

Gender Equality Forum
18 January 2024, 10.00-11:15
Teams meeting (virtual)

Attendees

Deputy Minister for Social Partnership
Bawso
Cardiff University
Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) Wales
Fair Treatment for the Women of Wales (FTWW)
Homestart Cymru
National Federation of Women's Institute (NFWI) Wales
Oxfam Cymru
Plan International UK
Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) National Adviser
Welsh Women's Aid
Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales

Welsh Government officials

Women's Health Team
Early Years, Childcare and Play Officials
Equality and Human Rights Officials
Equality Evidence Unit

1. Welcome and update on actions from previous meeting – Deputy Minister for Social Partnership

- 1.1 Attendees were welcomed to the fifth meeting of the Gender Equality Forum. The new CEO at Bawso, and the National Adviser for VAWDASV were welcomed to the Forum.
- 1.2 An update was provided on the actions from the previous meeting:
- The Women's Health team met with Fair Treatment for the Women of Wales to discuss the work on pelvic health and endometriosis. Arrangements are being made for a meeting with Wales TUC regarding their work on the menopause.
 - The draft of the internal implementation plan was to be shared with Forum members before the end of the year. This has not yet been completed as further work is being undertaken to review recent research which will provide an evidence base before we move to the next stage.
 - The three priority areas – women's health, unpaid care and childcare, and intersectionality and alignment between the equality plans - are now standing items on the agenda.

2. Women's Health Plan – Welsh Government

- 2.1 Work is underway to establish the Women's Health Network which will then have responsibility for developing the Women's Health Plan. The NHS Executive are recruiting two key posts - Clinical Lead and Network Manager – and the interviews will be completed by the end of February.
- 2.2 Preparatory work for the establishment of the Network is underway, which includes compiling a draft list of stakeholders and draft terms of reference. This work will not pre-empt the role of the network but is being undertaken to ensure progress can be made as quickly as possible.
- 2.3 An All-Wales Continence task and finish group has been established which aims to raise awareness of continence issues. Their work links to key aspects of women's health such as continence issues caused by birth trauma.
- 2.4 A refresh of 'A Healthier Wales' is underway, and the team are working on including women's health as a part of it.
- 2.5 Women's health has been explicitly mentioned in the Planning framework. Welsh Government has written to all Health Boards to ask that Women's Health Plans are included in the Integrated Medium-Term Plans (IMTP) that are being produced.
- 2.6 Welsh Government has written to health boards for clarification on endometriosis services. The responses will be reviewed, shared with the Gynaecology Implementation network and also help inform the development of the Women's Health Plan.
- 2.7 Forum members raised the following points/questions:
 - There are significant health concerns linked to VAWDASV including brain injury and strokes in women aged under 40.
 - Important that there is patient and Third Sector involvement in the Women's Health Network to ensure that the Women's Health Plan is inclusive and effective.
 - The Planning Framework for health boards and IMTPs should involve patients and co-production to ensure they are more equality focussed when developing and assessing services.
 - Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a significant issue in some Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.
 - The recent paper by the Royal College of Physicians Cymru Wales, 'Giving Everyone a Voice' was highlighted and a request made that it be considered when developing the terms of reference for the Women's Health Network.
- 2.8 The Women's Health team official provided the following responses:
 - The Women's Health Network is the responsibility of the NHS Executive which has already committed to it working in a co-productive manner.

ACTION: Women's Health team to meet with VAWDASV National Adviser to discuss health concerns linked to VAWDASV.

ACTION: Women's Health team to meet with Bawso to discuss FGM.

ACTION: Women's Health team to pass on the points raised regarding the Planning Framework and IMTPs to the appropriate team within Welsh Government for their consideration.

3. Unpaid care and childcare – Welsh Government

Unpaid Care

- 3.1 Welsh Government officials met with Wales Trade Union Congress (TUC) on 6 October 2023 to discuss support for unpaid carers and the draft toolkit being developed by Wales TUC. Information on our Short Breaks Programme and Carers Support Fund was provided to feed into the information being produced by the Wales TUC.
- 3.2 Welsh Government commissioned the Association of Directors of Social Services Cymru (ADSSC) to undertake a rapid review on how the rights of unpaid carers are being upheld. Their report was published on their website on 3 November 2023 ([Rapid review of how unpaid carers' rights have been upheld during and after the Covid-19 response \(adss.cymru\)](https://adss.cymru)).
- 3.3 Findings included delays and lack of access to carers' needs assessments and lack of awareness of carers' rights. The report also highlighted the challenges in meeting carers' identified needs and respite being the most significant unmet need. Welsh Government will work with local authorities and carer organisations in Wales to look at these barriers and share good practice.
- 3.4 The Deputy Minister for Social Services asked the Ministerial Advisory Group on Unpaid Carers to establish a working group to look at the findings of the review against the current Welsh Government delivery plan. This group has now been established and held its first meeting on 9 January.

Childcare

- 3.5 A progress update for the Childcare Offer was shared with Forum members.
- 3.6 There were nearly 13,000 children taking up the Childcare Offer in October 2023. This represents a take-up rate of 57 percent of estimated eligible parents.
- 3.7 The latest independent evaluation findings published in March 2023, once again found the scheme has been supporting parental employment. Parents surveyed reported a range of positive impacts from accessing the Offer:
 - 75% of parents reported that the Offer had made it easier for them to undertake their work;
 - 37% of parents reported that they would be working fewer hours had the Offer not been available to them – this impact was greater for parents earning under £26,000 per year (42% reported that they would be working fewer hours without the Offer);

- 10% of parents said they would be in a job with fewer career progression opportunities, and a further 10 per cent said they would not be working at all if the Offer had not been available to them.

- 3.8 The Childcare Offer is a demand led programme and support is made available for all eligible parents that apply. Welsh Government has prioritised communications across Wales to increase awareness and encourage take-up among eligible parents, and this will continue during 2024/25.
- 3.9 In addition to funding targeted communication work in each local authority, the Childcare Offer is part of a wider communications agreement that aims to provide parents across Wales with consistent, joined-up information about the variety of support available to them. As part of this contract, the Childcare Offer is promoted on various social media platforms, through local radio and on public transport to ensure as many parents as possible are encouraged to take up the Offer.
- 3.10 From September 2022, the Childcare Offer was expanded to parents in education and training, supporting the commitment made in our Programme for Government. By the end of the academic year 2022/23, 675 additional families were supported because of the expansion of the Offer to include eligible parents in education/training.
- 3.11 The success of the promotion work has so far seen the number of parents in education and training supported by the Offer rise to 1100 during the first term of this new academic year, compared to just under 200 during the autumn term for 2022/23.

Flying Start

- 3.12 Our Programme for Government commits us to continue our support for Flying Start which is the Welsh Government's targeted Early Years programme for families with children under 4 years of age who are living in some of the most disadvantaged areas of Wales. In line with the Co-operation Agreement with Plaid Cymru, we have extended this commitment to deliver a phased expansion of early years provision to include all two-year-olds, with a particular emphasis on strengthening Welsh-medium provision.
- 3.13 The core elements of the programme have been shown to influence positive outcomes for children and their families. These include: funded high quality, part-time (12.5 hours a week) childcare for two–three year-olds; an enhanced health visiting service; access to parenting support; and support for Speech, Language and Communication development.
- 3.14 Outreach is a key element of the programme which allows local authorities to apply a degree of flexibility within the programme.
- 3.15 The roll out of phase one of the expansion commenced in September 2022 and concluded in March 2023. Phase 1 included all Flying Start services being offered to around 2,600 additional children under four.
- 3.16 The Deputy Minister for Social Services is investing £46m in the phased Flying Start expansion and is committed to delivering the high-quality childcare element of the Flying Start during 2023-24 and 2024-25.

3.17 Delivery of Phase 2 of the expansion began in April 2023. Phase 2 will support over 9,500 more two-year-olds to access quality Flying Start childcare once the expansion is running at full capacity.

3.18 Members of the Forum raised the following questions/comments:

- The decision to reduce funding for the Childcare Offer based on the lower than expected uptake of the scheme, as detailed in the draft budget for 2024/25, is difficult to reconcile with what we hear from parents about the difficulties and excessive costs of childcare. Is there any research being undertaken to understand why eligible families aren't taking up the Childcare Offer?
- Is there a date for the full rollout of Flying Start? Concerns have been raised because it appears to be a postcode lottery. Is 2.5 hours of childcare per day enough?
- A petition submitted to the Senedd Cymru which called for the Welsh Government to 'offer Welsh working parents the same financial support for childcare as England' gained 10,820 signatures.
- Lack of a gender perspective in the Child Poverty Strategy.
- Research undertaken by Oxfam found that 27% said they were spending over £900/month on childcare. Childcare is pushing people into poverty. [Little-Steps-Big-Struggles.pdf \(oxfamapps.org\)](#)
- Does domestic abuse play a part in women/children not accessing Flying Start, particularly when substance misuse and mental health issues are also present?

3.19 Welsh Government responses to points raised:

- Communication work is underway to increase the take up of the Childcare Offer.
- Welsh Government has committed to revisit its assumptions regarding take up of the Offer, as and when the demand for the programme changes.
- The Deputy Minister for Social Services issued a Written Statement regarding the expansion of Flying Start childcare to more children in Wales on 14 April 2023 which detailed that £46 million would be invested in the expansion of the scheme over the next two years. We are not currently in a position to confirm any future funding arrangements beyond 2024/25.
- Flying Start childcare sessions are 2.5 hours per day, 5 days a week because the evidence shows that shorter, more frequent higher quality childcare sessions lead to the best outcomes for the child and place a significant emphasis on ensuring that robust transition helps to prepare children for entry to learning within the Curriculum for Wales at age 3. Welsh Government acknowledged this duration is not helpful to all parents, particularly working parents. There is flexibility in the scheme to allow parents to top-up the time available or to combine it into longer sessions, if it is in the best interest of the child. The guidance has recently been updated and provides details of the flexibility permitted within the programme. [Flying Start childcare: guidance \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)
- Flying Start is a geographically targeted Programme. Local authorities use income benefit data, a proxy indicator for poverty, to target areas with the highest proportions of children aged 0-3 living in income benefit households. These areas

have been identified using the Wales Index of Multiple Deprivation, data from the Department of Work and Pensions and HM Revenue and Customs and are broken down by Lower Super Output Areas. As the expansion continues, the areas in which it is available, will increase. The expansion must be undertaken in a way that makes it achievable as the sector also needs to expand alongside it.

ACTION: Childcare officials to confirm whether research has been undertaken to understand the low take-up of the Childcare Offer.

ACTION: Flying Start officials to meet with Oxfam Cymru.

4. Update on Intersectionality and alignment between equality plans – Dan Venables, Welsh Government

4.1 Our proposed National Equality Objectives are currently out to consultation. They will be published in early April and require long-term thinking and action at both national and local levels to support their delivery. The consultation can be found on the Welsh Government web pages and closes on 12 February. [Consultation on the strategic Equality Plan 2024 to 2028: proposed principles of approach and objectives \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

4.2 The National Equality Objectives aim to be both aspirational and deliverable and we recognise they will need to evolve as the equality landscape changes. We hope other Public Sector organisations in Wales will develop their own, tailored, local level objectives to match the national approach.

4.3 The consultation also sets out our Principles of Approach for the implementation of our National Equality Objectives. These underpin existing equality plans and focus on:

- embedding equality mainstreaming across Welsh Government, including through the use of meaningful Equality Impact Assessments (EqIA)
- the impact of intersectionality between protected characteristics in policy making across the organisation, alongside the integration of the Socio-economic Duty; and
- Addressing the gap between intention and delivery.

4.4 The importance of intersectionality was highlighted. As work to better understand intersectionality in relation to Welsh Government equality plans and policies progresses, the team will be looking to take forward with officials and stakeholders and will need input from external experts.

4.5 Forum members raised the following comments/questions:

- The equality mainstreaming model was tested on a live policy area – Net Zero Skills – in 2022. Still awaiting feedback from this. Concerning that it doesn't seem to have been taken forward.
- It appears that mainstreaming is going to be incorporated into the Integrated Impact Assessment. Mainstreaming is not simply filling out a form.
- Unless you adopt the integrated, collaborative approach at the outset (i.e. the mainstreaming model), then you will not get the results you are aiming for.

- Mainstreaming links to intersectionality – both are drivers towards equality.
- Budget cuts have led to a lot of pressure on equality based organisations and inequality rates are rising. How can people be confident that these plans will make a difference?
- Has an Equality Impact Assessment been done on the consultation?

4.6 Response from Welsh Government officials:

- Offers from organisations to assist with the work on alignment between equality plans were welcomed.
- Equality and Inclusion funding continues to support a range of equality focussed organisations.

ACTION: Equality officials (Strategic Equality) to meet with Cardiff University to discuss equality mainstreaming.

ACTION: Equality officials (Strategic Equality) to confirm whether an EIA of the consultation has been published.

ACTION: Equality officials (gender) to include an agenda item on the budget at the next meeting.

5. VAWDASV National Adviser

- 5.1 The National Adviser provided information about the role of National Adviser and the approach to tackling VAWDASV. The role of VAWDASV National Adviser was established under the provision of the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015. The key words included in the Act are prevent, protect and support. The role of a National Adviser is to support government and public services to fulfil the duties of the Act and work towards the vision of making Wales the safest place in Europe to be a woman.
- 5.2 The National Advisers are required to have an annual plan. The focus for the 2023-24 plan is on the delivery of a whole system approach. This is also a critical part of the VAWDASV Strategy 2022-2026. Overseeing the delivery of the Strategy is a National Partnership Board – a Ministerial-led board co-chaired by Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) on behalf of Policing in Wales, and the Minister for Social Justice and Chief Whip for Welsh Government.
- 5.3 The strategy is being delivered through a collaborative ‘blueprint’ approach, which brings together devolved and non-devolved organisations, as well as strengthening the partnership between public private and specialist sectors. It is crucial that the various systems and pathways are all connected.
- 5.4 Work on delivering the Strategy is being taken forward through a number of workstreams: gender-based harassment in all public spaces; workplace harassment; tackling perpetration; sustainable whole system approach, children and young people and older people.

5.5 The National Adviser highlighted the Senedd's Equality and Social Justice Committee's report, [How we must all play our part: a public health approach to halting the epidemic in gender-based violence \(senedd.wales\)](#), published on 15 January 2024. She identified two of the recommendations which she considered of particular relevance to the Gender Equality Forum:

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government should adopt a whole-of government approach and work with partners across public services, the private and third sectors to promote gender equality and inclusivity in Wales. To help to achieve this it should implement a 'gender equality test' which assesses the impact of all policy decisions and legislative proposals on gender equality with the aim of reducing gender disparities. The gender equality test should be introduced as soon as feasibly possible and should be applied to all Welsh Government decisions from December 2024 onwards at the latest.

Recommendation 3. The Welsh Government should set out how the development and evaluation of policies which address the intersectionality of GBV will be informed by data, evidence, and analysis. In particular the Welsh Government should provide the Equality, Race and Disability Evidence Units with clarity regarding their priorities and agree timescales for completion of key milestones by end of April 2024. The response should include details of: ▪ the target date for completing the work to establish baseline data and a summary of the baseline indicators it intends to use; ▪ the partners it will work with to gather baseline data and the target date by which data-gathering efforts will be mainstreamed; and ▪ when it anticipates the data gathered by the Units will be able to meaningfully contribute to policy development and evaluation.

5.6 The National Adviser highlighted some of her priorities which included:

- women with multiple protected characteristics as they are often disproportionately impacted by VAWDASV;
- Affecting change across all Welsh Government policy areas; and
- Creating a safe space for men and boys to be involved in the VAWDASV work.

5.7 Men and boys can feel that efforts to advance gender equality for women have made it more difficult for them as the expectations of what it is to be a man has become quite distorted. Positive role modelling and creating spaces for men to learn and be challenged is vital. The Welsh Government's 'Sound' campaign targeted men aged 18-34 with engaging and informative content around healthy relationships and behaviours.

5.8 Forum members raised the following comments/questions:

- Disappointment that the workstreams don't include disabled women as they have very specific needs.
- Does the Plan include a way to engage with those who have lived experience?
- Cardiff University/University of South Wales (USW) held a seminar in September 2023 at which it was concluded that Public Service Leaders were not taking responsibility for their 'due regard' requirements in this area – need ownership and leadership.

- Cardiff University/USW Violence Against Women and Girls network is discussing a series of events on workplace harassment with the VAWDASV Blueprint workstream team. They are particularly keen to attract public service leaders to these to engage and support them in their duties to prevent and support under VAWDASV.
- Concerning that the Committee report calls for a gender equality test as this should already be happening. This links to the work to review and renew the Public Sector Equality Duty as it is not producing what we hoped it would and is too process driven.

5.9 Response from National Adviser:

- Separate pieces of work are being taken forward to ensure that intersectionality is considered within each of the workstreams. Initial meetings have taken place with Welsh Government's Specialist Disability Policy Adviser and a VAWDASV National Adviser had attended a Disability Taskforce meeting.
- Recognition that wider representation is important.

6. Update on Gender Equality plan – Rae Cornish, Welsh Government

6.1 Due to time constraints, this agenda item was not reached during the meeting.

6.2 It was agreed that a written update would be shared with Forum members.

ACTION: Equality officials (Gender) to provide a written update on the Gender Plan to Forum members.

7. Any Other Business

7.1 The open Welsh Government consultation on the Fairer Council Tax was raised. Disappointment was expressed that it did not appear to have a gender focussed approach. The reduction in council tax for single occupancy has been limited to 25% which often has a disproportionate impact on women, including single parents. It was requested that relevant officials be invited to a future Forum meeting to discuss this further.

7.2 Any feedback or queries can be sent to: equalityandhumanrightsdivision@gov.wales.

7.3 The next Forum meeting will take place on 16 April 2024.

Summary of actions

- Women's Health team to meet with VAWDASV National Adviser to discuss health concerns linked to VAWDASV.

- Women's Health team to meet with Bawso to discuss FGM.
- Women's Health team to pass on the points raised regarding the Planning Framework and IMTP's to the appropriate team within Welsh Government for their consideration.
- Childcare officials to confirm whether research has been undertaken to understand the low take-up of the Childcare Offer.
- Flying Start officials to meet with Oxfam Cymru.
- Equality officials (Strategic Equality) to meet with Cardiff University to discuss equality mainstreaming.
- Equality officials (Strategic Equality) to confirm whether an EIA of the consultation has been published.
- Equality officials (Gender) to include an agenda item on the budget at the next meeting.
- Equality officials (Gender) to provide a written update on the Gender Plan to Forum members.