

NSPCC Cymru/Wales response to Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee on Covid-19 and its impact

NSPCC Cymru/Wales is concerned about the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on children and young people across Wales who are at risk of abuse and neglect in the home. The safety nets of school, nurseries and other settings children and young people access have been removed from their lives. We appreciate all the work being done by local authorities and schools to keep in touch with identified vulnerable children and welcome Welsh Government's widening of the vulnerable children definition to include children on the edge of care. However, we know that the number of vulnerable children attending education settings is low (4.4% at the latest count), therefore it would be useful to know how vulnerable children are being supported outside school settings.

We understand the committee particularly wants to hear about the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups based on experiences of domestic abuse, sexual violence and pregnant women. We have therefore included our concerns on these areas, in the context of the impact of the lockdown on children and young people.

Domestic Abuse

Children are often seen as invisible victims of violence and abuse in the home or indeed passive witnesses of the violence perpetrated by an abusive parent to the other parent. We are concerned that this apparent 'invisibility' is even more stark as children's opportunities to disclose are limited.

In the first 21 days of the UK lockdown two children (along with 14 women) were murdered in the context of domestic abuse¹.

1 in 5 children have been exposed to domestic violence in the UK. In Wales, during 2018/19, Welsh Women's Aid found specialist services supported 4,263 children impacted by VAWDASV. In its report 'Children Matter' Welsh Women's Aid ²estimated that 18,478 in Wales were impacted by DA in the past year, based on the 1 in 5 estimate. By their calculation, 14,224 (77%) children in Wales received no specialist support and so may not be known to other services and be even more invisible during lockdown.

Since the lockdown, calls to ChildLine have seen an increase from children and young people about all forms of abuse, the latest stats from ChildLine for example show a rise from 10% to 15% for emotional abuse, 19% to 24% for parent's behaviour and a 12% to 14% increase for physical abuse. Concerns from concerned adults to the NSPCC Helpline has seen an 11% increase in calls about domestic abuse.

¹ <https://kareningalasmith.com/counting-dead-women/>

² <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Children-and-Young-People-participation-report-FINAL.pdf> - page 14 and 15

Perpetrators who use coercive and controlling behaviour use a suite of tactics to gain and maintain power and control; isolation from friends, families and other sources of support is a common tactic used to maintain that power and control and the 'lockdown' has acted as an enabler for that isolation.

Where families have separated, abuse could escalate if the child is isolated with the abuser. There is also anecdotal evidence from specialist services of abusers refusing to return children to the non-abusing parent due to claims of self-isolation.

Welsh Women's Aid members have confirmed they are continuing to support children via phone calls and some face to face video calls but this is a challenge with younger children. They are continuing to maintain relationships with children and young people, but without confidential spaces their usual in-depth work is not possible and they are concerned about starting difficult conversations with vulnerable children who are then alone without support after the call.

We are concerned about the obvious immediate impact of the lockdown on children and young people exposed to domestic abuse, but also the long-term trauma for children and their non-abusing parents as they come to terms with their experiences. We are also very worried about the impact on services working with children and young people when the lockdown has lifted, it is highly anticipated that these services will see a spike in approaches. Before the pandemic, NSPCC Cymru/Wales had been raising its concerns about the need for better resources for services working with children and young people living with domestic abuse. We feel the need to fully resource services across Wales is even more urgent.

Sexual violence

The Lucy Faithful Foundation's Stop It Now helpline initially saw a drop in calls at the start of lockdown, however these numbers have recovered. Their online self-help programme for those concerned about their behaviour towards children has seen a significant increase in visits since lockdown. Stats from ChildLine indicate a drop in contacts from 43% to 35% about sexual abuse across the UK. This is particularly concerning given the hidden nature of child sexual abuse.

Specialist services working with child survivors of CSA have also raised concerns about the support they are able to offer young children during the lockdown who cannot access video calling independently.

Children who have been sexually abused are also under-represented on child protection plans, we are concerned therefore that they are even more invisible during this time. An estimated 1 in 20 children in the UK have been sexually abused³. The vast majority (90%) of children who experience sexual abuse were abused by someone they knew⁴. For children experiencing sexual abuse in the family, they may well be isolating at home with the perpetrator of that abuse. We know that it takes children and young people an average of 7 years to disclosure abuse, and that some are never able to tell what has happened to them⁵, so they may not be a concern to other adults⁶. We are very concerned about the impact on children being sexually abused in the home, both the immediate impact of the abuse and the long-term trauma. Of course, for children who are being sexually abused, the immediate and long-

³ Radford, L. et al. (2011) Child abuse and neglect in the UK today. London: NSPCC.

⁴ Radford, L. et al. (2011) Child abuse and neglect in the UK today. London: NSPCC.

⁵ Allnock, D. and Miller, P. (2013) No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse. London: NSPCC

⁶ Miller and Allnock 2013 Allnock, D. and Miller, P. (2013) No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse. London: NSPCC

term impact of this will happen regardless of isolation, but our concern is the lack of access to trusted adults and the risk of the abuse increasing.

Pregnant women

Concerns have been raised that some pregnant women are more vulnerable to the effects of Covid-19. This is of course extremely worrying for women and their families. We are also concerned about the impact of the lockdown and social distancing on perinatal mental health as pregnant women and new parents have to self-isolate and remain separated from wider sources of support, such as family and antenatal groups.

Before the pandemic, up to 1 in 5 mums and 1 in 10 dads experienced mental health problems during pregnancy and after birth, but there is growing concern that uncertainty surrounding lockdown, social isolation, and separation from family is causing heightened anxieties and pressure on parents. At such an uncertain time, nobody should be left to cope with perinatal mental health problems on their own. If left untreated, perinatal mental health problems can have a devastating impact on mums, dads/partners and babies – both immediately but also long after the COVID-19 situation has passed. It is therefore more critical than ever that all mums and dads/partners still receive the specialist care they need during pregnancy and after birth to enable early identification and support for mental health concerns.

On World Maternal Mental Health Day (6th May 2020), NSPCC Cymru/Wales hosted a virtual roundtable of leading health professionals and charities in Wales, to discuss how services have adapted during the pandemic to support parents, and share concerns about the immediate effect on mental health and the potential long-term impact on babies' health and development.

The roundtable revealed that dedicated health professionals and charities are rapidly adopting new and innovative ways of working to support families who maybe experiencing heightened anxiety and pressures. They reported how lines of communications have significantly improved between health services as they move to an increasingly virtual offer, resulting in more flexible and streamlined ways of supporting expectant and new mothers. However, they shared an increasing concern around reduced referrals for support and admissions to specialist mother and baby units, which provide inpatient psychiatric care for mothers and their babies. Concerns were also raised about the impact of the pandemic on the mental wellbeing of dads and partners, as well as health care professionals themselves.

It is worrying that whilst services are adapting rapidly and working hard together to support families, vulnerable parents experiencing perinatal mental health problems may not be coming forward to access specialist support, leaving them at risk.

Solutions

While we must continue to maintain social distancing to protect lives and the NHS, we must equally continue to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people. What we know from the figures so far is that children and young people already exposed to neglect and abuse are at increased risk and the vital, lifesaving, services that support them will need adequate funding to meet increased demand after lockdown.

We therefore suggest the following solutions;

Domestic Abuse

- We welcome recent announcements from the Home Office on boosts for and increased funding for specialist domestic abuse services, including those working with children, but would welcome more clarity on what funding will be made available for Wales and reiterate our call that better resources are needed for dedicated work with all children and young people experiencing and exposed to domestic abuse across Wales, when and where they need it. If as expected, demand for services peaks after the lockdown, the need for this will be even more stark. Services must be supported to prepare for this.

Sexual Abuse

- Welsh Government and Safeguarding Children Boards to publicise that services to support children are still open for business
- Welsh Government and Safeguarding Children Boards to urge anyone concerned about child sexual abuse to contact the NSPCC Helpline or Stop it Now! Helpline
- Resources to be made available for specialist services to continue to support all children and adult survivors now and in the aftermath of lockdown.

Perinatal Mental Health

- Welsh Government to urge any mum or dad/partner concerned about their mental health during the perinatal period to seek support
- Welsh Government to monitor referrals into specialist perinatal mental health teams and mother and baby units (MBUs) and address any barriers to mums accessing specialist community and inpatient support
- Welsh Government to continue to prioritise perinatal mental health now and in the aftermath of the lockdown, to ensure that women and their families in Wales can access specialist support when needed.