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Evaluability Assessment of the Live Fear Free Helpline

Executive Summary

1. Background

- 1.1 This paper provides an overview of the Evaluability Assessment (EA) of the planned contract for the Live Fear Free Helpline in Wales (hereby referred to as ‘the Helpline’). The Helpline is the Welsh Government’s all-Wales Helpline which aims to offer confidential, quality information and support to all survivors and victims of gender-based violence, domestic abuse, and sexual violence. This encompasses groups subjected to, or at risk of, all forms of violence covered by the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) Act, including honour based violence, female genital mutilation and forced marriage.
- 1.2 The contract to run the Helpline was awarded to Welsh Women’s Aid (WWA) in 2015 for a three year term and was extended for a further 24 months to the end of September 2020. Prior to this, the precursor to the Helpline (the All Wales Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Helpline) had been managed by WWA on behalf of the Welsh Government since 2004.
- 1.3 An independent evaluation of the original Helpline was published in 2014 (Welsh Government, 2014). This identified difficulties in being able to properly evaluate how effective the operation of the Helpline had been. Following this, the Welsh Government commissioned an EA to inform the development of a renewed tender specification for the next contract for the Helpline to commence from 1 October 2020,

and to assist with decisions about options for future evaluations and how best to capture outcomes and impacts for service users in Wales.

- 1.4 An EA is a systematic way of thinking through whether and how to evaluate new policies, programmes or interventions like the Helpline. It involves engaging stakeholders, clarifying intervention goals, developing a theory or change or logic model, and provides an opportunity to weigh up the value of an evaluation in terms of informing future decisions against the costs and feasibility of collecting the evidence. EAs are in increasingly wide use in government to inform programme and project designs and to maximise opportunities to assess their impact. The approach has been used successfully in relation to the Welsh Government's Flying Start and Families First programmes and also has a strong track record of success in Scotland.

2. Methodology

- 2.1 The EA was conducted by the Welsh Government's Social Research and Information Division between during 2018 and 2019. The three stages of the research were: scoping and desk-based review; group discussions with stakeholders to understand the logic underpinning the Helpline; and interviews with key stakeholders.
- 2.2 Stakeholders who participated in the development of the EA included:
- policy officials, primarily from the Welsh Government's VAWDASV team and with responsibility for the implementation of the VAWDASV Act;
 - representatives from groups and organisations working across the public and third sectors, including other helplines operating within the policy area;
 - staff and volunteers involved in delivering the Helpline and its associated support services, including representatives from Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board and Welsh Ambulance Service NHS Trust; and
 - individual Helpline users.
- 2.3 Over the course of four workshops and eight interviews, a draft theory of change was developed for the Helpline describing the core inputs, activities and processes, and the outcomes and impacts it was anticipated that the Helpline would contribute toward.

3. Key findings

- 3.1 The EA indicated strong support for an evaluation of the Helpline, and in particular of the benefits of collecting independent evidence regarding the Helpline's overall effectiveness. Participants noted that an evaluation would enable the Helpline to identify and examine service users' perceptions, expectations and assessments of the service. In addition, it was felt that an evaluation could potentially raise its public profile and increase its influence on Welsh Government policy relating to strategies to tackle domestic abuse, sexual violence and other forms of violence against women in an evidence-informed way.
- 3.2 The evaluability assessment has, however, identified a number of challenges for evaluating the impact of the Helpline, including lack of a clear and shared understanding of the Helpline aim and objectives; the lack of resources and/or expertise to design and tailor monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure that outcomes and impacts are assessed as part of the contract; limited data about service user engagement and problems of measurement and attribution; and ethical constraints.

Clear and shared understanding of aim and objectives

- 3.3 The process of developing a logic model for the Helpline as part of this EA was useful for assisting the research team in clarifying the Helpline objectives and, in particular, to identify some discrepancies between planned activities, staff and other resources, and the ultimate aim of the Helpline. It became clear during the fieldwork that the Welsh Government and the Helpline's stakeholders need to reach a clear and shared vision on the overall aim and objectives of the Helpline to ensure that they are realistic, achievable and outcome-based, and also appropriate to the resources available.

Monitoring and evaluation systems

- 3.4 The evaluation highlighted the difficulty of obtaining robust and consistent monitoring data, both through the Helpline and across other related specialist VAWDASV-related services. Whilst some limited data was being collected on outcomes and impacts as part of the current Helpline contract, there appeared to be some ambiguity and inconsistency in monitoring and evaluation approaches, in terms of understanding and clearly defining the anticipated outcomes and impacts of activities, and how progress against these were subsequently measured and

reported. Where quantitative evidence was collected, much of the data lacked robustness, making it difficult to draw any definite conclusions on impact.

- 3.5 The assessment also highlighted that the validity and reliability of data was highly dependent on the skill and capacity of the individuals responsible for monitoring and evaluation at organisational and programme level. Staff and stakeholders expressed concerns that they did not have the necessary expertise or knowledge to design effective and innovative monitoring processes or to ensure the deployment of suitable and appropriate evaluation tools, which contributed to the inconsistent approach being taken.

Measurability

- 3.6 Due to the nature and scope of the Helpline's activities, certain types of impact within the context of the Helpline will be difficult to measure in a quantitative sense, mainly because they deal with attitudes, behavioural change, self-esteem and strengthened partnership working and collaboration, all of which are objectives which take time and do not emerge uniformly.

Feasibility of attribution

- 3.7 The highly complex, multi-sectoral and integrated nature of the Helpline and the variable public systems and community contexts within which it is embedded will all have an important influence on how the Helpline's various services are developed and implemented, how survivors make use of those services and what outcomes are possible, and in turn how the Helpline and its associated services are evaluated. If it cannot be established that any recorded or observed changes have been caused by, and can therefore be attributed to, the Helpline, then questions relating to effectiveness and impact will be difficult to answer.
- 3.8 The feasibility of being able to attribute any observed changes to service user behaviour or attitudes to the Helpline is generally low, mainly because of problems related to the nature and scope of the Helpline and the multiple challenges faced by service users; the limited number of existing indicators against which to measure success; the timing of any future evaluation; and the difficulties of constructing a robust comparator group against whom change can be measured.

Ethical considerations

- 3.9 Within the context of the Helpline's core activities, even basic data collection about service users can present a safety concern. Consequently, the issue of data safety and client confidentiality is crucially important, not only in terms of the operational

delivery of the Helpline, but also in terms of the limitations it places on the type of data that can be collected for evaluation purposes.

4. Evaluation options

4.1 These issues, combined with the priorities identified in discussions with Helpline staff and stakeholders, indicate a mixed methods approach to evaluation. This would involve combining a process evaluation investigating the process of delivery from the perspective of the Welsh Government, Helpline staff and stakeholders; use of the Helpline by service users; and their perceptions of the effectiveness and quality of the service provided (employing a range of data and methods, including qualitative interviews, focus groups and/or quantitative surveys), with a potential quantitative investigation of outcomes and anticipated impacts of the Helpline. The latter can only be achieved provided that the Helpline addresses the issues identified in this assessment. With careful planning it may be possible to make changes to the Helpline's existing monitoring and evaluation systems and structures to support a more robust evaluation of the Helpline's processes, outcomes and anticipated impacts, focusing on the areas discussed.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 The Helpline should periodically review its purpose statement or statement of aim(s) and objectives and then revise these, if required, in order to reflect new directions and to make its work more evaluable. This would enable future evaluation studies to distinguish between different phases of the Helpline's development and identify periods of implementation where a clear logic was followed.
- 5.2 The Welsh Government and the Helpline's stakeholders need to reach a clear and shared vision on the overall aim and objectives of the Helpline to ensure they are realistic, achievable and outcome-based, and also appropriate to the resources available. At present, there is little reference to how the different components and activities that make up the Helpline service link together to achieve the overall aim.
- 5.3 A detailed Theory of Change and logic model should be developed for the Helpline, with input from service users and all relevant stakeholders, to clarify expectations and responsibilities and ensure that roles in delivering the Helpline service are clearly understood. Any differing priorities among stakeholders will need to be fully explored, clarified and agreed on at the outset, before an evaluation can be undertaken.

- 5.4 Greater attention should be placed on identifying risks and assumptions which allow progress towards the overall aim and objectives of the Helpline. Indicators should also be set for the most critical risks and assumptions, so that they can be monitored during project implementation.
- 5.5 An advisory group of service users with experience in accessing the Helpline service should be established and involved in key aspects of the evaluation process, from the development of evaluation questions and the design of the research instruments, to providing input on appropriate ways of engaging service users as part of any future evaluation.
- 5.6 The focus on 'progression pathways' and an integrated, collaborative approach to meeting the individual needs of participants was perceived by partners as being critical, and should be built upon in future contracts. Any future evaluation of the Helpline should look in detail at established referral pathways and emerging relationships in order to gain a better understanding of their development as part of the Helpline service and their overall effectiveness.
- 5.7 The Helpline should prepare detailed 'system maps' to capture the various referral pathways developed through the Helpline and illustrate the interrelated and coordinated nature of domestic abuse and sexual violence services in Wales. This would enable Welsh Government to develop a better understanding of how people navigate the services available to them and where they end up, identify if the Helpline and its various services are operating as planned, and highlight any barriers that might exist.
- 5.8 Encouraging a more robust approach to ongoing monitoring and evaluation of outcomes and impacts should be a key goal for any future phases of the Helpline, requiring consistent and sustained recording and reporting. Within this approach, specific attention should be given to:
- improving the structure, content and management of monitoring data and considering whether additional or alternative data should be collected;
 - providing appropriate evaluation training and support for Helpline staff and key stakeholders to allow them to effectively design and make best use of any monitoring and evaluation framework that is developed; and
 - providing clearer guidance on the analysis and use of Helpline monitoring data.

- 5.9 Due to the weaknesses in the quality of existing reporting mechanisms, programme and Helpline staff should aim to improve progress reports so that they include further detail on the delivery of benefits and outcomes for service users, and not just financial statements and descriptions of activities. The Helpline may consider using specialist evaluation staff or consultants to support monitoring process.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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