



Our Future Wales – Welsh Women’s Aid response 2020

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These are the views of:	<i>Welsh Women’s Aid (Third Sector) - the national charity in Wales working to end domestic abuse and all forms of violence against women.</i>

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About Welsh Women’s Aid

Welsh Women’s Aid is the umbrella organisation in Wales that supports and provides national representation for independent third sector violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) specialist services in Wales (comprising our membership of specialist services and members of the regional VAWDASV Specialist Services Providers Forums). These services deliver life-saving and life-changing support and preventative work in response to violence against women, including domestic abuse and sexual violence, as part of a network of UK provision.

As an umbrella organisation, our primary purpose is to prevent domestic abuse, sexual violence and all forms of violence against women and ensure high quality services for survivors that are needs-led, gender responsive and holistic. We collaborate nationally to integrate and improve community responses and practice in Wales; we provide advice, consultancy, support and training to deliver policy and service improvements across government, public, private and third sector services and in communities, for the benefit of survivors.

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We also deliver the Wales National Quality Service Standards (NQSS), a national accreditation framework for domestic abuse specialist services in Wales (supported by the Welsh Government) as part of a UK suite of integrated accreditation systems and frameworks. (More information on the NQSS can be found here: <http://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/our-members/standards/>)

Introduction

Welsh Women's Aid welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call to consultation on Our Future Wales. The COVID-19 pandemic has effected every person in Wales and we appreciate Welsh Government's call for contributions on shaping future Wales. Violence Against Women, Sexual Violence and Domestic Abuse (VAWDASV) is, in and of itself, a pandemic of epic proportions. Long before official social distancing guidance and lockdown on 23 March, 1 in 3 women¹ will have been experiencing some form of VAWDASV across their lifetimes. The pandemic has held a magnifying glass to this, showing in detail gaps in protection and support, unsustainable funding models for specialist support and the dangers and barriers which face survivors in Wales.

Situation

During COVID-19 it can be anticipated that all areas have seen increasing domestic abuse, sexual violence, forced marriage, so called honour- based violence, child sexual abuse, FGM, exploitation and other forms of violence against women and girls. Since the lockdown was instigated, Welsh Women's Aid, along with sister organisations, have been representing to Welsh and UK governments that it is highly foreseeable that the emergency measures will lead to an increase in harm to women and children.

Data is now showing:

- During the lockdown period, contact with Wales' national helpline Live Fear Free rose by up to 49%, call time trebled with those making contact often reporting more frequent abuse with shorter escalation periods. Visits to the Live Fear Free website increased by 144% in the last month and there were 1,683 homepage visits to the site made in April compared with 690 in March.²
- Nationally police forces across England and Wales have recorded an 8% increase in domestic abuse compared with the same period last year.³
- Imkaan has reported that services led 'by and for' black and minoritised women have reported significant increases in demand – particularly for refuge spaces.⁴

We will inevitably see an influx of demand for support that will go on long beyond the immediate crisis as the trauma of abuse experienced during lockdown will have lifetime impacts on physical and mental

¹ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report>

² Live Fear Free and Welsh Government monitoring data.

³ National Police Chiefs Council, Data from Operation Talla

⁴ Imkaan, The Impact of the Two Pandemics: VAWG and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls, May 2020





health, and socio-economic status. Beyond the individual, it will impact on the resilience of communities, progression of an equal Wales and impacts on economic stability.

While we have seen this increase during COVID-19, we must also recognise that most of those individuals accessing support will have had experiences of cumulative abuse throughout their lives prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has not caused domestic abuse but has escalated the circumstance in which it is taking place. COVID-19 has provided opportunities for perpetrators to further their power and control. COVID-19 has created further barriers for support seeking, particularly for specific cohorts like children and young people, BAME women and girls who may be more reliant of community led responses, women with insecure immigration status and women exploited by the sex industry who fear further persecution and prosecution for breaching restrictions.

Throughout the pandemic VAWDASV specialist services have been making concentrated efforts to both support survivors and raise awareness that support is available. New ways of working have been developed by the sector out of necessity to mitigate damage and stretch limited resources. Practices such as moving from physical to phone and online support where possible, managing a reduced workforce, social-distancing in refuge, and remote contact with children and young people have been adopted.⁵ We want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the incredible effort our members and the wider specialist support sector has made in protecting the safety of survivors, but also stress that these 'new' methods cannot be sustained long-term. Sustainability and availability of provision to protect and support all survivors of VAWDASV should be a key priority of any future Wales.

VAWDASV Strategic Roundtable

On 16 July 2020, Welsh Women's Aid facilitated, *Creating Change that Lasts: Responding to VAWDASV following the COVID 19 pandemic*, a strategic roundtable discussion which brought together Welsh Government officials, VAWDASV specialist support services, researchers/ academics, and key leads from housing, health, and justice. The purpose of discussions was to look at the impacts of COVID on VAWDASV as a whole and identify what actions were necessary going forward to protect and support survivors in Wales as effects of the pandemic, and the response to it, continue to change. A full write up of the event can be found [here](#).

Key areas:

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence services provide not only crisis but long-term support navigating trauma. Due to this and the nature of disclosures, specialists are preparing for a spike in referrals six-nine months following easing of social distancing measures and lockdown restrictions and will be providing ongoing support for years to come. We welcome the announcement of an additional £1.5 million COVID funding and that this funding can be utilised until 31 March 2020, as opposed to similar funds

⁵ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/2020/03/responding-to-violence-against-women-domestic-abuse-and-sexual-violence-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>



in England which must be spent by 31 October 2020. As the effects of the pandemic will be long lasting and continue to change both the support which is needed and the way in which provision is delivered, we call for this to be acknowledged in future commission practices and levels of continued investment across the VAWDASV sector.

Online or telephone therapy has worked with some client groups but this is dependent on levels of trauma, availability and affordability of good Wi-Fi and telephone connections, access to child care for both the support worker and the client (as therapy sessions are not appropriate for children to overhear), and how comfortable the client is with using technology (this often differs across ages and communities). It is suggested that in future a mixed economy of online, telephone and face to face provision will be required. A trauma informed, needs led response is required to ensure that building in these new responses going forward meets the long term needs of survivors of sexual violence to ensure that we continue to mitigate the impact of the trauma experienced during or pre COVID-19.

Links to mental health services have been raised as many specialist services found that during lockdown, the reduced mental health provision left their clients with very limited support and increased the complexities of the cases they were working with. This drew on resources and capacity at a time when it was already limited. Recognition of the removal or restriction of services will have knock on impact, particularly for small specialist services. Greater join up and resourcing across mental health and specialist VAWDASV services would ensure that planning during and post COVID-19 took in to account the needs of VAWDASV survivors.

Sexual Exploitation

Survivors of sexual exploitation and women engaged in prostitution have continue to navigate multiple complex barriers in the wake of the pandemic. In addition to the significant harm they already experience, many will be facing additional risks surrounding unsuitable/ unsafe housing, access to hygiene facilities, increased risk of infection, decreased income, increased police sanctions and increased abuse and harassment (from communities, buyers, and 'pimps'). The VAWDASV risks surrounding COVID 19 have largely been framed around domestic abuse, meaning survivors of other forms of VAWDASV, their realities and adequate housing/ support is not centred in planning. As the nature of the pandemic and our response to it continues to evolve as we plan for the future of Wales, it is vital that the safety and wellbeing of all survivors is included. A full paper on the needs of women exploited by the sex industry can be found [here](#).

Perpetrators of all forms of VAWDASV:

We are also anticipating increased numbers of people turning to abuse as a tool of control exacerbated by increased personal and family pressures created by the lockdown and the pandemic, especially financial pressures and the loss of jobs. The Respect perpetrator helpline has already recorded a 27% increase in calls and a 150% increase in visits to its website.⁹





A multi-tiered approach is needed for work with perpetrators to be effective. At Welsh Women's Aid we advocate for models which aim to reduce a perpetrator's space for action and create opportunities for attitudinal and behavioural change, both in the early stages of abuse and further down their perpetrating journey. This requires interventions at all levels, not just cases deemed 'high risk'. Welsh Women's Aid has worked with Respect UK to pilot the CLEAR programme as part of our Change that Last Approach. More information [here](#).

Embedding a holistic approach to perpetrators also requires training across all sectors and settings for identifying and referring perpetrators to interventions, this is aligned to the National Training Framework and 'Ask and Act' framework.

Perpetrator interventions need to be framed with preventative approach. Prevention is ultimately the key to eradicating all forms of VAWDASV. Under the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 and the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 there are requirements to provide preventative services, with a clear prevention plan laid out in the National Strategy on Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence – 2016-2021.

Migrant

women:

Emergency COVID-19 funds enabled services to support survivors with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). Services have raised concerns regarding women with NRPF following the pandemic and the removal of access to emergency funds. Having supported the women during lockdown they will not be able to remove the support due to the risk she will have to return to her abuser or face destitution. If the women are to be supported in refuge rent and support costs will need to be covered. If not covered by funders services will be burdened with the cost, this will have a disproportionate impact on smaller organisations as the costs are not recovered. Allowing for the use of the grant to support NRPF clients is welcome but this needs to be recognised during non-pandemic times as it exposes the inequity in the provision of protection and support.

As part of our campaign for secure and sustainable funding for the specialist violence against women sector, we want to ensure this is accessible to all survivors across Wales, including those with no recourse to public funds and an insecure immigration status. We therefore recommend a national fund to be established to meet the needs of survivors (or for services to access) who have no recourse to public funds, to have equal access to protection, safety and support. Wales is a Nation of Sanctuary and all women must have equal access to protection, safety and support. This needs include provision in refuge provision and support costs. Local authorities need to work with specialist services to enable support for survivors with NRPF.

Children

and

Young

People:

Children and young people are being specifically impacted by the current climate which provides increased opportunity for perpetrators to monitor and control family members, increased opportunity

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for online sexual exploitation and results in more children and young people becoming “invisible” to services⁶.

Specialist services that provide support for children and young people report that there are significant concerns for the wellbeing of children and young people across refuge and community support. Group work has not been possible during lockdown and barriers to this continue. Specialist services also tell us it is particularly challenging to keep younger children engaged and entertained in these circumstances. Online tools are being utilised to carry out quite basic chats, however therapeutic support is not possible and safeguarding/welfare checks are challenging as it is not clear who is in the room and with young children they are not able to access independently. There is considerable concern that the voice of children and young people experiencing and living with domestic abuse is being lost during lockdown, with limited respite in going to school and limited welfare checks.

As schools inevitably receive an influx of disclosures, we have to ensure effective referrals to specialist support for all children requiring it and that these services are sufficiently resourced to support these referrals. This resource must also reflect that children and young people need support as survivors of abuse in their own right, not having ‘witnessed’ abuse. It is key to get this right at the earliest stage possible to prevent future harm and trauma.

We also welcome that newly announced £1.5 million for VAWDASV services will include work with children and young people, but we call for the policy intent of the VAWDASV Act to be fully realised. This ground-breaking Act, together with the National VAWDASV Strategy and commissioning guidance, make clear that services to protect and support child survivors of VAWDASV must be available across every area of Wales. However, specialist VAWDASV services in Wales report that they are not receiving the funding needed to provide services for children and young people survivors of VAWDASV. 1 of the 7 local VAWDASV strategies describe the services they will provide to child survivors.

Children are now recognised as victims on the face of the Westminster Domestic Abuse Bill, Wales risks being overtaken and no longer being regarded as a pioneer nation in this vital work if the policy intent of the VAWDASV Act is not realised.

Communities and Housing:

The pandemic has magnified the importance of a safe home. Each survivor’s needs will be unique to their experience, services must be well resourced to offer this flexibility. In terms of domestic abuse, specialist services report that survivors who would normally rely on refuge for support have felt deterred as a result of the conceptions around shared living created by the virus and responses to it. Often accessing only a last resort and choosing to staying for a more limited amount of time. This

⁶ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/2020/03/supporting-children-and-young-people-through-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>





means women have been opting for more dangerous situations with abusive partners or relatives over seeking refuge.

Accommodation based support, including refuge, for survivors of VAWDASV differs from wider homelessness support as it is an important element of building safety, support, and enabling long term freedom from violence and abuse. Like other elements of the Housing Support Grant the support element is the critical part of the persons journey. For Phase 2 local authorities must consider how:

- Access to appropriate, safe refuge and move on housing is vital for women and children fleeing violence and abuse. This must be accompanied by adequate levels of support for adults and children.
- Many accessing homelessness services will have experienced some or many forms VAWDASV in their past and will still be impacted by the trauma of these experiences.
- Women experiencing homelessness a higher likelihood of experiencing violence and abuse in the present.

Specialist VAWDASV support services play a key role in the prevention of and response to homelessness. Specialist services have a critical role to play in developing and delivering the Phase 2 response to homelessness and COVID 19. It is critical local authorities engage with VAWDASV providers in their area to have a picture of need and the to ensure VAWDASV is embedded into the planned response.

Community focused campaigns from Welsh Women's Aid, the wider VAWDSV specialist sector and Welsh Government have worked to assure survivors that COVID 19 should not be viewed as a reason to stay silent and that we will work to offer support regardless of the circumstances. The efforts of this seemed to take effect as the week following the launch of the Welsh Women's Aid Bystander Toolkit, the Live Fear Free Helpline saw its highest increase in contacts (49% increase as of the 20th April). This as well as an emphasis on more 'discreet' ways of communication such as webchat and text chat have increased the options available to survivors in reaching out and their confidence in finding support. Effective alignment between awareness raising campaigns between Welsh Government and Welsh Women's Aid have worked well to engage at a national and community level.

There is also a clear need to strengthen protections and options for survivors of sexual exploitation. Specialist support and housing options for survivors leaving a domestic abuse situation can often be unsuitable for women engaged in prostitution and survivors of sexual exploitation. There can often be a range of additional support needs or safety concerns which means a more flexible housing solution is needed with quick access to multiple agencies.

Justice:

There is a widespread recognition within the courts and outside of it that the way procedures occurred before COVID 19 was not good enough. There is much work to be done with the courts linking in with support services more effectively, so survivors can be properly supported. Consideration needs to be made of ensuring that there are sufficient resources for support services to meet the needs of survivors accessing the adapted court systems. Many survivors will have had cases postponed or

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delayed, leading to increased support needs. Survivors with multiple needs, will need additional support to navigate the new court processes and access systems through socially distanced mechanisms, including accessing remote evidence centers.

Call to Action Overview:

What needs to be done: Overview of our key calls for protecting and supporting survivors of VAWDASV in a future Wales

1. Recentre Violence Against Women, Sexual Abuse, and Domestic Violence as a Welsh Government priority and renew commitment to embedding existing legislation across all directorates.
2. Ensure funding for the VAWDASV specialist sector is sustainable and reflects nuances across provision.
3. Proactively plan for the safety and support of survivors of sexual exploitation and women engaged in prostitution.
4. Frame ‘perpetrator work’ as ‘prevention work’ and ensure a multi-tier of interventions.
5. Commit to a long-term solution for supporting survivors with no recourse to public funds (NRPF).
6. Ensure referral routes to specialist services are prepared for a rise in disclosures by children and young people at schools.
7. Ensure dedicated children workers in both refuge and community services to provide practical and therapeutic services for children and young people to enable them to recover from their experiences, recognise abuse and develop healthy relationships in the future.
8. Increase the availability of varied flexible accommodation and support for survivors.
9. Do not default back to the inadequacies of pre-COVID court proceedings.





VAWDASV – What we need to do next:

VAWDASV is both an affront to women’s human rights and a major public health concern.⁷ All directorates have a role in supporting survivors and ending violence against women in all its forms, as acknowledged in the duties in all of Welsh Government and devolved public sector bodies in the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015.⁸

Leadership and Governance:

Welsh Government, local authorities and health boards need to ensure VAWDASV is embedded across their planning for post COVID Wales.

- **A renewed commitment to achieving the purpose of the Violence Against Women Sexual Violence and Domestic Abuse (Wales) Act 2015 across government.** The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the lack of cross government strategic awareness and focus on the legislation’s intended purpose to enable a cross-government, cross-department response to end VAWDASV and end the postcode lottery survivors face when seeking safety and support. We believe that until the purpose of the Act is achieved, consequences of the pandemic will continue to disproportionately effect survivors of VAWDASV.
- **A national strategy and delivery plan which includes cross-government action, developed, implemented, and monitored in partnership with survivors and the sector.** The national strategy ends in 2021, the new strategy must be ambitious, and include measurable actions cross-government, local authorities and health boards. Development of this should begin ahead of the current strategy coming to an end, so there is not a significant gap between the two.
- **Re-establishment of national governance structures to provide oversight of the delivery of the purpose of the Act and the National strategy and delivery plan.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Welsh Government have led weekly and bi-weekly VAWDASV Strategic COVID meetings that have provided a space to feed in and respond to the immediate crisis. Welsh Women’s Aid has raised that there needs to be a strategic focus now on planning for the future. We held our roundtable to enable the beginning of these discussions however leadership now needs to come from ministerial, adviser and official levels to take this forward. The National VAWDASV Expert Stakeholder Group has only met twice in the last 2 years. The governance structure at a national level must be re-instated and must engage across directorates. It has a role in monitoring and reviewing on progress to the national strategy and delivery plan and needs to have feed in from the Sustainable Funding Task and Finish Group, HBV Leadership Group, Vulnerable Children and Safeguarding Group and All Wales Sexual Violence group to strategically bring together work that has been instigated before and during COVID to monitor the strategic delivery in line with the duties in the Act.

⁷ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/3/section/1/enacted>





Ensure Sustainable Funding

- **Commitment to developing a sustainable funding model for the VAWDASV specialist sector.** COVID-19 has demonstrated that now more than ever services need to be in receipt of secure and sustainable funding to be able to both react and plan for changing needs and environment. As the specialist support sector navigate the fall out and work to mitigate further damage, secure funding will ensure [access to refuge](#), [trauma informed practice](#), [therapeutic support](#), [prevention work](#), [perpetrator interventions](#) and [support in the community](#) can continue. Sustainable funding means sustainability of specialist VAWDASV support and shows a commitment to ending VAWDASV as opposed to managing a crisis response.
- **Adherence to Welsh Government [Statutory VAWDASV Commissioning Guidance](#)** across all relevant funding streams for VAWDASV including Housing Support Grant and Community and Children’s Grant. It is vital that commissioning and procurement teams within local authorities are aware of the statutory guidance and how they can effectively implement them. A number of services are facing recommissioning during 2020-21 due to strict procurement decisions that do not necessarily take in to account the guidance. This is having an impact on the resources and capacity of services at a time when these are already stretched in responding to COVID 19.

Prioritisation of prevention and early intervention

- It is vital that we **do not lose sight of prevention of VAWDASV and enabling early access to support** during and post COVID 19. VAWDASV is preventable. This means we can take action to stopping VAWDASV happening in the first place, whilst also take earlier action to ensure we are preventing further harm for those already impacted.
- In Wales there is a prevention agenda across a number of remits VAWDASV, ACEs, Future Generations, Violence prevention Unit, housing, safeguarding – particularly creating join up on legislative and policy agendas that would **build on the synergy developed during COVID 19**.
- We have seen a move to **recognise the VAWDASV as a public health pandemic** during COVID-19 in Wales and this prioritisation must not be lost post COVID-19. The World Health Organisation has produced briefings on VAWG and COVID-19, with evidence based on global information and previous pandemic research, available [here](#).
- **Creating communities that are aware of the prevalence of VAWDASV, take action to challenge it and provide supportive responses to survivors.** During the COVID-19 pandemic Welsh Women’s Aid have focused on ensuring that support networks remain available to survivors and that communities are aware of how to take supportive action. Learning from our [Ask Me programme](#), we have developed our [Bystander Toolkit](#) that provided a range of information to get the message out there on how different community actors could still be active bystanders during COVID-19 in safe and supportive manner.

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No women turned away

At a time of limited space for action and reduced wider support networks it is vital that all survivors are able to access support when and where they need it. COVID-19 exposed inequalities that were already in existence and have been previously raised.

- **Provide a national fund for women with NRPF to enable them to access refuge and support costs.** Continue to lobby Westminster to remove the NRPF restrictions for all migrant women.
- **Ensure that survivors in rural areas are considered in plans for adapting provision.** This includes thinking about transport links, costs and journey times to support as well as accessing court services. Considering the costs and availability of Wi-Fi and phone connections in rural area. Prior to the pandemic Welsh Women's Aid produced a briefing outlining the needs in rural areas, available [here](#).
- **Ensure sufficient provision is available and accessible to disabled women.** This must be factored into decisions regarding adapting housing provision post COVID so that there are sufficient safe accommodation and refuge spaces for disabled women. Our report published last year outlines the key needs in this area, that have only been heightened by COVID-19, available [here](#).

Conclusion

The frequency of violence and severity of harm experienced by survivors of VAWDASV has increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic from already unacceptable levels. Effects of the pandemic has seen this increase happen in parallel with services managing limited staffing and resource and survivor's access to support being minimised.

A Future Wales where everyone is safe will mean prioritising the people most at risk of harm. It is vital that the safety and wellbeing of survivors of VAWDASV and the sustainability of the services which support them are included in planning from the very beginning. This response highlights key areas for action, and planning for a Future Wales without VAWDASV.

