



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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

Summary of progress made on domestic abuse and sexual violence annual plans from April 2022 to March 2023.

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Introduction

“ We are resolute in our collective commitment to adopting a zero tolerance to violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence in Wales, every individual has the right to live free from fear and harm” ”

The appointment and functions of the National Advisers for Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) are detailed in the VAWDASV (Wales) Act 2015. The publishing of an annual report is a requirement placed upon them. This report must detail the achievements of the National Adviser against the priorities set for the year and any other relevant activities.

This report for the financial year 2022 to 2023 is presented with a recognition of the final 6 months term of both Nazir Afzal and Yasmin Khan as National Advisers for Violence against Women Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Advisers and the first term of 6 months for Johanna Robinson undertaking the role alongside Yasmin Khan as we begin the new 3-year term.

As the National Advisers for Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse, and Sexual Violence in Wales, we present the annual report for 2022 to 2023, reflecting on the persistent challenges we face in our pursuit of eliminating violence against women, domestic abuse, and sexual violence in Wales.

Over the past year, although we have made some progress, it is essential to acknowledge the gravity of the issues we confront. According to data from the British Crime Survey and the Ministry of Justice, domestic abuse and sexual violence continue to cast a long shadow across England and Wales. Recent figures from the British Crime Survey estimated that there were 1.6 million incidents of domestic abuse and 786,000 incidents of sexual assault in the year ending 31 March 2022.

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This staggering statistic underscores the urgency of our work, even though it fails to capture the victims who suffer in silence without any intervention and/or support. Furthermore, the findings of the UK Government Rape Review and the Family Courts Report recently published by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales in 2023 have added a new layer of complexity to our efforts, highlighting the need for holistic and systemic changes in addressing these grave issues. This annual report serves as a testament to the work we have achieved and our commitment to creating a safer future for all in Wales remains and continues in the work we will do for the remainder of our term.

In May 2022 the new Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Strategy for 2022 to 2026 was published. This strategy was developed at a time of recovery from the pandemic, with continued increases in pressure on specialist and public services with the additional strain of the economic challenges. Welsh Government has reaffirmed its commitment to Wales being the safest place for a woman in Europe to live.

This has taken shape within the strategy through the inclusion of a blueprint which brings together the collective responsibility and action of all public services in Wales both devolved and reserved.

Although an ambitious programme of work in a time where the pressures are high, and resources are challenged, we believe change and improvements are possible to prevent, protect and support victim and survivors in Wales and prevent future generations from abuse. We are pleased by this opportunity, the renewed and refocused commitment and will work during our term to ensure there is success and where necessary challenge for better.

Victims and survivors of abuse in Wales continue to face significant challenges, often exacerbated by various factors, including the significant pressures on public services at this time. They have a critical role, function and duty, as mandated by the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse, and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) (Wales) Act 2015 to assess the needs of the population

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and take action to prevent, protect and support survivors of VAWDASV. We recognise that this challenge sits within the context of economic pressures that weigh heavily on Wales, as they do in the rest of the UK.

One of the most pressing issues faced by victims and survivors is the accessibility and availability of support services. This can only be resolved by increasing this vital resource. While the VAWDASV Act has undoubtedly improved the framework for addressing these issues, the demand for services continues to outstrip available resources. Many survivors report difficulties in accessing timely and appropriate support, ranging from crisis intervention to longer-term counselling and housing assistance. This strain on services not only impedes recovery but also perpetuates the cycle of violence for those unable to access help when they need it most.

Furthermore, the economic pressures in Wales have a profound impact on the vulnerability of individuals to domestic abuse and sexual violence. High unemployment rates, underemployment, and limited access to affordable housing can trap survivors in abusive relationships due to financial dependence. Economic insecurity can also dissuade victims from leaving abusive situations, as they fear losing their livelihoods or the ability to provide for their children. The intersection of economic pressures and violence underscores the importance of providing comprehensive support that addresses both immediate safety concerns and long-term economic empowerment.

Efforts to reduce these challenges require a multi-pronged approach. It is essential to increase investment in support services and infrastructure to ensure that survivors have accessible and timely access to help. This includes not only crisis services but also long-term support to assist survivors in rebuilding their lives. Additionally, addressing economic pressures through job creation, affordable housing initiatives, and financial empowerment programs can reduce the risk factors associated with domestic abuse and sexual violence.

Meeting the diverse needs of victims, survivors, children, and young people, as

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well as extending support to migrant women in Wales, requires a comprehensive and regionally responsive approach, considering the devolved nature of local government, housing, and health services. For victims and survivors, there is an urgent need for accessible and culturally sensitive support services, recognising that domestic abuse and sexual violence affect individuals from all walks of life.

This necessitates collaborative efforts between local authorities, health providers, and our specialist By and For providers to ensure survivors receive trauma-informed care, advocacy, and housing solutions tailored to their unique circumstances. It is equally crucial to prioritise the needs of children and young people exposed to such violence, by enhancing educational programs, therapeutic services, and safe spaces where they can heal and thrive.

Furthermore, support for migrant women should include legal assistance, language services, and culturally competent healthcare within the devolved systems, ensuring that no one is left behind or further marginalised due to their immigration status. By embracing a holistic and regionally responsive approach, we can better address the specific needs of these vulnerable populations and work towards a Wales where safety, dignity, and equality are accessible to all.

Progress

In our 2022 to 2023 plan we provided key objectives which we deemed priorities, based on engagement with key stakeholders. The following section provides progress against our priorities and highlights key actions included in our recommendations for the Welsh Government.

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Progress against Objectives for 2021 to 2022

Objective 1: chairing the National Survivor Scrutiny Panel

Survivor engagement and ensuring that experts by experience are involved in policy making and scrutiny of delivery at all levels is critical. Following the Welsh Government's research and consultation a commitment was made to create a National Survivor Voice, Scrutiny and Involvement Panel. In the first quarter of this financial year, further work was undertaken to ensure fairness and equality within the recruitment processes. This included securing the role of panel members as independent survivors providing scrutiny to the Blue Print delivery model, thus ensuring that the panel members are recognised as integral oversight and, as such, receiving remuneration for their time and commitment.

Advertising and recruitment for the panel began in November 2022, with our involvement and steer including attending various regional forums with existing survivor forums and meeting with interested individuals. Subsequently, working with the specialist sector to ensure a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds, we interviewed all applicants. The first meeting on the panel took place in May 2023, with subsequent meetings focussing on the blueprint delivery plans for each of the workstreams. We continue to provide support through 1-2-1 meetings for each of the panel members to ensure any concerns, challenges and support needs are addressed appropriately.

The panel and all of the work of the blueprint must continue to reflect as much as possible the diversity and complexities of experience of survivors of violence against women, domestic abuse, and sexual violence. Disabled victims are at a particular disadvantage, as too are sexually exploited women and older victims of abuse. Children and young people need to be engaged with and listened to early and particularly in education settings, creating spaces for improving prevention and early intervention. This remains a priority in achieving the goal of

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eliminating abuse.

Objective 2: embedding a public health approach

A critical factor of a public health approach is that all services are actively engaged in prevention and support. This is consistent with the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act and its purpose to prevent, protect and support people affected by VAWDASV. It also places a duty on public services to deliver against this purpose in identifying, tackling and early identification through handling disclosures at the earlier stage of a victim's journey. One of the many challenges is ensuring those at risk can access a range of support which includes education, awareness, and the right level of intervention.

No single agency can provide this: public services must work in partnership to ensure victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence receive the necessary support for protection through a public health approach because it requires a coordinated effort to address the complex interchange of physical and mental health, social, and legal factors affecting survivors, ultimately fostering a safer and healthier community for all. We provided written and oral **evidence to the Equalities and Social Justice committee** in 2023 to outline our assessment of what more can be achieved. We continue to work to ensure that public services in Wales are reminded of and scrutinised on their delivery of their duties. We have provided advice to the Minister for Social Justice about some improvements that we consider necessary and expect to see this translated to delivery in the next year.

The Sustainable Whole System Approach workstream within the Blueprint provides us with a significant mechanism to create a collaborative plan for delivery of a public health and whole system approach that will ensure that survivors of VAWDASV will be effectively responded to across public services and supported to access the specialist services. Through enhanced needs

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assessments and identification of the required action there will be a significant case for the wide and varied enhancement of prevention and earlier intervention to reduce the cost to the population of Wales. This cost is to be understood in two ways: direct harm to women, children and men as victims but also recognising the subsequent cost of this harm to public services dealing with the consequences of the harm and abuse.

In Wales, tackling violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence through a public health approach involves and requires coordination of the functions across all policy areas with Welsh Government and across public bodies involving strategies and initiatives. We must continue to evidence how the public health approach is holistic and proactive in tackling VAWDASV, aiming not only to address its immediate consequences but also to prevent it and create a safer Wales for all.

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

The Welsh Government VAWDASV strategy was published in May 2022. The strategy is inclusive of a blueprint approach with the purpose of bringing all services together. This includes criminal justice agencies as a non-devolved but critical area for delivery for survivors and tackling perpetration. The specialist sector is also represented in all areas including their experiences of the delivery of dedicated VAWDASV services and the experiences of the survivors engaging in those services. We attend all of the meetings within the strategy and blueprint governance. Yasmin is one of the co-chairs of the Sustainable Whole System Approach Workstream while Johanna is co-chair of the Gender based harassment in all public spaces workstream.

We have advised and informed the blueprint delivery team, SROs and policy team on various matters including the “Theory of Change” model as well as the high-level and separate detailed delivery plans. We have also worked closely

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with the Regional Advisers and Specialist Sector to ensure that they are represented appropriately, and to ensure communication channels to the wider stakeholders are improved. We have also formed the National Expert Advisory Group which aims to engage by and for representatives within the specialist sector. This group provides scrutiny of our work and provides an opportunity for us to work with the sector to ensure Welsh Government policy and delivery is informed by their experience and expertise and those of its members.

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

The Welsh Government continues to provide funding to the specialist sexual violence services across Wales. The UK Government provides funding through the Rape Support Fund to services in Wales as well as additional funding through Police and Crime Commissioners for Independent Sexual Violence Advocates (ISVA) and other sexual violence support. This has all increased as a consequence of improved knowledge and understanding of the scale of sexual violence throughout England and Wales.

The Wales Sexual Assault Services (WSAS) Programme continues to be a significant programme to deliver improved services for victims and survivors of sexual violence in Wales. We engage with the director of the programme monthly, attend the board meetings and the ISVA Advisory board that is organising the recommissioning of ISVA services. Johanna also spoke at the WSAS conference this year as a keynote speaker and attended conferences held by the specialist sexual violence sector.

Yasmin continues to chair the All-Wales operational group for sexually exploited women and highlight the systematic barriers they face. This work is also starting to inform gaps in training and awareness across Wales. Feedback from this group will continue to address some of the inequalities facing victims, including early identification of abuse and the gaps in services.

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Objective 5: exploring how commissioning can be more effective and consistent.

To sustainably commission the appropriate services necessary to prevent violence against women, domestic abuse, and sexual violence, we must ensure the right structures for understanding need, planning and procurement are in place across Wales. We are reviewing the funding landscape and process across Wales. This should be part of a strategic planning cycle that includes procurement but enables a full, whole system approach. This forms a significant element of the collaboration of partners in the blueprint-Sustainable Whole System Approach workstream.

The Plan to review and refresh existing regional and national arrangements is underway, working with commissioners and policy leads we envisage making needs-based arrangements to strengthen and better align with the purpose of the Violence against Women Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Act (2015).

The blue-print approach which encompasses both devolved and non-devolved bodies is reviewing the existing structures and mechanisms to ensure statutory public services are responsive to the needs of victims and survivors. In addition, this approach will assess whether the procurement approach can be improved to secure sustainability within the specialist sector to support effective collaboration between commissioners in Wales and enhance service provision and delivery.

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

New local VAWDASV strategies have been drafted during 2022 to 2023, as is required following the publication of the new national strategy for 2022 to 2026. These strategies will be published in 2023 to 2024. We have worked with Regional Advisers in the reviewing of draft strategies. During this time we have

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also been engaging, as stated above, with survivors and the specialist VAWDASV services. We have also scrutinised the needs assessments used to inform the local strategies. We recognise that the strategies are dependent on all services in Wales contributing to the needs assessment and process of identifying priorities and actions. This is an area that needs significant improvement and we have provided and will continue to provide challenge and support to ensure that guidance and scrutiny of future work is cognisant and requiring of this. This work will mainly be achieved through the blueprint and specifically the Sustainable Whole System Approach Workstream.

Objective 7: improving communication with the UK Home Office and Ministry of Justice

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner (DAC) for England and Wales provided a comprehensive report in 2022 “A Patchwork of provision: mapping report” how to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales. This report highlighted the challenges in the ability of victims and survivors who wanted it to access counselling support, with a 21 percentage point difference between the highest area (58% in the North East of England) and lowest area (37% in Wales). Furthermore, in pursuit of holding perpetrators to account and the specific behaviour change interventions, 16% of survivors in the North East of England reported their perpetrator was able to access support to change behaviour, compared to 3% in Wales. This information supports the anecdotal feedback we receive from key stakeholders and victims which supports the need for better and improved mechanisms and systems to identify gaps in services and needs assessments. We have worked with representatives from the DAC office to share findings from the report and direct action addressing the identified concerns and recommendations within it.

We continue to engage with the Ministry of Justice and Home Office on areas of relevance and this includes legislation, policy and guidance developments such as that on virginity testing and hymenoplasty, victims commissioning guidance

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and sexual violence.

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

Virginity testing and hymenoplasty are forms of violence against women and girls and are part of the cycle of so called 'honour-based' abuse. With the support of professionals, Yasmin provided expertise to those developing the non-statutory guidance which offers advice for chief executives, directors, senior managers, frontline professionals within agencies and anyone else who may come in to contact with women and girls affected by virginity testing and hymenoplasty. It encourages agencies to cooperate and work together to protect and support those at risk of, or who have undergone, these procedures.

In recognition of the specific barriers which survivors with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) are experiencing and identifying, and the significant barriers faced to access support and safety, we are pleased that the Minister for Social Justice has committed to ensuring additional support for survivors with NRPF in Wales. We provided advice to the Minister and officials during the planning and decision-making process. We also welcome the recommendations from the Equalities and Social Justice Committee to improve the response by public services through the fulfilling of duties placed upon them through Social Services and Well-Being Act as well as the VAWDASV Act. We will be monitoring the effect of these positive activities in bringing change for survivors into 2023 to 2024

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

Through the Welsh Government's Live Fear Free campaigns, we have

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continued to raise awareness of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence in all aspects of life, including the street and other public places. These campaigns provide practical advice for those who may be suffering abuse, as well as highlighting the support available to enable friends, family and the wider community to recognise abuse and take safe action. The campaigns are instrumental in promoting the Live Fear Free helpline, our free, 24/7 service for all victims and survivors of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence and those close to them, including family, friends and colleagues.

In November 2022, we worked closely with Welsh Government Officials and with Football Association Wales (FAW), along with female Red Wall fans to create a World Cup video to coincide with White Ribbon Day. The video was shared across Live Fear Free, Welsh Government and FAW social media channels and was widely shared and amplified by supporters and stakeholders.

Tackling perpetration remains a key priority for us as Independent National Advisors for Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse, and Sexual Violence, in which we recognise the strides that the Welsh Government has taken in tackling the issue of perpetration. This year has been marked by a concerted effort to address the root causes of violence, focusing not only on supporting survivors but also on implementing proactive measures to prevent and disrupt harmful behaviour. The Welsh Government's commitment to this endeavour is evident in its approach, encompassing awareness campaigns, perpetrator programs, educational initiatives and legislative measures that hold perpetrators accountable. Together, we are laying the foundation for a safer, more respectful society in Wales, where the cycle of violence can be broken, and individuals can access the help and support they need to change their behaviours.

Our work includes the join up with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's office as part of the Strategic Reference group on DA perpetrators. This group supports the DA Commissioner in her remit to encourage good practice and make recommendations within criminal justice agencies to connect new evidence and

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emerging practice across England and Wales. The aim of this group is to develop cross disciplinary leadership on effective responses to perpetrators.

We also worked with the Welsh Government VAWDASV policy team during the latter part of 2022 to 2023 to develop 'Sound'; an early intervention and prevention campaign aimed at young men aged between 18 and 34 which was launched in July 2023.

The campaign encourages young men to reflect on their own behaviours and make positive personal choices to begin open conversations with their peers, raising awareness of the importance of safe, equal and healthy relationships.

Conclusion

Our Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse, and Sexual Violence Annual Report for 2022 to 2023 marks another year of tireless commitment to addressing the specific barriers we face in Wales. As National Advisers, we have witnessed both progress and challenges that remind us of the immense work ahead. The statistics, as revealed by the British Crime Survey and the Ministry of Justice data, underscore the urgency of our mission, highlighting the pervasive nature of domestic abuse and sexual violence across England and Wales.

Throughout this year, we have worked to support survivors, identify service improvement, and collaborate with stakeholders across Wales. One of the key lessons from this report is the critical importance of embedding survivor voices into change across all regions in Wales. By valuing the lived experiences of survivors, we can shape more responsive, empathetic, and effective strategies for prevention, protection, and support.

Moreover, the public sector response is pivotal in our journey toward ending

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violence against women, domestic abuse, and sexual violence. It requires unwavering commitment, robust funding, and coordinated efforts to ensure that victims and survivors have access to the support they need, regardless of their circumstances. Collaboration between local government, healthcare, housing, and criminal justice agencies is essential to providing comprehensive protection and appropriate intervention.

As we move forward into the next year, we must remain resolute in our dedication to creating a Wales where violence against women, domestic abuse, and sexual violence is no longer acceptable, adopting a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of violence and harm. Our focus must remain with every statistic which represents a life impacted, a survivor seeking hope, and a community striving for safety. Together, with survivor voices at the forefront of our efforts, we can build a future where the fear of violence is replaced with optimism.

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