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Welsh Government

RESEARCH

Research with under-represented survivor groups of Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence to inform the Survivor Engagement Framework: phase 1 (summary)

This report explores the views of survivors in engaging with Welsh Government to shape its Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence policy.

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Introduction

The Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 ('the Act') was Welsh Government's formal commitment to tackling violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) through protection, prevention and supporting those affected by these types of violence and abuse.

The Act acknowledged that although women are statistically more likely to experience VAWDASV, anyone can be affected including:

- men
- people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds
- people from the LGBTQ+ community
- disabled people

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- younger people
- older people

The Act is supported by the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which states that freedom from abuse and violence is a key component of wellbeing. These commitments have led to a focus on delivering meaningful and sustained engagement with survivors of VAWDASV.

The Internal Research Programme (IRP, Welsh Government) was commissioned by the policy team for VAWDASV (Welsh Government) in October 2018 to conduct a small-scale research project to support the creation of a Survivor Engagement Framework for VAWDASV.

There were two phases to the research, which ran concurrently. Phase 1 was focused on how Welsh Government should best engage with survivors of VAWDASV from under-represented groups. Phase 2 focused on evaluating a pilot Survivor Engagement Panel. This executive summary details the Phase 1 element of the research.

Research aims and methodology

Phase 1 aimed to collect in-depth qualitative data from specific survivor populations whose views are not currently represented within the Welsh Government consultation on the development of a National Survivor Engagement Framework. These include: men, people from the LGBTQ+ community, disabled people, younger and older people and those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.

The objectives of Phase 1 were:

- to understand the views, capacities and motivations of the target populations to participate in a National Survivor Engagement Framework
- to understand the barriers and enablers to participation
- to explore the views and experiences of the target populations with respect to previous participation and effective models of participation

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- to understand the nature, focus and provision of support required to facilitate the participation of the target populations

The Phase 1 research methodology involved analysis of responses from a previous consultation on the National Survivor Engagement Framework proposals, theory of change workshops with survivors, stakeholders and government officials, and an online survey. The survey collected demographic data and views of engaging with Welsh Government. It was primarily targeted at individuals from under-represented groups, although all survivors were welcome to participate.

Survey findings

The following findings are from the online survey, which aimed to reach a diverse group of VAWDASV survivors with different characteristics and who are typically 'under-represented' in their engagement with Welsh Government policy. Furthermore, the survey asked if and how survivors would like to engage with Welsh Government going forward.

Diversity amongst survey respondents

This survey was designed to gather the views of a wide range of survivors of VAWDASV. A total of 101 people responded to the survey. Each protected characteristic was represented to some degree across these responses, with the exception of those identifying as transgender or intersex.

Type of abuse experienced by survey respondents

90 survey respondents agreed to answer questions on their experience of VAWDASV, but not everyone answered every question. Of these responses:

- 14 had experienced domestic abuse
- 10 had experienced child sexual violence, including child abuse

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- Six had experienced sexual violence, including rape
- nine reported experiencing any other type of abuse not listed
- there were no respondents who reported having experienced ‘honour-based’ violence, female genital mutilation or forced marriage

Access to support services

39 people reported that they had accessed support services following their experience of VAWDASV. Of these:

- 26 had accessed domestic abuse services
- 13 had accessed services aimed at victims and survivors of sexual violence, including specialist rape and sexual assault services
- six had accessed support from child sexual violence services
- one had accessed services for male survivors of abuse

Engagement with Welsh Government

According to survey responses, 11 people had previously engaged with or contributed towards the impact of Welsh Government’s work around VAWDASV. The types of activity respondents had been involved with included volunteering or working for organisations that support survivors, such as Welsh Women’s Aid, NHS, housing and accessing counselling.

There were 89 responses to survey questions around future engagement with Welsh Government, where respondents could choose multiple options. On type of engagement method:

- 58 people would most like to engage via the internet
- 39 would prefer face-to-face engagement
- 26 would like paper-based engagement
- 25 would choose over the phone as their preferred method
- alternative methods that respondents suggested included email and via third-party organisations

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In terms of specific online engagement tools, of 57 responses:

- 19 would most like to be able to access a website where there is an option to submit comments or suggestions
- 15 would prefer to use email
- 11 would choose an online forum/message board as their first choice for engaging
- six preferred to provide contact details via a government website
- two suggested use of an anonymous online chat function
- four were happy to use any of the tools listed in the survey (website; email; forum; providing contact details)

Respondents were asked about whether they would like individual or group engagement. Of the 89 responses:

- 49 had no preference to engaging with Welsh Government either alone or in a group
- 26 would prefer to engage on their own
- 14 would choose to engage in a group

When asked about the physical make-up of group attendees, of the 61 respondents:

- the majority did not mind who would be in the group (n=43)
- 12 would rather be in a group with people similar to them (in terms of age, gender, type of experience)
- only one would prefer to be in a group with people different from them
- five would prefer 'something else'. Three of these respondents stated they would only want to attend same-sex groups; these respondents all identified as women and would not want to be in a group with men or male-bodied participants. One other respondent only requested that the group was respectful; one did not feel the question applied to them.

38 people answered a question about how frequently they would want to engage with Welsh Government, of which:

- the most popular options were once every few months (n=12), once a month

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(n=9) and a few times a year (n=7)

- six people would prefer to engage more often than once per month
- three would want to engage a few times a year and one would prefer less than once per year

Barriers to engagement

Survey respondents were invited to give open answers when asked about barriers to engaging with Welsh Government on VAWDASV policy. Many different barriers were identified by respondents. The five most commonly cited reasons for being or feeling unable to be involved in the Welsh Government's work on abuse were:

1. lack of awareness on the work that Welsh Government does
2. mental health illness or disability
3. time restrictions
4. knowing how to become involved in Welsh Government's work on abuse
5. fear of consequences from being involved

Other barriers raised included: lack of confidence in value of their own experience, fear of being triggered through participation, wishing to move on, accessibility issues such as understanding language and concepts, gender-related barriers, historical abuse, age-related barriers, location, personal circumstances, fear of not being believed, lack of trust in government, feelings of shame, physical illness or disability, open legal cases, ongoing abuse and maintaining anonymity. Some were simply not interested in engaging.

Analysis of these cited barriers led to grouping into five broader themes:

- awareness and understanding
- fear
- personal circumstances
- demographic factors
- other

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Encouraging involvement

Respondents were asked to describe what, in their opinion, Welsh Government could do to encourage participation. A wide range of actions were suggested, although the most common answer was 'not sure' (n=10). Some suggestions were made by multiple respondents, others by one or two. The most common suggestions (made by five or more respondents) were:

- provide resource for specialist services, including single-sex services
- promote ways for survivors to be involved
- proactively seek out and contact participants
- genuinely listen to survivors' experiences
- maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality
- provide more funding/resource for local services
- fully inform participants of what engagement involves
- ensure participants' experiences are used to inform Welsh Government's work

Other ways Welsh Government could encourage engagement, as suggested by respondents, included: by raising awareness of VAWDASV and the government's work, recognising 'sex' over 'gender', recognising all types of abuse, providing safe spaces for survivors to share experiences, offering after-support for participants, ensuring that experiences are taken seriously, paying participants and by addressing victim-blaming culture.

Some of the suggestions made by participants would be relatively straightforward for Welsh Government to implement, such as raising awareness of its work or simplifying language. Others would take more planning and specialist resource, such as providing after-support for participants for example through counselling.

Evidence synthesis findings

Evidence collected through all Phase 1 research activities - the consultation on

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the Survivor Engagement Framework, the survey and the three theory of change workshops were synthesised, with key findings to explore how Welsh Government should set up the Survivor Engagement Panel.

Time barriers

Of the barriers raised in regards to participating in a survivor-led panel, time came up often - particularly in the theory of change workshops. Stakeholders suggested that survivors often do not have the time to participate in Welsh Government activities such as workshops or panel sessions. This was also echoed in the survey. Some of the reasons for not having enough time included caring responsibilities and work.

Survivors taking part in the theory of change workshop felt that there was not enough time to answer questions or explore topics as thoroughly as they would have liked. Feedback indicates that there was too much to cover in short sessions and being provided with preparatory materials before the session would have been a better use of their time.

The time spent travelling to the workshops was also an issue for some of the participants. The workshops were all held in Cardiff, meaning many either had to travel long distances to partake or were unable to attend at all.

Payment for participants

Paying participants was debated across all workshops and suggested by two survey respondents to demonstrate that survivor input is valued by the government. Both stakeholders and survivors felt that payment for participating survivors was important, particularly if other expert groups were paid by Welsh Government.

There was concern about where the resources for payment would come from, with stakeholders voicing that funding should not be taken away from front-line services. Survivors suggested non-financial payments, such as organisational support, which would still demonstrate value for their contributions.

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Government officials raised the ethical implications of paying survivors for taking part in Welsh Government work. Participation should be voluntary, not exploitative, and paying participants risks the reputability of Welsh Government. Payment may also attract people wishing to gain from the monetary reward, rather than the desire to help shape VAWDASV policy in Wales. In the stakeholder workshop, it was raised that paying survivors could alter the power dynamics between government and participants. They therefore felt that it was important for the whole VAWDASV programme within Welsh Government to be underpinned by the same agenda, that being the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015.

The cost implication was also a concern of government officials, because if they paid for one group they would have to pay for all and this would be an expense on public funds. Survivors were critical of this point, however, arguing that survivor consultants into the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse are paid using public money.

Methods of engagement

Whichever methods of engagement are to be used between survivor groups and Welsh Government, there needs to be adequate variety in terms of accessibility, including Braille, easy-read and multilingual versions.

Participants of the survivor workshop were very clear in stating that the methods would need to be continuous and structured in order to be impactful.

An idea for engagement was to have a central website where all activities were advertised; this could suit many people as the internet was the preferred engagement method consistently across all demographic groups in the survey.

Focus groups

The suggestion of 'focus group' as an engagement method came up repeatedly in the workshops. It was felt that participating in focus groups can be a positive experience for survivors of VAWDASV as they get to meet others who have

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been through similar situations, reducing feelings of isolation.

Preferences for focus group facilitation included: providing adequate time to discuss issues, allowing participants to set the agenda, ensuring a structure is followed and giving participants the chance to network before the workshop. It was suggested that these factors would help participants feel more comfortable throughout the engagement experience.

Identifying under-represented groups

The Welsh Government's VAWDASV policy team identified a number of under-represented groups through the consultation. These groups included men, people identifying as LGBTQ+, people of Black, Asian or minority ethnic background, disabled people, older people and younger people. Stakeholders in the workshop pointed out two further groups that are less likely to access frontline services: the travelling community and sex workers.

Addressing accessibility issues

Providing materials that were in different formats was considered important in ensuring engagement is as inclusive as possible.

Using gatekeepers of frontline service workers, for example, was suggested by stakeholders as a way of raising awareness amongst under-represented survivor groups of the work going on in Welsh Government and the opportunities to participate.

Data sharing

Workshop participants felt that there should be data sharing agreements in place before any engagement begins. This meant that, if survivor panel participants agree to their data being shared, front-line services can be alerted if there is imminent risk of abuse, for example.

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Protecting people's identities through data security would encourage participation from under-represented groups, it was argued by one survey respondent.

Social media

Despite online methods being the more preferred approach to engagement according to the survey, stakeholder research found that social media was the least preferred way to engage. Fear of association with a service, or revealing a person's identity, was thought to be a cause of this.

Survivor workshop participants discussed using social media as a tool for reaching people who may not engage through more traditional methods.

Consistency of language

Ensuring that language is consistent across the board was important for participants of all three workshops. This means using language that is jargon-free, survivor-led and familiar to society, not just government officials and stakeholders.

Government officials relayed how the VAWDASV acronym had taken a long time to develop and had been debated throughout. Therefore, the term would still be used but there was scope for flexibility around language within the area.

Sustainability

It was argued that the Survivor Engagement Framework needed to be sustainable in the long term and to do this, it needed to be financially and practically viable.

It was also felt that not only does the Framework need to encapsulate a diverse survivor panel in terms of demographic information, it should also represent different types of abuse in order to be truly representative.

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In terms of maintaining the Framework, quality feedback on the outcomes of the work survivors have contributed towards was essential as well as continuous engagement.

Terminology

Workshop attendees spoke about how terminology and its usage is critical for promoting inclusion and respect. Use of the word 'survivor' was debated; many felt that the word 'expert' or 'professional' was more appropriate. By drawing a difference between experts and survivors, it was felt that the input from participants would be less valued.

The way in which survivors' experiences are referred to by researchers was also contested. Using the word 'story' to describe experiences of abuse was considered disrespectful and even derogatory. At the same time, the word 'stories' is used in mainstream literature, media and academia on the subject. This tension highlights the sensitivity required when approaching topics like VAWDASV in terms of terminology.

Terminology can also exclude people. Those who do not consider themselves as a 'survivor' or 'victim' of VAWDASV may think they are not eligible to participate in related activities, despite having experienced some form of abuse. Using the word 'survivor' may also fail to encompass certain groups with lived experience of abuse; for example children, family members of the abused or those in the very early process of escaping abusive situations.

Alternatives to the word 'survivor' were suggested by stakeholders. These included 'client', 'victim of crime', 'people affected' and 'experts by experience'.

Respect

The need to respect people both individually and collectively underpins much of what participants told the researchers during the workshops. Giving appropriate time, attention and resource to the subject of VAWDASV all feed into showing

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respect for what survivors have been through and have to say.

Many participants voiced previous experience with ministers as lacking in respect and tokenistic. They felt that ministers did not give the proper time to VAWDASV survivors, often being fitted in to a busy schedule over lunch, for example.

Ways to demonstrate respect include quality time, accessible engagement methods, financial compensation and investment. Engagement should also be reciprocal, genuine and ongoing to consolidate feelings of trust and respect between participants and Welsh Government.

Representation

With survivor engagement, there is a risk that the most assertive and engaged people will be heard more than others when it comes to shaping policy. However, this will not necessarily represent all survivor experiences and there was a concern from workshop participants about hearing from a range of viewpoints. It was felt that a collective voice can be powerful in taking action.

Wellbeing

Participants of the survivors' workshop called for a wellbeing policy for all people involved with Welsh Government research. Such a service could help assist people who would otherwise be unable to participate in research, for example due to disability.

Officials discussed the role of personal responsibility in looking after wellbeing. It was felt that taking on responsibility for participants' wellbeing was beyond the remit of the policy team. In expecting participants to look after their own wellbeing, the idea that survivors are strong and capable is perpetuated.

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Managing expectations

Workshop attendees felt that Welsh Government had a responsibility to manage expectations for participants in research. Participants in the stakeholders' workshop tended to see the 'bigger picture' of expectation management with regards to what outcomes can realistically be achieved by partaking in research.

To manage expectations throughout the process, it was suggested that continual feedback was given about how their data and input is being used. It should also be made clear from the outset what taking part in research fully entails.

Social context

Data collected through the workshops demonstrate that VAWDASV is a socially-embedded phenomenon. Talking about abuse is still considered 'taboo', and public awareness needs to be improved to allow discussion on VAWDASV to become more normalised. It was recognised by government officials that, whilst the Survivor Engagement Framework alone cannot tackle VAWDASV in Wales, it can contribute to a bigger movement in which abuse survivors are believed and included in mainstream society.

The role the patriarchy plays in allowing VAWDASV to occur was discussed by participants. There was a sense that men are 'excused' from their abusive behaviour because they are men. Whilst statistics show that the majority of abuse perpetrators are male, female perpetrators exist and should be held accountable too. Moreover, the majority of victims of VAWDASV are female, according to data from the ONS. However, it should be highlighted that there is potentially significant under-reporting of abuse against boys and men. Research shows that men make up a large minority of sexual abuse service users.

At the same time, patriarchal structures can also affect outcomes for men. One survey respondent stated that, by virtue of being a heterosexual and white man, they are not taken seriously as a survivor of abuse. Other male respondents reported feelings of shame, fear and distrust in speaking up about their experiences.

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Stakeholders argued that current engagement tools were not working for men. A one-size-fits-all approach that is underpinned by the notion that abuse victims are female excludes so many people and therefore is not representative of the diversity of people who experience abuse.

The subject of women-only spaces is an important and very real issue for some respondents. It is evident that a proportion of respondents feel that allowing self-identifying trans women access to women's-only services poses risks to the safety of women who are female as determined by biological sex. Feedback from the survey suggests that the issue relates to concerns around safety and dilution of women-only services; that cis-gendered women are entitled to a space free from what they perceive as male-bodied people, whether they are trans or not. Some worried that male abusers may try to pass as women in order to access survivor groups and/or targeted individuals.

Transphobia within VAWDASV survivor groups is a highly sensitive subject that policy officials need to consider. There is a risk for trans people in disclosing gender identity at group meetings that they will be subjected to transphobia by other participants. This could lead to them being excluded from fully participating in Welsh Government's work on VAWDASV, and continuing to be under-represented as a social group.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for the recruitment and facilitation of the Survivor Engagement Panel.

- Undertake targeted engagement with under-represented groups using appropriate support organisations.
- Ensure that the remit for the panel is clear to participants and their expectations are appropriate.
- Offer a variety of options for survivors to engage with Welsh Government.
- Consider offering compensation for participation.
- Have a clear strategy for recruitment to ensure diversity of voices on the pilot panel.

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- Ensure that engagement respects survivors' anonymity and safety.
- Acknowledge and directly address the issues around 'women-only' spaces and transphobia.
- Consult with participants about the terms to be used for survivors and the reasons for the use of those terms.
- Be aware of additional difficulties for survivors from particular backgrounds, particularly under-represented groups.

Next steps

The research conducted under Phase 1 ran concurrently to Phase 2, which is published in a separate report. Phase 2 evaluates a pilot of the Survivor Engagement Panel, making recommendations for permanent implementation.

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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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