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Welsh Women's Aid

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Putting Women & Children First

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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>

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. Our membership comprises of 20 specialist support services. These services deliver lifesaving and life-changing support and preventative work in response to violence against women, including domestic abuse and sexual violence against children and young people, men and boys, trans and non-binary people, 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 also award 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](#)).

Stalking or harassment Authorised Professional Practice (APP)

The new APP replaces three separate advice documents with formal, role-specific guidance that sets out clear requirements for every role in policing.

The new APP reflects learning from the joint investigation into the super-complaint submitted by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust in December 2022, on behalf of the National Stalking Consortium.

We are not gathering information about stalking protections order (SPO) forms. These operational forms fall outside the remit of this consultation.

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Consultation response itself below:

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: The APP is easy to understand. Answers (Likert scale)

Agree

Please provide an explanation of your answer.

We agree that the APP is generally clear and easy to understand. It is necessarily detailed given the complexity of stalking and harassment and the range of roles and circumstances covered. The role-specific structure is helpful, particularly where practitioners may need to dip in and out of the guidance when responding to an incident or managing an investigation.

We welcome the emphasis on understanding stalking as a course of conduct and on considering the wider pattern of behaviour, rather than assessing individual incidents in isolation. This is particularly important given that individual behaviours may not appear problematic or criminal when considered separately, while the cumulative impact and risk may become much clearer when they are considered together.

It is clear what police officers and staff need to do in relation to the initial response or investigation of stalking or harassment. Answers (Likert scale)

Agree

Please provide an explanation for your response.

We welcome the clear emphasis on safeguarding, risk identification and the potential for stalking to escalate. The guidance appropriately makes clear that victim safety and harm reduction should be prioritised and that risk should be continually reassessed throughout the investigation.

We also welcome the emphasis on early referral to specialist stalking support and advocacy, as well as the guidance around early multi-agency working. The APP recognises the important role of independent stalking advocates and caseworkers in providing trauma-informed support, safety planning and advocacy.

However, the effectiveness of this guidance will depend on its consistent implementation. Clear guidance needs to be accompanied by sufficient capacity, training and supervision to enable officers and staff to apply it effectively in practice.

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Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: it is clear what senior leaders and managers need to do in relation to the governance of reports of stalking or harassment. Answers (Likert scale)

Agree

Please provide an explanation of your answer.

The APP provides a clear framework for governance, including performance management, auditing, data and analysis, scrutiny, resourcing and the monitoring of stalking protection orders and investigation quality.

Our concern is less about whether the APP describes what senior leaders should do, and more about how compliance with these expectations will be prompted, monitored and enforced. The APP sets out a number of important mechanisms, including regular audits and scrutiny arrangements, which we would welcome regular transparent communications around for the purpose of identifying best practice and areas where performance could be improved.

We would welcome greater clarity about what happens where these mechanisms are not implemented or where audits identify persistent shortcomings. Given the significant potential consequences of missed opportunities in stalking cases, effective governance should include meaningful accountability for implementation rather than relying solely on local compliance.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: The APP provides enough information to help differentiate between stalking and harassment. Answers (Likert scale)

Neither agree nor disagree

Please provide an explanation of your answer.

We recognise that the APP provides useful information on the distinction between stalking and harassment, including the relevant legal framework, behaviours associated with stalking and the importance of considering the wider course of conduct.

However, this remains an inherently complex distinction in practice. The APP itself recognises that stalking may initially present as another offence and that individual behaviours may not appear problematic when considered in isolation.

We would therefore welcome further practical examples of more complex or borderline cases, particularly where behaviours overlap with domestic abuse, coercive and controlling behaviour, post-

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separation abuse, malicious communications or other offences. This could help reduce the risk of inconsistent identification or classification at an early stage.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: The diagram and/or table in section 2 of the APP helps to differentiate between stalking and harassment. Answers (Likert scale)

Neither agree nor disagree

Please provide an explanation of your answer.

The diagram and table are useful as a quick reference, but there may be circumstances that do not fit neatly into either category. We would welcome further clarification and practical examples of cases where the distinction is less straightforward.

In particular, it would be helpful to clarify terminology such as the "underlying problem" used within the framework, and to make clear whether this refers to the underlying behaviour or circumstances affecting the perpetrator, rather than the circumstances experienced by the victim.

More generally, the APP should reinforce that where there is uncertainty, officers should consider the wider pattern of behaviour and risk rather than defaulting to a lower-level classification. The guidance appropriately recognises that some behaviours only become clearly harmful when considered together as part of a course of conduct.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: The APP makes it clear the actions needed to support and safeguard the victim. Answers (Likert scale)

Agree

Please provide an explanation of your answer.

The APP provides strong guidance on safeguarding and victim support, including risk assessment, safety planning, protective measures, specialist advocacy and multi-agency working. We particularly welcome the emphasis on victim safety and harm reduction, rather than treating a criminal justice outcome as the sole measure of an effective response.

However, there can be a significant gap between what guidance requires and what victims experience in practice. We are concerned that stalking and harassment may continue to be deprioritised where other offences are perceived as more serious or more immediately visible, particularly where violence has occurred. Additionally, we are also concerned that there is no significant exploration of risk management

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in relation to connected family members. This is of particular relevance where considering the needs of children and young people and those experience so-called 'honour-based' abuse.

We welcome the APP's emphasis on considering the full course of conduct and wider pattern of behaviour. This is particularly important where another offence has occurred, as the stalking behaviour may provide essential context for understanding the level of risk and the appropriate safeguarding response. The APP itself identifies the importance of preventing misclassification and of ensuring stalking behaviours are identified at the earliest opportunity.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: The APP effectively addresses digital offending, including online behaviours, technology-facilitated abuse and associated risks. Answers (Likert Scale)

Agree

Please provide an explanation of your answer.

We welcome the inclusion of detailed guidance on digital and technology-facilitated stalking. The APP appropriately recognises that stalking can be carried out wholly or partly online and includes consideration of digital evidence, spyware and stalkerware, multiple or anonymous accounts, indirect contact and the wider impact of online behaviour.

It is particularly positive that the guidance recognises the practical implications of digital evidence gathering for victim safety, including the potential consequences of removing a victim's phone, which may be their primary means of emergency contact, income and support.

However, as with the wider APP, the effectiveness of this section will depend on whether digital stalking is consistently taken seriously in practice. Officers need to have the skills, confidence, specialist support and resources required to identify and investigate technology-facilitated abuse. Digital behaviours should not be treated as inherently less serious than physical behaviours, particularly where they form part of a wider course of conduct.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: The APP provides helpful guidance on when to use and obtain stalking protection orders (SPOs). Answers (Likert scale)

Agree

Please provide an explanation of your answer.

The guidance provides useful clarification around the role of SPOs, including the fact that they can be used at an early stage and do not require a prior conviction. We also welcome the recognition that an SPO should form part of a wider safeguarding and risk management strategy rather than being used as a substitute for criminal investigation.

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However, some aspects remain relatively broad. In particular, the reference to "acts associated with stalking" could benefit from further practical examples to support consistent decision-making. We recognise that the threshold for an SPO is different from the threshold for charging someone with a stalking offence, and the guidance appropriately reflects this.

We also welcome the explicit recognition that the process of applying for an SPO may itself cause escalation or trigger further offending behaviour. This is important in ensuring that the application process is considered as part of the overall risk assessment rather than treated as a purely procedural step.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: The APP sets out clear and practical guidance for the management and scrutiny of reports of stalking or harassment.
Answers (Likert scale)

Agree

Please provide an explanation for your response.

We welcome the substantial attention given to supervision, governance, quality assurance and scrutiny. The APP sets clear expectations that stalking investigations should be appropriately supervised, that investigators should have the necessary skills and experience, and that investigative strategies should be regularly reviewed. It also specifically requires consideration of digital, behavioural and pattern-based evidence.

We particularly welcome the proposed use of data, audits, scrutiny arrangements and victim feedback to monitor performance.

However, we would encourage the APP to place greater emphasis on measuring the experience and safety of victims alongside procedural and criminal justice outcomes. For example, scrutiny should consider whether victims felt believed and informed, whether they were appropriately involved in safety planning, whether they were offered specialist support, and whether they experienced unnecessary repetition when providing their account.

What (if anything) do you think should be added to the APP?

We would welcome greater consideration of intersectionality within the victim considerations section.

The APP appropriately identifies a range of vulnerability factors, but could provide more practical guidance on how characteristics such as disability, race and ethnicity, age, sexuality, gender identity and immigration status may interact with stalking and affect a victim's experience, risk, ability to report, engagement with police and access to support.

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These factors should not simply be treated as demographic characteristics. They may affect how stalking is perpetrated, how risk presents, the barriers a victim faces in seeking help, and their confidence in engaging with statutory services. Further guidance would help officers and staff recognise circumstances with which they may have less familiarity and support a more individualised response.

We would also welcome further guidance on children and young people as victims. Where children are affected by stalking (either by a partner, family member, person known to them or a stranger), or where their parent or caregiver is being stalked, the impact on their safety, wellbeing, routines, education and relationships should be actively considered rather than treated simply as an additional vulnerability factor.

Finally, we would welcome more explicit guidance on victim disengagement. A victim's decision not to engage with an investigation or criminal justice process should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that risk has reduced. In stalking cases, disengagement may reflect fear, exhaustion, trauma, coercion or a desire to minimise further contact with the perpetrator or criminal justice system. Risk and safeguarding should therefore continue to be considered even where a victim's engagement changes.

What (if anything) do you think should be changed in the APP?

We do not believe that substantial sections of the APP need to be removed or fundamentally rewritten. Instead, we would recommend strengthening the guidance around implementation and practical application.

In particular, the APP could more clearly set out how forces should demonstrate that the expectations within the guidance are being implemented, including through audit, performance monitoring, victim feedback and independent scrutiny.

The APP should also reinforce that stalking should not be deprioritised when other offences are present. A violent offence, for example, should not result in the wider stalking pattern being overlooked or treated as secondary when that pattern may be central to understanding risk and preventing further harm.

We would also encourage greater practical clarification around “borderline” “stalking/harassment” cases, the use of SPOs and intersectional vulnerability, so that the guidance supports consistency as well as understanding.

What (if anything) do you think should be removed from the APP?

Nothing at this stage. We consider the content broadly relevant and appropriate to the purpose of the APP. Our recommendations are primarily about strengthening implementation, clarity and accountability rather than removing existing material.

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As a result of the guidance given in the APP do you think there may be impacts on members of the public? For example, those with protected characteristics as set out in the Equality Act 2010 and those with non-protected characteristics? These impacts can be positive as well as negative. Answers (Yes/No/Unsure)

Yes

Please explain these impacts. If you feel the impact will be negative, please explain how we could prevent or reduce this.

The APP has the potential to have significant positive impacts for victims of stalking and harassment by promoting earlier identification, improved risk assessment, better safeguarding, greater use of specialist support and more consistent investigation.

We particularly welcome the trauma-informed approach and the recognition that victims may respond to stalking in different ways. We also welcome the recognition of children and young people, older and vulnerable adults and other groups who may experience particular vulnerabilities.

However, there is a risk that characteristics relating to mental health, disability or neurodivergence could be misunderstood or inadvertently used to undermine a victim's account, particularly where their presentation or response does not conform to expectations about how a victim "should" behave. The APP should reinforce that vulnerability or mental health characteristics must not be used to minimise the impact of stalking, undermine credibility or shift responsibility onto the victim.

Similarly, mental health or other characteristics of perpetrators may be relevant to understanding behaviour and managing risk, but should not be allowed to become an explanation that minimises the harm caused or displaces the focus on victim safety and perpetrator accountability.

We would also welcome specific consideration to be given to the needs of survivors of Adult Sexual Exploitation who are routinely let down by the criminal justice system. The disproportionate level of discrimination faced by this group means that their experiences of stalking and harassment may be overlooked, under-reported and mismanaged, leading to their risk of serious injury or loss of life being significantly higher.

Greater guidance on intersectionality, as outlined above, would help reduce these risks and ensure that the APP produces equitable outcomes for victims with different characteristics and circumstances.

What impact do you think the APP could have on the police service? This could be positive or negative and could include, for example, how you feel the APP affects public trust, day to day policing activities and/ or policing practices and outcomes.

The APP could have a positive impact on policing by providing a clearer and more consistent framework for identifying, investigating and managing stalking and harassment. If implemented effectively, it has the

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potential to improve the quality of investigations, strengthen safeguarding, improve partnership working and increase public confidence in the police response.

We particularly welcome the emphasis on specialist knowledge, supervision, data and analysis, auditing, scrutiny and learning from investigations. The APP also recognises the need for appropriate capability and capacity to undertake high-quality investigations and deliver appropriate outcomes.

However, there is a significant risk that the benefits of the APP will be limited if forces do not have sufficient resources, staffing, specialist expertise and investigative capacity to implement it. The guidance places substantial expectations on frontline staff, investigators, supervisors, digital teams, senior leaders and partnership agencies. These expectations need to be matched by the resources required to deliver them. Currently only 50% of Welsh Police Force areas have commissioned stalking services. Where frontline Officers are understandably generalists and reliant on specialists, until we have equitable provision across Wales the likelihood of consistent application of the guidance is unlikely.

If implemented consistently, the APP could improve public trust by demonstrating that stalking is recognised as a serious pattern of behaviour and that victims will receive an appropriate and specialist response. Conversely, if victims continue to experience a significant gap between the standards set out in the APP and the response they actually receive, this could undermine confidence in policing.

If you have any additional comments on the APP, please provide them below. (Please avoid providing comments already detailed earlier in the survey.)

Overall, we welcome the development of this APP and the move towards a more consistent, victim-centred and specialist approach to stalking and harassment.

We particularly welcome the recognition of stalking as a pattern of behaviour, the emphasis on safeguarding and escalation of risk, the inclusion of digital and technology-facilitated stalking, the role of specialist advocacy, and the attention given to supervision, governance and multi-agency working. As research¹ has shown that some victims feel they experienced poor police responses to stalking, describing inaction, victim blaming and not being taken seriously, further clarification for police responders is urgently needed.

The APP provides a strong framework. The key issue will be whether it results in meaningful and consistent change in practice. Effective implementation will require appropriate resourcing, training, specialist expertise, supervision and scrutiny, alongside meaningful involvement of victim and survivor organisations.

We also welcome the inclusion of police-perpetrated stalking within the APP. Given the particular position of trust and authority held by police officers and staff, allegations involving police personnel require a response that maintains victim safety, confidence and independence, and avoids conflicts of interest.

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We would encourage the College of Policing and forces to continue to involve specialist victim and survivor organisations in implementation, training, scrutiny and evaluation of the APP. We would particularly like to emphasise the need to understand what the external mechanisms which will support the effective implementation of this guidance look like in a devolved nation. This will help ensure that the guidance remains grounded not only in policy and procedure but in the lived experiences of those affected by stalking and harassment.

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