



Welsh Women's Aid Briefing Update: 26 March 2020

Update on Responding to Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence during the COVID 19 Pandemic

Introduction

In light of the current and developing situation with COVID 19, violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) services are taking action to continue to provide the lifesaving and lifechanging support to those who need it in Wales as well as protecting survivors and staff within their services.

Welsh Women's Aid has consulted with our membership and the following points have been raised as key areas to be addressed to ensure a robust response to VAWDASV during this unprecedented time for consideration of Welsh Government and public bodies in Wales.

1. Refuges Provision

Feedback from our members indicates that in the majority of cases, they have not yet experienced a significant spike in referrals, however this does not mean that there has not been a rise in VAWDASV, nor does it mean these cases will not become visible in the future.

Information from Routes to Support shows that there is currently a number of beds available across refuges in Wales. At one point, there was very minimal availability however this improved during the week. A number of beds have been vacated, more analysis is needed to look at the reason's survivors left refuge, whether it was a planned exit or a decision to leave due to current circumstances.

At present we are aware of number of services closing beds due to:

- Self-isolating survivors with vulnerabilities in refuge (pregnancy and disability)
- Self-isolating survivors due to COVID19 symptoms
- Limited staff due to staff childcare or having to self-isolate due to vulnerabilities or symptoms.

Concern has been raised by services as to the cost of voids due to the closed beds and the impact this will have on the sustainability of provision due to lost housing benefit and support funding that would usually cover the rental and staffing costs.

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Access to food for women in refuge has also been raised by refuge providers. Refuges cannot do delivery orders, due to disclosures of addresses and some women only have cash due to no access to cards. Due to staffing shortages delivering food to refuges where survivors are self-isolating, particularly in rural areas is particularly onerous on services. We are advising members on linking in with mutual help groups in communities however these are minimal at present in some areas and again cannot have access to the refuges.

Children are spending most of their time in refuge, this is impacting on survivors and support workers being able to carry out normal refuge and support activities when children would usually be in school. It is also adding to the demand on children's workers where they are available, not all refuges have dedicated children workers and many have minimal hours so children are not getting as much support as they may require.

We have produced and shared the following information on supporting children and young people at this time: <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/2020/03/supporting-children-and-young-people-through-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

2. Sexual Violence services and other community provision

Sexual violence services and most domestic abuse community provision has moved provision to telephone or online support. This means they are having to purchase phones for women to provide support as some do not have the access they need or have limited data due to pay as you go contracts. In rural areas connectivity is also an issue. Survivors are also finding it hard to find safe spaces for remote support as family and children are around.

Similarly, they are purchasing equipment for staff and are having to cover the costs of home working. Training is required for staff and volunteers on the use of technology and the provision of remote support for survivors, particularly in remotely handling flashbacks and triggers during sessions.

Sexual violence service are also being impacted by staff shortages (see below).

3. Concerns on provision for women exploited by the sex industry

Consideration must be made for women in the sex industry, as they will be more vulnerable to risk, violence and exploitation as well as experiencing further poverty. They may be at considerable risk of infection and they may require additional support to self-isolation, social distance or access to healthcare. Many rely on outreach to access condoms, other health and





wellbeing supplies, and to share ugly mug information. If stricter restrictions on leaving the house are implemented, this will impact women who are engaged in street prostitution, as they are likely to be disproportionately impacted by any fines or arrests. Due to many women in the sex industry also engaging in substance misuse, consideration of their need must inform the response with substance misuse services. Provision of personal protective equipment will be crucial for those providing outreach support to women in the sex industry.

4. Live Fear Free Helpline

The helpline continues to provide a full 24/7 provision. A small decrease in calls has been recorded. It is suspected that this could be due to survivors not having the safe space to make calls and less professionals currently working to make inquiry calls. To address this, we are promoting the webchat and texting services which may be easier for survivors to make contact through. We are also promoting safety messaging for survivors through social media.

Support for members is being provided through diversion of calls when services have minimal staff.

5. Staffing of all VAWDASV provision

Across the board staffing is an issue for services due to staff with vulnerabilities, sickness and childcare concerns. Most services have reduced staffing in place and are currently managing this through reallocation of cases and duties, however some have had to reduce provision due to staff shortage. Smaller, local services are being significantly impacted by staff shortages

6. Keyworker childcare provision

Members report that local authorities are only providing school or childcare where both parents are key workers, or they are a single parent with no other family able to provide care. As many support workers are the lower income earner in their household and also the predominance of women being the main carer many are still unable to work due to child commitments. For the VAWDASV sector this means a significant proportion of staff impacted by school closures.

Further to this, support workers are struggling to provide online or telephone support while working from home, as they have children at home, and they do not have the safe space to





provide effective support due to the nature of their work. It is not appropriate for children to overhear VAWDASV support provision that is not directed at them.

7. Provision of PPE

Members are reporting limited access to personal protection equipment. Some have stock, such as gloves, but it is running low, others have items on order but have long waits for it to arrive. Soap and hand sanitiser stocks are low.

Solutions and recommendations:

To deal with the above situation we request the following be considered by Welsh Government:

Emergency Planning

- Regular feedback from **VAWDASV representation in Welsh Government emergency planning meetings.**
- **Support for the evaluation and data collection** to provide ongoing picture of the impact of COVID 19 procedures on VAWDASV and specialist services. Data collection must not put added burden on frontline provision and must be resourced appropriately.
- **Ensure that the enactment of the Emergency Coronavirus Bill in Wales is not implemented in a manner that may put women and children experiencing abuse at increased risk.** There are potential implications on court proceedings, mental health capacity and social services support. For instance, the bill states: *Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 to enable local authorities to prioritise the services they offer in order to ensure the most urgent and serious care needs are met, even if this means not meeting everyone's assessed needs in full or delaying some assessments.*¹

Supporting services

- **VAWDASV support workers recognised as Key Workers provided with childcare options.**
- **Work with VAWDASV sector to support a central coordination of volunteers,** to support service provision such as getting food or equipment to vulnerable women in refuge or at home.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-bill-what-it-will-do/what-the-coronavirus-bill-will-do>





- **The Welsh Government must urge local authorities, Housing Associations and Social Landlords to work with specialist service to use any properties** they have which are void and unallocated to keep women safe if there are serious safety or risk concerns. Please see accompanying statement on the use of Hotels and B&Bs at this time.
- **Clear guidance for specialist services and local authority on the implementation of opening services to survivors with no recourse to public funds (NRPF).** The removal of the no recourse to public funds restrictions is very welcome however it is essential that this is clearly communicated so that it actually is delivered in practice. Consideration also needs to be made regarding the impact of covering housing benefits for women with NRPF as this continues to be a burden put on the service or women themselves.
- **Provision of personal protection equipment for support workers** in specialist services that does not put a financial burden on services.
- **Testing kits to be made readily available** to determine if refugees need to lockdown, and if staff and residents need to isolate.

Commissioning and funding

- **Suspend any competitive tendering processes and KPIs**, to ensure services are secure in their provision and can focus on frontline provision and adapting services to meet the need of survivors.
- **Additional funding** that will be needed both immediately and ongoing to cover:
 - Loss of housing benefit revenue for refugees
 - additional costs of sourcing alternative accommodation, where necessary.
 - Need for new technology and digital capabilities, recognising the increased cost of equipment and digital tools at present.
 - the increasing costs of accessing PPE
 - Training of staff on new technology or differing support methods, such as online or telephone counselling.
 - For use of dispersed units/B&B if refuge becomes full due to longer stays self-isolating/infection containment is required.
 - To cover increased staffing costs such as to cover additional on call as staff may have to double or treble their on call commitments to cover staff who are off sick or self isolating. Similarly services are having to cover costs of staff working from home such as heating, phone bills and additional equipment.
 - Increase funding for children's workers as there are likely to be more children in refuge and other settings for longer due to school closures.

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- This **funding must be swiftly and easily available to specialist services and go directly to them to deliver the provision needed.** It must offer the flexibility for them to identify what is needed specific to the service need and continue to cover impact costs beyond the immediate crisis. Service managers do not have time at present to be doing lengthy applications for funding and may not be able to set out directly all spend as needs are rapidly changing.
- **Amendments need to be made to allow for current funding** for capital projects as well as recent short term grants offered that need spending before end of March to accommodate to allow for it **to be carried forward into the new financial year** as delivery has been disrupted by current situation.
- Many services have had to take **immediate decisions to purchase essential items** such as beds and white goods for new dispersed units now to provide additional spaces for isolation. Feedback from some services, suggested they were applying for funds for these items through the Capital Grant underspend money. In awarding this grant it would help services if there was leeway, if awarded the grant, to include items purchased in advance which were included in their original application that they have needed to purchase immediately due to their response to COVID 19.

Guidance

- We welcome the guidance for VAWDASV accommodation provision. Please see our separate feedback on the draft guidance.
- Welsh Government and Public Health Wales **guidance on social distancing and self-isolation urgently requires specific safeguarding and support advice** for those who experience harm at home or will have increased mental health concerns due to VAWDASV. It must include the steps adult and child survivors, their family and friends, and professionals can take to protect their safety, promote the support that's available and how to access it. This should be developed in partnership with specialist services and relevant public sector agencies.

Equal Provision

- **Specific recognition of the need to relax KPIs in the provision for women experiencing multiple forms of discrimination,** for instance disabled women with additional vulnerabilities, who may need to go into self-isolation for longer and may need to access dispersed units or remote support for longer due to the ongoing risk of infection. This will require longer stays in refuge which must be recognised by funders and should not impact KPIs.

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- Consideration that those experiencing multiple forms of discrimination will experience further impacts from COVID-19 measures, including loss of minimal support networks and higher likelihood of loss of income due to informal/zero hour contracts. This may increase demand for specific services such as BME services as well as increase the multiple needs of those accessing all specialist services.
- **Consideration must be made for women in the sex industry** and providing additional support to support services so they can continue to support women and adapt provision as needed. This should include PPE for support workers.

Perpetrators

- **Assurance from Criminal Justice System is required to give public confidence that they will continue to respond robustly to all forms of VAWDASV.** This should address how Police will attend call outs and take people into custody, ensuring the risk of infection is not prioritised over the safety of women and children. That restraining and protection orders against the perpetrators will be continued. That probation monitoring of offenders is effective. That the safety and needs of survivors are prioritised in any early release scheme. A strong message must be made that we will not allow for lower expectations in responses to perpetrators of VAWDASV.
- During a time of possible escalation of abuse, it will be important to promote the response available for those using abuse that may wish to access support. To this end, **the promotion of the Respect UK Helpline should be part of government guidance and communications.**

The situation is changing rapidly, Welsh Women's Aid is endeavouring to keep up to date with trends and concerns facing survivors and specialist services. We are in regular communication with our members to support them during this time as well as enabling the VAWDASV services in Wales to share any mitigating actions that may help others. We are working together with members, VAWDASV organisation across UK and Europe and public bodies to ensure we keep the network of VAWDASV provision in Wales open for survivors during this period.

We welcome the positive, solution focused responses from Welsh Government and other public bodies and will continue to work to support and inform this approach as much as possible.

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