



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

REPORT

Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: national advisers annual report 2020 to 2021

Making Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual
Violence everybody's business.

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Introduction

Section 22 of the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) Act 2015 requires the National Adviser(s) to produce an Annual Report to lay before the Senedd.

We, Nazir Afzal OBE and Yasmin Khan were appointed to the role of National Advisers on a job-share basis in January 2018, this is our Annual Report as required. The Government has agreed with us that our terms of office will be extended to July 2022. This will enable us to complete work delayed by COVID-19 and to assist the newly elected Government with its VAWDASV priorities to further expand and strengthen its work in this area as part of its Programme for Government commitment to make Wales the safest place in Europe to be a woman.

This has been an extraordinary year which has been blighted entirely by the COVID-19 pandemic and has rightly led to the Welsh Government focussing on responding to the crisis. It has had a detrimental impact on some medium and long term objectives we set out in our Annual Plan for 2020 to 2021 as we diverted our efforts to concentrate on mitigating the effects of the pandemic on victims, survivors and the VAWDASV sector, but we are pleased to report that much has still been achieved. Much of which has been driven and influenced by the specialist sector and informed by victims and survivors. However, we must accept the impact of the pandemic which has left specialist providers and their front-line staff with considerable vicarious trauma. We must plan ahead and ensure services and their workforces are supported and recognised for their formidable work in these unprecedented times.

We, once again, want to thank the VAWDASV team in the Welsh Government for their continued support and assistance and want to recognise their achievements this past year despite being below optimum staffing levels for most of the year. It is only right that we recognise their efforts to support the

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VAWDASV sector and to provide such a high level of service during these challenging times.

Our role during the pandemic has been supported by Welsh Ministers, for which we pay tribute to the First Minister and his Ministerial team especially the Minister for Social Justice Jane Hutt who has continued to drive this area of work with immense interest and commitment, building on her decades long involvement in this field. The commitment in the Programme for Government to strengthen the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence strategy to include a focus on violence against women in the street and workplace as well as the home, clearly demonstrates the pace of change and strong leadership within the Welsh Government.

Most of all, we want to thank the many third sector providers who tirelessly support victims and survivors. They have responded to the pandemic in ways that none of us could have imagined and at a time when violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence has sadly increased.

The VAWDASV Act 2015 remains one of the greatest achievements of the Welsh Government and allows us to say, with no qualification, that where Wales leads, the rest of the UK follows. The achievements following enactment are well-rehearsed but we list some of them below when giving our updates on our work for the year but also our commentary on what has been achieved by the Welsh Government.

There remain significant challenges and we should never under-estimate them. They have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The efforts of the Welsh Government are rightly focussed on dealing with these challenges and working to address inequalities where they exist to ensure equitable provision is accessible to all those who need it, ensuring against a “postcode lottery” approach.

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Progress during the financial year 2020 to 2021

Explore how a Public Health Approach can be developed and make recommendations to Welsh Government on implementing this approach

We have been working with the office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for South Wales to explore and challenge current thinking in favour of a public health approach framework for VAWDASV. We feel this area of work, and the workshop we participated in 2020, aligns with the sustainable development principle within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The aim of this joint working is to identify opportunities to embed a public health approach and to gain an understanding of the existing VAWDASV landscape across Wales.

Work with Local Authorities, Local Health Boards and Third Sector and SARC Service providers to ensure the needs of victims and survivors are reflected within the Local Strategies

As identified in last year's report, this is an ongoing annual activity and it is right that it continues to be included in our plans and reports.

We have identified specific themes for good practice and also where we feel improvements are required. We intend to share with strategic boards and partnerships across Wales as they prepare their updated action plans during the course of this year. We have committed to attend at least one such board or partnership in each region to participate in their action planning process where possible.

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Continue to review work on identifying gaps in research data and data collection and identifying best practice

We continued to support officials in the development of strategies, policies and guidance through each and every engagement to ensure that the work of Welsh Government is guided by research and data.

We supported Welsh Government officials in the development of the VAWDASV National Survivor engagement pilot panels throughout 2019 and await the report on recommendations.

During the pandemic, we supported officials and the sector by providing strategic leadership to the COVID-19 Strategy Group which was created to minimise the impact of the pandemic on specialist services and, in turn, victims and survivors.

We conducted a snap survey of the sexual violence sector in recognition of the immense pressure the sector was, and continues to be, under in relation to waiting times and backlogs. Additional funding during the pandemic has helped to alleviate some of the unprecedented pressures on services and reduce their wait times.

At a number of stakeholder fora it has been recognised that a key barrier to progress in relation to tackling so-called honour based abuse has been a lack of data. We have worked with groups to further understand this need and progress the issue with officials.

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Work with the Government to implement the Final Agreed Set of Indicators in order to report against the National Strategy

In June 2019, following a public consultation exercise, the Welsh Government published a set of national indicators for measuring progress against the National Strategy. Work with stakeholders to identify additional data sources and further refine the indicators was paused when the Covid-19 pandemic took effect. We will however continue to feed in the views of key stakeholders and survivors when the indicators are revised following the publication of the next iteration of the National Strategy later in 2021.

Continue to Chair the Sustainable Funding Group and work with the Government and stakeholders to progress this work

This Sustainable Funding Group is chaired by Yasmin Khan. It has met its expected outcomes by providing Commissioning guidance, a full mapping exercise, and establishing a Commissioning Group. This sets out the basis on which sustainable commissioning can take place, provides the information necessary to identify gaps and a forum for operational decisions to be shaped by shared information and perspectives.

Proposals to explore the establishment of an All Wales VAWDASV Commissioners group were agreed at the Sustainable Funding Group in May 2020 and the group was established in March 2021. The overarching aims will assist commissioners with responsibility for VAWDASV support services to work to identify collaborative and integrated contracting and commissioning opportunities which ensure gaps in services are addressed and outcomes for service users are enhanced.

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The development of a new National Strategy provides an opportunity to set out future direction for any further developments in funding and commissioning arrangements as part of the discussions of how this might be achieved involving stakeholders during workshops planned for 2021.

Work with Welsh Government colleagues to improve communication with the UK Home Office and Ministry of Justice and collaborate with the new Domestic Abuse Commissioner to ensure UK policy and legislation take into account the Welsh context

The work of the Single Unified Safeguarding Review Training and Learning sub-group chaired by National Adviser Yasmin Khan has developed a learning matrix which will be integrated into the model around December 2021. The learning outcomes framework enables preliminary, mid-term and bi-annual learning to ensure changes and procedure can be implemented at pace.

National Advisers are working with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner as part of the framework within which the Commissioner will operate to ensure an England and Wales approach is integrated in terms of oversight and provision of services. Whilst the DA Commissioner has a limited remit in Wales, she is working with colleagues in respect of the devolution settlement, recognising that responsibility for matters which include local government, health and education rests with the Welsh Government.

We continue to work with the Home Office to ensure better alignment of Welsh legislation is upheld as part of the work programme, policy setting and wider VAWDASV landscape.

Explore with sexual violence service providers how

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capacity can be built and collaboration enhanced

As covered in the update relating to data and research, we have worked with sexual violence providers to look at how capacity can be built and have supported them to deliver in new ways during the pandemic. The Welsh Government has provided additional funding to reduce waiting times.

Support the work of the All Wales Honour-based Abuse, Forced Marriage and FGM Leadership Group to formulate clear objectives

The work of the All Wales Honour based abuse Leadership Group has gained momentum and has compiled a training matrix for partners, we feel this is important to gain a fuller understanding of where knowledge gaps exist. We have highlighted good practice and contributed to a guide for professionals through HARM (honour abuse research matrix), an academic and expert partnership panel. This guidance provides front-line professionals with a range of guidance materials, funded by Research England and produced to help organisations address honour based abuse.

Work to review ongoing policy development to ensure the needs of children as victims and witnesses are considered and appropriately addressed and make recommendations for improvement where appropriate

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 recognises children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right. This is an important step and highlights the need for specific and tailored support children and young people.

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We supported the development of the Welsh Government's vulnerable children and young people stakeholder group however this was stalled by the pandemic. We will continue to work with the Welsh Government to continue its focus on children and young people and ensure their needs are reflected in the new National Strategy.

Work with the Government and specialist providers to explore how accessibility to services for those living in rural areas can be improved

The pandemic required us all to work remotely and the third sector in particular rose to the challenge with extraordinary speed. This quickly illustrated how those in rural areas could have better access to services where transport links and other obstacles persist. It's evident that many providers and those they support want to continue a more blended engagement post pandemic and we and the Welsh Government will consider how that can be made to work long term. It does not, however, provide a comprehensive solution given the variability of broadband and IT availability and capability. We therefore continue to investigate all options.

Take an active role in awareness raising and contribute to the Government's development of strategies to inform through the curriculum and guidance

We continue to be involved in the delivery of the new curriculum, both with the Welsh Government and key community networks. Specifically, to understand the tensions and concerns of diverse groups. We are providing expert advice to the sector in Wales to allow professionals the flexibility to identify potential tensions and approaches to engage a wider range of community groups, including women from diverse backgrounds.

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We supported awareness raising of the Welsh Government Communication Framework and Live Fear Free campaigns throughout the last year. We participated in a video alongside specialist services encouraging victims to still access support through the COVID-19 lockdown periods.

National Advisers' assessment of Welsh Government achievements 2020 to 2021

In previous years we have looked at Welsh Government progress and assessed it in relation to each of the objectives set out in the National Strategy. This year however, it feels more appropriate to focus on how the Welsh Government and the VAWDASV team responded to the pandemic and the achievements made to ensure victims and survivors were protected and supported.

As noted under the previous section, during the pandemic, the Welsh Government established a COVID-19 Strategy Group which brought together officials and sector representatives to ensure that policies and practices that were necessarily being developed at speed reflected the needs and potential impacts on specialist services, victims and survivors. It is not an overstatement to say the input into this group from the specialist sector and the resulting action from Welsh Government will have saved lives.

Recognising the potential for an increase in VAWDASV as a result of the pandemic, the Welsh Government launched its 'home shouldn't be a place of fear' campaign, so victims would know that services were still operating and offering support, and to encourage bystanders and concerned others to access help and information.

This is a multi-media campaign, and has been shared across TV, Radio, National and local news and press, online, and with support of community networks such as pharmacies, local supermarkets and police forces, reaching

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the widest and most vulnerable. The campaign was also shared within COVID-19 Testing and Vaccination centres.

Our assessment of this campaign is that it was effective in reaching people during a time of increased risk and uncertainty. This is an example of Welsh Government listening to stakeholder groups and taking decisive action to ensure victims and survivors knew how to get help and support.

As well as this public campaign, the Welsh Government also provided additional training to professionals to raise awareness of VAWDASV. This training reached groups such as criminal justice professionals, the private housing sector and charities. The course focussed on the much needed areas honour based abuse, responding to male victims, responding and supporting children and young people affected by domestic abuse, working with victims of sexual violence and recognising and responding to perpetrators of abuse.

Providing this additional training will have not only increased awareness but equipped people to support others during a time when they needed it most.

We also commend the Welsh Government for providing additional funding to support VAWDASV organisations to respond to the challenges and pressures of not only the pandemic itself but also any issues caused by the easing of restrictions. Last year, Welsh Ministers approved an additional £4 million of funding to help support the VAWDASV sector to meet the anticipated increase in demand as the easing of lockdown developed further. This funding was used for specialist training and to address gaps in provision.

Next steps

We look forward to the consultation and resulting publication of the revised National Strategy for VAWDASV which is due to be published later in the year.

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The strategy marks the culmination of extensive engagement and consultation with both devolved and non-devolved organisations and sets out the ambition of a whole system, public health approach to VAWDASV.

The next year also brings renewed focus to Welsh Government's work on survivor engagement. Policy cannot be made in a vacuum and the voices of those who have experienced VAWDASV should be at the forefront of everything we do.

We look forward to continuing our engagement and our relationship with the specialist sector experts in Wales.

The ambitious commitments within the Welsh Government's Programme for Government set a clear path towards eradicating VAWDASV and we are excited to continue providing our advice and expertise in order to achieve this goal.

Conclusion

Six years on, the VAWDASV legislation has been underpinned by work to change attitudes and to ensure more victims and survivors come forward. To achieve this we need to ensure that they get the support they need, when they need it. As the true scale of these crimes is revealed we need to strengthen our work to change attitudes, improve prevention and where possible rehabilitate offenders to stop reoffending. To do this we need to make tackling violence against women and girls everybody's business. From health, education and law enforcement, to employers and friends and family we all need to play our part. By enabling women to disclose violence as part of their everyday interactions we can support earlier identification and intervention to stop violence and abuse from escalating to critical levels.

During this "water-shed" period in history, the level of attention we've seen given

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to these issues has been long overdue, but organisations and stakeholders who have been supporting violence against women and girls have pinned their efforts in creating sustainable change in Wales. To this effect, we have developed our priorities within this report to achieving long-lasting change which cannot be met without the commitment, leadership and delivery of our stakeholders. It is with this intent, we continue to take the necessary steps to develop a resilient and needs-led approach to meeting the needs of victims and survivors across Wales.

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