

Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse & Sexual Violence (VAWDASV): Gwent Regional Strategy 2023 – 2026 (draft)

Consultation Response - Barnardo's Cymru

Overview

Barnardo's Cymru has been working with children, young people and families in Wales for over 100 years and is one of the largest children's charities. We currently run more than 60 diverse services across Wales, working in partnership with local authorities. Each year we regularly support more than 10,000 children, young people and families. We aim to secure better outcomes for more children by providing the support needed to ensure stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures. We use the knowledge gained from our direct work to campaign to improve the lives of children, young people and families by promoting positive change in policy and practice. We believe that with the right help, committed support and belief all children can fulfil their potential.

Our response

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation and would like to address the following areas of the draft strategy:

1. We believe the strategy needs more emphasis on the provision of child centred, trauma informed, specialist services for children and young people affected by, and living with domestic abuse (pg. 24-25)
2. We would like to see more information on how multi-agency, partnerships and collaboration will be achieved in practice (pg. 33)
3. We would like more detail on how Operation Encompass will secure better outcomes for children and support schools to better understand the impact of living with domestic abuse on children and children's lived experiences (pg.35)

4. We believe the timescales in the action plan for the Children and Young People focus area of work are too long. Two years is a long time in the life of a child. Action needs to be taken now. (pg42)

1. The need for more emphasis on child centred, trauma informed services for children and young people affected by domestic abuse.

We welcome the fact that the strategy recognises the need for a whole family approach to tackling domestic abuse with a focus area within the strategy on children and young people. We are also pleased to see an emphasis on prevention through education and a whole school approach to healthy relationship education. However, we believe that more needs to be done to support children and young people who are experiencing or witness to domestic abuse now. We would like to see more of an emphasis on child centred, trauma informed services for children and young people affected by domestic abuse within the strategy.

At Barnardo's Cymru we have expertise in supporting children and young people who have been affected by abuse including domestic abuse. Gender-based violence is a widespread and complex challenge. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimates that 6.9% of women aged 16 years and over experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2022¹. There is growing evidence that children who live in families where there is domestic abuse can suffer serious long-term emotional effects².

From 2019 – October 2022 our Opening Closed Doors service in Gwent specialised in working with children and young people who had been victims or witnesses of domestic abuse at home³. This model is based on the premise that working with all family members meets their needs more comprehensively, addressing the causes as well as the consequences of domestic abuse and helps to bring about sustainable change. Professionals interviewed for the evaluation specifically referred to the benefits of a holistic approach: *"The whole family offer is really important. There was support for women (and to a lesser extent men and children)*

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesoverview/november2022#domestic-abuse-in-england-and-wales-data>

² <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/children-affected-domestic-violence>

³ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/Barnardo%27s%20Opening%20Closed%20Doors%20Programme%20Evaluation%20final%20report%20130220.pdf>

already but it was not connected. It supports victims to know that the perpetrator is also trying to change.”⁴

We believe that addressing these issues with a whole-family approach is important for breaking down silos by helping families understand how they interact with each other, in a safe and appropriate way, which can prevent escalating violence. It has been our experience that the whole family approach is incredibly important and a big part of why the work with perpetrators has been successful, because it is done in the context of the whole family and emphasises the impact that their behaviour has had on their children, which can act as a huge motivator for change. An independent evaluation showed that 78% of families were showing signs of recovering from domestic abuse after involvement with the service⁵.

Engagement with the Opening Closed Doors programme has resulted in healthier relationships and positive school improvement for children and young people. In addition, involvement with the service saw that 89% of children’s legal protection statuses either reduced or did not escalate as a result of Opening Closed Doors support⁶.

This model has been described as *“good practice and, as such, could be recommended as a model that is worth investing in and that could be rolled out in other areas.”⁷*

Funding specialist services

Despite these successful interventions, there is a general lack of provision for children and young people who experience gender-based violence and domestic abuse. Barnardo’s is calling on the UK Government to ensure that all children who are victims and witnesses of abuse and exploitation – including domestic abuse – have access to specialist services in the Victims and Prisoners Bill. Despite the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 rightly naming children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right, this has not translated into investment in services for them. A report by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales found that just 30% of victims and survivors of domestic abuse in Wales were able to get support for their children.⁸

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

⁸ https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/DAC_Mapping-Abuse-Survivors_Summary-Report_Nov-2022_FA.pdf

For many services, unless a sustainable funding offer is developed soon, important interventions and expertise will be lost by services that cannot continue to fund their vital work. Without the continued support from specialised services, children and young people can go on to experience their own difficulties in creating healthy relationships in adolescence and adulthood⁹.

This continued loss of funding has left a huge gap for children and young people's specialist service provision across Wales¹⁰. Many service providers focus on adult victims of abuse, and whilst we support the need for these services, the high case numbers of the Opening Closed Doors service reflected the clear need for family intervention and support through a dedicated service to prevent further escalation. The ability to break down barriers and support each family member both individually and as a unit provided the right intervention and received positive evaluations from professionals, practitioners and the children and young people themselves. One young person told us that *"My worker let me talk openly about how I was feeling. She really helped me to understand and supported me to manage my emotions."*¹¹ Managing emotional wellbeing has positives both now and in the future for children and young people, as childhood adversity can contribute to poor resilience, lack of healthy relationships and other poor adult outcomes¹². Our practitioners believe that the current provision does not always meet the needs of children and young people due to the restrictive and inflexible nature of adult-focused services. Barnardo's practitioners also highlighted that of those services that can offer support to children waiting lists are often long, contributing to increased risk of harm, lack of recovery and support and mental health impacts¹³.

2. How will multi-agency working, partnerships and collaboration will be achieved in practice?

On page 33, the strategy has a section on multi-agency working, partnerships and collaboration. Stating that "the region has benefitted from strong collaboration and partnership working arrangements for many years". We would like to see more information about how the collaboration, partnership arrangements and multi-agency working will be achieved in practice. For example, how will the strategy "further facilitate

⁹ ['Not just collateral damage' Barnardo's Report_0.pdf \(barnardos.org.uk\)](https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/'Not%20just%20collateral%20damage'%20Barnardo's%20Report_0.pdf)

¹⁰ anecdotal from practitioner

¹¹ Information from Opening Closed Doors Service - internal email

¹² [Ending childhood adversity: A public health approach - Publications - Public Health Scotland](#)

¹³

https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/'Not%20just%20collateral%20damage'%20Barnardo's%20Report_0.pdf

the expertise and knowledge that the specialist services and sector bring”? We would like to see an evaluation of how this approach is working, what benefits and successes have been achieved to date and whether it is sustainable.

3. How will Operation Encompass secure better outcomes for children and support schools to better understand the impact of living with domestic abuse on children and children’s lived experiences?

The strategy states that it will continue to support Operation Encompass aims across Gwent, by directly connecting police and schools, to:

- Secure better outcomes for children
- Enable schools to better understand the impact living with domestic abuse has on children
- Help schools to better understand a child’s lived experience and to therefore be able to support and nurture each child, making a child’s day better and giving them a better tomorrow.

Whilst we support this sentiment, we would like to see how the strategy will achieve this in practice. Will this be via training or support services or pastoral care? We believe more detail is needed here on exactly how children and young people will be supported.

4. Action plan timescales for the Children and Young People focus area.

The strategy sets out a three-year action plan for the Children and Young People focus area. This includes developing a ‘Knowledge Hub of evidence-based programmes and interventions for Children and Young People which will be the focus of the first two years of the action plan with the commissioning of services planned for year 4. We feel that over two years is a long time before actioning intervention. We have outlined our Opening Closed Doors model above. This model has been evaluated as an example of best practice and could be rolled out in Gwent now. Two years is a long time in a life of a child, particularly a child who is experiencing domestic abuse and we believe intervention services should be commissioned without delay.