

Welsh Women's Aid briefing: Short, medium and long-term actions needed to support survivors of VAWDASV throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has held a magnifying glass to the unacceptable global presence of violence against women. We have seen in detail gaps in protection and support, unsustainable funding models for specialist support and the dangers and barriers which face survivors in Wales.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic it can be anticipated that all areas have seen increasing domestic abuse, sexual violence, forced marriage, so called honour- based violence, child sexual abuse, FGM, exploitation and other forms of violence against women and girls. Since the lockdown was instigated, Welsh Women's Aid, along with sister organisations, have been representing to Welsh and UK governments that it is highly foreseeable that the emergency response measures to the pandemic will lead to an increase in harm to women and children.

Available data shows:

- During the initial lockdown period, contact with Wales' national helpline Live Fear Free rose by up to 49%, call time trebled with those making contact often reporting more frequent abuse with shorter escalation periods. Visits to the Live Fear Free website increased by 144% in the last month and there were 1,683 homepage visits to the site made in April compared with 690 in March.¹
- Nationally police forces across England and Wales have recorded an 8% increase in domestic abuse compared with the same period last year.²
- Imkaan has reported that services led 'by and for' black and minoritised women have reported significant increases in demand – particularly for refuge spaces.³

In July Welsh Women's Aid hosted a roundtable event which focussed on actions needed to build back with a preventative and early intervention focus VAWDASV to bring about change that lasts.⁴ Following this we also responded to the Welsh Government consultation on Our Future Wales post COVID-19 lockdown measures. A key focus is on preparing services for an influx of referrals as lockdown measures ease. Whilst also considering additional factors caused by the arrival of a second wave, the new local restrictions being introduced in response and actions which must be implemented.

¹ Live Fear Free and Welsh Government monitoring data.

² National Police Chiefs Council, Data from Operation Talla

³ Imkaan, The Impact of the Two Pandemics: VAWG and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls, May 2020

⁴ <https://www.welshomensaid.org.uk/2020/08/creating-change-that-lasts-responding-to-vawdasv-following-the-covid-19-pandemic-roundtable/>

Below we have highlighted key actions for the short, medium and long-term to ensure survivors of all forms of VAWDASV are able to access support, and that services are equipped to adapt and maintain provision regardless of how the pandemic and Government response to it develops.

This briefing has been informed by our the Creating Change that Lasts roundtable event, joint Welsh Women's Aid and NSPCC Children and Young People roundtable event, Welsh Women's Aid quarterly data reports, 2 surveys carried out with specialist services on the impact of COVID 19 and consistent conversation with the Live Fear Free Helpline, our member services, the wider sector and the people they support.

Short-term

These are actions which must be implemented immediately to ensure women and children across Wales have access to relevant and effective support, and the immediate safety of frontline specialist support workers is protected.

- *Communication and support for survivors in 'local lockdown' areas with new restrictions.* The introduction of lockdown areas and new restrictions brings with it the possibility of initial issues we saw at the beginning of lockdown resurfacing. This is a crucial time period to:
 - Get the word to survivors that services are available and can be reached in a number of safe and secure ways. Share Welsh Government ['Home shouldn't be a place of fear'](#) campaign.
 - Promote the [Welsh Women's Aid Bystander Toolkit](#) and [Live Fear Free Helpline](#) to ensure all Welsh citizens and agencies can get help for a person they're concerned for.
 - Circulate information about [mask exemptions](#) for people who've experienced trauma.
 - Highlight Welsh Government guidance that seeking safety from violence and abuse are legitimate exemptions for leaving your local area.⁵
- *Ensure communications and provision are intersectional and reach all survivors.* Communication that support is available and the subsequent provision needs to be accessible to *all* survivors. The needs of women of colour and survivors from minoritised communities, LGBT survivors, survivors with disabilities and survivors living in rural areas must be at the forefront of planning and provision to ensure barriers to support are removed and the support provided is needs led. All agencies working alongside services with this specialist knowledge and survivors with these experiences will be key to getting this right.
- *Ensure workplaces are supportive to survivors of all forms of VAWDASV.* There needs to be action in ensuring that workplaces have effective policies and procedures in place covering all forms of VAWDASV, and that these are adapted to remote and new working arrangements.

⁵ <https://twitter.com/LiveFearFree/status/1308119106114195462>

Human resources, managers and any workplace champions/union representatives should be provided with additional information on their roles in supporting employees affected by VAWDASV. This should include training such as Trusted Professional training⁶ and for devolved public bodies ensure they continue to adhere to the National Training Framework across all levels.

- *Ensure referral routes to specialist services are prepared for the rise in disclosures by children and young people at schools.* As children return to education and schools inevitably receive an influx of disclosures, we have to ensure effective referrals to specialist support for all children requiring it and that these services are sufficiently resourced to support these referrals. This resource must also reflect that children and young people need support as survivors of abuse in their own right, not having ‘witnessed’ abuse. It is key to get this right at the earliest stage possible to prevent future harm and trauma.
- *Solidify frontline staff in specialist services as key workers, ensuring they have continued access to PPE and have prioritised access to testing, childcare and vaccinations as developed.* Frontline staff in specialist services have been key to ensuring women and children have been able to receive support when they need it most. However, from the first introduction of initial UK lockdown measures,⁷ staff shortages due to sickness, necessary self-quarantine and limited childcare access has limited services’ capacity. Every effort must be made to keep frontline specialist workers safe, and fully equipped to provide support.
- *Housing and homelessness plans must be informed by specialist VAWDASV services.* Accommodation based support, including refuge, for survivors of VAWDASV differs from wider homelessness support as it is an important element of building safety, support, and enabling long-term freedom from violence and abuse. Like other elements of the Housing Support Grant the support element is the critical part of the person’s journey. Housing support regional leads must work with local specialist services to consider how access to appropriate, safe refuge and move on housing is of adequate levels of support for adults and children. Specialist services have a critical role to play in developing and delivering the response to homelessness and COVID 19. It is critical local authorities engage with VAWDASV providers in their area to have a picture of need and the to ensure VAWDASV is embedded into the planned response. Many accessing homelessness services will have experienced some or many forms VAWDASV in their past and will still be impacted by the trauma of these experiences.

⁶ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/change-that-lasts/south-wales/trusted-professionals/>

⁷ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/2020/03/responding-to-violence-against-women-domestic-abuse-and-sexual-violence-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

- *Ensure health services facilitate identification and disclosure with onward referral to specialist support.* Changes to accessing health care, such as phone call access to GPs and A&E triage systems may create barriers for identifying those experiencing abuse. The implementations of new systems need to consider how space will be created to enable disclosures and to safely signpost or refer to specialist support. Staff managing triage calls or other points of contact with patients that have changed due to COVID-19 need to be trained to safely respond and act on disclosures within the current situation, in line with the National Training Framework.
- *Access to test and tracing system needs to consider the safety and support needs of survivors.* Many survivors will not be able to share personal details as it could be significantly dangerous for them to disclose where they have been or to be traced. Systems have been discussed with the test and trace system, to support contacting survivors accessing refuges can be done through the safety of linking with specialist support services. Advice has also been given to tracing service to understand the barriers to a survivor participating in the process. If someone is or has experienced coercive controlling relationship they may experience restricted access to testing, restricted in who they are able or allowed to be contact with, there may be significant dangers in disclosing to a testing centre who they have been in contact with or being traced. They may also be restricted in complying with self-isolation.
- *Ensuring we continue to hold perpetrators to account.* Courts have a backlog of cases that they are currently going through. This has meant that in many cases survivors have gone through additional distress with cases being postponed and delayed further. They will require additional support and advocacy to support them in engaging with the new set up of courts and the delays. Survivors with multiple needs, will need additional support to navigate the new court processes and access systems through socially distanced mechanisms, including accessing remote evidence centres. The delay and backlogs must not see a reduction in perpetrators being held to account, we must ensure bail conditions are robust and do not enable further abuse and we must see sentencing remain proportionate. Perpetrator services have adapted their provision to meet with COVID-19 restrictions, these services need to be continued throughout new local lockdowns, recognising that there will be increased demand for these services going forward as evidenced in increased calls to the Respect UK helpline.
- *Proactively plan for the safety and support of survivors of sexual exploitation and women engaged in prostitution.* Survivors of sexual exploitation and women engaged in prostitution have continue to navigate multiple complex barriers in the wake of the pandemic. In addition to the significant harm they already experience, many will be facing additional risks surrounding unsuitable/ unsafe housing, access to hygiene facilities, increased risk of infection, decreased income, increased police sanctions and increased abuse and harassment (from communities, buyers, and 'pimps'). The VAWDASV risks surrounding COVID-19 have largely been framed around domestic abuse, meaning survivors of other forms of VAWDASV, their realities and adequate housing/ support is not centred in planning. As the nature of the

pandemic and our response to it continues to evolve as we plan for the future of Wales, it is vital that the safety and wellbeing of all survivors is included. These concerns also need to be embedded for medium and long-term planning for VAWDASV, including the Welsh Government National VAWDASV National Strategy refresh.

Medium-term

These are actions which must be implemented to ensure specialist services and wider agencies are adequately prepared and resourced to maintain and adapt provision as the pandemic and the Government response to it continues to develop.

- *Monitor the need for additional funding ahead of March 2021 £1.5million spend deadline.* We welcomed the announcement of an additional £1.5 million COVID-19 funding to be utilised until 31 March 2020. As the effects of the pandemic will be long lasting and continue to change both the support which is needed and the way in which provision is delivered, we call for this to be acknowledged in the Welsh Government budget and future commission practices and levels of continued investment across the VAWDASV sector.
- *Recentre Violence Against Women, Sexual Abuse, and Domestic Violence as a Welsh Government priority and renew commitment to embedding existing legislation across all directorates.* The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the lack of cross government strategic awareness and focus on the legislation's intended purpose to enable a cross-government, cross-department response to end VAWDASV and end the postcode lottery survivors face when seeking safety and support. We believe that until the purpose of the Act is achieved, consequences of the pandemic will continue to disproportionately effect survivors of VAWDASV. Recentring VAWDASV as a Welsh Government priority will ensure the safety of women and children is considered in policy development and emerging emergency measures.
- *Re-establishment of national governance structures to provide oversight of the delivery of the purpose of the Act and the National strategy and delivery plan.* During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Welsh Government have led weekly and bi-weekly VAWDASV Strategic COVID meetings that have provided a space to feed in and respond to the immediate crisis. Welsh Women's Aid has raised that there needs to be a strategic focus now on planning for the future. We held our roundtable to enable the beginning of these discussions however leadership now needs to come from ministerial, adviser and official levels to take this forward. The National VAWDASV Expert Stakeholder Group has only met twice in the last 2 years. The governance structure at a national level must be re-instated and must engage across directorates. It has a role in monitoring and reviewing on progress to the national strategy and delivery plan and needs to have feed in from the Sustainable Funding Task and Finish Group, HBV Leadership Group, Vulnerable Children and Safeguarding Group and All Wales Sexual Violence group to strategically bring together work that has been instigated before and during the pandemic to monitor the strategic delivery in line with the duties in the Act.

- *Ensure dedicated children workers in both refuge and community services to provide practical and therapeutic services for children and young people to enable them to recover from their experiences, recognise abuse and develop healthy relationships in the future.* Children and young people are being specifically impacted by the current climate which provides increased opportunity for perpetrators to monitor and control family members, increased opportunity for online sexual exploitation and results in more children and young people becoming “invisible” to services.⁸ Specialist services that provide support for children and young people report that there are significant concerns for the wellbeing of children and young people across refuge and community support. Therapeutic support has not been possible with adapted online support and safeguarding/welfare checks are challenging as it is not clear who is in the room and with young children they are not able to access independently.
- *Increase the availability of varied flexible accommodation and support for survivors.* Accommodation based support, including refuge, for survivors of VAWDASV is an important element of building safety, support, and enabling long-term freedom from violence and abuse. The pandemic has magnified the importance of a safe home. Each survivor’s needs will be unique to their experience, services must be well resourced to offer this flexibility.

Long-term

These are actions which must be implemented to ensure a stable foundation on which to build a ‘new normal’ where we commit to ending violence against women and children in all its forms. Although these actions are ‘long-term’ the work to fulfil them must begin today.

- *Ensure funding for the VAWDASV specialist sector is sustainable and reflects nuances across provision.* COVID-19 has demonstrated that now more than ever services need to be in receipt of secure and sustainable funding to be able to both react and plan for changing needs and environment. As the specialist support sector navigate the fall out and work to mitigate further damage, secure funding will ensure access to refuge, trauma informed practice, therapeutic support, prevention work, perpetrator interventions and support in the community can continue. Sustainable funding means sustainability of specialist VAWDASV support and shows a commitment to ending VAWDASV as opposed to managing a crisis response.
- *Commit to a long-term solution for supporting survivors with no recourse to public funds (NRPF).* Emergency COVID-19 funds enabled services to support survivors with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). Services have raised concerns regarding women with NRPF following

⁸ <https://www.welshomensaid.org.uk/2020/03/supporting-children-and-young-people-through-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

the pandemic and the removal of access to emergency funds. Having supported the women during lockdown they will not be able to remove the support due to the risk she will have to return to her abuser or face destitution. If the women are to be supported in refuge rent and support costs will need to be covered. A long-term commitment to supporting women with NRPF is the only way we can ensure *every survivor* will have access to safety and support.

- *Invest in early intervention and prevention.* It is vital that we do not lose sight of prevention of VAWDASV and enabling early access to support during and post COVID 19. VAWDASV is preventable. This means we can take action to stopping VAWDASV happening in the first place, whilst also take earlier action to ensure we are preventing further harm for those already impacted. In Wales there is a prevention agenda across a number of remits VAWDASV, ACEs, Future Generations, Violence prevention Unit, housing, safeguarding – particularly creating join up on legislative and policy agendas that would build on the synergy developed during COVID 19. We have seen a move to recognise the VAWDASV as a public health pandemic during COVID-19 in Wales and this prioritisation must not be lost post COVID-19. The World Health Organisation has produced briefings on VAWG and COVID-19, with evidence based on global information and previous pandemic research, available [here](#).
- *Create communities that are aware of the prevalence of VAWDASV, take action to challenge it and provide supportive responses to survivors.* During the COVID-19 pandemic Welsh Women's Aid have focused on ensuring that support networks remain available to survivors and that communities are aware of how to take supportive action. Learning from our Ask Me programme, we have developed our Bystander Toolkit that provided a range of information to get the message out there on how different community actors could still be active bystanders during COVID-19 in safe and supportive manner.

Any comments or questions regarding this briefing can be directed to:

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