

**P-05-882 Transforming the response for older people experiencing domestic abuse – a call for action, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 01.06.20**

Thank you for email and attached documentation outlining Jane Hutt's AC/AM response to our community-led petition, **P-05-882 Transforming the response for older people experiencing domestic abuse – a call for action.**

Dewis Choice is a practice-based Welsh initiative designed and implemented by older people to deliver support to older victims –survivors of domestic abuse. The Initiative provides the first dedicated service for all older people aged 60 years and over; it provides the first global longitudinal study of older people's help seeking and justice seeking in the context of coercive control.

Since 2012, our work in communities<sup>1</sup> and our research has identified that there are insufficient specialist services available in Wales to ensure equality in provision to support and protect older people. The responses available are also not equipped to address older male victim-survivors, older LGBTQ+ groups and the most high-risk group where domestic abuse co-exists with a diagnosis of dementia.

The response by Jane Hutt AC/AM discusses the following areas:

1. VAWDASV Officials engagement with Sarah Wydall and the team from Dewis Choice;
2. Funding allocations of outreach services available for victims of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV);
3. The additional fund for housing support provision aimed at older people;
4. The VAWDASV 2015 Strategy and the National Training Framework, including Ask and Act;
5. Appropriately resourced, high quality need led, strengths based, gender responsive services cross Wales;
6. The initial funding for training ' Responding to Older People affected by Domestic Abuse'.

We will take the opportunity to respond to the six areas above identified by the Deputy Minister. We propose a transformative response is required based on our extensive knowledge both in terms of our practice and research evidence in Wales and globally and the stakeholder response to the community-led Dewis Choice service. We are concerned that none of the six points provides evidence of an appropriate level of service provision and the training will not address the significant gap in responses for older victim-survivors, who are more at risk of harm than other age groups from domestic abuse, because of the service, guidance and policy gaps.

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<sup>1</sup> The Dewis Choice community engagement programme, involving nearly five thousand people in the last four years, provides evidence that older people do not feel current services are suitable for them because awareness-raising material, guidance, risk assessments and service provision is aimed as younger women with families.

## **1. VAWDASV Officials engagement with Sarah Wydall and the team from Dewis Choice**

Amy Jones, a Senior Policy lead representing the VAWDASV team, attended the launch event, 'Transforming the Response to Domestic Abuse in Later Life,' held in Cardiff on 19<sup>th</sup> February 2020 and offered to meet with Sarah Wydall and the team to discuss how the learning from Dewis Choice can be embedded into VAWDASV work. We welcome this meeting as a positive step forward.

## **2. Funding allocations of outreach services available for victims of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV).**

Clients engaging with the Dewis Choice service have reported a significant lack of access to appropriate specialist outreach domestic abuse services. Recovery programmes are often designed for younger women in heterosexual relationships and involve attending group sessions. Older women who have attempted to engage with group recovery programmes have reported that they are not relevant to their needs or circumstances. There are also no current recovery programmes designed for older males and older people who are LGBTQ+ or those where domestic abuse and dementia co-exist, or physical disability.

## **3. The additional fund for housing support provision aimed at older people.**

Housing related support for older people - the majority of clients are unable to use Refuge, as Refuge does not meet a range of complex needs associated with people aged 60 years and over. Furthermore, older victim-survivors who are owner-occupiers face additional barriers, including having to fund a Refuge space whilst keeping up payments on jointly owned property.

## **4. The VAWDASV 2015 Strategy and the National Training Framework, including Ask and Act.**

*'The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 ('the Act') shares seven well-being goals detailing the ways in which public bodies must work, and work together to improve the well-being of Wales and to create a more equal Wales. This goal is supported through the VAWDASV National Strategy, where we have committed to provide victims with equal access to appropriately resourced, high quality, needs led, strengths based, gender responsive services across Wales.'* Section 4 of the Act: Equality of Health outcomes, signposts resources and provision in relation to improving the VAWDASV response. Resources include a 'Manual for Health Managers' and the 'Ask me' Scheme and 'Trusted Professionals' that form part of the Welsh Women's Aid 'Change that Lasts' programme.

There is very limited provision of specialist training around identifying, appropriately risk assessing and supporting older victim-survivors of domestic abuse with the exception of Dewis Choice. **Older men** the 'Manual for health

managers' explicitly states the guidance does not include a response to male victim-survivors of domestic abuse; thus, the response excludes older men. Older men comprise a third of our client base. Our current longitudinal study also confirms this fact, as male clients do not feel able to access current VAWDASV services and tend to form a higher risk group within our client base as they have delayed help-seeking for many years.

**Non-engagement with current VAWDASV services** We have strong evidence from a decade of research focussing on domestic abuse and older people, and from running our dedicated service for older people that our clients do not engage with VAWDASV support for a range of reason outlined in our previous responses. Instead, older people are 'welfarised' and referred into social care routes. When reviewing more generalist training, it is worth noting that the Auditor General for Wales Report (2019) highlighted that the training rolled out under the Social Services and Wellbeing Act ***is a 'tick box' exercise and is not effective at equipping frontline staff with the confidence and skills to identify and respond to potential cases of harm or abuse.***

Drawing on the Ask and Act guidance, we illustrate an example of a missed opportunity to highlight older victims of VAWDASV. Although across the guidance it does not give an upper age limit for victimisation, there is no specific reference given to older people. Instead, older people's needs are assumed to be encapsulated within the general approach to Ask and Act. Whilst specific reference is made to training 'maternal health services' and 'hospital-based specialists' where it is noted that younger victims are being identified. The absence of specific reference to older people is surprising given that research has found higher levels of victimisation in later life (Fisher, 2006; Bonomi, 2007). It is important to recognise that the subtlety of language that omits to mention services commonly occupied by older people, reinforces the view that VAWDASV is a younger person's problem. We recommend that particular reference should be made within the guidance that makes a direct link to older victim-survivors.

**Welsh Language Provision:** when responding to the needs and rights of this age group - very few services are able to recruit practitioners especially Independent Domestic Violence Advisors who are first language Welsh speakers. These are specialists who deal with high risk crisis intervention, thus for an older survivor living in fear, or someone with fluctuating capacity, using their first language to disclose is /will be significant. This deficit in service provision reflects **a failure to meet the needs of the Welsh speaking population**; Furthermore, provision rarely includes adult-child to parent abuse which is a significant feature of older people's experience of domestic abuse;

## **6. The initial funding for training 'Responding to Older People affected by Domestic Abuse.'**

We are pleased to learn that options are being explored to provide enhanced training to the VAWDASV specialist sector. Especially given that people aged 60 years and over may have additional needs than younger cohorts. The material rarely addresses older people's experience of the abuse. Typically,

guidance and research are based on white, middle class, heterosexual, female victim-survivors under 70 years of age, who experience intimate partner violence, not adult family violence. Adult family violence is as common as intimate partner violence in people aged 60 years and over.

We call for a more inclusive approach to training that encompasses the diversity of people aged 60 years and over. We welcome the commissioning of a four-day specialist course 'Responding to Older People Affected by Domestic Abuse' however, Dewis Choice is the only initiative available with the skills to be able to deliver this and this initiative ends in 2020. It is essential that practitioners working with older victim-survivors identified as high-risk have access to specialist training to respond to the specific needs of this demographic, particularly as there is a lack of training available specialising in responding to victim-survivors of abuse from adult family members, male victims, LGBTQ+ groups and people experiencing domestic abuse whilst living with dementia.

### **How Dewis Choice are supporting training and further training needs.**

Dewis Choice co-delivered specialist training with SafeLives as a pilot in England & Wales during 2018 and 2019. Dewis Choice have agreed to partner to co-deliver the four-day specialist training to be held in Wales in April 2020. The training is targeted at accredited Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVA's) working with victim-survivors identified as high risk using the DASH Risk assessment tool.

However, SafeLives (2018-2019), found only 3% of those accessing IDVA services supported by the MARAC model, were over 60 years of age, suggesting a lack of identification of older victim-survivors of domestic violence by statutory services.

Current domestic abuse risk assessments are based on research from the study of, and designed for, younger women experiencing intimate partner violence from men who have young families.

Taken together, the six points show a general commitment to addressing the needs and rights of a demographic group that fall into the 'public story of domestic abuse. However, for the diverse range of people aged 60 years and over we can evidence in Wales that they do not receive sufficient protection and support. As a result, as researchers with significant experience in this area we feel that there is a significant well-being and human rights deficit with regard to protection, private life, and justice.

### **Covid-19 context**

In response to the Covid-19 crisis, Dewis Choice have adapted their training to provide free online training to services and practitioners in contact with older people during Covid-19 restrictions. A wide range of organisations and individuals have registered for training including domestic abuse, police, social care, health, older person's mental health professionals and volunteers. The Older People's Commissioner for Wales issued a press release urging key workers across Wales who engage with older people to

undertake the training. Feedback from individuals who have undertaken the training included:

*"As a specialist domestic abuse worker, I did not feel I had the necessary skills to respond to cases where dementia also existed. I attended the training to gain more information on what support was available. After attending the course, I feel more confident responding to dementia and domestic abuse and have a better understanding of how I can work with other organisations to better support clients."*  
(Domestic abuse worker)

Comments from those attending the training course demonstrate the need for specific training related to the diverse and multiple needs of victim-survivors aged 65 years and over.

Compared to other services responding to domestic abuse in Wales, Dewis Choice have received an increase in referrals for older people experiencing domestic abuse. The complexity of these cases has further magnified the ageism older victims face, for example:

- There is a lack of safe accommodation for older people at the point of fleeing abuse, particularly if they have care and support needs. Adapted, ground level refuge spaces are limited and not equipped to accommodate an older person with care and support needs, therefore, there is a reluctance by domestic abuse services to accept referrals where a victim-survivor has care and support needs. Alternative local authority housing is not readily available immediately at point of fleeing.
- Providing services via phone only and not face-to-face has added challenges working with older people who are not digitally connected. Assistance in accessing information about rights and entitlements, filling in online applications, for example, applying for an occupation order, requires face-to-face support. This further highlights the need for adequately resourced outreach provision, alongside the research findings from Dewis Choice that older people value face-to-face contact with a support worker they can build a relationship of trust with.

1<sup>st</sup> June 2020

Response provided by Sarah Wydall, Elize Freeman, Rebecca Zerk, 'Dewis Choice – Transforming the response to domestic abuse in later life' The Centre for Age Gender and Social Justice, Aberystwyth University.