



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

POLICY AND STRATEGY, DOCUMENT

Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: national advisers annual plan 2023 to 2024

What we are doing to prevent violence and to support and protect people who have experienced violence.

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Contents

[Introduction](#)

[UK Government legislation and landscape](#)

[Annual plan 2023 to 2024](#)

[Conclusion](#)

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Introduction

Violence in all its forms against all victims is never acceptable and has no place here in Wales. Collectively, in all regions, we are committed to eradicating abuse and harm for those at risk and preventing where possible behaviour and attitudes within our society, whether it be visible or hidden that are harmful. Our landmark legislation, the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015, aims to keep our communities safe, alongside non-legislative programmes we are committed to work with our stakeholders, specialist providers and public bodies and survivors to ensure we can deliver the ambition of Wales being one of the safest places for a woman, today and for future generations.

In 2015, the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act ('the Act') came into force. It was and continues to be a landmark piece of legislation aiming to make Wales a country free from abuse. Through the act the Welsh Government has introduced a range of measures to tackle the root causes of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV), as well as meeting the strategic objective to improve collaboration across the public sector and improve responses to VAWDASV in Wales.

The new **VAWDASV National Strategy** launched in May 2022 renews the commitment to make Wales the safest place to be a woman. The Strategy has 6 objectives:

- Objective 1: challenge the public attitude to violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence across the Welsh population through awareness raising and space for public discussion with the aim to decrease its occurrence.
- Objective 2: increase awareness in children, young people and adults of the importance of safe, equal and healthy relationships and empowering them to positive personal choices.

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- Objective 3: increase the focus on holding those who commit abuse to account and supporting those who may carry out abusive or violent behaviour to change their behaviour and avoid offending.
- Objective 4: make early intervention and prevention a priority.
- Objective 5: relevant professionals are trained to provide effective, timely and appropriate responses to victims and survivors.
- Objective 6: provide all victims with equal access to appropriately resourced, high quality, needs-led, strength-based, inter-sectional and responsive services across Wales.

The new strategy is to be delivered through a Blueprint approach. The Blueprint is a tried and tested model for delivery and collaboration across devolved and non-devolved public and specialist services. It also provides a mechanism for accountability. The Strategy recognises that the impact of VAWDASV is not uniform, affecting different people in different ways and so understanding the equality impact of VAWDASV on an intersectional basis will be vital if we are to address the problem for everyone in Wales. It also recognises the importance of victim and survivor involvement and within the new governance arrangements for the delivery and monitoring of the strategy, there will be a Survivor Scrutiny and Involvement Panel which will be formed of experts by experience and provide an opportunity for victims and survivors to influence and shape policy, decision making and service delivery.

National adviser role

The national adviser is a statutory role, required by the Act, and is appointed via the public appointment process. The national advisers are expected to provide an informed and independent perspective on the work being taken forward by Welsh ministers to develop and implement policy and legislation in these areas. The national advisers are required under Section 22 of the Act to prepare an annual plan setting out how we propose to exercise the functions of this role during the following financial year. Our plan is pursuant to our statutory

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responsibilities and as such we are keen to engage with key stakeholders to ensure we can meet the aims of the Act to improve the experiences of survivors, children, and those at risk of gender- based violence.

Consultation with stakeholders: September 2022

Since our appointment in August 2022, we have ensured the priorities of our annual plan are influenced by the voices and experiences of key stakeholders including survivors. As part of our engagement with key partners we held an initial session specifically to influence and inform the national adviser's objectives within our annual plan and to identify subsequent priority areas of work. Key themes from the workshop included but were not limited to:

- ensure that the core work of specialist service provision and support for victims and survivors is not lost
- identify children and young people as victims in their own right with distinct needs
- must reflect the need to deal with the challenges and pressures created by the current cost of living crisis on services to meet high demands, increased costs and staffing issues
- improved learning and increased awareness for services for older people experiencing abuse, drawing on work with the Older People's Commissioner and research conducted in 2022
- respond to the issues currently experienced by victims and survivors accessing services but also the increased risk of abuse for victims caused by the cost-of-living crisis
- should not just be raising awareness of needs of diverse communities, vitally important to do something about it particularly for women with no recourse to public funds
- ensure the survivor perspective is considered and importantly how it will be responded to
- include addressing perpetrators as a priority as this is key and sharing the

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learning from the Single Unified Safeguarding Review model and how this will work to identify learning outcomes across Wales

- early intervention and prevention need to be included explicitly
- create clarity in the use of terms such as public health approach, whole society approach
- consider reducing the objectives and explaining more of the how these will be acted upon

We will continue to evaluate and build on the priorities within the coming year through continued engagement and consultation. We have clearly heard that we need to be responsive to emerging issues and challenges. We will also establish a VAWDASV Reference group to maintain meaningful engagement with the services directly supporting survivors so we remain independent and can identify gaps and improvements as part of the new governance and accountability of the blueprint workstreams as well as wider policy work. In addition, the meeting will also present a new way of engaging and improving the integration and coordination with the VAWDASV specialist providers into the blueprint approach across Wales. A significant role for us for the next few years will be leading the Survivor Voice Scrutiny and Involvement Panel. This panel will be formed of experts by experience and will have the role of offering scrutiny of the work of the National Partnership Board and its duty to oversee the delivery of the new VAWDASV strategy and the accompanying board and work streams. In this way survivors will influence policy and practice in the most significant way since the development of the Act.

Ensuring we can deliver our objectives for all survivors means we must adopt an intersectional approach which address the specific issues affecting victims who experience multiple barriers and disadvantages. Race, sexuality and gender identity can shape the experience of VAWDASV and data shows that disabled people experience significantly higher rates of domestic abuse. We are pleased there is interface with the VAWDASV strategy and link into the work on the development of the Strategic Equality Plan, the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, the LGBTQ+ Action Plan and the work of the Disability Rights Taskforce.

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Current challenges

During times of economic and other environmental and societal challenges and uncertainty, gender inequalities mean that women and girls, particularly those experiencing or at risk of harm will need more protection and routeways to support. This is very much in our current reality with the COVID-19 recovery and current cost of living crisis. We have heard from all stakeholders that this is increasing immense pressure on services with limited capacity and decreasing resources while also having to meet increased demand in terms of number of survivors seeking support and the complexity of their cases. In Wales, we must also recognise the strain on our specialist and public services which are also facing huge economic and workforce issues. It is within this complex landscape we must now step up our national efforts to deliver the ambition of making Wales a safer, prosperous and equal place for women and children. We can do this by asserting all efforts and actions into delivering the new Strategy with the blueprint approach the vehicle for real and meaningful change.

UK Government legislation and landscape

In addition to the Welsh Act, Strategy and wider policy context there is also the UK context. This is relevant for all of the work but particularly for the non-devolved stakeholders including police and other criminal justice agencies. In addition to the Home Office's recently published Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan and the separate Tackling Violence against Women and Girls Strategy, there are a number of other key areas in development. We will work with UK Government, Commissioners, where relevant individually but also collectively with the Welsh Government Policy Team and other Welsh stakeholders to ensure that the Welsh experience, contribution and challenges are heard and considered so that developments and implementation are appropriate for Wales and survivors in Wales.

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There are a number of pieces of legislation being proposed by the UK Government that impact on the VAWDASV landscape in Wales. Some will have a greater impact than others and part of our role as Advisers is to ensure that the context and differences in Wales are properly understood and reflected in legislation and statutory guidance to avoid any unintended consequences. As Advisers our purpose is to influence change and the statutory framework that sits around VAWDASV is a key mechanism for change. Our intention is to ensure that legislation is influenced and implemented in full cognisance of the impact in Wales and that victims, survivors and perpetrators in Wales are treated no less equally than those in England.

Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and statutory guidance

The VAWDASV (Wales) Act was the first to provide a statutory definition of domestic abuse. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 definition incorporates a range of abuse beyond physical violence, including controlling or coercive behaviour, emotional, and, for the first time, economic abuse. This enables us to build on the work in Wales and particularly for criminal justice agencies. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 also recognises children who see, hear or experience domestic abuse as victims in their own right. This new **statutory guidance** goes further to ensure that the complexity of domestic abuse is properly understood to support a coherent ‘whole system’ response to supporting victims and survivors, including children. By setting out best practice approaches and encouraging multi-agency working, a whole system response will deliver the step change needed to tackle this abhorrent crime.

In our role as Advisers, recognising that everybody has a role to play in supporting victims and survivors of domestic abuse, we will continue to provide specific reference to the Welsh landscape in our engagement and work with devolved agencies and Commissioners and ensure our survivors can be represented at national groups and workstreams.

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Online safety bill

The Bill introduces new rules for firms which host user-generated content, i.e., those which allow users to post their own content online or interact with each other, and for search engines, which will have tailored duties focussed on minimising the presentation of harmful search results to users. Those platforms which fail to protect people will need to answer to the regulator and could face fines of up to ten per cent of their revenues or, in the most serious cases, being blocked.

This means all platforms in scope will need to tackle and remove illegal material online, specifically material relating to terrorism and child sexual exploitation and abuse. Platforms likely to be accessed by children will also have a duty to protect young people using their services from legal but harmful material such as self-harm or eating disorder content. Additionally, providers who publish or place pornographic content on their services will be required to prevent children from accessing that content. The largest, highest-risk platforms will have to address named categories of legal but harmful material accessed by adults, likely to include issues such as abuse, harassment, or exposure to content encouraging self-harm or eating disorders. They will need to make clear in their terms and conditions what is and is not acceptable on their site and enforce this. There is a code of practice guidance has been created due to the high prevalence of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) perpetrated in the digital sphere.

Victims bill

Published in May 2022, the draft Victims bill seeks to improve victims' experiences of the criminal justice system. The provisions in the bill will affect all victims of crime, but it is anticipated those most affected will be victims of serious crime, including VAWDASV. The key areas covered in the consultation were:

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- enshrining the Victims' Code in law and expanding provisions of the code where necessary
- improving communication with victims of crime and ensuring their voices are heard in the criminal justice process
- improving oversight, performance, and quality
- delivery of victim support through community-based services
- increasing the Victims' Surcharge
- improving advocacy support for victims of Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence and other serious violence and improving advocacy for children and young people

We will continue to work, alongside the Welsh Government Policy Team and other Welsh representatives, with Ministry of Justice and relevant UK wide bodies to ensure Wales is featured in policy directives and programmes affecting our communities across all regions.

Public sexual harassment

The Home Office has recently consulted on legislating to further criminalise public sexual harassment. Public safety is within the objectives of the new VAWDASV Strategy and within the work of the blueprint workstreams. Currently the UK government perspective is that there is existing legislation for this. The consultation did offer options for new legislation. We believe that this would be a significant step in demonstrating full commitment to challenging societal attitudes that perpetuate male violence, misogyny and gender inequality.

Annual plan 2023 to 2024

In addition to the work of the blueprint approach and specific workstreams, we have identified key priorities for our plan. Considering the complexities and

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challenges which lay before all of our services and for the Welsh Government we must also consider some of the priorities may require amendments or revision.

Aim

Work with, advise and challenge, government, public services and commissioners for the delivery of a whole system approach, preventing further abuse and protecting survivors of VAWDASV.

Priorities

- Attending forums and meetings that provide oversight of the delivery of the VAWDASV strategy, blueprint approach and workstreams along with any other relevant fora.
- Engaging and consulting about specific issues of good practice, new developments as well as emerging themes and concerns.
- Keeping informed of relevant best practice and evidence and undertaking research to enable the delivery and expansion of well evidenced approaches in the delivery of services preventing VAWDASV and meeting the needs of survivors in Wales.
- Maintaining awareness of survivor experiences and issues, sharing and escalating through the Survivor Voice Scrutiny and Involvement Panel, wider consultation with survivors and survivor experiences through the specialist sector and any other engagement required.
- Utilise powers as provided within the Act to request information from a relevant authority in order to properly scrutinise and advise on the delivery of the Act.
- Specifically advise public services and relevant stakeholders on the delivery of their responsibilities within the Act for the prevention, protection and support of victims and survivors.

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- Ensuring that while there is change and innovation, there is investment in 'core' and by and for services that consistently meet the needs of victims and survivors of VAWDASV.
- Ensuring that equality issues and intersectionality are considered in all of the work to deliver the Act. This means that action is taken to meet the needs of minoritised victims and survivors. Furthermore, that children and young people and older people are recognised for their own distinct needs as victims in their own right.
- Participate in all fora to bring the Welsh experience and needs into focus and for policy, funding and government decision making relating to VAWDASV.
- Representation of the Welsh perspective in UK Government policy, improving and representing the Welsh perspective and survivor voices within UK Government policy and Commissioners.
- Work with fellow commissioners and advisers to maximise the impact of that work and ensure that it is cognisant of the Welsh perspective and experience.

We anticipate many of our priorities will lead to the outcomes outlined below:

- Progress on testing and developing models of early intervention that include healthy relationships work but also whole society approaches to addressing attitudes, behaviour and cultural norms that address the conditions that enable acceptance, tolerance and perpetration of VAWDASV in Wales.
- Improvement in the commissioning of services and investment in what works that enhances services but does not lead to less investment in the support services that have and continue to meet the needs of the majority of victims and survivors of VAWDASV (core services).
- Access to services for survivors with an equalities approach enhancing access to support and addresses the underlying cultural, societal and system issues that are the root causes to VAWDASV but also inhibit access for survivors.
- Evidence of interventions that effectively challenge and address the behaviour and harm caused by perpetrators.

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- Monitoring of the collective and individual activity of public services, specialist services and assesses achievements against the intentions set out in the Act and Strategy.
- Evidence of survivors' experiences are utilised in the development of strategy, policy and practice. Responsive commissioning and policy making that is prepared to flex to meet any emerging needs and challenges.

Conclusion

Whilst we recognise our priorities for our annual plan will align with the strategy and blueprint approach to implement this, we cannot ignore the considerable economic and societal challenges services and commissioners are currently facing. As we are aware one of the biggest components of the estimated cost domestic abuse has to the UK economy is the physical and emotional harms incurred by victims (£47 billion annually). It is imperative that we challenge the inequalities and attitudes which perpetuate violence and abuse but also that we improve public sector responses to VAWDASV and therefore identifying improvements for survivors is key to our work. They must also be significant contributors to developing and implementing the improvements.

We are building on the great work of partners in Wales, committed to improving the lives of victims and preventing abuse for future generations. As National Advisers we will continue to work with our stakeholders to deliver the ambition and realise the potential of living fear free on streets, in workplaces, online and across all regions within Wales.

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