



## Briefing for the joint CPG on Violence against Women and Children and CPG on Children and Young People

### Domestic Abuse: its impact on children, services in Wales and what we're calling for

#### Introduction

Domestic abuse impacts many people across Wales. Public Health Wales Adverse Childhood Experiences research found that 16% of adults in Wales grew up in a house with domestic violence<sup>1</sup>. Experiencing domestic abuse in the home has particularly serious implications for children and young people. NSPCC has found that 1 in 5 children have been exposed to domestic abuse<sup>2</sup> and 130,000 children and young people in the UK are living with high risk domestic abuse<sup>3</sup>. Increasingly, practitioners have recognised that children are not 'secondary or passive witnesses' of violence in the home, but are directly experiencing it alongside their non-abusing parent. Children, along with the non-abusing parent are controlled, threatened and have their 'space for action' reduced by domestic abuse. The harm to a child of seeing or hearing parental domestic abuse was first recognised in law as abusive to children in the Adoption and Children Act 2002. As Dr Emma Katz explains; '*Coercive control places children in isolated, disempowering and constrained worlds which can hamper children's resilience and healthy development and contribute to emotional and behavioural problems*'<sup>4</sup>.

Domestic abuse happens within the wider context of violence against women and girls. It happens disproportionately to women, because they are women. In turn, children can be used by the perpetrator in this context to maintain power; by threatening their safety, threatening to report the mother to children's social care or by undermining the mother's ability as a parent.

#### The impact of domestic abuse on children

Domestic abuse is an adverse childhood experience. A third of children witnessing domestic violence also experienced another form of abuse<sup>5</sup> and, in Wales, 25% of children that are in receipt of care and support because of parental domestic abuse in 2017<sup>6</sup>. In England analysis of serious case reviews found that domestic abuse is a factor in over half of serious case reviews, though this type of data is unavailable for Wales<sup>7</sup>. The evidence shows that experiencing domestic abuse as a child can:

- Lead to highly restrictive and un-free family lives
- Negatively impact mental health and wellbeing
- Lead to bedwetting, increase in the risk of being bullied, self-harming and suicidal ideation
- Cause withdrawal from family and friends
- Lead to children and young people exhibiting challenging behaviour
- Lead to additional learning needs or mental health needs

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<sup>1</sup> Bellis, M. et al (2015) Adverse Childhood Experiences and their impact on health-harming behaviours in the Welsh adult population: Public Health Wales

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/domestic-abuse/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/domestic-abuse/domestic-abuse-facts-statistics/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://avaproject.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Emma-Katz-2016.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Radford, L. et al. (2011) [Child abuse and neglect in the UK](#). NSPCC

<sup>6</sup> <https://stats.wales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/children-receiving-care-and-support/parentalfactorsofchildrenreceivingcareandsupport-by-measure-year>

<sup>7</sup> Sidebotham, P. et al (2016) [Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014](#)



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## Welsh policy context

Many policy areas relevant to domestic abuse are devolved to the National Assembly for Wales. In 2015 the National Assembly legislated to improve the response via the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act. The Act places responsibility on the public sector to respond to violence and abuse, including via the Ask and Act framework<sup>8</sup>. The Act recognises children and young people as victims of domestic abuse. The Welsh Government National Strategy on Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Cross Government Delivery Framework 2018 – 2021 recognises that witnessing violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence can have a huge impact on children and young people and can impact their safety, health and wellbeing and educational attainment<sup>9</sup>. In January, UK Government laid the Domestic Abuse Bill before parliament, while much of the bill focuses on areas which are devolved to Welsh Government, it crucially introduces a ban on abusers cross-examining their victims in the family courts.

Welsh Government have a duty of due regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 19 of the UNCRC states that Governments must do everything to protect children and young people from all forms of violence and abuse and that help must be available for children and young people who are hurt by violence and abuse. The Welsh Government's National Strategy on Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence – 2016 – 2021<sup>10</sup> provides a clear framework for preventing, protecting and supporting all victims, including children and thus realising children's rights to protection and support to recover from domestic abuse<sup>11</sup>.

## Service Provision in Wales

There is a gap between the policy intent of the Act/ National Strategy and the provision of services for child survivors across Wales. Welsh Women's Aid members report that the funding for provision for children and young people impacted by domestic abuse is patchy and inconsistent. Many Welsh Women's Aid members do not have dedicated funding for children and young people provision, yet attempt to stretch their resources to respond to the needs of children via family work models. But evidence continues to demonstrate funding is unstable for direct children's service across Wales.

Welsh Women's Aid members reported that 266 children and young people were living in refuge each quarter of the last year across Wales. This was a 14% increase compared to the year before which saw an average of 228 per quarter. Of these children, 17% were on a child protection register. The Live Fear Free helpline<sup>12</sup> provided support to parents of an estimated 3422 children and 29 children and young people who contacted the helpline directly<sup>13</sup>. NSPCC's Childline Service delivered 8,853 counselling sessions to children who we knew lived in Wales in 2016/7<sup>14</sup>. Of these, Childline delivered 361 counselling sessions about domestic abuse: 241 counselling sessions were to children and young

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<sup>8</sup> <https://livefearfree.gov.wales/policies-and-guidance/ask-and-act?lang=en>

<sup>9</sup> <https://gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/commsafety/181716-vawdasv-delivery-framework-en.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> ibidi

<sup>11</sup> <https://gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/commsafety/161104-national-strategy-en.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://livefearfree.gov.wales/about/?skip=1&lang=en>

<sup>13</sup> Welsh Women's Aid (2018) Annual Report: Data from specialist services in Wales, 2017/18. Cardiff: Welsh Women's Aid

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/our-services/childline/>



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people about parental domestic abuse and 120 counselling sessions to children and young people in Wales about domestic/partner abuse.

What is clear from Welsh Women's Aid members is that more intensive, specialised, therapeutic support is needed for children and young people experiencing violence and abuse. It is not good enough that the provision of services for children is not consistently available across Wales. Despite commitments from Welsh Government to invest in prevention work with children, many specialist services report that they only receive annual funding for children's work (if they receive any direct funding at all).

### **Local Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) Strategies**

Local VAWDASV strategies are key to ensure effective delivery of the VAWDASV (Wales) Act in all areas of Wales. Analysis of the eight local VAWDASV strategies show that all recognise children as victims of domestic abuse. Encouragingly all plans are prioritising early intervention and work in schools on healthy relationships education. One plan acknowledges that *'there is very little direct support provided to children to combat the impact of domestic abuse or sexual violence within their home environment'* and another recognises the need for more counselling and support for children. Despite most plans prioritising work on providing victims with equal access to support services, none specifically prioritise developing or establishing support services for children. Some strategies talk about the importance of survivor engagement but there is no evidence of direct engagement work with children and young people.

### **Survivors voices should be central**

Welsh Women's Aid has conducted research with their member organisations and focus groups and 1-2-1 interviews with children and young people and their parents. Through this work, the following key points have been raised by survivors and their children;

*Survivors have called for:*

- Dedicated specialist services for children and young people impacted by or experiencing domestic abuse, sexual violence, FGM, forced marriage, sexual exploitation or harassment, available in every area.
- Improved awareness of and response to violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence by professionals involved in the family justice system (CAFCASS Cymru, judges and court personnel, contact centres), and safe child contact with parents/carers following separation, in cases of domestic abuse and sexual violence.
- The vital need for professionals to better understand the consequences of living with abuse and violence
- Improved support for children and young people in schools and communities
- Access to specialist mental health services in response to children's needs
- Positive male role models
- Healthy relationships education



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*Children and young people have called for:*

- Designated 1-2-1 workers who can talk to children and young people about what services are available for them to access
- Access to group programmes – children reported this had a positive effect, with children feeling “happier” and “more confident” after attending group programmes.
- More activities and games
- 100% of the children who participated agreed that lessons on healthy relationships in schools would benefit them

Survivors are clearly calling for dedicated specialist work with children. Work with children is pivotal to achieving long term change in Wales and children must be given a voice and enabled to access services in their own right. It is crucial that children and young people’s experiences and recommendations are heard. Welsh Government, therefore, in their commitment to work with children must consider how best they can ensure these voices are listened to and the recommendations acted on.

Experiencing abuse is compounded by other factors, such as poverty. Research by Children in Wales’ Child and Poverty in Wales Report found that measures of poverty, such as ‘relative poverty’ is based on household incomes, therefore some of the population can be excluded, such as women and children living in refuges<sup>15</sup>. The report also found that the impact of welfare reform was seen as the biggest issue impacting poverty, at 38%. This is coupled with the lack of affordable housing and the rising cost of living. All can act as a barrier to leaving an abusive partner and impact on women and children ‘thriving’ post separation. The ability for perpetrators to further economically abuse under universal credit has been well documented<sup>16</sup> and the lack of affordable housing results in a lack of appropriate move on accommodation for women and children leaving refuge. Disabled people are more than twice as likely to suffer some form of domestic abuse compared to the general population, and also find it harder to leave their current situation as their carer may be the abuser. It is very hard to leave an adapted property or a support network that may be very specific to physical needs.

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.childreninwales.org.uk/resource/child-family-poverty-wales-results-child-family-survey-2018/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/news-parliament-2017/universal-credit-domestic-abuse-report-publication-17-19/>



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## **What we are calling for**

### **1. Dedicated services for children and young people who experience domestic abuse**

We want the Welsh Government VAWDASV Sustainable Funding Group to work with local authorities, cross government departments and the specialist sector, including Welsh Women's Aid to identify funding for the following:

- Dedicated children workers in both refuge and community services as standard to provide play and therapeutic work while the family is in crisis
- Specialist services in each region of Wales staffed with appropriately trained professionals to provide therapeutic services for children and young people to enable them to recover from their experiences and develop healthy relationships in the future.
- The Wales Centre for Public Policy to ensure children and young people services are included in the review of refuge provision

### **2. Local VAWDASV strategies**

We want to see:

- All local plans to recognise children and young people are directly impacted by abuse and commit to consult child survivors about the protection and support they need
- Local strategies to prioritise the development of specialist service provision for children and young people in every region of Wales.
- Close working between Safeguarding Children Boards and partnerships and agencies working to end domestic abuse to ensure effective protection and support of child victims

### **3. Prevention, Early Intervention and Cultural Change**

- The new school curriculum must include expertly taught mandatory healthy relationship education so that pupils are equipped to recognise VAWDASV
- All education institutions should implement a [whole-education approach](https://livefearfree.gov.wales/guidance-for-professionals/advice-on-supporting-your-clients/supporting-clients-who-have-suffered-or-are-experiencing-domestic-abuse-and-sexual-violence/what-is-a-whole-school-education-approach/?lang=en)<sup>17</sup>, to promote learning and challenge to unhealthy relationships

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<sup>17</sup> <https://livefearfree.gov.wales/guidance-for-professionals/advice-on-supporting-your-clients/supporting-clients-who-have-suffered-or-are-experiencing-domestic-abuse-and-sexual-violence/what-is-a-whole-school-education-approach/?lang=en>