

ELGC COV 05

Ymchwiliad i COVID-19 a'i effaith

Inquiry into COVID-19 and its impact

Ymateb gan: Hourglass Cymru

Response from: Hourglass Cymru

Hourglass Cymru, formerly Action on Elder Abuse Cymru, is Wales' only charity dedicated to stopping the abuse of older people and ensuring safer ageing for all. We run an expert helpline to support vulnerable older people at risk of, or experiencing abuse. The helpline also provides advice to those concerned about an older person and we receive calls from family members, friends, neighbours as well as professionals. For older people we offer advice, signposting and we can support the referral process to adult safeguarding teams or reports to the police. Crucially we offer vital emotional support to those who have experienced heinous acts of abuse and who have had crimes perpetrated against them.

To prepare us for the crisis we are facing due to the levels of support expected due to the COVID-19 pandemic we are currently recruiting and training a team of volunteers to ensure that calls from Wales are answered in Wales and that we can provide a bilingual service. Additionally, the services we are providing is changing, we are dealing with significantly longer calls from older people and we are also dealing with diversification in the issues people are seeking our advice on. In addition, we are anticipating a surge in demand once lockdown is over. We are urgently seeking to underpin and diversify our approach to prevent older people from not receiving the service and support they so desperately need. And they simply have no escape during this time. Put frankly, without the requisite front-line staffing and funding we will not get through this COVID-19 pandemic.

We are warning of a significant increased risk of abuse and neglect to the nation's older population as widespread lockdown and self-isolation takes effect amid the UK's efforts to tackle the pandemic. Hourglass commissioned new polling data which reveals that more than 1 in 3 (34%) UK residents don't believe that 'acts of domestic violence directed towards an older person' count as abuse. Neglect is of even greater concern, with nearly half of all those surveyed reporting that 'not attending to an older person's needs in a timely fashion' doesn't constitute abuse (49%). These are frightening statistics.

Over recent weeks, we heard a great deal in the media around domestic abuse and how this 'pressure cooker' environment is leading to a spike in calls. We respectfully ask 'does domestic abuse suddenly cease at 60 years old?' – we know it does not, our calls suggest not and the growth in our services during this COVID-19 nightmare underlines this further. Additionally, our service is unique because we work to protect older men as well as women experiencing violence from their partners, and we crucially support older people who are abused by their family members; daughters, sons, siblings, grandchildren, as well as friends and family members. We are the only helpline that supports older people experiencing physical, financial, psychological, sexual abuse and neglect and the only charity who has nearly 30 years of working with victims of elder abuse. We stand ready to work in partnership to ensure that the older population see cross-party commitment in the Senedd to end the blight of elder abuse. Especially relevant now during COVID-19 and in its aftermath. But these are desperate times and we need urgent help.

Our calls, in recent months, have peaked at 1,200 monthly across the UK. The Hourglass Cymru helpline is currently being promoted by a consortium of organisations brought together by the Older People's Commissioner for Wales, including: police forces, Health, local authorities, Trading Standards and other specialist third sector organisations. Our helpline number is being promoted in the Welsh Government food parcels. We have a specialist service and we welcome this support to

raise awareness and get the message out across Wales that there is support available to older people experiencing abuse in Wales, that they have not been forgotten.

However, with traditional fundraising processes almost dead – we are looking to underpin our services and stay afloat. We've recently moved more and more staff onto front line calls and as mentioned we are now establishing and training a team of volunteers in Wales. But we are barely able to cope with 30% of the calls we are receiving across the UK and we want to ensure that every older person in Wales speaks to a helpline information officer in Wales.

Hourglass is diversifying its areas of concern – to ensure that understanding the perpetrator's issues are part of the casework model. The current period of isolation, lockdown and the pressure cooker environment has led to an upsurge in calls and enquirers where alcoholism, addiction, mental health, bereavement and more neglect concerns have come to the fore. There is no escape for the victims and there are so many people at risk. We are already seeking to build robust strategic partnerships across the social care, third sector and community settings to ensure a comprehensive community and urgent care response during these extraordinary times.

We are absolutely determined to support those older people who are victims of emotional, physical, financial or sexual abuse – or any type of neglect, discrimination or exploitation. Hourglass promises to invest in new services focused on access to the legal and financial sectors – as well as challenging those industries who don't put the rights of the vulnerable older population first. The charity will also campaign tirelessly to promote understanding of the five types of abuse, to lobby for legislation change and to seek greater punishment for perpetrators and offenders. After lockdown and this period of isolation, the UK will be a different place for everyone. Hourglass wants to ensure that the COVID-19 hangover is short-lived but that the organisation is ready, willing and able to support virtually, remotely and in person those older people who need its services most.

We are struggling to balance the needs of callers against the lack of fundraising – and whilst we are striving as hard as we can to cope with current demand we need urgent support to ensure we can deal with the inevitable upsurge in demand post lockdown. The support from the Senedd Cymru is invaluable and we ask the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee to consider the specific needs of older people in Wales and ensure that Hourglass Cymru is here to help them and that we are able to sustain our services during lockdown and beyond.