



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

POLICY AND STRATEGY

Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: national advisers annual plan 2022 to 2023

What we are doing to prevent violence and to support and protect people who have experienced violence.

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Introduction

This is our final annual plan as National Advisers and its publication comes at a time where violence against women and girls is rightly at the forefront of the public conscience. While we, the specialist sector, victims and survivors and the Welsh Government have been working towards tackling VAWDASV for a long time, it has taken recent, horrific and high profile cases to bring the epidemic of male violence into the headlines.

In recent months, we have seen women murdered and taken away from their families forever, we have seen policemen abuse their positions of trust and we have seen the police inspectorate publish hard-hitting reports. The voices of women have ignored for too long; it is time for action.

We hope this annual plan galvanises the Welsh Government's approach to VAWDASV. We support the ambition outlined in the Programme for Government to tackle harassment and abuse in the street and workplace as well as the home. We also recognise how absolutely essential it is to educate young people

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about healthy relationships and consent. We need a holistic approach if women are to be safe in every sphere of their lives.

This plan outlines how we will support and challenge the Welsh Government and Welsh Ministers to tackle VAWDASV and ensure Wales is the safest place to be a woman.

It is not for women to modify their behaviour. It is for men to change theirs.

Statutory requirements

The Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 is a landmark piece of legislation and the first of its kind in the UK and Europe. The overall aim is to improve the public sector response in Wales to addressing violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) and to ensure consistent consideration of preventative, protective and supportive mechanisms in the delivery of services.

As National Advisers for Violence against Women and other forms of Gender-based Violence, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence, we are required, under Section 22 of the Act, to prepare an annual plan setting out how we propose to exercise the functions of this role during the following financial year. Our plan for 2022 to 2023 is pursuant to our statutory responsibilities; in doing so we look forward to the publication of the next VAWDASV strategy and the partnership work that will be at its core with a continued focus on prevention and education.

In accordance with international obligations, the Welsh Government acknowledges that violence against women is a violation of human rights. All its policies and strategies explicitly define it according to those internationally held human rights. Additionally, the Welsh Government sees violence against women as a form of discrimination and a manifestation of historically unequal power relationships. It also recognises and seeks to address the multiple and intersecting forms of violence as a greater understanding develops of the nature of VAWDASV. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE 2014) states that: ‘the cost, in both human and economic terms is so significant

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that even marginally effective interventions are cost effective”. Tackling and eradicating violence and its root causes can improve not only health and wellbeing, but it can have a wider positive impact for society and the economy.

By recognising the overwhelmingly gendered nature of these harmful behaviours, it does not minimise the impact on male victims; however, women and girls are disproportionately the victims.

It is six years since the VAWDASV Act 2015 was passed. While this Act remains the benchmark by which legislation on gender-based violence is measured across the United Kingdom, we have also seen the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 which received Royal Assent in April 2021. It is our view that the work within the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 requires better alignment to the VAWDASV Act (2015). We continue to work with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and her team to ensure improved coordination of actions relative to the devolved areas of Government.

The impact of COVID-19

While we continue to live through the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact on victims and survivors is clear – the risk factors have been increased by lockdowns and support networks became harder to access. With restrictions easing, the needs of victims and survivors are likely to be more complex than ever before. The extraordinary efforts of the Welsh Government, in partnership with the specialist sector, to adapt to these circumstances and ensure that victims and those working to support them were able to continue to access help cannot go unmarked.

As we noted in our Annual Report, the Welsh Government officials working on VAWDASV have worked tirelessly through the pandemic to engage with, listen to and effectively respond to the feedback of the specialist sector to understand what victims and witnesses need and to try to provide an effective and rapid response. While this has been impressive to witness and to be a part of, there remains much to do. As we noted in our plan last year, the pandemic has had a huge impact on the economy which will only serve to widen the inequalities

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many face including those who suffer VAWDASV. We intend to recognise this and ensure all our objectives work towards a sustainable response which strives to achieve equitable outcomes.

If we are to transform the VAWDASV landscape, we must assert our focus on prevention and minimise the long-term impact of harm on all affected, especially for children and young people.

In last year's plan we acknowledged that it was to be our last in the post as National Advisers. However, in light of the ongoing uncertainty caused by COVID-19, the Welsh Government has extended our positions to July 2022 to ensure stability and to enable us to continue or restart some of the work we had planned but was unfortunately stalled. We intend, therefore, to roll over some activities into 2022 to 2023 because they remain valuable objectives to tackle VAWDASV.

Our annual report 2020 to 2021, which was placed before the Senedd this autumn, outlined progress against all streams of work up to April 2021 and we do not intend to rehearse that here. However, policy cannot and should not be made in a vacuum. In order to ensure interventions are effective, that they focus on prevention at one end but also provide proper support at the other, survivor's voices must be at the centre of policy development and the Welsh Government's response to VAWDASV.

Objectives for 2022 to 2023

Objective 1: Chairing the National Survivor engagement panels

Welsh Government recently published reports into the research and pilot work carried out with survivors of VAWDASV during 2019. Specifically, '[Research with under-represented survivor groups of Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence \(VAWDASV\) to inform the Survivor Engagement Framework: Phase 1](#)' and the '[Evaluation of the Violence](#)

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Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) Survivor Engagement Panel Pilot: Phase 2'

We must continue to identify gaps in existing provision and remove barriers for those with protected characteristics. We are committed to the recommendations made within the reports to ensure that those with lived experience have a platform to influence, shape and develop Welsh policy. We will chair these panels as independent advisors, and embed a culture where voices of those with lived experience is the heart of policy development and can influence change.

As National advisors, we will aim to understand and capture the views, capacities motivations and barriers to engaging with Welsh Government and will work with specialist sector stakeholders to reduce barriers to engagement. We will act as the link between Policy makers, Welsh Ministers and other VAWDASV stakeholder groups.

Objective 2: Embedding a public health approach

In September 2021, the Violence Prevention Unit published its report '**What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence? Systematic Evidence Assessment**'. The report defines a public health approach as follows, 'The World Health Organization's Violence Prevention Alliance describes a public health approach to violence prevention as one that 'seeks to improve the health and safety of all individuals by addressing underlying risk factors that increase the likelihood that an individual will become a victim or a perpetrator of violence' (Violence Prevention Alliance, 2021b)'.

Recognising VAWDASV as a public health issue is key to understanding and tackling the long and short term health consequences and wider social costs including women's participation in education, the workplace and their access to the world around them. Our work with the NHS Wales Safeguarding Network has identified key VAWDASV priorities within their plan. We will ensure the VAWDASV Commissioners group works to include health as one of the key priorities for future commissioning objectives.

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Objective 3: Exploring a blueprint approach for rolling out the next five-year VAWDASV National Strategy

We have been working with the Welsh Government, and its working group of key partner organisations, to develop the next five year VAWDASV strategy. The strategy will be published in early 2022. Part of the work to deliver this strategy will be to implement a blueprint approach which will ensure all organisations, both devolved and non-devolved, work together to explore a whole system approach to tackle male violence and misogyny. This will be achieved through an improved governance structure and a set of sub-groups focussing on particular elements of tackling VAWDASV. This is an ambitious piece of work but one which will benefit from the experiences and lessons learnt in establishing the existing blueprints for female offending and youth justice. We will provide our independent voice to guide the work of the blueprint and ensure it delivers for victims and survivors.

We are working with the VAWDASV Commissioning group to identify core service delivery within local areas and regions to ensure equitable and accessible services can be available to all victims. In doing so, we will be identifying gaps in provision and accessibility and how the blueprint approach can help bridge those gaps.

Objective 4: Continuing to engage with sexual violence specialist services to ensure victims and survivors have the support they need

In the summer of 2020 we commissioned a snap survey of sexual violence services which identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in relation to delivering for victims and survivors. We have provided feedback to partners and included sexual violence as one of our key priorities in this final plan.

In 2021 to 2022, the Welsh Government provided almost £300,000 to Specialist Third sector Sexual Violence organisation across Wales, a 4% uplift compared

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to pre-pandemic amounts.

We will continue to explore with sexual violence providers how capacity can be built and collaboration enhanced.

Objective 5: Exploring how commissioning can be more effective and consistent

Commissioning of services can be a complicated landscape and it is therefore important for us to provide strategic direction for the co-ordination of services across Wales and to champion consistency of approach.

We are keen to work with the Welsh Government and stakeholders in continuing to provide direction and oversight in ensuring the work of the All Wales VAWDASV Commissioning Group contributes to the objectives of the revised National Strategy, once published. This will assist commissioners with responsibility for VAWDASV support services to work to identify collaborative and integrated contracting and commissioning opportunities. Part of this work will be to ensure commissioning is embedded in the blueprint approach and works within the governance structure.

Objective 6: Ensuring the needs of victims and survivors are reflected within the local strategies

Thorough needs assessments ensure that local strategies properly support all victims of VAWDASV. We will continue to work with Local Authorities, Local Health Boards, the Third Sector and SARC service providers to ensure local strategies are informed by need as well as Welsh Government strategic priorities and legislation. This is the best way to deliver services and we will provide specific feedback in order to identify where things are working and where improvements can be made.

Objective 7: Improving communication with the UK Home

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Office and Ministry of Justice

During the development stages of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, we ensured there was significant input from us as Advisers, the Welsh Government and also stakeholders in Wales. The implementation of the Act and the creation and publication of statutory guidance is ongoing. We regularly meet with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and her office and will continue to engage with UK Government colleagues. We will continue to input into this work and ensure the expertise within Wales is given the prominence and recognition it deserves.

The Ministry of Justice is taking forward legislation on the Victims Bill. This piece of work spans a vast number of areas including VAWDASV. We will work with Welsh Government officials to ensure this work benefits survivors and victims of VAWDASV in Wales.

There are now few, if any, obstacles to the UK Government incorporating the CEDAW convention into UK law and to ratifying the Istanbul convention. We will work with Ministers and officials to ensure that the Welsh Government remains at the centre of these initiatives.

Objective 8: Tackling virginity testing and Hymenoplasty and providing expert advice on the issue of those fleeing VAWDASV who have no recourse to public funds

The UK and Welsh Governments are considering options around criminalising virginity testing. We will provide our support to this work and act as the link between Welsh Government and other stakeholders. In 2018 the World Health Organisation (WHO) defined virginity testing as an inspection of the female genitalia meant to determine whether a woman or girl has had vaginal intercourse; also referred to as hymen, “two-finger” or per vaginal examination. These tests have no scientific merit or clinical indication. The practice is harmful and is a form of violence against women and girls.

We are committed to providing guidance as members of an Independent Expert

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panel scheduled for Autumn 2021 which will consider recommendations to the UK Government as to whether hymenoplasty should be banned. We will ensure the position in Wales is represented and considered at this panel.

Refugee, migrant and asylum seeking women fleeing VAWDASV experience particular challenges and hardship and this has been exasperated through the pandemic. We are committed to working with partners within Wales but also within UK Government to find solutions that can address these inequalities and provide adequate support.

Objective 9: Supporting the Welsh Government in further awareness-raising campaigns

During the pandemic, the Welsh Government launched its 'Home Shouldn't be a Place of Fear' campaign to let victims know how they could access help and support even during national lockdowns. The impact of campaigns like this cannot be underestimated. As the impact of COVID-19 continues to be felt, communications campaigns will continue to be important to deliver these powerful messages. We will work with the Welsh Government to help shape further campaigns and use our platforms to amplify the messages to ensure they reach a diverse range of victims and those at risk of harm.

Considering the tragic murder of Sarah Everard, we must continue to shine a light on this area and do more to ensure a range of communications campaigns raise awareness of what VAWDASV is, challenge attitudes and provide clear signposting to the help and support available.

Conclusion

We acknowledge the approach to tackling violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) in Wales has been transformed and huge progress has been made since the implementation of the Act. It has led to increased training, stronger guidance, practice change and clear strategic

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direction throughout the Welsh public service, all impacting on the lives of those affected.

This is our final plan as National Advisers. As our time in these roles comes to an end we would like to thank the Welsh Government officials we have worked with, the Welsh ministers who have shown such leadership and direction, the specialist sector who have advised and challenged us but mostly we would like to thank the victims and survivors who have provided their voice and experience to our work.

While this plan repeats some of the objectives we have made previously, this is not through lack of ambition, this is in recognition of the setbacks experienced during the pandemic. VAWDASV has been called a 'shadow pandemic' of the COVID-19 pandemic. We can evidently see this in our work in this area and it is evidenced in the conversations we have had with the specialist sector. Now is the time to regroup and to focus on getting things right.

The new five-year VAWDASV strategy will be a chance to do this and we are looking forward to working with Welsh Government and wider partners to ensure its effectively delivery. It is an opportunity to refresh the commitment to improve outcomes through early intervention and co-ordination to support long lasting change and to build resilience.

Specialist providers must be resourced and in a sustainable way if the multiple inequalities faced by some groups of women are to be recognised and the ways in which they intersect to be understood. The response to the pandemic has relied on the expertise of specialist providers to keep those at risk of harm safe, though the various emergency response funds this has been possible. We must also thank the Welsh Government and the PCC's particularly who have provided much of this through accessible grants.

Preventing VAWDASV is a priority, it will remain a priority until we form a comprehensive response and suite of programmes which include different settings such as the workplace, the street, night time economy and public spaces. All of which must interact to develop a system which encourages safe and healthy behaviour and holds violent and abusive behaviour to account.

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