violence and abuse training and awareness for frontline staff within your sphere of influence.

There is an urgency for the provision of specialist sexual violence and abuse training and awareness-raising to be made available to all frontline staff to ensure that women and girls who have experienced sexual violence and abuse are met with understanding and a trauma-informed approach. [Icena](#) provide a range of bespoke, specialist training courses and seminars for professionals, businesses, schools and colleges, and the public and third sectors.

6. We call on you to support and encourage the development of public awareness campaigns.

There is an urgent need for major public awareness campaigns across Essex, Thurrock and Southend, designed to create societal shifts in attitudes that challenge excuses for men's sexual violence against women and girls. We urge you to work with Rape Crisis Centres in Essex (Synergy Essex) to deliver effective responses and tackle the root causes of men's sexual violence.

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