



Cymorth i Ferched Cymru
Welsh Women's Aid

State of the Sector 2023-2024



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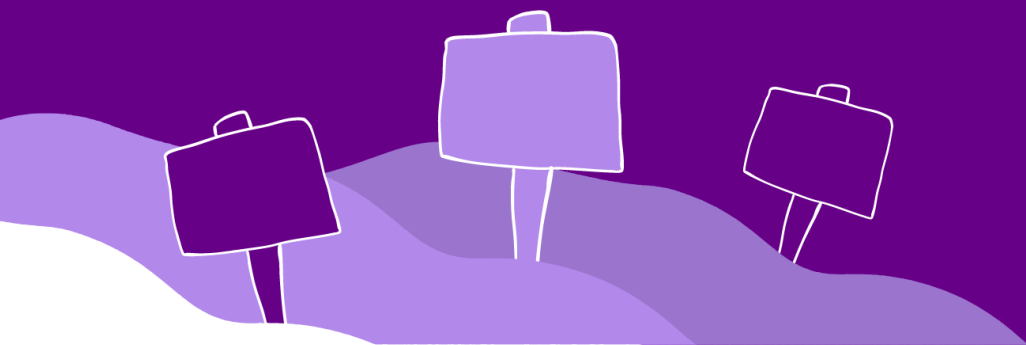
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Introduction

In 2013, the World Health Organisation (WHO) labelled violence against women a global health problem of epidemic proportions¹ and since this, the problem has only worsened.

Levels of violence against women, domestic abuse, and sexual violence (VAWDASV) are at an all-time high. Globally, 1 in 3 women will experience a form of physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both in their lifetime², a statistic which the WHO labels 'devastatingly pervasive'³. Given that these statistics do not include sexual harassment or the vast majority of cases of VAWDASV which go unreported due to stigma, fear of retaliation and/or lack of information and trust in statutory agencies, levels are likely to be significantly higher.

But while demand for support is increasing, the funding and resources needed to support survivors are not. This is even more so the case for groups of survivors who face additional barriers when accessing support, such as migrant women, Deaf and disabled survivors, LGBTQIA+ survivors, older survivors, and survivors of sexual exploitation.

This is all occurring against a backdrop of severe economic precarity. In our 'A Perfect Storm' report⁴, released in 2022, we outlined how a combination of factors such as austerity, Brexit, COVID-19, and the cost-of-living crisis had left the sector, which was already stretched, on the brink of irreversible decline. Since the release of the report, the situation has tangibly declined.

1 <https://www.who.int/news/item/20-06-2013-violence-against-women-a-global-health-problem-of-epidemic-proportions->

2 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures#83918>

3 <https://www.who.int/news/item/09-03-2021-devastatingly-pervasive-1-in-3-women-globally-experience-violence>

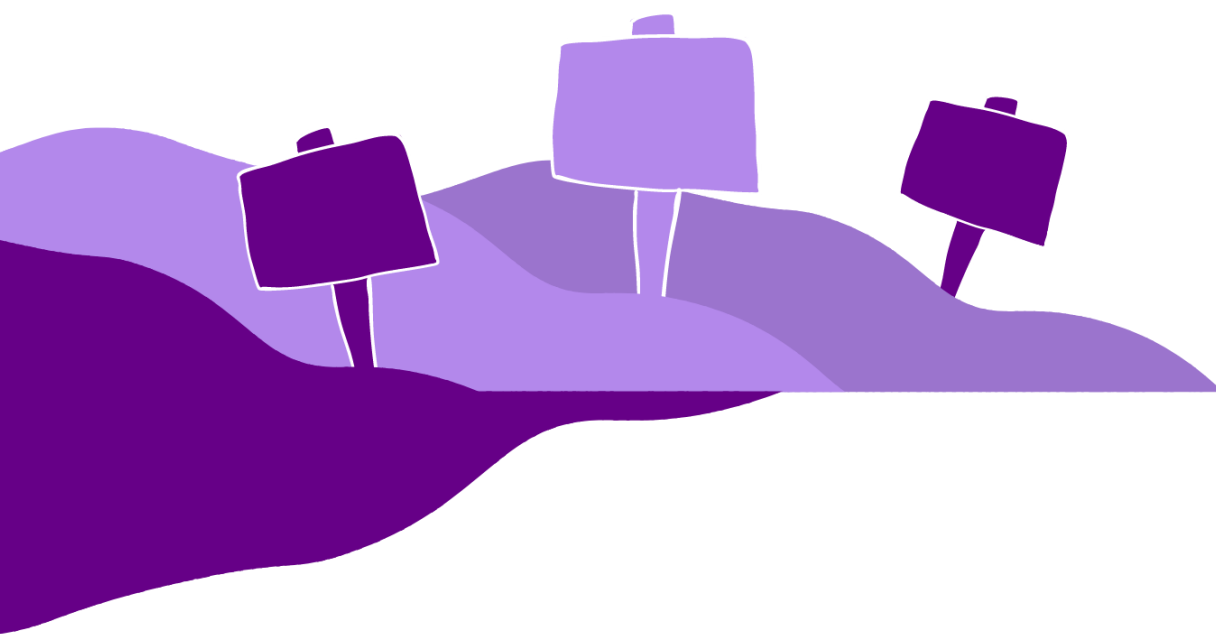
4 <https://welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Perfect-Storm-Report-ENG-compressed.pdf>

This is a critical time for the VAWDASV sector more broadly, but particularly for the landscape in Wales. We are nearly halfway through the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Strategy 2022–2026⁵ and it is clear the Welsh Government has admirable aims to make Wales the safest place in Europe to be a woman.

However, we believe progress is still too slow. Services continue to work beyond their capacity to support survivors and the uncertainty felt across the sector remains prescient. In our 2020 and 2021 State of the Sector reports, we outlined what a sustainable funding model for the sector would look like and how it could be achieved. We are buoyed by the inclusion of a sustainable whole systems approach workstream within the Welsh Government’s VAWDASV Blueprint, however, frontline services are yet to feel the benefit of this work.

All across the sector, external factors are leaving services and survivors having to make extremely tough choices that they should not have to make. In this report, we will explore some of these factors and recommendations to solve them.

It is clear that the sector is in crisis and the time for change is now.



⁵ <https://www.gov.wales/violence-against-women-domestic-abuse-and-sexual-violence-strategy-2022-2026-html>

The impact of the cost of living on survivors

Although the rates of inflation are falling, the cost-of-living crisis continues to impact people across Wales. In their most recent report, The Bevan Foundation showed that people's health in Wales is still being negatively affected by their financial position, with 45% of people saying their financial position was affecting their mental health and 28% saying it was affecting their physical health.

It is widely agreed upon that women are the 'shock absorbers' of poverty⁶, both directly and indirectly.

Women are more likely to be unemployed, in low-pay employment or work part time and are less able to increase their paid work or access to disposable income or savings⁷. Women are also more likely to be employed in and rely on public services⁸, so the impact of austerity measures on public services impacts women most.

In Wales, the economic picture for women is particularly concerning. One in seven households currently report that they sometimes, often or always struggle to afford essential items⁹ and there was little change in living standards in the first half of 2023. Even before the current cost-of-living crisis, single-parent households in Wales were the most likely to be in relative poverty¹⁰, and women are the most likely to occupy these households.

This has a knock-on effect for survivors of abuse. Increased costs such as those for food, housing, and utilities are leaving survivors having to make extremely tough choices. When asked about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, survivors who are members of Welsh Women's Aid's Survivor Network¹¹ reported "selling things on Vinted or Facebook to make ends meet", "choosing between to heat your house or eat" and not being able to fund children's hobbies, sports, school trips, uniforms, and birthday parties, thereby "isolating" their children. Services further outlined that due to increases in the cost of living, the support they are providing is both changing and growing. They said "[refuge] residents are asking for more food banks, food vouchers, struggle to pay service charges, transport to visit families etc".

Further, rates of financial and economic abuse are on the rise. One in six women in the UK has experienced economic abuse in either a current or previous relationship¹² and it is often considered the biggest barrier to leaving an abusive relationship. Data from

6 <https://justfair.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/2.-Womens-Budget-Group-Submission.pdf>

7 <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-gendered-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis.pdf>

8 <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Gendered-impact-of-cost-of-living-crisis-on-public-services-1.pdf>

9 <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/resources/snapshot-of-poverty-summer-2023/>

10 <https://www.gov.wales/relative-income-poverty-april-2019-march-2020-html>

11 <https://welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/survivor-engagement/>

12 https://survivingeconomicabuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Statistics-on-economic-abuse_March-2020.pdf

our membership of specialist services in Wales shows a 28% increase in reports of financial abuse from survivors accessing community-based services between 2021-22 and 2022-23¹³. Recent data from Women's Aid in England found that 73% of those living with an abuser said the cost-of-living crisis had either prevented them from leaving the relationship or made it harder to do so. Further, 2022 data from the charity Surviving Economic Abuse found that survivors at the time had an individual average debt of £20,000 which is six times more than in 2020, with the expectation that this would increase after the winter.

A number of survivors reported that the cost-of-living crisis has increased the use of financial means as a tool of post-separation abuse. This is demonstrated further in the case studies in this section, in which several survivors noted that the fear of several forms of post-separation abuse leave them feeling controlled and limited in how they spend their money, and the choices they are able to make.

¹³ <https://welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Annual-Membership-Report-2022-23-ENG.pdf>

Survivors stories

"I am so careful of what I do spend my money on too as in the back of my mind I am always worried that my perp will use the family court or another legal procedure against me as part of post separation abuse. This fear is something I live every day."

"I can't ever enjoy anything as he is always in the background trying to destroy my life. The systems have not stopped him and the system will allow him to do anything to carry out post-separational abuse. That fear is always there."

"I'm fortunate to be in a good job, but running a house alone is getting tougher and tougher. My mortgage is up £170 a month since the rate increase and added to the rising costs of food and energy, I'm having to find about £500 a month extra including the mortgage cost. It's a lot of pressure when also dealing with post-separation abuse years down the line from leaving for our safety.

As a survivor and a single mum I work full time to pay my mortgage, petrol (My child's school is 16 miles away from the house I escaped too) and other bills. The cost of living crisis has meant that everything has gone up. However this is made worse by post separational abuse when systemic failings enabled perpetrators to kidnap your child in order to continue financially controlling me. Due to the failing of others my perpetrator was able to take my child benefit away and actually taken maintenance from me after he had abused me. This has not helped me survive the cost of living crisis either. On top of that I am still paying back thousands of pounds that I borrowed to use the family court who failed me."

Combined, these show that financial precarity is becoming more pronounced due to the current economic climate, and this is not only leaving survivors financially reliant on their perpetrators and preventing them from leaving abusive relationships, but it is also making the process of leaving much more dangerous and complicated.

Financial support for survivors is improving, but is not sufficient. We welcomed the reform of the benefits and child maintenance systems to ensure establishment of the Pilot Emergency Fund of £300,000 to support survivors in England and Wales leaving abusive relationships and the announcement of an extra £2 million to extend this fund in the most recent Autumn Statement¹⁴. However, this does not go far enough. Such funds must be made permanent and accompanied by wholesale survivors have access to sufficient, independent financial resources to secure and sustain their independence.

Increased demand on Specialist Services

Demand for support from specialist domestic abuse and sexual violence services is soaring. We believe all survivors should have rapid, accessible support available wherever they are in Wales, whatever time of day or night, and Welsh Government themselves have stated that “commissioning should be based on the principle that no survivor is turned away from accessing critical support services”¹⁵. However, lack of capacity in the sector is making this impossible.

We know that reports of domestic abuse and sexual violence increased sharply during the pandemic, but many incorrectly think levels of abuse have reduced to pre-lockdown levels. Indeed, data from one council in Wales¹⁶ shows that since the lifting of lockdown restrictions, services have seen an increase in referrals of between 40–50%, with no signs of slowing down.

In the last financial year, 739 survivors in Wales were able to access refuge-based support services provided by our membership of services, while 712 survivors were unable to access refuge-based support services. Where refusal reason was recorded, lack of refuge space remained to be the most common reason, accounting for 28% of this group. This has been consistent for several years.

Outside of refuge provision, specialist services also supported 9,155 survivors in the community, 1,015 survivors in specialist sexual violence services, and 187 survivors in specialist sexual exploitation services. The Live Fear Free Helpline is funded by Welsh Government and operated by Welsh Women’s Aid. We have seen increases in calls to the Helpline for many years. In 2022–23, there were 23,272 contacts to the Helpline, including 18,432 calls, 876 emails, 2,822 webchats and 655 texts. While broad comparisons with the previous year are not possible due to the introduction of a new call handling system in 2022, it should be noted that there was a 33% increase in the number of emails to the Helpline and a 43% increase in texts. Further, our most recent quarterly data showed that Helpline Advocates handled 7,592 contacts and when

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-of-renters-in-wales-better-off-with-uk-government-boost-to-housing-support>

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-05/statutory-guidance-for-the-commissioning-of-vawdasv-services-in-wales.pdf>

¹⁶ [Latest News \(flintshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.flintshire.gov.uk/latest-news)

compared with the same period in 2022, average call time increased by 62% and there was a 53% increase in requests to access a safe refuge space. Combined, these show that not only is demand increasing, but the complexity of the support required by survivors is growing year-on-year.

Specialist services are feeling this increase acutely. In a poll of member services, almost 70% said there had been an increase in demand when compared with the previous financial year, while the remaining 30% said that demand on their services had stayed the same.

Specialist Service story

“Last year our centre received record number of referrals to the centre, as well as people supported. This financial year 23-24 the same trend is continuing, and data suggest that 23-24 will be another record breaking year.

Not only are referral numbers still increasing, but also are the needs of service users. Service users are presenting with more complex mental health needs, that are higher risk, requiring additional and lengthier support, which has an enormous impact on the organisation from additional costs to ensure continued provision of services, but also on work load and well being of staff.”

The funding landscape

VAWDASV specialist services in Wales are funded through a variety of different local, regional, and national commissioning mechanisms alongside extra funding from grants and charities. This system is piecemeal and not structured sufficiently to deal with the pressure the sector is seeing.

The only way to accommodate the increase in demand is with sufficient levels of funding to match. Welsh Women’s Aid have been evidencing the need for more sustainable funding models for many years, both through our State of the Sector reports^{17,18}, and through our contributions to successive planning groups and commissioning frameworks. However, these are yet to come to fruition.

¹⁷ <https://welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/State-of-the-Sector-2020.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/State-of-the-Sector-2021-ENG.pdf>

The Welsh Government VAWDASV Budget funds large amounts of the work done by Welsh Women's Aid and specialist services all across Wales. Although demand on services is increasing, as outlined above, the VAWDASV budget remains the same this year as last year, and looks to remain the same into the 2024-25 financial year. The Housing Support Grant (HSG), also funded by Welsh Government, is the biggest single funding stream for most of our member services. This grant plays a critical role in funding housing and homelessness support services in Wales, which includes refuge services, move-on accommodation, and floating support, where survivors are supported to remain in their own homes. In the 2023-24 Welsh Government Budget, the HSG was frozen at a baseline of £167 million, where it has been since the pandemic. It is set to remain at this level for the 2024-25 financial year¹⁹. This is sub-inflationary and does not account for increases in costs, demand, and pressure on those services. More information on the impacts of this will be covered in detail below.

Combined, these show that funding is not keeping up with demand, and services are increasingly being expected to deliver more with either the same or fewer resources.

When asked about their financial situation when compared with the last financial year, two thirds of member services told us their financial situation is the same, while the remaining one third told us their financial situation has worsened.

This is exacerbated by local authority cuts. The Welsh Government provides local authorities with grant funding to invest in VAWDASV as a national policy priority, but funding for local authorities has been rapidly decreasing. A recent report from Cardiff University's Wales Governance Centre shows that without significant action, local authorities in Wales will face a funding gap of £744 million pounds by 2027²⁰. Further, one in five council leaders and chief executives in England think it is likely they will need to issue Section 114 notices due to a lack of funding to keep key services running²¹. Research from the New Policy Institute with the Lloyds Bank Foundation²² shows that rising demand and shrinking resources in council services often leaves local charities to fill the gaps. This include specialist VAWDASV services, who are being left to pick up the pieces.

The consequences of this are stark. Services are having to make cutbacks and are finding it increasingly difficult to fund not only innovative programmes of support, but even tried-and-tested, evidence-based core services. These services are critical for early intervention and prevention and for survivors accessing the vital support they need at the time they need it.

19 <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2023-12/2024-2025-draft-budget-narrative.pdf>

20 https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/2776448/The-medium-term-fiscal-outlook-for-local.pdf

21 <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/section-114-fear-almost-1-5-council-leaders-and-chief-executives-after-cashless-autumn>

22 <https://www.lloydsbankfoundation.org.uk/media/fdwfepeto/a-quiet-crisis-summary.pdf>

The situation is such that one specialist service told us:



“This year, the [name of organisation] Board has for the first time considered ceasing one of its key projects to ease the pressure centrally.”

This lack of funding means that specialist providers having to choose between the services they are able to provide, survivors are concerned about the support available, and we are failing to uphold our policy priorities. Welsh Government have said repeatedly that VAWDASV is a policy priority²³ but we do not believe this can be achieved unless every survivor can access support directly at the point of need.

Indeed, one member service told us:



“Support for [children and young people] currently does not fit with the legislation that CYP should be seen as victims in their own right.”

The mechanisms via which the funding is provided are becoming increasingly competitive, costly, and time-consuming. Competitive tendering processes pit specialist services against each other, and undermine their ability to share best practice based on common experiences and approaches across the sector. This is a particular issue for specialist by and for services, such as those for Deaf and disabled survivors, Black and minoritized ethnic survivors and LGBTQ* survivors, who are often less able to competitively bid for such funding. On this topic, one survivor told us “there are a lot of concerns re reduction in refuge and support services – especially those that are for BAME groups etc – some concerns where that cuts would see specialised services cut and all fall under one service – which marginalises women from ethnic groups etc shortage of refuge places.”

Not only does this make it harder for services to secure funding, it makes the funding they do secure come with increasingly more caveats and stipulations. Services must rely on funding from a multitude of sources meaning they must dedicate a significant amount of time to writing funding bids and applications as well as reporting and outcome measurement, the labour of which takes away from their ability to provide core, frontline services.

²³ <https://www.gov.wales/violence-against-women-domestic-abuse-and-sexual-violence-strategy-2022-2026-htm>

On this topic, one member service told us:



“Many of our projects are multiply funded. For example, our children’s service has 6 strands of funding, all of which have varying outcomes, require regular reports and constant fundraising.”

Cuts in other related policy areas are also increasing the costs laid on the shoulders of survivors and specialist services, such as legal aid. Cuts to the legal aid budget since 2012 have left a ‘justice gap’²⁴, with many areas of justice being removed from the scope of legal aid and millions of people not meeting the thresholds for legal aid, leaving them either unable to access justice or facing significant legal costs which push them further into financial precarity. This is undoubtedly affecting survivors, with one survivor reporting they have “ongoing legal costs due to malicious accusations and regular solicitor’s letters. Like many survivors, I don’t get legal aid.”

The Housing Crisis

Alongside the increased cost of living, the housing crisis has worsened during 2023–24. A report by the Wales Expert Group on the Cost-of-Living Crisis, released in September 2023, found that rising rent and mortgage payments are significantly affecting households’ disposable income, and low-income households are more likely to be private renters than previously due to the lack of social housing. This is directly impacting survivors, who are increasingly more likely to require private rentals as these are becoming the most accessible form of accommodation.

²⁴ <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Gender-gaps-in-access-to-civil-legal-justice-WBG.pdf>

Survivor story

“With regards to renting during or after escaping DV, I was already in a privately rented property when my perpetrator was arrested. I stayed there due to location for work and animals I had. Landlord was made aware of my situation straight away and were initially supportive. However, that didn’t last long, they issued me a S21. I was unable to get any financial help due to having a certain level of income. Although [name of organisation] did advise me to try sheltered housing, having pets that would not have been an option so I was left homeless. The estate agents, also aware of my situation with DV and SV, were of no help at all, they didn’t even offer to help me find an alternative accommodation. The council did not offer any assistance either despite me being homeless. I had to foster out my pets and stay with family until I was able to find somewhere suitable, which proved extremely difficult due to the financial abuse I had also suffered leaving me with a poor credit score when checks were being done. I had to obtain 2 guarantors and pay extra deposit and upfront rental payment to secure a home, along with letters from the IVA company, of which I had to deal with due to the debt I was left with. The rental market is extremely difficult as it is with a good salary and clean credit score, so when you have a low income, have debt through financial abuse, and no support, it is almost impossible to find somewhere. From my experience, there was no help at all.”

There is also a significant lack of temporary or move-on accommodation which is accompanied by an increasing need. As of September 2023, where the most recent Welsh Government data is currently available, there were 11,228 individuals in temporary accommodation, an increase of 43 since the previous month and an increase of 2,576 since September of the previous year. Notably, this figure will include survivors who have been accepted as homeless and are currently residing in refuge. This lack of both temporary and secure accommodation means survivors are facing longer waits for housing and in many cases are having to stay in refuge for longer periods of time. When asked, 100% of services to whom the question applied told us the housing crisis was impacting the support available to survivors.

One survivor told us:



“I am reading more and more of women not be able to access refuge due to family size children with special needs etc.”

And a member service told us:



“Due to the lack of affordable housing, survivors are accommodated in refuge for a longer period that would normally be expected, in turn creating less available refuge spaces throughout the service”

and:

“survivors cannot move on with their lives as they are accommodated in refuge for longer periods”

The impact of the housing crisis on survivors is further compounded by several other issues.

1. Housing Benefit. The Benefit Cap, alongside increased accommodation costs, is making it very difficult for survivors to afford housing. This both prevents survivors from being able to flee abusive relationships and securing move-on accommodation. For many survivors, private rentals are becoming the most available option and the housing benefit cap is increasingly pricing survivors out of the market. In a survey, 52% of Refuge’s workers said the benefit cap was a problem when supporting survivors who had fled abuse, with two workers saying all their clients had experienced difficulties related to the benefit cap²⁵.
2. Local Housing Allowance (LHA). LHA rates help those renting from private landlords with the cost of rent paid as housing benefit. In Wales, for 2023–24, these were fixed at the April 2020 rate, despite increases in annual private rental prices of 7.1% in Wales in the 12 months to December 2023, higher than both England and Scotland (6.1% and 6.3% respectively)²⁶. We welcome the announcement in the Autumn Statement that these will be increasing, and more recent announcements of the new increased rates due to come into force in April²⁷. These must be continuously monitored and adjusted in line with increased housing costs and inflation.

²⁵ <https://refuge.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Welfare-Reform-and-Domestic-Abuse-Report.pdf>

²⁶

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/indexofprivatehousingrentalprices/december2023>

²⁷

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-of-renters-in-wales-better-off-with-uk-government-boost-to-housing-support>

3. The Bedroom Tax. We welcomed the exclusion of refuge and other specialist safe accommodation for survivors of abuse under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, however, we believe survivors living in their own homes must be exempt from the bedroom tax to ensure their safety. Many survivors remain at home with the perpetrator and may take multiple attempts to leave abusive relationships, during which their safety must be guaranteed. Reduction in benefits for survivors using extra bedrooms for their safety is inappropriate and may minimise financial resources that are critical for survivors to leave abusive relationships.
4. Housing Support Grant (HSG). This funding is key to supporting those either experiencing or at risk of homelessness, many of whom are survivors of abuse. As outlined above, the funding for this grant has been frozen since the pandemic despite significant increases in demand across the sector. Due to this, services are increasingly having to scale back costs or cover these from their reserves. There is no doubt that unless this grant is increased in line with inflation at a minimum, services will not be able to sustain operating at current levels, and this may have a devastating effect on the support available for survivors in Wales.
5. The Renting Homes (Wales) Act. The implementation of the Renting Homes (Wales) Act is continuing to affect refuge services across Wales, as outlined in our most recent briefing²⁸. Refuge services continue to manage the new ways of working under the Act, with the accompanying administrative work taking services on average of one staff day every 1-2 weeks. One service told us this is “estimated at 5 hours per fortnight”, another said this is an “average of 6 hours a week” and a third service told us this takes up “approx [sic] 5 hours”. With no accompanying funding since the onset of the Act, refuge services have been unable to increase staffing levels, so this takes staff time away from life-saving frontline services.

One member service told us:



“staff are taken up when dealing with administrative hours regarding [Renting Homes Wales]... This means the work put into RHW takes staff away from the front-line support”

²⁸ <https://welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Welsh-Womens-Aid-Briefing-on-The-Renting-Homes-Wales-Act-2016.pdf>

Specialist Service staff recruitment and retention

Specialist services have been facing issues with staff recruitment and retention for many years. Uncertainty in the sector and insecure funding models mean contracts for the staff providing life-saving support to survivors of abuse are often short-term and precarious, with extensions being funding dependent.

As outlined above, the Housing Support Grant is one of the main funders of VAWDASV services in Wales, and the stagnation of this grant is having a wide-reaching impact on the sector. Many contracts funded by the grant have not increased for many years, with some services reporting no increases for up to 15 years. Due to this lack of funding, specialist services have struggled to increase staff salaries in line with inflation or the increases in the National and Real Living Wages, which has resulted in a palpable erosion of staff's terms and conditions, particularly when compared with other sectors. The result of this is high levels of staff attrition and turnover. When asked about this, 100% of member services told us they were facing issues with staff recruitment and retention. This has knock-on impact on specialist service funding, as they invest significant amounts of time and money training staff only to lose them to better paid jobs.

One of the main reasons for this is the disparity in pay between staff in specialist services and equivalent jobs in statutory services. Internal data collected by Welsh Women's Aid shows that Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs) in statutory services may be paid more (between £32,000 and £35,000) than both IDVAs in specialist services (around £23,000) and IDVA managers in specialist services (between £29,000 and £31,000). The picture is similar for sexual violence services. Internal data collected by Welsh Women's Aid shows that Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs) in statutory sector-run sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) have a wage of roughly £35,666 whereas the same role in a specialist service has a wage of around £28,090. Notably, due to funding restrictions, such roles tend to be fixed-term posts and our internal data also shows that these are longer for statutory roles than for roles in specialist services. Consequently, highly trained and well skilled staff are leaving the specialist sector for higher paid, more secure jobs in statutory services.

On this, one member service told us:



“...the specialist 3rd sector has to compete with its statutory partners who often have far greater budgets which creates a wage disparity.”

While another told us:



“Pay rates are affecting retention with 4 staff leaving to join statutory services (because of the pay) within the past 12 months.”

And another told us:

“[We] continue to lose highly trained staff to local authority as salaries are higher”

This uncertainty has a noticeable effect on the physical and mental health of staff, which has been compounded by the cost-of-living crisis.

One service told us that they had completed an annual staff survey which showed:



“Overall emotional wellbeing is poor (53% of respondents) with high levels of concern regarding finances (70% of respondents)”

While another said:

“Staff are feeling the pressure of the [cost-of-living], increased complexity and the Housing Crisis.”

Many services have implemented wellbeing initiatives such as lengthened lunch breaks to take part in wellbeing activities, staff rewards, extra training, and increased counselling and clinical supervision, however, these are adding to the financial burden laid on specialist services and staff from one organisation told us “this doesn’t take away the frustration that they are feeling”.

Trauma-informed support is central to support for survivors, but this must be provided in trauma-informed workplaces. Vicarious trauma is prevalent in the VAWDASV sector, having a detrimental impact on the mental and physical wellbeing of staff. This is compounded by increased workloads and demand, which both contributes to and is impacted by high levels of staff turnover. Consistency of care is crucial for both survivors of abuse and the staff that support them, and there is no doubt that the ongoing instability of the sector is leading to staff burnout and undermining services’ ability to provide the care they are expertly trained to deliver.

No Recourse to Public Funds

Welsh Women's Aid believe that all survivors must have immediate access to support, regardless of their immigration status. At present, women who are subject to immigration control will have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). This means they are unable to claim public funds including benefits and housing assistance. Some survivors may be able to access the Destitution Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC), but this is not available to all survivors of violence against women and girls and there is extremely limited funding for legal aid to support survivors to access this. As immigration policy is not devolved to Wales, the Welsh Government is limited on the extent to which they can support survivors with NRPF.

We welcome the Welsh Government's Nation of Sanctuary plan²⁹ and we are pleased it contains commitment to helping survivors of domestic abuse who are refugees or asylum seekers to get support and to stopping people seeking sanctuary becoming victims of slavery or trafficking. We are also pleased that the Welsh Parliament withheld legislative consent to the Illegal Migration Bill earlier this year and we welcomed the establishment of the Migrant Victims of Abuse Support Fund earlier this year³⁰, but we believe much more must be done. No dedicated funding for this was allocated and, as yet this does not seem to be changing. The Fund was also set up as a pilot and there is, at present, no confirmation from Welsh Government whether the fund will be extended beyond the 2023-24 financial year. Such a guarantee is crucial to ensuring adequate support for migrant women and their children, many of whom are survivors of abuse.

Beyond a lack of dedicated funding, there remains to be a wide lack of understanding of the support available for survivors with no recourse to public funds. Staff in local authorities appear to have an inconsistent understanding of the duties owed to or support available for these women, and there are limited training opportunities to overcome this inconsistency. When surveyed, 100% of those to whom the question was applicable – because they support survivors with no recourse to public funds – said the support available from statutory services was not sufficient for these survivors.

On this, member services told us:



“I believe that there is a lack of knowledge surrounding NRPF due to complexity of NRPF in most services”

and:

“generally [local authorities] are not fully aware of responsibilities to survivors with NRPF”

²⁹ <https://sanctuary.gov.wales/glossary/nationofsanctuaryplan> <https://www.gov.wales/written-statement-migrant-victim-abuse-support-fund-pilot>

³⁰ <https://www.gov.wales/written-statement-migrant-victim-abuse-support-fund-pilot>

Specialist Service story

“In the past, we have had [local authorities] prefer to place children with abusive parents who have access to public funds rather than allow them to remain with non-abusive parent who has NRPF. We have also heard comments suggesting survivors have the option of returning home if they cannot self-fund their stay in UK. Both of these examples are unacceptable when working with survivors of DA.”

Further, data sharing between the police, the Home Office, and other statutory services is one of the most significant barriers to survivors with NRPF seeking support. Data obtained from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales shows that over a three-year period, every single police force in England and Wales has shared data of a survivor of domestic abuse with immigration enforcement³¹. Many perpetrators weaponise insecure immigration status to instil fear in survivors. Research by the Latin American Women’s Rights Service (LAWRS) and the Step Up Migrant Women campaign found that 62% of migrant women had experienced such threats from their abuser³². A lack of safe reporting mechanisms leaves many migrant women unable to report abuse through fear of being detained or deported. Implementing a firewall between statutory services and immigration enforcement would prevent this, and we strongly support calls for this to be introduced as an amendment to the Victims and Prisoners Bill³³.

31 https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/FINAL-DOC_Firewall-Report_2023_V2.pdf

32 <https://stepupmigrantwomenuk.files.wordpress.com/2019/05/the-right-to-be-believed-key-findings-final-1.pdf>

33 <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/12/victims-and-prisoners-briefing-for-house-of-lords-second-reading.pdf>

Our recommendations

- An increase in the VAWDASV Budget
- Sustainable funding models with inflation-linked increases and payments made in advance Longer funding cycles of a minimum of 3 to 5 years
- Simplified tendering processes with easier reporting mechanisms
- An increase in the Housing Support Grant
- Increased Local Housing Allowance
- Ensure independent access to Universal Credit as default
- End the Bedroom Tax for survivors
- End the two-child credit limit and benefit cap
- End means-testing for and expand access to legal aid
- An exemption for Refuge under the Renting Homes (Wales) Act
- Permanence of the Support for Migrant Survivors Fund, with dedicated, ring-fenced funding for by and for organisations supporting these survivors
- Implementation of a firewall between statutory services and immigration enforcement to prevent data sharing.



Conclusion

The independent frontline specialist services that make up the VAWDASV Sector, as well as Welsh Women's Aid, were borne out of the feminist movement of the 1970s. They were established to provide specialised, needs-led support for women and children experiencing male violence and they continue to be at the forefront of that support today. They are often co-ordinated by women with lived experience of violence against women and girls and, as such, are subject experts that are best-placed to provide the holistic, trauma-informed support that survivors need.

Despite our continued efforts, the landscape in which these services operate is becoming increasingly turbulent. Against a backdrop of economic uncertainty that is directly impacting survivors of abuse, services are expected to provide more support with fewer resources and survivors are facing longer waits for support, services, and safety. The transition of labour from statutory to non-statutory services, owing to austerity measures, is stark and is leaving staff in the specialist sector overworked, underpaid, and burnt out.

We are nearly halfway through a bold and ambitious strategy to prevent violence against women and girls in Wales, but little progress is being felt on the ground. Ultimately, well-resourced services that provide support to survivors and contribute to early intervention and prevention are key and investing in these is critical to achieving the Government's honourable aim of making Wales the safest country in the world to be a woman.

Welsh Women's Aid would like to thank members of the Survivor Network for their contribution to this work and our membership of specialist domestic abuse and sexual violence services both for their involvement in this report and for the vital work they do year-round to support survivors of all forms of violence against women and girls, and their children, both in Wales and beyond.

Anyone affected by these forms of violence and abuse should be able to access help and support when they need it and every case should be taken seriously.

The Live Fear Free Helpline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for women, children and men experiencing domestic abuse, sexual violence or other forms of violence against women.

Call: 0808 80 10 800

Email: info@livefearfreehelpline.wales

Text: 07860 077333

Webchat: visit <https://gov.wales/live-fear-free/contact-live-fear-free> to use our webchat service

Addendum

Since the production of this report, the Welsh Government have released their final budget which contains an extra £5 million to the Homelessness Prevention and Support budget³⁴ which, alongside an extra £8 million³⁵, will be allocated to the Housing Support Grant to address pay pressures on services. Alongside sector colleagues, Welsh Women's Aid have been campaigning on this issue for some time³⁶, so we are grateful that the Housing Support Grant is being given the priority it deserves, particularly given the challenging economic climate.

While we welcome this extra funding, we are concerned that this comes alongside a £92,000 decrease to the VAWDASV budget after a promise that this would be protected³⁷. We have been assured this relates to a reprofiling of work and will not impact any existing VAWDASV commitments, but we will monitor the effects of this closely. Further, one-off uplifts of this kind do not address many of the concerns laid out within this report. Initial feedback from member services is clear that while this funding is helpful, it is not enough to cover the increased demand on services, or the pay pressures being felt across the sector particularly the wide gap between statutory and non-statutory pay as outlined within this report.

We are concerned that the uplift contains no ring-fenced funding for VAWDASV services specifically so may be allocated differently across different local authorities. VAWDASV services are not prioritised sufficiently or consistently and this undermines the provision of trauma-informed, needs-led support for survivors across Wales. Members have reported concerns that the funding is not sufficient to cover the deficits incurred by the living wage increase and that it may be used to commission additional services rather than increase the funding allocated to current contracts. There are also concerns that the Housing Support Grant remains restricted in some areas, for example, it cannot be used to support survivors with no recourse to public funds and their children.

We are also concerned that due to the patchwork nature of funding for the sector, this funding may create disparities between staff salaries within services, where some staff are funded by the Housing Support Grant and some from other sources. Many services operate fair pay policies to ensure equitable treatment of staff so where this occurs, specialist services will have to make up the shortfall from reserves, pushing them into further financial precarity.

It is clear that while the funding is welcome, it must not stand alone. It must be accompanied by long-term, inflation-linked increases, dedicated funding for VAWDASV services and the immediate implementation of a sustainable funding model for the sector more broadly.

34 <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2024-02/final-budget-2024-2025-note.pdf>

35 <https://www.cymorthcymru.org.uk/housing-support-grant-to-receive-13-million-uplift/>

36 <https://welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/campaigning/housing-matters-wales/#>

37 <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2023-12/2024-2025-draft-budget-narrative.pdf>



Welsh Women's Aid

Pendragon House, Caxton Place,
Pentwyn, Cardiff, CF23 8XE

02920 541 551

info@welshwomensaid.org.uk

www.welshwomensaid.org.uk

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