

PLVAW 10

Ymchwiliad ôl-ddeddfwriaethol i Ddeddf Trais yn erbyn Menywod,

Cam-drin Domestig a Thrais Rhywiol (Cymru) 2015

Post legislative inquiry into the Violence against Women,

Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015

Ymateb gan: Mae'r Ymddiriedolaeth Survivors

Response from: The Survivors Trust

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The Survivors Trust (TST) is a national umbrella agency for over 140 specialist rape, sexual violence and childhood sexual abuse voluntary sector support organisations throughout Wales, England, Scotland and Ireland.

We are the largest network of Organisations delivering rape, sexual violence and sexual abuse support services within the UK.

In Wales, The Survivors Trust operates under the guise of Survivors Trust Cymru and from its Office at Bro Merthyr, The Redhouse, Old Town Hall, High Street, Merthyr Tydfil CF47 8AE (telephone number 07791 567085).

The five specialist voluntary sector organisations who offer and provide counselling and support services to Survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse in Wales are all Members of the Survivors Trust.

Survivors Trust Cymru provides a Helpline for Survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse.

The Survivors Trust wish to submit the following observations in relation to the five questions tabled by the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee in relation to their Post Legislative Inquiry into the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 (the Act)

Question 1: To what extent the approach to tackling violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence is improving as a result of the obligations in the Act?

1.1 As you might expect, we can only comment on improvements to the approach to tackling sexual violence and abuse. It is generally accepted that Survivors of sexual violence and abuse rely on the specialist voluntary sector for counselling, help and support. The five specialist sexual violence and abuse voluntary sector organisations working in Wales are all Members of The Survivors Trust. Also, we, operating under the guise of Survivors Trust Cymru, provide a Helpline specifically for Survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse.

1.2 We have not noticed any discernible improvement in the approach to tackling sexual violence or sexual abuse as a result of the obligations contained in the Act or the implementation of the Act to date. So far as we are aware, no Local Authority, Health Board or Public Service Board in Wales has introduced a strategy specifically for sexual violence and sexual abuse or have plans to do so.

1.3 Some Local Authorities have produced a general VAWG Strategy but such strategies show a bias toward domestic violence and abuse - which is perhaps understandable but is still regrettable – and seem to fail to understand the help needed by Survivors of sexual violence or sexual abuse and the challenges faced by the specialist voluntary sector that supports them. Therefore, in our view, it is unlikely that existing Strategies will benefit Survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse or the specialist voluntary sector organisations working in Wales to any great extent.

1.4 In our view the acceptance of at least some of the following suggestions would help:

1.4.1 A duty should be placed on each Health Board to have a strategy in place which has as its aim: (1) ensuring that it is aware of the prevalence of sexual abuse and sexual violence in its area and the full extent of the services available to Survivors; (2) ensuring that it is aware of the needs of Survivors; (3) ensuring that appropriate services are available to Survivors when they need them and close to where they live; (4) ensuring that there is a proper and full engagement between the Health Board, The Survivors Trust and Survivors Trust Wales Members so that the Health Board is fully aware of the challenges and pressures faced by service providers from time to time and is able to support service providers to the fullest extent possible.

1.4.2 Each Local Authority Domestic Violence Forum in Wales (or their successors in function or alternative Forums in each Local Authority area) should accept responsibility for considering and dealing with matters relating to domestic and non-domestic sexual violence and sexual abuse and underline this commitment in the title/name and terms of reference of the Forum. Also, each local Domestic and/or Sexual Violence Forum should have a strategy which has as its aim: (i) ensuring that it is aware of the needs of Survivors and the services available to them; (ii) reducing the prevalence of sexual violence and sexual abuse; and (iii) ensuring that adequate counselling and general support services are available to Survivors when they need them and within a reasonable distance of where they live.

1.4.3 The majority of counsellors who provide specialist counselling to Survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse are volunteers. Wales Government should provide annual funding to each of the Survivors Trust Wales Members to enable them to employ a Trainer/Volunteer Co-ordinator whose role would be to recruit, train, organise and supervise Volunteer Counsellors.

1.4.4 An increase in the number of Volunteer Counsellors would result in more volunteers being recruited, more Survivors receiving counselling and support and Survivors receiving the help that they need when they need it and close to where they live. The likely attendant cost saving to the public purse through Survivors hopefully being returned to good health would be considerable and far more than the cost of employing Trainers/Volunteer Co-ordinators

1.5 We also feel that our specialist voluntary sector could, when compared to the domestic violence sector in particular, be better treated in terms of funding and support provided by Wales Government and other public authorities.

Question 2: What are the most effective methods of capturing the views and experiences of survivors? Are arrangements in place to capture these experiences, and to what extent is this information being used to help inform the implementation of the Act's provisions?

2.1 As already stated, we can only comment in relation to Survivors of sexual violence or sexual abuse. Engaging with Survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse is not an easy task as many Survivors choose not to reveal the violence or abuse they have suffered or, if they have opted to seek counselling, help or support, they choose to then try and put their past behind them.

2.2 The majority of Survivors who are victims of sexual violence or abuse and who decide to seek counselling, help and support will approach one of the five voluntary sector specialist service providers working in Wales. Therefore, the best method of capturing the views and experiences of Survivors of sexual violence or abuse might be to engage with the Survivors Trust and its Members working in Wales to ascertain and agree the information that could most usefully be obtained from Survivors to help inform the implementation of the provisions of the Act.

2.3 Another avenue that might possibly be worth pursuing is for the Wales Government to engage with the Cardiff Office of IICSA to ascertain whether IICSA would be prepared to make available an agreed questionnaire to Survivors at the end of a Truth Project Session, which questionnaire could be returned to Wales Government or its nominee agent.

2.4 A third method of obtaining information would be to establish three Regional Survivors Forums in Wales for Survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse which Regional Forums would feed into to a Wales National Survivors Forum. The Survivors Trust has just established, with backing and financial support from NHS England and MOPAC, a London Survivors Forum and we would be happy to use the knowledge and experience gained from the London Survivors Forum to work with Wales Government, the National Adviser and our Members/the specialist sexual violence and abuse voluntary sector in Wales to establish Regional Survivors Forums and a National Survivors Forum.

2.5 Suffice to say that, in relation to sexual violence and sexual abuse, we do not believe that effective methods currently exist to capture the views and experiences of Survivors to help inform the implementation of the provisions of the Act.

Question 3: Whether survivors of abuse are beginning to experience better responses from public authorities as a result of the Act, particularly those needing specialist services?

3.1 In real terms, we feel that, in the context of sexual violence and sexual abuse, little has changed in relation to the responses provided by and available from public authorities as a result of the Act. In this context, we would be very interested to learn of the improvements and initiatives introduced by various public authorities for Survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse in response to the Act.

3.2 We feel that it would help if Health Boards and/or Local Authorities were placed under a duty to ensure that counselling and support is available to Survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse when they need to receive it and reasonably close to where they live. As these services are (funding permitting) already provided successfully and at the lowest possible cost by Survivors Trust Wales Members, a better and more comprehensive service could simply and quickly be provided by the provision of funding to Survivors Trust Wales Members supported by appropriate Service Level Agreements. For this purpose, an overarching all Wales Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy Board could be created, membership of which would consist of the National Adviser, Wales Government, Health Boards, Local Authorities and The Survivors Trust and its Wales Members.

3.3 It would also help if the Wales Government, with the co-operation of Local Health Boards and Local Authorities in Wales, undertook to provide more information to Survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse about the help and support that is available to them in and across Wales.

3.4 We also feel that Local Health Boards, Local Authorities and other statutory organisations should be placed under a duty to locate and make available to the specialist voluntary sector in Wales unused or available office accommodation from which counselling and support services could be provided to Survivors of sexual violence and sexual abuse.

Question 4: Whether the National Adviser has sufficient power and independence from the Welsh Government to ensure implementation of the Act?

4.1 We are very impressed with the National Adviser, how approachable she is and her genuine desire to make a difference. An excellent appointment.

4.2 It is too soon for us to be able to judge or to offer an opinion as to whether the National Adviser has sufficient power and independence from Wales Government to ensure implementation of the Act. Time will tell.

4.3 In our view, it would be a great shame if, having made such an excellent choice in the appointment of a National Adviser, her attempts to properly implement the Act were to any degree hindered by the Welsh Government or indeed Public Authorities in Wales or if she did not receive from everyone their full support.

4.4 In terms of views and concerns that we have heard expressed in relation to the development and consequences of the work to be undertaken by the National Adviser, the following comments should be mentioned:

- 4.4.1 Whilst the Act and the role of the National Adviser are welcomed and supported, there remains uncertainty on the part of individuals and organisations as to how this will translate into practice on both a regional and local level. This includes concern about the move to regional funding and the impact this will have on organisations and service delivery.
 - 4.4.2 There is a concern that there is a lack of clarity and guidance around the structure of boards, operational groups and steering groups formed to help implement and deliver the National Strategy and the Act. Areas are keen to develop local plans and strategies but appear to lack the knowledge to determine how their work will be incorporated into and fit in with the wider policy and legislative context.
 - 4.4.3 Concerns as to how newly established boards, hubs, operational groups and steering groups will fit in with, compliment and work with existing boards and groups such as Local Safeguarding Boards.
 - 4.4.4 Concerns as to whether the National Adviser will be able to sustain and provide the level of support and guidance that will be needed across Wales when implementing the National Strategy and the Act.
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Question 5: To what extent the good practice guide to healthy relationships is successfully influencing the development of a whole school approach to challenging violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence?

We are unable to comment at this stage.