

Written evidence submitted by Welsh Women's Aid (COR100)

About Welsh Women's Aid

1. Welsh Women's Aid is the umbrella organisation in Wales that supports and provides national representation for independent third sector violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) specialist services in Wales (comprising our membership of specialist services and members of the regional VAWDASV Specialist Services Providers Forums). These services deliver life-saving and life-changing support and preventative work in response to violence against women, including domestic abuse and sexual violence, as part of a network of UK provision.
2. As an umbrella organisation, our primary purpose is to prevent domestic abuse, sexual violence and all forms of violence against women and ensure high quality services for survivors that are needs-led, gender responsive and holistic. We collaborate nationally to integrate and improve community responses and practice in Wales; we provide advice, consultancy, support and training to deliver policy and service improvements across government, public, private and third sector services and in communities, for the benefit of survivors.
3. We also deliver the Wales National Quality Service Standards (NQSS), a national accreditation framework for domestic abuse specialist services in Wales (supported by the Welsh Government) as part of a UK suite of integrated accreditation systems and frameworks. (More information on the NQSS can be found here: <http://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/our-members/standards/>)

Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus): Further call for evidence on domestic abuse in Coronavirus inquiry

4. Welsh Women's Aid welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence from the Home Affairs Committee.
 5. Violence against women and girls (VAWG) in all its forms is an epidemic. 1 in 3 women experience some form of violence and abuse in their lifetime¹. During the course of the COVID 19 pandemic the already unacceptable instances of VAWG are predicted to rise (as below). In a domestic abuse context, women and their children will, as a result of social distancing and self-isolation guidance, be trapped with their abusers and will be further cut off from support networks. Swift, cross government action must be taken in order to save lives and protect the safety and wellbeing of survivors.
 6. The prevalence of these issues since the Government issued 'stay at home' guidance on 23 March
 7. It is widely anticipated that during the COVID 19 pandemic acts of violence against women and girls will rise.
- The World Health Organisation (WHO) acknowledge that violence against women tends to increase during every type of emergency, including epidemics².

- Early evidence from China, as well as learning from other global pandemics, shows potential increases in domestic abuse³.
- VAWG specialist services anticipate that acts of VAWG will increase, but demand for support will be highest when restrictions start to be relaxed and survivors have more opportunities to reach out for help⁴.
- Our COVID-19 Guidance for Perpetrator Services: Key points for practitioners highlights that expertise from specialist support services suggests perpetrators may utilise COVID-19 measures to further their coercive and controlling behaviour⁵.
- Similarly our children and young people briefings highlight that the current climate provides increased opportunity for perpetrators to monitor and control family

1 <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report>

2 <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331699/WHO-SRH-20.04-eng.pdf?ua=1>

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

4 <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/An-open-letter-to-the-prime-minister.pdf>

5 <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/2020/04/covid-19-guidance-for-perpetrator-services-key-points-for-practitioners/>

- members and means that more children and young people become “invisible” to services⁶.
- School closures will mean that children at risk or in need of care and support will not be observed everyday by teachers. Equally, children and young people who depend on the stability and relative safety of school will be kept at home.

⁶ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/2020/03/supporting-children-and-young-people-through-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

⁷ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/2020/03/statement-on-the-use-of-hotels-bbs-to-supplement-refuge-space-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

⁸ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/2020/03/statement-on-the-use-of-hotels-bbs-to-supplement-refuge-space-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

8. Welsh Women’s Aid keeps in consistent contact with our membership services and our colleagues at the [Live Fear Free Helpline](#) to monitor the rapidly changing situation. In the initial stages of lockdown, members reported a worrying lack of refuge capacity, largely due to having unfillable voids as a result of following isolation guidelines for the safety of existing vulnerable (due to health related concerns) survivors and the safety of survivors who would be moving in. We have also had reports of refuge provision closed as a result of limited staffing levels due to sickness, self-isolation and childcare of refuge-based staff. Across the weeks members report that, with a few exceptions, available refuge space is back to what would have usually been available prior to the pandemic. However, refuge and accommodation-based services are planning for possible increased

demand in future and some have taken the forward planning step to block book or prepare to source hotel or B&B cover. If these options are to be utilised we need to ensure the provision is safe and supportive for survivors and does not impact on the sustainability of services through utilising excessive funding resources.⁷

9. The Live Fear Free helpline has not yet experienced a significant change in the level of calls, this could be for a variety of reasons and does not mean that there has not been a rise in violence against women, nor does it mean these cases will not become visible in the future⁸. The complexity of calls has increased in recent weeks relating to the impact COVID 19, leading to longer call times and impacting on the support level needed for helpline workers. Provision must be available and able to react quickly to the changing situation.
10. The way in which support is having to be delivered due to social distancing guidelines has also changed in some areas. For example, where possible and practical through phone and via online chats. We also go into further detail on this in our [most recent COVID 19 briefing](#) and the specific new challenges that this change in provision comes with.
11. **Measures or proposals to help support victims of domestic abuse and child abuse at this time**

12. Women and their children currently self-isolating with a perpetrator need to be made aware that support is available to them regardless of the pandemic – Specialist services, including Welsh Women’s Aid, have been consistently highlighting on social media and all public facing communications that help is available and sharing national Live Fear Free helpline number and other useful numbers. Any awareness raising from UK Government must highlight the availability of different national helplines (including Live Fear Free in Wales) to ensure survivors can access the most relevant support. With differing legislation and devolved responsibilities on housing, health, VAWG, education and local authorities it is important that the helpline responding to the survivor has an awareness of the context in Wales which covers both devolved and non-devolved areas. When producing communications these should developed and coordinated with VAWG services in Wales to reflect the context survivors are living in.

13. Once survivors are aware that they can access support it is critical that there is support available to them. Our [most recent COVID 19 briefing](#) offers detail on the challenges facing refuges and other specialist support, highlighting that **without ringfenced emergency funding and resource there will be not be the capacity to meet the needs of survivors**. Our membership have confirmed that at least 90% of services are incurring additional costs due the circumstances caused by COVID 19. This is further exacerbated as refuges supporting people and their children fleeing domestic abuse are seeing a loss of receipt of housing benefit due to voids, which are necessary for following the Government's social distancing guidance.
14. Our key solution to this issue being **flexible additional funding** provided directly to the VAWG sector to cover:
- • Loss of housing benefit revenue for refuges
 - • Need for new technology and digital capabilities, recognising the increased cost of equipment and digital tools at present
 - • The increasing costs of accessing PPE
 - • Training of staff on new technology or differing support methods
 - • Additional costs of sourcing alternative accommodation, including the use of dispersed units/B&B if refuge becomes full due to longer stays self-isolating/infection containment is required
 - • 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.
 - • 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

- • Increased demand following the relaxing and lifting of lockdown.
- • Technology for survivors to keep in touch with support services.
- • Sourcing of safe spaces to support survivors, away from children who it may not be appropriate for them to have calls in their presence.

Funding will need to be easily accessible so that the focus can be on delivery, not endless funding bids and available ongoing so that services can be responsive as demand and need changes overtime.

Measures or proposals to reduce or avert domestic abuse and child abuse at this time

Welsh Women's Aid has for many years been calling for public services, including the police, to address perpetrator behaviour as a route to protecting victims, but this must be done in a way that ensures the needs and safety of women and children are paramount. Governments across the UK have produced guidance for services for perpetrators of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, in an aid to protect the safety of survivors and their children.

We have also produced key points for practitioners within perpetrator programmes, we would encourage these be shared.⁹

⁹ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/2020/04/covid-19-guidance-for-perpetrator-services-key-points-for-practitioners/>

Survivors also need confidence that if they report abuse they will receive support and protection, and that perpetrators will be held accountable for their actions, even in spite of the circumstances caused by the COVID 19 pandemic. Some police forces in Wales have already reported a decrease in reporting. There are also concerns with the early release of prisoners that probation monitoring of offenders will be effective. The safety and needs of survivors must be prioritised in any early release scheme. A strong message must be made that we will not allow for lower expectations in responses to perpetrators of VAWG.

We have offered the following solutions:

- A message should be jointly put out from all police forces in Wales addressing how Police will attend call outs and take people into custody, ensuring the risk of infection is not prioritised over the safety of women and children. That restraining and protection orders against the perpetrators will be continued.
- 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.

Pendragon House, Caxton Place | Pentwyn, Cardiff | CF23 8XE Tel: 02920 541551 | Fax: 02920 736128 | Email:

info@welshwomensaid.org.uk | Web: www.welshwomensaid.org.uk Registered Charity Number: 1140962 6

– Ensure support for the continuity of services available for women in the criminal justice system to meet housing and specialist VAWG support. Proposals to release pregnant prisoners back into the community need to recognise that many of these women will have experienced VAWG and may have multiple needs regarding homelessness, substance misuse and VAWG.

Some members have raised concerns regarding the early release of prisoners. We have had examples of perpetrators contacting survivors prior to release with threats of violence. These have been reported to the police but survivors and the sector need further information to provide them with the confidence that perpetrators of domestic abuse will not be released early and will be effectively monitored by probation when this does occur. Similarly guarantees of the use of DVPOs and non-molestation orders will be given and upheld during the pandemic need to be strengthened and ensured that this is delivered on the ground in local courts and by police forces across the country.

Preparedness of responders and service providers to address the needs of victims during the pandemic

Service providers supporting people fleeing domestic abuse and all forms of VAWG are doing all they can with the limited funding and resource available to them.

Sexual violence services and most domestic abuse community provision has moved provision to telephone or online support. Services are purchasing equipment for staff and are having to cover the costs of home working, and will require additional funding to ensure they can sustain this provision. Extra funding is needed to support them to do this. Both survivors and support staff are finding it hard to find safe spaces for remote support as family and children are in close proximity. We are consistently advising that KPIs need to be relaxed from commissioners to ensure support can be as flexible as possible to help accommodate people's individual circumstances. Training is required for staff and volunteers on the use of technology and the provision of remote support for survivors, particularly in remotely handling trauma including flashbacks and triggers during sessions. We are constantly calling for the suspension of any competitive tendering processes and KPIs, to ensure services are secure in their provision and can focus on frontline provision and adapting services to meet the need of survivors.

Across the board staffing is an issue for services due to staff with vulnerabilities, sickness and childcare concerns. Most services have reduced staffing in place and are currently managing this through reallocation of cases and duties, however some have had to reduce provision due to staff shortage or utilised agency staff at an extra cost to already stretched

Pendragon House, Caxton Place | Pentwyn, Cardiff | CF23 8XE Tel: 02920 541551 | Fax: 02920 736128 | Email: info@welshwomensaid.org.uk | Web:

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budgets. Smaller local and rural services are being significantly impacted by staff shortages where availability of agency staff maybe too costly or limited in numbers.

Our members have also reported a lack of PPE which due to the nature of their work is necessary to protecting their health and wellbeing and the people they support. We have specific concerns for those services providers and service users in outreach provision for women with multiple needs including homelessness, substance misuse and exploitation by the sex industry as it will be particularly difficult for this cohort of women to take precautions to stay safe and avoid infection. PPE for staff will be critical as they continue to provide support.

The effectiveness of Government advice, co-ordination and support for responders and service providers

We welcome action that Government is taking to support charities and vulnerable people, particularly around the work to develop specific guidance to services supporting survivors and their children, and that additional funds have been made available for frontline charities. This must provide flexible funding directly to specialist support services to respond to dynamic needs to continue safe and effective services for survivors and perpetrators. At present there is not clarity on the funding that is being announced by Home Office, MOJ and the Chancellor as to how, or even if, this will be available to specialist services in Wales or if there will be 'consequentials' provided to Wales so that the equivalent investment can be made by Welsh Government. We have asked this question when the moneys were announced but have yet to receive a response.

Similarly, clarity is needed on the funding announced by the Chancellor that will be administered via the National Lottery. It is not clear how or if this will be accessible to services in Wales. Welsh specialist

The ongoing plan to respond to the pandemic must include a strategy to protect women and girls and prevent abuse. This must be informed and monitored by those linked to the frontline provision of specialist services. We are concerned that there is limited consultation with the Welsh VAWG sector in regards to MOJs responses, particularly regarding criminal and civil court arrangements. We are seeing increased need from survivors regarding child contact and family court, as survivors in Wales will be interacting with a non-devolved civil court system and a devolved CAF/CASS Cymru service provision, it is critical that their voices and the specialist services supporting them inform government and court responses.

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