



Welsh Women's Aid Briefing: March 2020

Responding to Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence during the COVID 19 Pandemic

Introduction

In light of the current and developing situation with COVID 19, violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) services are taking action to continue to provide the lifesaving and lifechanging support to those who need it in Wales as well as protecting survivors and staff within their services.

Early evidence from China, as well as learning from other global pandemics, shows potential increases in VAWDASV.¹ Isolation and social distancing can increase means of coercive control, increase incidents of physical and sexual violence, increase economic abuse as well as limiting survivors space for action. Isolation and social distancing also has an impact on those who have previously experienced abuse, triggering flashbacks and increasing anxiety. This comes at a time when specialist services are also under significant strain due to staff shortages and having to adapt services to ensure they can be provided in a manner that protects staff, survivors and the wider community from further infection.

Welsh Women's Aid has consulted with our membership and the following points have been raised as key areas to be addressed to ensure a robust response to VAWDASV during this unprecedented time for consideration of Welsh Government and public bodies in Wales.

Emergency Planning

- It is vital that there are **regular, coordinated planning meetings with VAWDASV sector and government** to ensure the national responses are up-to-date with the current and dynamic issues facing survivors and specialist services. These meetings should look at current demand levels, service provision levels and inform guidance for public and support for services. In England, a weekly virtual meeting is being coordinated by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner with representative organisations and helpline providers. We would recommend the equivalent is carried out in Wales, possibly led by the National Advisers or VAWDASV team.

¹ <http://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1881/vawg-helpdesk-284-covid-19-and-vawg.pdf>





- It is vital there is **inclusion of VAWDASV representation in Welsh Government emergency planning meetings**, possibly through VAWDASV team or national advisers. This must link with the above coordination to ensure a two way flow of information.
- At a local level, **local authorities and health boards must engage with their local specialist support services** within their planning and implementation processes for COVID 19. Welsh Government should ensure that they provide guidance to local authorities and health boards that this occurs.
- Ensure **VAWDASV data**, including data from Routes To Support, Live Fear Free Helpline and Welsh Women's Aid membership data, is **part of the monitoring to inform action**. This will provide ongoing picture of the impact of COVID 19 procedures on VAWDASV and specialist services. It will enable the monitoring of provision available and allow for informed decision making. It must be recognised that numbers accessing services may go down at times, but this does not mean survivors are not experiencing abuse or violence but that it may be harder for them to access services. Data collection must not put added burden on frontline provision and must be resourced appropriately.
- **Welsh Government must ensure that the needs of survivors are part of their negotiation and scrutiny of the Emergency Coronavirus Bill**. There are potential implications on court proceedings, mental health capacity and social services support. For instance, the bill states: *Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 to enable local authorities to prioritise the services they offer in order to ensure the most urgent and serious care needs are met, even if this means not meeting everyone's assessed needs in full or delaying some assessments.*² This must not be implemented in a manner that may put women and children experiencing abuse at increased risk. We already know that coercive control is often not recognised, this may lead to delays in responses if it is not identified or treated with the seriousness it will require.

Supporting services

- **VAWDASV support workers must be recognised as Key Workers**. This should enable them to access additional childcare, testing or protective equipment to enable them to continue working to keep VAWDASV services open. Childcare will be particularly critical as the majority of VAWDASV support staff are women and will be particularly

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-bill-what-it-will-do/what-the-coronavirus-bill-will-do>





impacted by school closures. At a time when specialists services will already be struggling with reduced capacity it is vital that the Government ensures a strong and protected workforce to keep VAWDASV services open.

- Work with VAWDASV sector to support a **central coordination of staff and volunteers**, allowing for the sharing of staff and volunteers across agencies if services start to need to reduce provision/ staffing to try and maintain provision levels.
- Ensuring all **commissioners and funders ease demands on Key Performance Indicators** and allow for flexible delivery as service move to limited face to face contact. This will need to be continued into the new financial year, as the disruption to service is likely to have impact beyond the lifting of any specific COVID 19 measures as training of staff will have changed and behaviour of the public will likely be different for some time.
- **The Welsh Government must urge local authorities, Housing Associations and Social Landlords to work with specialist service to use any properties** they have which are void and unallocated to keep women safe if there are serious safety or risk concerns. Refuges may reach a position where there are no spaces available or they are unable to make new intakes due to the virus being present in the property. Public bodies, RSLs and specialist services need to be facilitated work together to ensure no one is turned away from support.
- **Clear guidance for specialist services and local authority on the implementation of opening services to survivors with no recourse to public funds.** The removal of the no recourse to public funds restrictions is very welcome however it is essential that this is clearly communicated so that it actually is delivered in practice. Work should be carried out to ensure that this becomes a long term removal of the restriction otherwise there is a danger of funding for survivors being removed as some point, leaving it to the specialist services to cover at a time when they will be continuing to have funding burdens and survivors facing destitution or returning to abusive situation if service is removed.

Children

- **Increase funding for children's workers** as there are likely to be more children in refuge and other settings for longer due to school closures. The impact of self isolation and social distancing is likely to be particularly traumatic and anxiety inducing for children affected by abuse and violence, many of whom will have had their freedom previously curtailed by perpetrators of abuse.

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- **Family Courts and child contact arrangements.** Survivors are being impacted by changes to the civil and family court procedures. Guidance has been published by HMCTS.³ We are having reports from survivors of perpetrators withholding children and not returning after contact and stating they are self-isolating the children. CAF/CASS Cymru must be aware and reactive to these concerns where relevant to their work.

Funding

- **Additional funding** that will be needed both immediately and ongoing to cover:
 - Loss of housing benefit revenue for refugees
 - Need for new technology and digital capabilities, recognising the increased cost of equipment and digital tools at present.
 - Training of staff on new technology or differing support methods, such as online or telephone counselling.
 - For use of dispersed units/B&B if refuge becomes full due to longer stays self-isolating/infection containment is required.
 - To cover increased staffing costs such as to cover additional on call as staff may have to double or treble their on call commitments to cover staff who are off sick or self isolating. Similarly services are having to cover costs of staff working from home such as heating, phone bills and additional equipment.
- This funding must be **swiftly available to specialist services** and go directly to them to deliver the provision needed. It must offer the flexibility for them to identify what is needed specific to the service need and continue to cover impact costs beyond the immediate crisis.
- **Repurposing of the final £15 million Tampon Tax** has been a suggestion to be utilised to mitigate impact of COVID 19. However from a Welsh perspective we are concerned that the guidance for the fund states that applications should be for minimum of £1m. The use of the Barnett Formula to allocate just £905,000 to Wales means organisations in Wales can only receive funding as part of UK wide projects, largely through projects making onward grants. This obviously puts Welsh VAWDASV services at a disadvantage. We would be keen that this restriction is removed to ensure that any funds were equivalent to Wales and able to come directly to services in Wales. We urge the Welsh Government to make this representation to the UK Government, especially at this time when funding is so urgently needed.

³ <https://www.judiciary.uk/announcements/covid-19-national-guidance-for-the-family-court-message-from-president-of-the-family-division/>





- **Amendments need to be made to allow for current funding** for capital projects as well as recent short term grants offered that need spending before end of March to accommodate to allow for it **to be carried forward into the new financial year** as delivery has been disrupted by current situation.
- Many services have had to take **immediate decisions to purchase essential items** such as beds and white goods for new dispersed units now to provide additional spaces for isolation. Feedback from some services, suggested they were applying for funds for these items through the Capital Grant underspend money. In awarding this grant it would help services if there was leeway, if awarded the grant, to include items purchased in advance which were included in their original application that they have needed to purchase immediately due to their response to COVID 19.

Guidance

- Welsh Government and Public Health Wales **guidance on social distancing and self-isolation urgently requires specific safeguarding and support advice** for those who experience harm at home or will have increased mental health concerns due to VAWDASV. It must include the steps adult and child survivors, their family and friends, and professionals can take to protect their safety, promote the support that's available and how to access it. This should be developed in partnership with specialist services and relevant public sector agencies.

Equal Provision

- **Equal provision for disabled women with additional vulnerabilities**, who may need to go into self-isolation for longer and may need to access dispersed units or remote support for longer due to the ongoing risk of infection.
- **Consideration must be made for women in the sex industry**, as they will experience loss of income and will therefore be more vulnerable to risk, violence and exploitation. This will put them at considerable risk of infection, they may require additional support to self isolation, social distance or access to healthcare. Due to many women in the sex industry also engaging in substance misuse, consideration of their need must inform the response with substance misuse services.

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Perpetrators

- **Assurance from Police** is required to give public confidence that they will **continue to respond robustly to all forms of VAWDASV**. This should address how they will attend call outs and take people into custody, ensuring the risk of infection is not prioritised over the safety of women and children. A strong message must be made that we will not allow for lower expectations in responses to perpetrators of VAWDASV.
- During a time of possible escalation of abuse, it will be important to promote the response available for those using abuse that may wish to access support. To this end, **the promotion of the Respect UK Helpline should be part of government guidance and communications**.

The situation is changing rapidly, Welsh Women's Aid is endeavouring to keep up to date with trends and concerns facing survivors and specialist services. We are in regular communication with our members to support them during this time as well as enabling the VAWDASV services in Wales to share any mitigating actions that may help others. We are working together with members, VAWDASV organisation across UK and Europe and public bodies to ensure we keep the network of VAWDASV provision in Wales open for survivors during this period.

We welcome the positive, solution focused responses from Welsh Government and other public bodies and will continue to work to support and inform this approach as much as possible.

For further information, please contact Head of Public Affairs and Communications, Gwendolyn Sterk at Welsh Women's Aid on 02920541551 or email gwendolynsterk@welshwomensaid.org.uk.

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