



All-Wales Operational Group on  
Sexually Exploited Women

# Freedom from Adult Sexual Exploitation?

Adult Sexual Exploitation:  
The picture from statutory  
services across Wales



Cymorth i Ferched Cymru  
Welsh Women's Aid

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## Overview and key findings

In 2022, the All-Wales Operational group submitted a series of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to all twenty-two Local Authorities, seven Health Boards, four Police Forces and four Police and Crime Commissioners Offices across Wales. The aim of these requests was to explore the current level of strategic commitment and investment from named agencies in ensuring support for adults and children who have experienced or are at risk of sexual exploitation, as well as how these strategic commitments co-align. The Operational Group was established to advocate for adult survivors of sexual exploitation (ASE), to share good practice and resources to promote parity of service provision for survivors of ASE and address the gap in the understanding of how this form of abuse affects adults.

We received a total of **32 responses**<sup>1</sup> to the FOI requests submitted:

- Local Authorities: 17/22
  - University Health Boards: 7/7
  - Police and Crime Commissioners: 4/4
  - Police Forces: 4/4
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- Of the 32 agencies that did respond, a total of six (19%) stated that they were unable to provide **any** data associated with the FOI request.
  - 25% (n=8) of agencies were able to provide data regarding the number of adults supported who had experienced, or were at risk of, experiencing sexual exploitation.
  - 47% (n=15) of organisations (n=15) were able to provide data regarding Child Sexual Exploitation.
  - The data returns revealed a minimum of 404 adults and 1,001 children had been supported for CSE or ASE over the previous three financial years (2019-2022)<sup>2</sup>.
  - Of the agencies that were able to provide data:
    - **6** were based in South Wales
    - **4** were based in North Wales
    - **1** organisation was based in Mid and West Wales
    - **4** were based in the Gwent region.
  - 87% (n=213) of those supported by services were female and 13% (n=33) were male.

<sup>1</sup> Since the completion of this report, there have been two additional returns, both from Local Authorities. These returns have not been included in this report as their submission exceeded the FOI return deadline:

- One Local Authority respondent in North Wales area had supported a total of 74 children who had experienced sexual exploitation, over the last 3 financial years. The same respondent indicated that they had supported 1,024 children during the last 3 financial years who are at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation. This respondent was unable to provide any data on adults that had been supported – indicating that “Data not held”.
- The second respondent, a Local Authority in the South Wales indicated that they had supported “0” adults within the last 3 financial years. This respondent stated that they had supported 79 children during the last 3 years. 73% of these survivors were female. The ages of survivors supported ranged from 3 to 18, with the majority being aged between 11-15 years old.

<sup>2</sup> Due to methodological concerns with the data, the decision was made to exclude some data to ensure accuracy.

- The ages of survivors supported ranged from 11 to 72 years old. In relation to child sexual exploitation, the most prevalent age group was 14-17. The next two age ranges with the highest number of survivors supported were both in the adult age ranges – between 25-34 years and 18-24 years old.
- There was evidence in the returns of tailored risk assessments for children at risk of/experiencing CSE, whilst the majority of respondents used more generic risk assessment tools for adults.
- 47% of respondents (n=15) indicated that the third sector would be involved in supporting survivors.
- The findings of the report demonstrate a disparity in how adult sexual exploitation (ASE) and child sexual exploitation (CSE) are currently understood, funded and risk assessed by statutory agencies across Wales.
- The Operational group recommends that provision for ASE be embedded across all areas of policy development relating to VAWDASV. Consistent guidance, training, and data collection is needed to promote a unified approach to this form of abuse across Wales, and to ensure that no opportunity to identify and safeguard survivors is missed.
- In order to Provide all victims with equal access to appropriately resourced, high-quality support as per the commitments made in the VAWDASV strategy, there needs to be a financial investment in support services for adult survivors of sexual exploitation. The group recommends that specific funding for these services be considered part and parcel of core funding for VAWDASV.

## Background

The All-Wales Operational Group on Sexually Exploited Women was established in 2020, following two roundtable events with key stakeholders. Specialist services providing support to women experiencing sexual exploitation highlighted that there was a significant gap in the response to, and recognition of, this form of abuse in adults. This was particularly evident during the Covid-19 Pandemic, which had a profound impact on sexually exploited women<sup>3</sup>. Despite being on the forefront of the pandemic, women engaged in survival sex and women experiencing street-based sexual exploitation were absent from consideration in Governmental planning and response to the crisis.

The Operational group has a diverse membership, comprised of National and Regional VAWDASV advisors, representatives from Police services and the Wales Police and Crime Commissioners' Offices, as well as statutory and third sector specialist services. The group are dedicated to working collaboratively to advocate for parity of recognition, investment, and service provision for all survivors of adult sexual exploitation. The work of the group is underpinned by the belief that every survivor should have equal opportunity to report,

<sup>3</sup> <https://beyondthestreets.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/The-impact-of-Covid-19-on-women-who-sell-sex-or-are-sexually-exploited.pdf>

access services and recover from trauma regardless of the type of harm or exploitation they have faced.

The sexual exploitation of adults (ASE) is a prevalent yet, rarely discussed or understood form of gender-based violence. In the absence of a statutory definition of ASE, the group have developed a working definition which intends to encompass the broad experiences of survivors:

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“Sexual exploitation occurs when someone is coerced, forced, or manipulated into engaging in sexual activities by a third party, or out of necessity to finance basic needs.”

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This form of abuse can occur as a facet of domestic abuse, whereby perpetrators coerce their partners into engaging in sexual activities with unwanted third parties, such as a friend of the abuser. Matlosci (2020) recognised that in these cases, there is often ‘no indication that money or anything material was received by the perpetrator’<sup>4</sup>. This is a rarely recognised form of domestic abuse, whereby the exploitation is an extension of the coercion and control exerted over the victim by their partner.

Equally, ASE can also occur within the context of the wider commercial sex industry. This includes human trafficking, grooming by organised crime groups (OCG’s) and modern slavery. Sexual exploitation within the commercial sex industry can also include instances of survival sex. The House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee report into the link between Universal Credit and Survival sex notes that ‘Survival sex’ is when people—overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, women—have to turn to sex work to meet their basic survival needs, including money, food and shelter.’<sup>5</sup>

Despite its prevalence, those who have experienced sexual exploitation or harm through the sex industry are often marginalised and missing from key conversations about VAWDASV service provision and policy development. As noted in the statutory definition of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), this form of abuse often capitalises on a power imbalance or vulnerability of the individual, and exploitation can still be occurring even if the sexual activity appears consensual.<sup>6</sup>

A commitment to encouraging increased awareness and provision for all survivors of sexual exploitation undoubtedly starts with identifying and understanding the issue. The Operational group aims to improve Wales-specific data collection in order to recognise the nature and prevalence of adult sexual exploitation, map gaps and inform solution planning across Wales. Specialist services within the third sector have long been advocating for

<sup>4</sup> [https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/259331342/Unwanted\\_sex\\_with\\_third\\_parties\\_in\\_domestic\\_abuse.pdf](https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/259331342/Unwanted_sex_with_third_parties_in_domestic_abuse.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmworpen/83/83.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/591512/HO\\_DfE\\_consultation\\_response\\_on\\_CSE\\_definition\\_FINAL\\_13\\_Feb\\_2017\\_2\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/591512/HO_DfE_consultation_response_on_CSE_definition_FINAL_13_Feb_2017_2_.pdf)

survivors of adult sexual exploitation and sharing their expertise and data. The submission of the Freedom of Information requests aims to identify the gaps in existing publicly available data, and explore the picture of sexual exploitation according to statutory services within Wales.

## Methodology

In 2022, the All-Wales Operational group submitted a series of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to all twenty-two Local Authorities, seven Health Boards, four Police Forces and four Police and Crime Commissioners Offices across Wales. The aim of these requests was to explore the current level of strategic commitment and investment from named agencies in ensuring support for adults and children who have experienced or are at risk of sexual exploitation, as well as how these strategic commitments co-align. Through the analysis of this data, we wanted to identify whether there was consistency in the recognition of and provision for sexual exploitation by statutory agencies across Wales. The data provided by the named agencies has been collated and analysed using descriptive statistics. The data and subsequent findings from these returns have been summarised by grouping under overarching themes within this report.

**All of the agencies approached were asked the same series of questions with the aim to extract the following information (exact question wording of the questions can be found in appendix A):**

- What data the agencies collect on the number/percentage of adults they support who are experiencing/identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation and whether this data is disaggregated across the nine protected characteristics?
- What data the agencies hold on the number/percentage of children they support who are experiencing/identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation and whether this data disaggregated across the nine protected characteristics?
- What risk assessments and strategies are in place for tackling ASE/CSE when responding to survivors?
- What support services were commissioned by the agency and how much funding was committed to ASE/CSE?
- How does strategic decision making associated with ASE link up with strategic decision making associated with CSE?
- Has there been or are there plans for the agency to consult with adult and child survivors of sexual exploitation to inform assessments and strategies?

### From this data we hoped to learn:

- a) If relevant data is held, and is it disaggregated across the nine protected characteristics.
- b) What types of support are commissioned by each agency.
- c) The number of adults and children who had supported in the last 3 financial years by each agency.
- d) Information on risk assessments and strategies in place for survivors of ASE and CSE.
- e) How does strategic decision making and response to CSE and ASE link up with strategic decision making and responses to VAWDASV.

## Number of responses

We received a total of **32 responses**<sup>7</sup> to the FOI requests submitted:

- Local Authorities: 17/22
- University Health Boards: 7/7
- Police and Crime Commissioners: 4/4
- Police Forces: 4/4

Notably, some organisations submitted partial responses to the request. For example, by providing data on CSE but being unable to provide data on ASE.

## Agencies who were unable to respond

Of the 32 agencies that did respond, a total of six (19%) stated that they were unable to provide **any** data associated with the FOI request:

- Local Authorities: 2/17
- University Health Boards: 1/7
- Police and Crime Commissioners: 1/4
- Police Forces: 2/4

These agencies cited that the information was not held or that the cost of compliance would exceed the appropriate limit due to a requirement to manually search their data. It is also

<sup>7</sup> Since the completion of this report, there have been two additional returns, both from Local Authorities. These returns have not been included in this report as their submission exceeded the FOI return deadline:

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- The second respondent, a Local Authority in the South Wales indicated that they had supported “0” adults within the last 3 financial years. This respondent stated that they had supported 79 children during the last 3 years. 73% of these survivors were female. The ages of survivors supported ranged from 3 to 18, with the majority being aged between 11-15 years old.

worth noting that organisations such as the four offices of Police and Crime Commissioners do not provide direct support to victims of any crime.



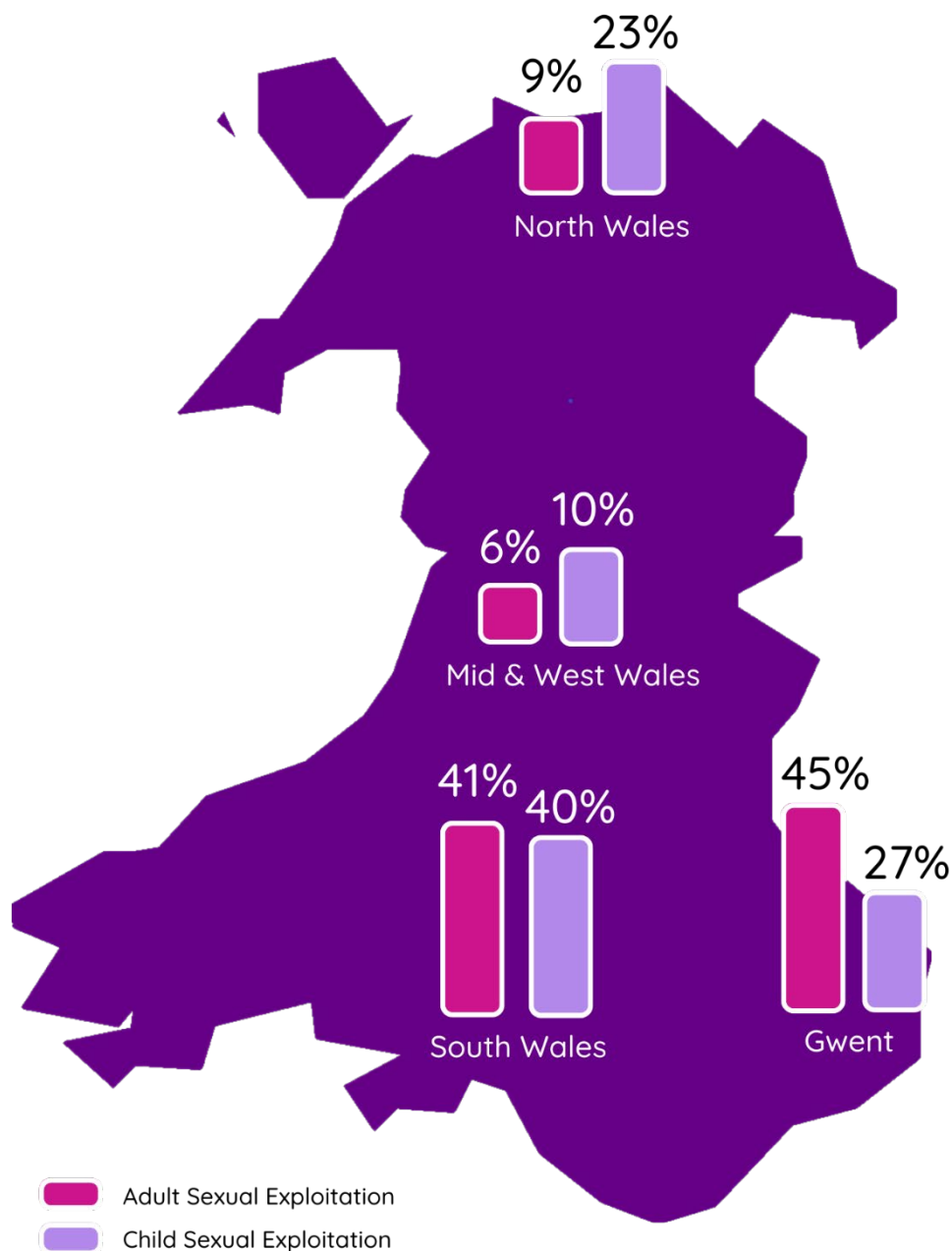
## Nature and Prevalence: Was relevant data held by the named agencies?

Only some of the named agencies held data relevant to the freedom of information request. Of the agencies that responded, 25% (n=8) were able to provide data regarding the number of adults supported who had experienced, or were at risk of, experiencing sexual exploitation. Comparatively, 47% (n=15) of organisations (n=15) were able to provide data regarding CSE. The data returns revealed a minimum of 404 adults and 1,001 children had been supported across Wales over the previous three financial years (2019-2022)<sup>8</sup>. Notably, almost double the number of agencies were able to provide data on CSE compared to ASE, indicating that there a disparity in the recognition of and response to the sexual exploitation of adults when compared with children.

Of the agencies that were able to provide data, six were based in South Wales, four were based in North Wales, one organisation was based in Mid and West Wales and an additional four were based in the Gwent region. Therefore, the larger percentages in certain areas may be a reflection of the higher number of data returns from a specific region.

<sup>8</sup> Due to methodological concerns with the data, the decision was made to exclude some data to ensure accuracy.

## Percentage of people supported by region



**NB: Due to rounding percentages may not equate to 100%.**

Whilst this report provides only a brief snapshot of the available data and does not begin to fully represent the nature and prevalence of sexual exploitation across Wales, the data does evidence that sexual exploitation is a pan-Wales issue. This is significant as the group has previously recognised that the perceived lack of prevalence of sexual exploitation, particularly outside of urban areas, has meant that any focus, funding and safeguarding of survivors by statutory agencies has been discretionary. Consequently, this lack of understanding and recognition of ASE has resulted in victims not being identified or offered

the appropriate support encompassing all of their needs. This is something that is recognised in the updated VAWDASV Strategy for Wales<sup>9</sup>, and is evidenced within the FOI returns. Despite being a Wales-wide form of gender-based violence, 19% of public bodies were unable to provide **any** data associated with the FOI request, and most of the returns received were unable partial responses that could not address all questions asked as part of the request.

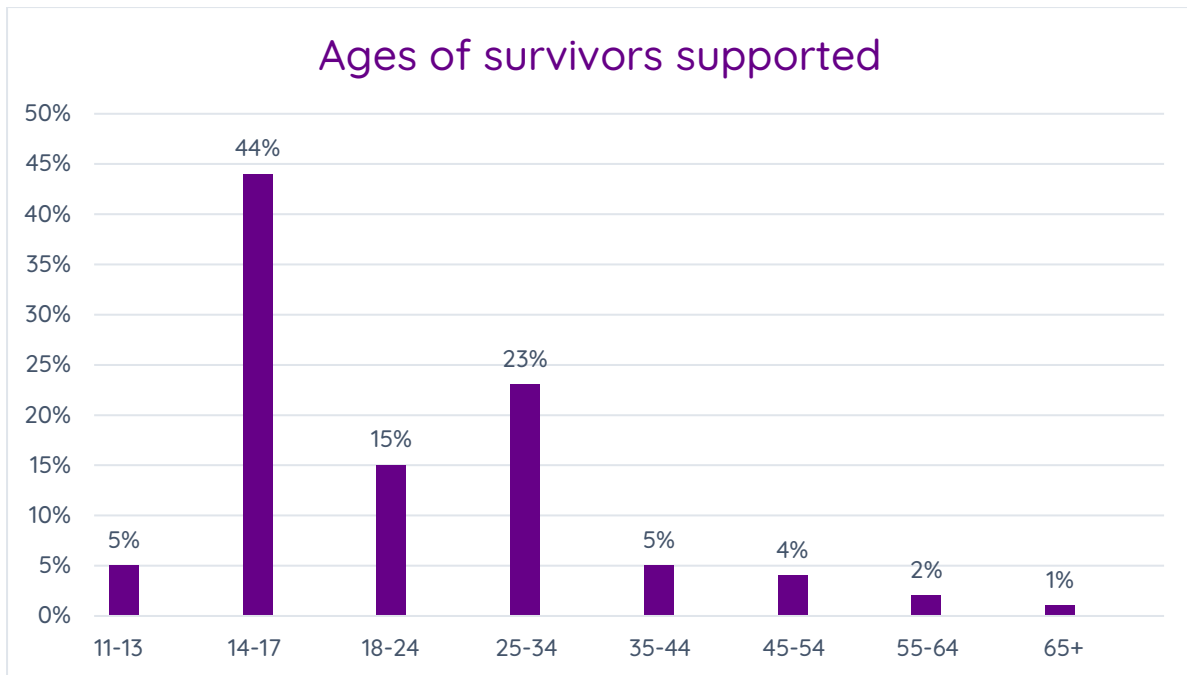
## Protected Characteristics

Only 16% (n=5) of agencies were able to provide data on some protected characteristics, however no agencies were able to provide data for all nine protected characteristics. Furthermore, one additional organisation stated that they do collect this information but were unable to provide it in their response due to low figures which could void the anonymity of survivors who had accessed support. Whilst it is acknowledged that this is a small sample size, the data nevertheless supports anecdotal evidence which indicates that sexual exploitation is a gendered form of abuse. The data in this report revealed that 87% (n=213) of those supported by services were female and 17% (n=33) were male. Although information regarding gender identity and sexual orientation was requested, it was not present in any of the returned data. Thus, the experiences of LGBTQ+ survivors may be represented within the data but are undiscernible. One Health Board stated that they “do have transgender clients but we only log what gender the client considers themselves at time of referral.”

## Age

The findings of this report revealed that the ages of survivors supported ranged from 11 to 72 years old. In relation to child sexual exploitation, the most prevalent age group was 14-17 years old, with 44% (n=41) of survivors of supported being in that age range. The next two age ranges with the highest number of survivors supported were both in the adult age ranges, with 23% (n=21) of survivors being aged 25-34, and 15% (n=14) being aged between 18-24. The Operational group have previously identified concerns regarding the support available for children who have experienced sexual exploitation when they reach adulthood. These findings suggest that children and young adults are at highest risk of exploitation, and also suggests a link between those who have experienced sexual exploitation in childhood and those who experience further exploitation in adulthood. Despite this, the returns demonstrate the inconsistency in data collection and recognition of sexual exploitation in adults, with only 8 agencies able to provide statistical data regarding victims of adult sexual exploitation in their region.

<sup>9</sup> Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: strategy 2022 to 2026: <https://www.gov.wales/violence-against-women-domestic-abuse-and-sexual-violence-strategy-2022-2026-html>



**NB: Due to rounding, percentages may not equate to 100%.**

Additionally, one Local Authority noted that they had supported ‘7 care leavers over the past 3 years who were at continued risk of sexual exploitation’ which could suggest that involvement with the care system is a risk factor for sexual exploitation. This supports existing literature from various research that has been conducted in the UK as well as landmark criminal cases such as the Rotherham case, which have repeatedly concluded that care-leavers are actively targeted by perpetrators of sexual exploitation<sup>10</sup>. It is crucial that child and adult support agencies work collaboratively, and that information is shared between agencies and transitional support plans are put in place, particularly when the child is on the cusp of entering adulthood.

## Ethnicity

Three agencies were able to provide information on ethnicity. One additional agency was able to state that all but two of the children that were supported were white Welsh, however no numerical data was provided. The majority of survivors of ASE and CSE, 80% (n=118), identified as white or British/Welsh. It was evident from the returns that information on ethnicity was recorded inconsistently across organisations. For transparency, this data has been presented as provided by each respective organisation:

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/communities-and-local-government/141022-Jay-Explanatory-Note-to-Ctee.pdf>

Ethnicity	Number of Survivors
Any White Background	32%
British	30%
Welsh	5%
White British	13%
Spanish	1%
Nigerian	1%
Eritrean	1%
Kenyan	1%
Thai	1%
Chilean	1%
American	1%
Polish	1%
Bulgarian	1%
Lithuanian	1%
Vietnamese	1%
Iranian	1%
Iraqi	1%
Romanian	6%
Mixed race	1%
Black	1%
Asian	1%
Not Stated	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>149</b>

Limited information was provided in relation to other protected characteristics such as disability and sexual orientation. Only two agencies were able to provide information on disability. The data revealed that 16% (n=9) of adult and child survivors had indicated that they had a disability. Only one agency was able to return data on religion and sexual orientation. To ensure anonymity for the survivors accessing support, we have not published this data.

The lack of unified data collection regarding these protected characteristics provides a barrier to drawing accurate conclusions as to the intersectionality of sexual exploitation. This is of particular concern as we know that financial hardship is one of the primary driving forces of sexual exploitation, and the Women’s Budget group have already stated that the economic uncertainty caused by the increased cost of living will disproportionately impact women, particularly Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic and disabled women<sup>11</sup>. We also know that trafficking and sexual exploitation often co-exist, with Unseen UK reporting a 15% increase in reports of sexual exploitation to their anti-slavery and exploitation in their 2021

<sup>11</sup> The Gendered Impact of the cost of living crisis, Women’s Budget Group (March 2022) <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-gendered-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis.pdf>

annual report.<sup>12</sup> So it is crucial that there is a consistent, unified data collection across regions to enable accurate information sharing across areas and between adult support services and child support services. It is also crucial that there is consistent and adequate service provision across Wales for survivors.

<sup>12</sup> Helpline Annual Assessment, Unseen UK (April 2022) [Alarming rise in sexual exploitation for third year running - Unseen \(unseenuk.org\)](#)

## Support, funding & risk assessments

### Support and funding

Respondents were asked for information regarding any dedicated funding or support for survivors experiencing ASE or CSE within the last three financial years. Only one respondent stated that they had provided direct funding to services that support survivors of exploitation, however no monetary amount was given. A further five organisations stated that they do provide funding for services that may support adult survivors of sexual exploitation, such as specialist sexual violence services, however this funding is not committed specifically to sexual exploitation. Four organisations stated that they provide direct funding to support survivors of child sexual exploitation, totalling just over £1.1 million in the last three years. One Local Authority respondent stated:

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‘We have no specific projects directed to supporting adults at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation. Most support is currently provided and directed towards children’.

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Only two respondents, both Local Authorities, indicated that they had provided direct support to adults in order to exit sexual exploitation. These organisations supported six survivors in total. One further organisation indicated that they did have a specific project which aimed to identify and support adults experiencing sexual exploitation, however no statistical data was provided. A total of 47% of respondents (n=15) indicated that the third sector would be involved in supporting survivors, either by signposting directly to specialist support or the third sector would be present at multi-agency meetings to discuss support plans. It is evident from the returns that the majority of the work being done to address sexual exploitation and support survivors in Wales is being carried out by specialist services in the third sector. Yet, these services are not widely commissioned and are heavily reliant upon volunteers and short-term funding.

### Risk assessments & strategies for survivors

We also asked for information on risk assessments and strategies used by the organisation to identify and support survivors. Sixty-six percent (n=21) of respondents provided information on risk assessments used to assess the needs of adult and child survivors of sexual exploitation. The majority of respondents indicated that they would follow the procedures and guidance set out in the Wales Safeguarding and the Social Services and Wellbeing Act 2014 to support those experiencing or at risk of ASE. Multi-Agency meetings such as multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC) were also mentioned. There

was evidence of more tailored risk assessments for survivors of CSE, used in conjunction with Wales safeguarding procedures and the Social Services and Wellbeing Act. Assessments such as the Child Sexual Exploitation Risk Questionnaire (CSERQ), Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Frameworks (SERAF), the North Wales regional Exploitation Tool and Gwent's Safeguarding's Child Exploitation Measurement Toolkit<sup>13</sup> were all referenced in the returns. Multi-Agency Strategy Meetings (MASM's) were also identified as a means for assessing the needs of children and young people.

There were some areas of good practice evident in the responses. The returns from the Gwent area stated that monthly Adult at Risk of Sexual Exploitation meetings (AROSE) are used to assess the needs of adult survivors. These meetings are attended by police alongside partner agencies from specialist services, so intelligence can be shared, and actions allocated to support survivors. The needs of children and young people are assessed in a similar way within Multi-Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) meetings. One Local Authority in South Wales stated that they had a Contextual, Missing Exploited and Trafficked (CMET) team that supports young people who have experienced or are at risk of exploitation. The contextual approach also takes a focus on the disruption of exploitation and making spaces safer. An additional Local Authority in South Wales stated they use the Safeguarding Adolescents from Exploitation (SAFE) framework.

Forty-one percent (n=13) respondents indicated that they had a dedicated strategy in place to address ASE and CSE. Of those returns, 54% (n=7) indicated that they had specific strategies in place to address ASE. The information provided by respondents regarding the risk assessments and strategies used clearly demonstrates the difference in recognition, understanding and response to ASE compared to CSE. One Local Authority respondent acknowledged that there is:

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'a dearth of guidance for practitioners across Adult Services to support assessment and intervention, when compared to what is available across Children's Services'.

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## Survivor engagement

Of the organisations that did respond (n=32), six stated that they engage directly with survivors to inform their service development. Of these, half (n=3) of the respondents indicated that they had consulted with survivors who have lived experience of CSE. Two additional organisations stated that service delivery and performance is shaped and influenced by children and young people who engage with their services. However, this was not said to directly include consultation with children who have experienced or are at risk of

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.gwentsafeguarding.org.uk/assets/document-library/Protocols-and-Procedures/Child-Exploitation-Measurement-Toolkit.docx>



sexual exploitation. Only one organisation stated that they had engaged with adult survivors to develop policy and strategy. This respondent stated that this engagement was done predominantly through the Welsh Women's Aid SEEdS (Survivors Empowering and Educating Services)<sup>14</sup> and therefore was with survivors of VAWDASV more generally and thus may not have included survivors of sexual exploitation.

## Examples of good practice

Disparity between approaches to ASE and CSE, and in the collection and recording of data by public bodies was evident within the returns. Despite this, there were several examples of good practice from respondents that we wish to highlight and see replicated across Wales.

As already highlighted within the 'Risk Assessments and Strategies' section in this report, dedicated risk assessments and strategies for both adult and child survivors equip professionals with consistent information required to provide a needs-led, collaborative, and holistic approach to support. This consistency also prevents survivors from being subjected to a post-code lottery of support and enables accurate information sharing across regions. Some agencies indicated that they were working with their local safeguarding hubs to develop a specific sexual exploitation strategy, the group would also like to see this replicated across Wales. Cardiff and Vale highlighted that their tackling exploitation strategy covers the approach for both children and adults<sup>15</sup>. Additionally, one Local Authority respondent highlighted that they have a specific process in place for providing support to survivors of CSE on the cusp of adulthood, stating that:

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'For care-experienced young people transitioning into Adult Services who are subject to exploitation multi-agency meetings there is an internal transition exploitation tool in place to enable this to continue if appropriate.'

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Again, this is an area of good practice which the group would like to see replicated across Wales, as it is vital that young people who have experienced CSE continue to be supported when they enter adulthood, in order to safeguard them from revictimisation.

Several organisations recognised that more needed to be done to address sexual exploitation in Wales. Some highlighted the fact that as sexual exploitation has now been included in the updated VAWDASV strategy, exploitation has been recognized as an area for development and associated guidance and policy will be updated to reflect this. One Local Authority commented that adult sexual exploitation 'is relatively new' in that, the Welsh Government National VAWDASV strategy published by Welsh Government in May 2022 marked 'the first time Adult Sexual Exploitation has been officially

<sup>14</sup> Now known as Welsh Women's Aids Survivor Network.

<sup>15</sup> [Exploitation-Strategy\\_ENGLISH.pdf \(cardiffandvalersb.co.uk\)](#)

stated/accepted as a form of VAWDASV under the VAWDASV strategy'. This demonstrates the importance of statutory guidance in encouraging a consistent approach and pan-Wales commitment to addressing this form of violence against women. The group would like to see the commitment to tackling sexual exploitation in the strategy supplemented with detailed guidance and training for public bodies.

With regard to survivor engagement, one organisation noted that they had recently established a network of survivors that could be consulted to inform best practice and will be engaging with those who have lived experience going forward. This is an area of good practice the group would like to see introduced in other regions.

## What did we set out to establish?

**A.** **If relevant data is held, and is it disaggregated across the nine protected characteristics:** Of the agencies that responded, 25% (n=8) were able to provide data regarding the number of adults supported who had experienced, or were at risk of, experiencing sexual exploitation. Comparatively, 47% (n=15) of organisations (n=15) were able to provide data regarding CSE.

**B.** **What types of support are commissioned by each agency:** Only one respondent stated that they had provided direct funding to services that support survivors of exploitation. A further five organisations stated that they do provide funding for services that may support adult survivors of sexual exploitation, such as specialist sexual violence services.

**C.** **The number of adults and children who had supported in the last 3 financial years by each agency:** Only two respondents, both Local Authorities, indicated that they had provided direct support to adults in order to exit sexual exploitation. One further organisation indicated that they did have a specific project which aimed to identify and support adults experiencing sexual exploitation, however no statistical data was provided 47% of respondents (n=15) indicated that the third sector would be involved in supporting survivors.

**D.** **Information on risk assessments and strategies in place for survivors of ASE and CSE:** Sixty-six percent (n=21) of respondents provided information on risk assessments used to assess the needs of adult and child survivors of sexual exploitation. There was evidence in the returns of tailored risk assessments for children at risk of/experiencing CSE, whilst the majority of respondents used more generic risk assessment tools for adults. However, there were some examples of good practice in this area the group would like to see replicated across Wales.

**E.** **How does strategic decision making and response to CSE and ASE link up with strategic decision making and responses to VAWDASV:** Forty-one percent (n=13) respondents indicated that they had a dedicated strategy in place to address ASE and CSE. Of those returns, 54% (n=7) indicated that they had specific strategies in place to address ASE. In the majority of the returns, there was little evidence of how approaches to CSE and ASE link up. However, there were some examples of good practice in this area.

## Summary & recommendations

In 2022, the Welsh Government published the updated National VAWDASV strategy for 2022-26, the strategy emphasises the importance of a broad understanding of VAWDASV which equally recognises and responds to all forms of violence against women including sexual exploitation. The strategy also recognises that a lack of understanding has ‘led to responses starting and finishing with domestic abuse with the broader concepts missed.’<sup>16</sup> However, in order for this commitment to be actualised, cohesive guidance, training, and leadership around forms of VAWDASV such as sexual exploitation is crucial in order to provide survivors with consistent and high-quality support across Wales.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/violence-against-women-domestic-abuse-and-sexual-violence-strategy-2022-2026.html#:~:text=Our%20strategy%20is%20to%20harness,need%20it%20is%20everyone's%20business.>

The FOI returns evidence a lack of consistency across regions and organisations with regards to understanding and identifying adult sexual exploitation. Consideration for survivors of adult sexual exploitation has historically been missing from key conversations about VAWDASV service provision and policy development. This, in addition to an absence of any statutory duty or guidance to address this form of abuse, has resulted in a postcode lottery of support for adults and children who need to access lifesaving, specialist support. This is particularly concerning when we consider the indisputable link between trafficking and sexual exploitation. We hope to see this change now that a commitment to recognising and responding to sexual exploitation has been included in the refreshed National VAWDASV strategy for Wales.

Key recommendations from the findings:

- The issuing of statutory guidance and training which promotes a consistent and unified understanding of and response to ASE across Wales.
- Standardisation of how data is recorded in order to promote ease of information sharing across regions and between adult support services and child support services.
- Provision for adult sexual exploitation to be considered part and parcel of core funding for VAWDASV as opposed to being viewed as additional projects.
- Meaningful engagement with survivors of sexual exploitation to shape policy development and service provision.
- We also recommend that policies and agencies involved in supporting victims of child sexual exploitation consider the risk of sexual exploitation in adulthood.
- Those who have been identified as being at risk of or subjected to sexual exploitation in childhood need to continue to be given the appropriate support after they turn 18. They should be provided information about or referred to adult support agencies who specialise in supporting sexually exploited adults.

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