

Scottish Women's Convention response to:

Policing 2026 Consultation

May 2017

The Consultation

Policing in Scotland has a long and successful record of adapting to the changing demands and needs of people and communities. A consultation is currently being set out for the proposed 10 year strategy, developed collaboratively by the Scottish Police Authority (SPA) and Police Scotland, to ensure that Scottish policing remains fit for the future.

Policing has undergone major change in recent years with the transition to a single service. Despite the scale of the change, the most significant in policing in more than a generation, communities have continued to benefit from a service which has performed strongly through the activity of both local and national resources.

However, Scotland's communities continue to diversify and grow, and the needs of people in society are changing. Demands on policing are growing as the world around us changes at rapid pace. In order to meet the evolving needs of all Scotland's communities, policing must also continue to change. The draft strategy sets out why change is needed, what will change and how this will happen.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to the issues around how policing affects women in Scotland.

Question 1:

Does the Policing 2026 strategy identify and acknowledge the main risks, challenges, opportunities and demands likely to impact on policing over the next 10 years?

Yes.

The strategy identifies and acknowledges the main risks and demands likely to impact on policing over the coming decade to a significant degree. However, there is a considerable lack of language within the strategy outlining these in relation to women.

Protecting women and children from all forms of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG), providing support and services for those who have or are experiencing violence, and preventing violence from occurring in the first place are all national priorities that should be included as a key marker of tackling crime and inequality. VAWG is both a cause and a consequence of the significant gender inequalities which exist in society.

“This issue is so important. The only way to ensure women have access to justice, support and most importantly safety, is by putting in place actions which punish the men who abuse.”

The work undertaken by the police force and various agencies in tackling domestic abuse has been welcomed. Despite this, there is still ambiguity within the law which means those who perpetrate abuse are not punished in the way they should be. Victims, the majority of whom are women, are denied access to justice as a result.

Increased reporting of crimes against women may illustrate the greater confidence that women feel they have in reporting such incidents to the police. However, this does not deter from the fact that it is still a prevailing issue within society which often does go unreported for a number of reasons. Women have told the SWC that there are *“too many loopholes”*, which discourages them from reporting, or encouraging their friends and family to report instances of domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault to the police.

The SWC welcomes the strategy’s emphasis on giving an increased focus to community policing. Women have spoken out continuously about feeling unsafe within their own local areas due to the impact that the centralisation of the police force has had on them and others within their towns.

Some Local Authorities have introduced cost-cutting measures which are having an impact on the safety of individuals. In certain areas, councils are turning street lights off in order to save money. This has a particular impact on women, who are left feeling unsafe when, for example, returning home from work. This is especially true for those in rural areas, where much of the employment available is shift-work within the likes of the hospitality industry.

“I finish work at about ten o’clock at night and have to walk fifteen minutes along the road to get home. It’s not so bad in the summer because it’s still fairly light so you don’t notice that there are no streetlights. In the winter, however, when it’s dark and freezing cold and wet, it’s horrible. I don’t have a choice though - I need my job, I don’t drive and there aren’t any taxis in the area that would take me the equivalent of a few minutes in the car.”

Whilst the draft does pay some attention to the increased need for a more diverse police force in order to meet the requirement of a progressively changing Scotland, the strategy places no emphasis on recruitment, training and retention of specifically female police officers. In order for women to feel safe in reporting of crimes, much more attention must be given to this pressing issue. The likes of language barriers and cultural sensitivities must be included within training for all new and current police recruits, with an emphasis on employing more female officers with these skills.

In order for the Policing 2026 strategy to fully work, therefore, it must highlight the significant impact of these problems facing Scotland and outline a strategic cohesive framework in order to tackle this effectively.

Question 2:

Do you agree the main areas of focus proposed within the Policing 2026 strategy are the right ones to deliver an enhanced policing service?

Outlining an emphasis on prevention within the strategy in order to tackle inequality is welcomed by the SWC. However, there needs to be a stronger focus on women as a specific category in order to develop an effective approach to tackling crime. The SWC fully supports the main areas of focus within the draft strategy, particularly as outlined in regards to tackling inequality and a focus on localism and diversity.

Many women have commented on the potential risks to community safety following the closure of a number of police stations, particularly in smaller towns and villages. The creation of Police Scotland has resulted in the centralisation of a number of services, often to the detriment of local residents.

“We used to have a police station in the town. Over the past few years staffing levels have been reduced and after the single police force came into being the station closed altogether. As a woman living on my own, this has made me feel quite apprehensive. Previously, if I needed assistance, I knew I could contact the station and a local officer would come to my house. Now I have to phone a central call centre and wait until officers are available. It’s really disconcerting.”

The SWC has heard from women on the physical reporting of incidents to the police and how emotionally draining this can be on top of being victims of crime. Oftentimes, this can even amount to feeling it is almost not worth the effort.

“Going to the police, telling your story over and over again, then having to go to court takes its toll.”

In order for the main areas of focus to have the intended effect, the Policing 2026 strategy must encompass these factors in order to deliver an enhanced policing service.

Question 3

Do you agree the methods proposed within this strategy are the right ones to deliver an improved policing service?

The proposed methods are viewed positively by the SWC in order to deliver an improved policing service, most particularly in relation to improvement of public contact and strengthening of partnerships.

The 218 project in Glasgow, for example, deals primarily with women aged 18 and over who have live involvement with the criminal justice system, a range of complex needs such as addiction, poor mental or physical health and trauma issues. Involvement with the project is considered an alternative to custody. Women who use the service benefit greatly from the support and assistance they receive.

“It’s so good having folk there just to listen to me. Attending has given me options I never would have had previously. It’s opened doors for me.”

Encouragement of strong partnerships between the likes of these services and the police is essential in order to reduce sentencing and reoffending for women. More local services in effective cooperation with the police force should be used to encourage rehabilitation and community integration. This would greatly benefit the women who are in a cycle of offending, for example, which often results in a ‘revolving door’ syndrome. In addition to this, an emphasis on effective cooperation would lead to a more trustworthy relationship being built with police officers within local communities.

A more individualised approach should be stressed within the strategy in relation to how the police force can improve services. Improving engagement and public contact is vital in order for this to occur, particularly in relation to dealing with women from BME communities, disabled women and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This should be considered, with particular attention paid to cultural issues and specific needs.

“There just isn’t enough information available for women who are looking to get protection. This discourages too many from even trying.”

The SWC also welcomes the emphasis within the methods on information technology and digitalisation within Scotland. The surge in the number of people using social media and smart phones has led to an increase of so-called ‘revenge porn’, which is having a significant impact on women. The Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Bill looks at the introduction of a specific offence of disclosing, or threatening to disclose, an intimate photograph or film. The idea that images can be shared anonymously and in such a short space of time must be effectively tackled by the police through their own increased usage of sophisticated information technology in order to ensure perpetrators do not escape justice.

The SWC has also consulted directly with women who have spoken of the impact revenge porn has had on them.

“My ex posted topless pictures of me a website, along with details of my Twitter and Facebook accounts, the town I live in (which is a small town) and where I work. I have never been so embarrassed in my whole life. I could have lost my job, but thankfully my employers were extremely understanding. That didn’t stop the whispers and rumours

going round the office though. People would stop my parents in the street and talk to them about it. It got to the stage where I didn't even want to leave the house. Meanwhile he got off completely scot free because there was nothing the police could really do about it."

It is extremely important that when supporting victims of crimes such as revenge porn that the police can provide advice and support, especially given the rise in this form of VAWG. It is also vital that the police force are given thorough training in order to be able to properly deal with both victims and perpetrators. Without this full circle approach, women will continue to be limited in access to justice and redress.

"Too many vulnerable women are frightened of the legal system and do not know where to turn for help."

Question 4

The Policing 2026 Strategy states that public confidence will be a key measure of success and the effectiveness of Police performance. Do you agree with this approach?

There is a strong patriarchal culture in Scotland which is especially apparent in rural areas. This can make it extremely difficult for women to 'speak out' and report incidents, often due to fear of repercussions within the community. VAWG is seen as a "*hidden evil*" in many rural areas and a "*behind closed doors*" mentality is often displayed. A lack of female police officers, particularly in more remote areas, can also create barriers for women in reporting domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault etc. Police officers tend to be known in smaller communities, which can make it even more difficult to disclose incidents of violence.

"I don't want to be talking about my private life with the local police officer who is the son or daughter of someone I have known for years. I would feel more comfortable discussing these things with a complete stranger."

In order to tackle the issues faced by a significant number of women, the strategy must include specific requirements concerning the need for the recruitment of a considerable proportion of female officers. Attention should be particularly paid to those with specialist training in the likes of language skills or in dealing with mental health issues that many women when reporting a crime would not feel comfortable in discussing with a man.

"Too many vulnerable women are frightened of the legal system and do not know where to turn for help."

The most important consideration is undoubtedly that of safety. The creation of Police Scotland itself has resulted in the centralisation of a number of services, often to the detriment of local communities and individuals.

"Over the past few years staffing levels have been reduced and local police stations closed altogether. As a woman living on my own, this has made me feel quite apprehensive."

In order to successfully gain public confidence in the merits of the police force, more must be done around increasing the outreach of the police within local communities. Many women have commented on this lack of effective policing within their local areas due to centralisation of the police force and local cuts. Effective police performance must be a vital issue within the strategy in terms of engaging with the community at all times.

Question 5

The Policing 2026 strategy highlights that we will need to re-shape our organisation with a workforce focused on having the right skills and capacity to meet future challenges. Do you agree with this approach?

Effective training within the workforce should be paramount within the Policing 2026 strategy to promote confidence in women throughout all areas of Scotland regarding the police force.

Organisational restructuring in order to meet the demands of an increasingly diversified population is needed to meet challenges that will arise now and in the future. Cultural barriers such as language often lead to increased anxiety and stress amongst women when reporting crimes to the police. This should be particularly exercised in the case of female police officers to ensure women who have experienced the likes of sexual assault feel in a safe environment when reporting.

“More female translators or women who understand cultural sensitivities on hand to help in these circumstances are vital.”

Whilst advancing the police force within the next decade should lay out a plan for achieving a notable increase in specialist female police officers within communities, the strategy should also encompass a considerable amount of training for male officers covering a diverse range of issues pertaining to women. Inductions for new and current officers should spend a significant amount of time covering these and the sensitive nature of them. This should also be the case for employees, regardless of level within the police force and should be routinely updated in order to instil confidence in women in Scotland that the police are committed to taking a victim-centred approach to the reporting of crimes.

Question 6

We would welcome any additional views you have on our strategy and how it will affect you, or any other person.

As emphasised, an effective strategy must cover sufficient training to ensure old stereotypes regarding the likes of domestic abuse cases are treated seriously at all times. Women throughout Scotland should feel confident in reporting any incident, no matter how small, to the police. An effective police strategy which highlights the pressing issue of women’s inequality in all areas of society is crucial for a framework for the police force within Scotland to develop and achieve the most possible within the next ten years.

Conclusion

The SWC fully supports the introduction of a strategy designed to significantly change policing in Scotland over the next decade. The creation of a plan with a heightened focus on the likes of digitalisation within the country and recognition of the increasingly diverse nature of local communities is welcomed. Any strategy that is developed must continue to emphasise a strong gender focus in order to have the potential to afford not only justice to more women, but also safety and security for them and their families. This is an extremely positive move and would demonstrate the commitment by the SPA and Police Scotland to tackle and eradicate VAWG and gender inequality in Scotland.

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