

The Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act – Barriers to implementation briefing

Presented to Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee

NSPCC is leading the fight against child abuse in the UK and Channel Islands. We help children who've been abused to rebuild their lives, we protect children at risk, and we find the best ways of preventing child abuse from ever happening. Learning about what works in the fight against abuse and neglect is central to what we do. We are committed to carrying out research and evaluation to make sure the approaches we're taking are the right ones and we share what we have learnt with partners. Abuse ruins childhood, but it can be prevented. That's why we're here. That's what drives all our work, and that's why – as long as there's abuse – we will fight for every childhood

Introduction

NSPCC Cymru/Wales feels a major barrier to successful implementation of the VAWDASV Act is the absence of children and young people from much of the work. While both the Act and accompanying national strategy specifically name children as directly impacted by VAWDASV, this is not realised in practice. NSPCC has found 1 in 5 children have been exposed to domestic abuse¹ and 130,000 children and young people in the UK are living with high risk domestic abuse². It is therefore imperative that a child's right to protection and recovery from abuse is realised.

In the evidence provided by NSPCC Cymru/Wales to the Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee in 2016 we highlighted our concern about the harassment and violence experienced by children and young people, the need for mandatory RSE within a whole school approach and the provision of specialist services for children and young people impacted by abuse.

Progress against these concerns have been limited; An inquiry into harassment experienced by children and young people has not happened to date. However, progress has been made towards mandatory RSE and we strongly welcomed this in our response to Welsh Government's [consultation](#). However, we feel a more comprehensive guidance about the expected content of the resource is needed, specifically the importance of keeping safe, healthy bodies and healthy relationships and the upskilling of teachers to ensure important and difficult subjects are covered. Additionally, we continue to call for an RSE curriculum co-produced with children and young people *'young people should be regularly consulted on the issues they're most impacted by and what kind of language and expression is most useful for supporting them to navigate current dilemmas in their daily lives. They should be given the opportunity to identify their needs, comment on any policies and contribute to curriculum*

¹ <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/domestic-abuse/>

² *ibid*

planning. This information should be gathered at a school level and used to inform the design of RSE provision³.

Specialist Services

A report considering the proposed 'Ending Violence Against Women and Domestic Abuse (Wales) Bill' in 2012 stated '*delivery of services is patchy with no consistent, strategic oversight of the issue*'⁴. Almost eight years later and five years after implementation of the VAWDASV Act, the resources for and availability of services is still inconsistent across Wales.

In 2016, we highlighted our concern that provision of support for children impacted by domestic abuse across Wales was patchy. At the time, professionals told us; '*there are not enough therapeutic services such as counselling, CBT and attachment based therapies*'.

In early 2019 NSPCC Cymru/Wales produced a [briefing](#) with Children in Wales and Welsh Women's Aid on the impact of domestic abuse on children. The briefing highlighted that while both the VAWDASV Act and National Strategy specifically name children as direct victims and not 'passive witnesses' there remains a gap between the policy intent of the act/national strategy and the provision of services for child survivors across Wales. Using data from Welsh Women's Aid membership of specialist services the briefing highlighted that many of these services do not have dedicated provision for children and young people. Despite a commitment from Welsh Government to invest in prevention work with children and the intent of the Act to move towards a preventative model, dedicated services for children are not consistently available across Wales.

We feel our concern is compounded by children being absent from conversations about VAWDASV. The Wales Audit Office report for example, highlights the short term and inconsistent nature of funding for specialist services, but there is no mention of the chronic lack of provision for child survivors. It therefore suggests a mapping of services across Wales to understand current provision and gaps, but does not reference the importance of mapping the gaps in provision for children – this can be done by utilising the work done by NSPCC Cymru/Wales and Welsh Women's Aid.

In terms of the data used to complete local authority needs assessments the Wales Audit Office report notes public bodies are not always drawing on a comprehensive evidence base to fully assess local need. The data sources listed would indicate a gap in terms of the impact of VAWDASV on children, with data from maternity services and social care noted but no mention of other public bodies who work for or come into contact with, children.

Children's voices are missing from VAWDASV strategies, the report highlighted that survivors' voices were not consistently heard by local authorities when consulting with stakeholders. In local strategies children's voices are not discussed separately from adult survivors, so we can only assume their voices went unheard in much of the evidence gathering. A review of local VAWDASV strategies by NSPCC Cymru/Wales noted that only three of the eight strategies recognised children as victims of domestic

³ <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/consultation-responses/nspcc-cymru-wales-response-to-draft-curriculum-for-wales-2022.pdf> page 23

⁴ Robinson A, et al, The Welsh Government's proposed 'Ending Violence Against Women and Domestic Abuse (Wales) Bill': Recommendations from the Task and Finish Group <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/64054/1/Robinson%20et%20al%20%282012%29%20Task%20and%20Finish%20Group%20Report.pdf>, page 18

abuse and only two strategies were prioritising early intervention and work in schools. However, no children were consulted in the development of the strategies and none specifically prioritised developing or establishing support services for children.

Any prevention work on VAWDASV must have work with children as front and centre, however the Wales Audit Office report makes little mention of CYP when considering prevention work. Health, local authorities, Fire and Rescue and registered social landlords are mentioned as key players in preventing VAWDASV and of course they will engage with children, but schools and other public bodies working directly with children and whose primary responsibility is to the child must also play a pivotal role in prevention and early identification.

It appears the shift to prevention and awareness raising is slow, with funding presenting a challenge, this is compounded by commissioners not using good quality information to understand demand for VAWDASV services. There is no mention of demand for and the gap in children's services within the Wales Audit Office report. While services have been mapped, the report acknowledge there are gaps in this data and the failure to mention children speaks for itself.

It appears that slow implementation, a lack of resource and an inconsistent availability of specialist services for children recovering from abuse is preventing the Act from having a transformative impact on children and young people. For children already impacted by VAWDASV they need their own intensive, specialist, therapeutic support to help mitigate the impact of the abuse. In addition, work with children to spot the signs of abuse at an earlier stage or to educate them before it happens at all, is key to eradicating VAWDASDV for future generations.

What we are calling for;

We reiterate the calls made in our joint briefing with Children in Wales and Welsh Women's Aid.

1. Dedicated services for children and young people who experience domestic abuse

We want the Welsh Government VAWDASV Sustainable Funding Group to work with local authorities, cross government departments and the specialist sector to identify funding for the following;

- Dedicated children workers in both refuge and community services as standard to provide play and therapeutic work while the family is in crisis.
- Specialist services in each region of Wales staffed with appropriately trained professionals to provide therapeutic services for children and young people to enable them to recover from their experiences and develop healthy relationships in the future.
- The Wales Centre for Public Policy to ensure children and young people services are included in the review of refuge provision

2. Local VAWDASV strategies

We want to see:

- All local plans to recognise children and young people are directly impacted by abuse and commit to consult child survivors about the protection and support they need
- Local strategies to prioritise the development of specialist service provision for children and young people in every region of Wales

- Close working between safeguarding Children Boards and partnerships and agencies working to end domestic abuse to ensure effective protection and support of child victims.

3. Prevention, Early Intervention and Cultural Change

- Relationship and Sexuality Education within the new school curriculum must be mandatory
- The whole-education approach to be implemented across all education institutions to promote learning and challenge unhealthy relationships.