

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Ymchwiliad i effaith argyfwng Covid-19 ar blant
a phobl ifanc yng Nghymru

COV 76
Ymateb gan: Cymorth i Ferched Cymru

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on
children and young people in Wales

COV 76
Response from: Welsh Women's Aid

About Welsh Women's Aid

Welsh Women's Aid is the national charity in Wales working to end all forms of violence against women. We are a [federation of specialist organisations](#) in Wales (working as part of a UK network of services) that provide lifesaving services to survivors of violence and abuse - women, men, children, families - and deliver a range of innovative preventative services in local communities. We have been at the forefront of shaping coordinated community responses and practice in Wales since we were established in 1978. We do this by campaigning for change and providing advice, consultancy, support and training to deliver policy and service improvements for survivors, families and communities. We also deliver services including the Welsh Government funded [Live Fear Free Helpline](#) and a [National Training Service partnership](#). We champion survivor engagement in all aspects of our work so that the many voices and lived experiences of those impacted by abuse are amplified and understood. Our success is founded on making sure the experiences and needs of survivors are central to all we do. 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.

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 life changing support to the children and young people who need it in Wales as well as protecting adult survivors and staff within their services.

In order to respond to this consultation, 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 the demands on services, and those they support, to be met.

Service delivery

Most members that provide support for children and young people report that services are struggling and there are significant concerns for the wellbeing of children and young people across refuge and community support. There is considerable concern that the voice of children and young people experiencing abuse, including domestic abuse and sexual abuse, is being lost during lockdown, with limited respite in going to school and limited welfare checks. Some services report being able to provide tablets to children and young people through regional VAWDASV grants as well as being able to source play equipment for refuges with outdoor spaces. Specialist services tell us it is particularly challenging to keep younger children engaged and entertained in these circumstances. Online tools are being utilised to carry out quite basic chats, however therapeutic support is not possible and safeguarding/welfare checks are challenging as it is not clear who is in the room with young children as they are not able to access independently.

Members also report being increasingly concerned that children and young people are being isolated from support providers and are in potentially unsafe situations. Some have had reports from mothers who have stated their perpetrator is using the current situation to manipulate child contact arrangements, for example refusing to return a child saying he/she has symptoms.

A key issue for member services are the significant challenges to maintain communication with children and young people accessing support. These include:

- Lack of supervision: for example, children in refuge although classed as vulnerable cannot access the school's hub unless there is social services involvement. Supervision in refuge is depleted due to staff availability, many services have very limited or no children and young people workers for refuge.
- Staff are setting up WhatsApp video calls to maintain a presence in refuge, and one member is currently conducting a Children and Young People support programme via this method, however engagement has reduced.
- Member services are offering children and young people a variety of communication methods to engage with support, such as phone, WhatsApp, email, texting and zoom, however this presents heightened safeguarding issues as identified above.
- Reduced access to programme support, for example one member had a number of families due to start the STAR programme before isolation started. Group work is not possible during lockdown.

Developing resources

Welsh Women's Aid has developed a range of bilingual poster resources on promoting healthy relationships, online relationships, past experiences of abuse, adolescent to parent abuse and perpetrating abuse. We are also producing some on FGM and honour based violence (available soon). These are available in the Children and Young People section of the Bystander Toolkit: <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/campaigning/covid-19-bystander-toolkit/>

Member services are doing an extraordinary job developing resources in order to maintain access, communication and support with survivors. These include:

- Developing an “at home pack” with information and activities to help children and young people communicate how they're feeling and to maintain weekly contact.
- Liaising with schools to send out a letter/information sheet on all forms of violence and abuse via whatever app they are using to contact pupils, to include information on who to contact for support.
- Developing resources and ideas for parents for fun things to do with a young family.
- Providing information to mothers regarding support available for children and young people who need someone to talk to, such as Child line and the Live Fear Free helpline.
- Weekly social media posts containing 'tips from children and young people' on what to do during lockdown to create community engagement and support.
- Establishing an Amazon wish list to provide donations of board games, DVDs, books and toys for the refuge and safe house children.
- Some members have developed a directory of resources sent out by email, to enable them to provide targeted support to the families who are most vulnerable.
- Engaging in conversation with funders about targets and funding applications to ensure that the one third of children supported in a single member service who were 'at risk' can continue to be supported throughout and beyond the pandemic.
- Local multi-agency forums are still working very effectively and they have been approached by social services to see what support they need.

Referrals

Referrals for children and young people are still coming into specialist services, however at a decreased rate and via outreach programmes for women as opposed to schools and/or health visitors. The decline in referrals is concerning, as it speaks to children and young people's reduced agency to access support in their own right. Member services are still engaging with social services if there are any safeguarding concerns, however many are pre-empting a massive increase in all areas once lockdown is over, which is concerning when it comes to capacity and available resources – both of which were already reduced prior to the pandemic.

In our recent [Children Matters](#) report, it was identified that during 2018/19, **4,263 children and young people were known to access some form of specialist VAWDASV** support in Wales. 1,070 children under 16 years of age were supported in refuge-based support services, and 3,193 were supported by specialist domestic abuse community-based support/outreach services. In addition, the helpline has provided support to the parents of an estimated 2,922 children, and to 19 children and young people who contacted the helpline directly.

The current picture of specialist service provision is hugely varied across Wales.

- 33% of specialist services have just one children and young people's member of staff providing full (19%) or part time (14%) support.
- In one organisation this part time provision equates to 5 hours a week. Just 5 hours to provide support to all the children and young people in that area.
- One service has no specialist Children and young people staff in place at all.
- 24% of specialist services have between 1 and 2 members of staff providing full (10%) or part time (14%) support.
- 33% of specialist services have between 2 and 3 members of staff providing full (19%) or part time (14%) support.

Children and young people not returning to school will also mean that a considerable number will continue to be in refuge on a daily basis. This will inhibit the returning of support for adult survivors as it is not appropriate to provide support with children present. This will put a strain on resources at refuge, especially for those no or limited children and young people support workers. Most would not have the hours needed to provide the level of support required, this will put stress on other survivors at the refuge and may lead to disengagements in service.

This also impacts community support and sexual violence services, as without child care provision, survivors will struggle to access therapeutic or group work, whether online or in person, while children remain out of school.

Online relationships / exploitation

With children and young people spending more and more time online, due to social distancing and isolation, the risk of exploitation or engaging in coercive relationship cultures has increased. There has been a surge in online child sex abuse images hosted online across Europe, with almost a third self-generated (i.e. taken and shared by the children, usually after grooming).

“Of the self-generated content, three in every four (76%) showed a girl aged 11 to 13 – something the IWF said was at risk of increasing during lockdowns where children are likely to be spending more time in their bedrooms on computers.”¹

It's important to note that even though only 1% of the images were hosted in Britain, that does not mean that images are not being taken in Britain, or shared through other means. All children equally vulnerable to this kind of exploitation. Furthermore, due to the current restrictions children are having less engagement with services or other programmes in order to establish and identify a healthy relationship dialogue, which presents significant issues for early intervention.

The lockdown also contributes to the risk of harm of so called Honour Based Violence and Female Genital Mutilation, as these children and young people are quite simply going unseen and unheard with no capacity for intervention.

Join up of services

In order to ensure children and young people are protected and supported it is imperative that the police, social services and specialist services work in collaboration. For example, if a child is known, or becomes known, then it is essential referral pathways are known and maintained, so that access to specialist support is encouraged and facilitated to establish communication at the earliest opportunity. Specialist Services can also assist to develop mechanisms of contacting families safely, and share resources developed during this time to increase engagement and well-being. At present we are hearing ad hoc evidence from some areas that police, schools and social services are not aware of specialist support available to children and young people. This is leading to very limited safeguarding responses to children and young people.

¹ <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/news/uk-world/1291774/surge-in-number-of-child-sex-abuse-images-online/>

Adolescent-to-parent violence increase

Welsh Women's Aid has received reports from members of an increase of adolescent-to-parent violence, which is compounded by the fact the Live Fear Free helpline are receiving more calls in relation to this. It is possible that some of the the adolescents are known to specialist services and were getting interventions (e.g. Break4Change) prior to lockdown that have now either stopped or are being continued in an online format, which is nowhere near as effective. It is clear that there is not enough accessible support out there for children and young people who are struggling with their emotions and behaviour.

Welsh Women's Aid has produced an information resource available here: <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Poster-6-Worried-about-your-teenagers-behaviour.pdf>

Recommendations

In summary, Welsh Women's Aid has identified the following areas member services in the VAWDASV sector need support in order to best service vulnerable children and young people during the pandemic:

- An online resource hub to include information on healthy relationships, activities, information and advice that children, young people and their families can engage with on a weekly basis. The posters developed will also be posted on the Hwb for services to share: <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/campaigning/covid-19-bystander-toolkit/>
- Ring-fenced funding and support for funding applications (due to limited staff capacity) to protect service delivery throughout and beyond the pandemic, as highlighted and requested in [Welsh Women's Aid recent letter to Welsh Government on funding](#).
- On-going multi-agency communication (via an online platform) to share best practice, support and to ensure engagement with those families who are most vulnerable, to include VAWDASV specialist services. Welsh Government must commit to a short and long term plan beyond statutory funding in order to protect the provision of these services.
- A Wales-wide public platform for children and young people to share top tips, information and ideas on how to keep safe to increase prevention engagement in the absence of school and health interception.
- The provision of games, toys, books and further resources for all refuges.

Welsh Women's Aid is also available to provide further written and oral evidence around this issue if required.