



Welsh Women's Aid response to UK Government (MHCLG) Consultation:

'Future Delivery to Victims and their Children in Accommodation-Based

Domestic Abuse Services (England)'

About Welsh Women's Aid

Welsh Women's Aid is the umbrella organisation in Wales that supports and provides national representation for independent third sector violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) specialist services in Wales (comprising our membership of specialist services and members of the regional VAWDASV Specialist Services Providers Forums).¹ These services deliver life-saving and life-changing support and preventative work in response to violence against women, including domestic abuse and sexual violence, as part of a network of UK provision.

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

We also deliver direct services including, for example, the Welsh Government funded Live Fear Free Helpline and a National Training Service partnership. We are piloting the Survivors Empowering and Educating Services (SEEds) project, which is empowering survivors of violence and abuse to collectively influence and inform improvements in public services and commissioning frameworks, and help change attitudes.

We also deliver the Wales National Quality Service Standards (NQSS), a national accreditation framework for domestic abuse specialist services in Wales (supported by the Welsh Government) as

¹ Our membership of 22 third sector violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence specialist services in Wales, with whom we have national partnership agreements to ensure our work is coordinated and integrated includes: Aberconwy DAS, Atal y Fro, Bangor and District Women's Aid, Clwyd Alyn Housing Association (CAHA) Women's Aid, Stepping Stones, Safer Merthyr Tydfil, Carmarthen Domestic Abuse Service, Calan DVS, Cardiff Women's Aid, Cyfannol Women's Aid, Domestic Abuse Safety Unit (DASU), Gorwel (Grwp Cynefin), Montgomeryshire Family Crisis Centre, Newport Women's Aid, North Denbighshire Domestic Abuse Service, Port Talbot & Afan Women's Aid, RCT Women's Aid, Safer Wales (including Dyn Project), Swansea Women's Aid, Threshold, West Wales Domestic Abuse Service and Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre (RASASC) North Wales.

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part of a UK suite of integrated accreditation systems and frameworks. (More information on the NQSS: <http://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/our-members/standards/>)

Consultation response

This consultation seeks views on the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government's proposals for a new approach to delivering support to victims of domestic abuse and their children in "accommodation-based services" in England.

Welsh Women's Aid does not usually respond to consultations that are restricted to England; however, this includes within its scope the delivery of refuge-based support services and other domestic abuse services in the specialist third sector, which are also under review in Wales. These services offer a vital network of provision across Wales, England and the rest of the UK and beyond. Given our four decades of work on quality standards, service models and provision of domestic abuse services in Wales, this response sets out our key considerations on the proposals set out by MHCLG.

Within the consultation we are pleased to see that the MHCLG has looked to Wales as an example of how to introduce statutory duties on local authorities to provide support for victims of domestic abuse and their children. We also welcome that it recognises that a range of accommodation-based support is vital to ensure all survivors' needs are met.

However, we urge a coordinated and joined-up approach to resourcing vital domestic abuse specialist services as a network of provision across England and Wales, to ensure survivors of abuse no longer face a post-code lottery when accessing safety, services and support.

Key issues that any review of domestic abuse services and support must address:

Definition:

While the consultation recognises the need for specialist workers, we are concerned by the term 'broad' used in the consultation (when referring to support providers), which could be interpreted by local authorities to mean a generic service. It is concerning that the definitions of 'accommodation-based' services as it currently stands is unclear. It is vital that definitions of **refuge-based services** is included which is distinct from generic provision. This could be drawn from the UK 'Routes To Support' definition of refuge-based services. It is also essential that "specialist" is incorporated. For example, Welsh Government consulted with the sector and included a definition of specialist services in the [Wales Statutory Commissioning Guidance](#).

Resources:

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There is insufficient detail in the consultation as to how the proposed duties and model will be funded, nor what the equivalency will be for Wales in the event of any increase in allocation of resources to deliver this new model.

The estimated £90million per annum is unlikely to meet the cost of specialist provision across England, and there is no clarity in the consultation on how specialist services in Wales will be securely resourced.

We strongly advocate the need for Whitehall and Welsh Government departments to work together to pool resources from those departments that accrue cost savings from the support that refugee-based services deliver locally and across both countries.

Although Wales is already fulfilling many of the expectations being proposed for English local authorities, laid out in this consultation, the implementation of statutory duties in Wales is not sufficiently backed by resources to deliver locally. The specialist sector in Wales has been calling for secure sustainable funding for services for years, and while this is a commitment in Welsh Government's Strategy (2016), it has, as yet, not been delivered.

The consultation, rightly, highlights the importance of providing support to all victims and their children and responding to the needs of diverse groups, including, for example, disabled survivors. In a recent joint report² between Welsh Women's Aid and Disability Wales, we highlighted the concern from both survivors and our membership of specialist services across Wales about the need for more accessible, domestic abuse (and other VAWG) accommodation for disabled survivors. The consultation does not clarify how survivors with multiple needs who face severe and multiple discrimination and disadvantage, will be supported.

Central to any new duties must be resources to ensure the needs of all women and children are met, including, for example Black and minoritised survivors, LGBT survivors, disabled and Deaf survivors: specialist services must be adequately resourced to meet their needs. Consideration should be given – as in Wales – to regional or cross-authority commissioning, and it is also vital to ensure an element of national funding is retained so that provision can be secured across local authority areas. Proposals must include commitments to deliver secure and sustainable funds that are ring-fenced locally and nationally, including specifically for refuge provision which is led 'by and for' the communities they support.

We echo the concerns of migrant and minoritised women, and of our member services and specialist BME services, who know that services led by and for the communities they serve face additional challenges to secure and sustainably deliver specialist support for Black and minoritised communities. We also remain concerned, along with our colleagues in England, that there is no mention of how domestic abuse serviced and support will be provided to survivors with "no recourse to public funds" due to their insecure immigration status, within the consultation. Many survivors face a stark choice

² <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/WWA-and-Disability-Wales-2019-report-Final-ENG.pdf>



of staying with their abusers or facing destitution, and decades of evidence has been provided to Westminster outlining the significant additional risks and further secondary abuse many migrant women face at the hands of an unjust immigration system. It is disappointing that a coordinated approach cannot be found across the UK Governments to ensure migrant women survivors of abuse who have insecure status are not doubly abused by the system which purports to protect them.

Commissioning:

Wales has introduced regional Strategic Boards to address violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, that are already expected to complete regional and cross-authority needs assessments to inform strategies and commissioning plans. In Wales, there is a legal obligation to publish these strategies under the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015, and this is accompanied by a statutory National Training Framework and statutory guidance to 'ask and act' across the devolved public sector. This has led to a rise in referrals to specialist services resulting from public sector duties to improve their identification and response to abuse, which must be considered when commissioning and sustaining specialist services.

We also have Welsh statutory commissioning guidance for violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence specialist services, that has yet to make significant positive impact on the ground. We also face challenges when the commissioning guidance encourages a co-produced collaborative approach, informed by quality standards and local needs, yet the standing orders commissioners must abide by require competitive tendering. Until this discrepancy is addressed and until sufficient secure and sustainable resources are allocated to specialist services, domestic abuse services will continue to face challenges with funding and commissioning arrangements locally.

Children:

We welcome commitments to ensure local authorities meet the support needs of children and young people. We are very concerned about the 'postcode lottery' of provision for this work across Wales and between Wales and England. We already face a significant gap between the policy intent of the Wales Act/ National Strategy and the provision of services for child survivors across Wales.

This is despite the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 recognising children and young people as victims of domestic abuse, and the Welsh Government National Strategy on Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence 2016 – 2021³ recognising that witnessing violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence can have a huge impact on children and young people and can impact their safety, health and wellbeing and educational attainment.

³ <https://gweddill.gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/commsafety/161104-national-strategy-en.pdf> page 21

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Welsh Women's Aid members already report that the funding for provision for children and young people impacted by domestic abuse is patchy and inconsistent, and many domestic abuse services do not have dedicated funding to support children and young people provision. We are concerned that this funding gap will be even more apparent if there is no equivalence in resources allocated to Welsh Government to deliver secure and sustainable funding for domestic abuse services and to support victims through the justice system in Wales.

Wider national oversight and legislative/non-legislative mechanisms:

This consultation follows the announcement that local authorities in England will be expected to grant a lifetime tenancy to victims of domestic abuse where they previously held a lifetime tenancy. This is, again, currently only considered for England and while housing legislation in Wales provides protections for survivors in other ways (domestic abuse is a priority need, legislation will soon be passed that will allow landlords to target perpetrators for eviction where there is a joint tenancy), figures from our membership services tells us that the number of survivors staying longer than six months in refuge has doubled in a year⁴. This highlights the lack of move-on accommodation and the likelihood many survivors may have lost their secure tenancy through the act of fleeing violence.

The proposed “national steering group” must include representation from Wales, to ensure future arrangements avoid widening the gap and inconsistency in provision when survivors cross the border.

Lessons from Wales also indicates that new regional and local accountability and commissioning mechanisms must also include specialist services representation from the third sector. The scope of this oversight and accountability should be extended to include all forms of violence against women and girls, because otherwise survivors and services face silo responses by public services and commissioners.

To mitigate this risk, a joined-up approach is also needed across Wales and England to ensure that victims of domestic abuse have equal access to protection, support and justice across borders. We reiterate our call for the UK Government to ensure equivalency of resources and protections for survivors in Wales, to deliver secure, sustainable funding support for specialist services in Wales so that no women and children are turned away, and delivery of lifetime tenancies for survivors. The UK-wide network of refuges is a vital, life-saving service, which operates across borders – all of these services, regardless of where they are based, must be supported to continue this life saving work.

Welsh Women's Aid would like to thank UK Government for the opportunity to provide feedback on this important issue. We would also be happy to provide further oral or written evidence, if required.

⁴ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/State-of-the-Sector-2018-Eng.pdf>

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Any comments or questions regarding our response can be directed to:

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