

Senedd Cymru

Pwyllgor yr Economi, Masnach a Materion Gwledig
Costau byw

COL-13

Ymateb gan: Cymorth i Ferched Cymru

Welsh Parliament

Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee
Cost of living

Evidence from: Welsh Women's Aid



Welsh Women's Aid Response: Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee inquiry into Cost of Living

Organisation:	<i>Welsh Women's Aid</i>
These are the views of:	<i>Welsh Women's Aid (Third Sector) - the national charity in Wales working to end domestic abuse and all forms of violence against women.</i>

About Welsh Women's Aid

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.

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.

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/>)

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Introduction



Welsh Women's Aid welcomes the opportunity to input into the committee's important inquiry into the cost of living. As the umbrella organisation for Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence in Wales our response will be focused on the impact that a rise in cost of living will have on survivor's access to safety and support, and the ability of specialist services to staff and deliver these quality services.

The rise in cost of living is of great concern to our membership and the people they support. As a result, Welsh Women's Aid are in the process of conducting a full analysis into the impact of the increase in cost of living on our sector along with other contributing factors such as a lack of sustainable commissioning, the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 response and the fallout of Brexit.

As such, this initial response to the committee's inquiry will be a short snapshot of concerns and data. We will of course happily share the full report with the committee to help inform its work once it is fully completed.

Key concerns

There is a growing concern within the sector that factors such as:

- The ongoing effects of COVID-19
- Fallout from Brexit
- The cost of living crisis

Are culminating in a 'perfect storm' which is severely hindering service delivery from every angle.

Specialist VAWDASV staff are incredibly committed to ending VAWDASV, and it's important to recognise the physical and emotional impact that the role has on individuals in the sector. Staff supporting adult and child survivors of VAWDASV have ensured that essential, lifesaving and life-supporting services have continued under the strain of recent events. However, the

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ongoing challenge for the sector is that organisations are hampered by relatively lower wages, short term contracts and jobs carrying high caseloads and work out of hours.

In short, the VAWDASV specialist sector is starting from a place of limited resource and stretched capacity even ahead of the sharp rise in cost of living.

Difficulties with recruitment and retention of staff have affected the sector and increased instability and uncertainty at a time where people have needed it the most. Our State of the Sector 2021 report¹ showed that, staff retention is an extremely pertinent issue currently facing specialist services. As an example, our members are currently able to pay £20,541 for a support worker role, whilst local housing association pay between £24,000 -£26,000 for similar roles. Even for equivalent roles, specialist services receive significantly lower funding to offer wages. For instance, an ISVA in a rape crisis centre has a wage of £27,444 but the statutory sector run SARC offers a wage of £35,000 within the same locality.

This inequality is particularly stark in specialist children and young people roles where an average local authority based role working with children pays 9.1% higher than those in the VAWDASV sector that require additional specialisms and skills. The specialist sector is working within tight budgets and has less flexibility than other organisations/ sectors to raise wages to attract appropriate staff when necessary.

Other challenges include:

- People not wanting to change jobs during the uncertainty of Covid-19
- Staff may feel undervalued seeing higher wages outside of the third sector
- Additional training and support costs put services at financial risk
- Capacity is taken away from service delivery to train new staff
- Creating roles around specific funding requirements set by government bodies, rather than meeting the needs of survivors.
- Cost of transport deterring staff from accepting positions.

¹ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/2021/10/a-strategy-for-sustainable-support-state-of-the-sector-2021-published/>



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Staff turnover, illness and difficulties recruiting have a financial and emotional cost. Delivering a trauma informed, needs- led service means having consistency and stability for survivors, particularly children and young people. These challenges have been intensified by sharp rise in cost of living. The VAWDASV sector workforce is predominantly staffed by women, who have been show to been some of the most negatively affected – ‘bearing the brunt of soaring poverty’².

“Keeping the same staff member is crucial in terms of building relationships with young people and with schools” – Specialist Service

At the core of delivering this work and achieving the ultimate goal of ending VAWDASV in Wales is the expertise of specialist services and survivors. Without a clear and dedicated focus on prevention and adequate resourcing which allows both services and survivors to properly engage, there is a slim chance of improvement on the current situation.

What do specialist services say?

As part of our annual membership survey, we asked services to comment on the sustainability of their services under the current funding situation.

- **Specialist services and expertise are in danger of being lost**, particularly for children and young people, where a continued lack of funding commitment and postcode lottery over years has created a dearth of provision.

“If long term funding is not gained, we will lose all our children's workers.”

- **The impermanency of funding is making staff recruitment and retention hard**, this creates a ‘brain drain’ from the sector and threatens the support provided to survivors.

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/women-poverty-cost-of-living-crisis-b2067579.html>

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“We continue to be on the treadmill of looking for continuation funding for vital projects that between them provide direct support to 100 individuals (women and children) a year.”

“Where staff have moved on it has been in favour of permanent roles”

- **Specialist services have implemented wellbeing initiatives** such as wellbeing hours, offering more clinical support, and resources. Even when funding is limited, specialist services have found innovative ways to keep staff morale high. However, when capacity is limited due to short-term funding, and the stress of increasing waiting lists, service demand and caseloads, there's an urgent shift needed to balance job satisfaction, capacity and salary.

“For me, it's not just about wages, it's much more than that, the place, the venue, the culture is massive, how you look after your staff, how you reward them”

Conclusion

In summing up this short response we would ask the committee going forward consider as a crucial element of its work, the impact the 'cost of living crisis' has had and continues to have on the sector's ability to deliver services and ultimately what this means for survivors seeking safety and support. Ahead of this initial rise in cost of living we saw a 22% increase in the number of survivors who could not be supported by the refuge due to the lack of capacity or resources, when compared with the previous financial year³ (2020), including:

- Unable to meet support needs (around drug and alcohol) (27%)
- Unable to meet support needs (around mental health) (61%)
- Unsafe (perpetrator knows the location of the survivor/ refuge) (92%)
- No/ limited recourse to public funds (29%)

³ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/State-of-the-Sector-2021-ENG-1.pdf>

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As a bare minimum to support the sector in mitigating some of these devastating impacts, we ask the committee to support our continued calls for the following measures:

- A strong Welsh Government commitment to continuing to develop and implement a sustainable funding model for the specialist VAWDASV sector, in the upcoming national VAWDASV strategy.
- Commissioners to agree contracts for a minimum of 3-5 years and to ensure contracts offer a living wage, to enable services to recruit and retain dedicated, qualified staff.
- Ensure adequate and sustainable investment in support for children and young people specialist provision. Working with children and young people affected by VAWDASV aligns with work in ACEs and children in the care system; there must be alignment in investment.

We will follow up on this response shortly once the full report in the impact of cost of living and other contributing factors has been completed, with a full range of recommendations.

