

Survivor engagement – domestic and sexual abuse

Engaging with survivors of sexual and domestic violence through an independent advisor coordinator, to learn about their lived experience and promote change in the criminal justice system.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Domestic abuse Rape and serious sexual offences Community engagement
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Region	Wales

Key details

Partners	Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Education Government department Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of Implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	November 2019
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Victims

Aim

The aims of the survivor engagement coordinator (SEC) role are to:

- improve the service, policy and practice for victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence
- increase understanding around the impact of domestic abuse and sexual violence
- facilitate conversations across the whole criminal justice system to improve the response to domestic abuse and sexual violence
- empower survivors to use their lived experience to influence legislative, strategic and operational activity across the violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual abuse (VAWDAS) sector
- identify and reduce any communication barriers faced by those with protected characteristics

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of the SEC role are:

- increased victim satisfaction (although this is a difficult outcome to measure)
- improved training to officers and staff

- improved services for victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence (this can be measured through scrutiny panels and continued feedback from survivors)
- improved resources and support available for victims considering their options
- improved feedback from our partners (such as independent domestic violence advisors (IDVAs) and independent sexual violence advisors (ISVAs))

Description

The survivor engagement coordinator (SEC) role was implemented in 2019. The role is now embedded in both the governance structure of Gwent Police and within the regional VAWDAS government work.

The role must be filled by a qualified IDVA or ISVA to manage safeguarding and risk, but also to understand the entire criminal justice journey. The role also needs to be independent to avoid any organisational bias. Our role sits in Victim Services, which is a police staff department.

The SEC is responsible for:

- running regular focus groups (advertised through social media)
- obtaining one to one feedback
- inviting focus group and feedback participants to join the Survivor Network and/or Victim Reference Group
- providing feedback to focus group and feedback participants as to how their participation has made a difference
- acting as a point of contact for partners to initiate service recovery with individual cases
- building relationships with partners
- raising awareness about the existence of the survivor engagement coordinator role

Overall impact

The SEC role has made a significant difference across all areas of work. It has:

- contributed to a considerable improvement in culture within the organisation – with all service areas valuing survivor feedback to ensure their response is victim-centred
- become well respected by our partners

- contributed to our Victim Reference Group growing considerably – with scrutiny being requested for projects across the region by multiple organisations
- encouraged survivors to feel their voice is being heard and to feel empowered – as helping us improve can help other victims

Survivor voice has been implemented in officer training, using survivor videos and case studies in order to train officers and to aid their understanding of the impact of abuse.

The SEC also attends domestic abuse (DA) and rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) scrutiny meetings to provide survivor voice and contact the victims of the cases scrutinised to gain their feedback.

The victim reference group are able to provide feedback and case studies internally but also have participated in partner projects such as Safe Spaces, Welsh Government initiatives and health board improvement projects. The group have also been instrumental in developing a DA information booklet that can be given to victims and also used by partners with clients to understand the criminal justice process and improve engagement and understanding.

An important part of the SEC role is to identify and enable opportunities for survivors to increase their confidence and resilience by providing ongoing personal, emotional and skills-based development opportunities. Survivors from the victim reference group have stated that being part of the group has given them the confidence to develop in their personal and professional lives for example successfully gaining employment in DA support fields, learning to drive and writing articles on DA and controlling or coercive behaviour for major publications.

Learning

The SEC role was a big change for the organisation. The internal culture change (and acceptance of critical feedback about services areas) took a while to filter through. Chief officer support and department lead buy-in was vital to ensure this role's success.

It also took time to establish collaboration with partner agencies and build the trust required for survivors to engage. Corporate communications were key to promoting the existence of a referral pathway. We wanted referrals to be voluntary and not the result of cold calling.

It's important to understand this is a long-term change and not a quick win.

The victim should always be the focus in this line of work and while their feedback is paramount to help us learn, we must consider the impact this has on their emotional wellbeing. Risk assessments should always be completed to ensure it's safe for victims to participate.

It's important to consider Home Office guidance on the counting rules for recorded crime when considering barriers to reporting. For example, if a victim discloses information they haven't already reported, we would then have to record this. This may risk any trust created.

The wellbeing of the survivor engagement coordinator is incredibly important. There is a huge risk of vicarious trauma. This needs to be managed by someone who works in this field to fully understand the impact.

It was identified that while Gwent has a survivor group for members of the public, there is not one for internal members of staff. Avon and Somerset Police have been successfully facilitating an internal DA survivor forum and this has now be successfully implemented within Gwent utilising Avon and Somerset expertise and guidance. While the external group is a working group which provides lived experience for ongoing projects, the aim of the internal forum would be to provide help and support and be a safe place with others who have shared experience.

The forum is run in a safe and confidential way to ensure all members are able to attend in a way that is comfortable to them. An information document has been created to share with potential members and a fully anonymous attendance process is available to any staff who wish to attend in this way. Feedback for the group has been incredibly positive with members commenting that it a positive step forward in removing the shame that many members of the feel when talking about their abuse.

The SEC role is now embedded within the organisation and consulted on changes and improvements within the organisation. It is regularly used by partners for service recovery as a softer approach to complaints and allows the survivor voice to be heard and changes to be made.

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Tags

Violence against women and girls Sexual and violent offenders Rape and sexual offences
Domestic abuse Domestic violence