**Violence, abuse and neglect against older persons**

Dewis Choice Initiative

The Centre for Age, Gender and Social Justice

Department of Law and Criminology

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Wales

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**The Context**

The Dewis Choice Initiative is a ‘best practice’ model co-produced by older people in 2015 aimed at ‘transforming the response to domestic abuse in later life’. It is based in the department of Law and Criminology at the Centre for Age, Gender and Social Justice in Wales. (See link: [https://dewischoice.org.uk](https://dewischoice.org.uk/) ) The Centre is seen as a ‘Centre for Excellence’ by the Older Peoples Commissioner for Wales, giving UK-wide evidence and input to materials on domestic abuse, sexual violence, and coercive and controlling behaviours in both adult family violence and intimate partner violence. The team are also leading experts on domestic homicide occurring in people aged 60 years and over.

The Dewis Choice Initiative, led by Sarah Wydall, was developed as a response to significant gaps in policy, practice and training in Wales. Dewis Choice aims to co-produce transformative measures to promote healthier relationships, research and supporting activities, and challenge entrenched practices that discriminate against victim-survivors of domestic abuse aged 60 years and over on account of age.

Dewis is unique, as it fulfils four functions, first, it provides a bespoke co-produced domestic abuse service designed by older people in two areas in rural Wales. The older people’s service prioritises informed choice, and intensive support, working with clients and safe family members from crisis through to recovery. Dewis Choice adopts a rights-based approach ensuring that the cohort of clients has equality of opportunity to access justice provision, alongside equipping survivors with the resources to aid recovery through promoting wellbeing.

Second, Dewis Choice researchers are undertaking the global first longitudinal prospective research study on older victim-survivors help-seeking and justice seeking experiences. Third ,the longitudinal data and case management data has been used to co-produce and deliver research-led training nationally and internationally. The longitudinal data and direct work with over 200 survivors has also produced resources including podcasts, short films, webinars and publications highlighting new areas of learning e.g the co-existence of dementia and domestic abuse; the experiences of older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors of domestic abuse. Fourth , the team also actively involve older survivors in ‘speaking truths to power according to their preferences, so they give input through a range of means to other stakeholder consultations as a ‘hard to reach’ group of survivors.

The Dewis Choice Initiative was an Impact Case Study (ICS) ranked 4\* ‘world leading’ in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021. Research produced by the team challenged previous responses to domestic abuse which assumed gendered violence only occurs in women under 45 years old. Dewis Choice improved access to justice and wellbeing for older victim-survivors of domestic abuse across Wales, through the delivery of a service which safeguarding older victim-survivors and informed more effective provision and delivery of public services for older victim-survivors of domestic abuse across the UK. Dewis Choice had a significant impact on the provision of training and services for older victim-survivors of DA UK- wide. To date, the team have trained over 20,000 practitioners and engaged with over 600 volunteers aged between 8-92 years to raise awareness on domestic abuse and coercive and controlling behaviours in later life.

The Mid-West and Wales Violence against Women and Sexual Violence Lead:

“ The regional Strategic Lead reports: The impact… Dewis Choice… has had for older people… and their families is unmeasurable… [it has] … a profound and ground breaking impact on the understanding and awareness of the abuse experienced by older people, as well as the development and improvement of the responses and support available”

Victim Survivors

Across Wales, older victim-survivors

supported report that Dewis Choice changed and enhanced their lives:

· `the project … helped me… escape. Restart my life’ ;

· `It actually change[d] my life’ ;

· `Don’t think I would have coped without the Choice Support workers there when I escaped. They helped me when I was leaving and called the police. I don’t think Iwould have survived because of the threat he posed to me’ ;

 `It has had a big effect on my quality of life …for years and years I just shut up about the domestic violence but after Dewis I was able to talk about this experience’ ; · `without them [Dewis Choice] you know it's no lie I would have given in on myself [taken own life] because I couldn’t cope’

**The response**

The details below describe the research findings that led to the inception of Dewis Choice and our research to date. .

**Access to justice**: how does the State fulfil its obligations to ensure older persons’ access justice, and to obtain remedies and reparations, when their human rights have been violated as a result of violence, abuse and neglect?

The Dewis Choice initiative initially grew out of the findings of two research studies conducted by members of the team, examining the policy and service responses to people aged 60 years and over experiencing domestic abuse in Wales.

The first of these research studies was the ‘Evaluation of the Access to Justice Pilot Project (Clarke et al., 2012; 2013; 2016). This was the first qualitative study in the United Kingdom to examine, from a multi-agency perspective, service responses to older female and male victims of domestic abuse. The pilot project was developed out of the Welsh Government’s six-year strategy The Right to be Safe (Welsh Assembly Government, Government 2010). The pilot was designed to address the needs of older people who were victims of domestic abuse and facilitate their access to criminal and civil justice options. More generally, the Access to Justice sought to reflect the UN Principles for Older People, to tackle discrimination against older people whenever it occurs, promote positive images of aging and give older people a stronger voice in society .

The evaluation of 131 detailed case studies involved analysis of 152 records compiled by practitioners from the police (98), safeguarding services (48), hospitals (3), Age Cymru (2) and a GP (1). Of the 131 victim-survivors, ninety-five (73%) were female and thirty-six were male (27%) The evaluation highlighted numerous gaps in justice provision for older people.

 For example:

• Two-thirds of the sample were not involved in the decision-making process when their justice options were considered.

• Very few cases of abuse resulted in a criminal prosecution (n=11) (n = 11) or a civil remedy (n=4), (n = 4), suggesting a pattern of attrition worthy of further investigation.

• A significant proportion of frontline workers lacked sufficient training to be able to explore civil justice remedies with older victims.

• Older victims of domestic abuse were frequently diverted into a process where domestic abuse risk assessment tools are not routinely used, thus denying older people access to specialist domestic violence and abuse resources.

• Older people (n=12), who participated in the qualitative interviews, felt that victims of abuse were more likely to engage with a justice provider if they were given additional time with one worker to build a relationship, establish trust and develop a rapport.

In summary, the evaluation revealed that older people’s views and wishes went undocumented in their statutory case files, which suggest that older victim-survivors **were not at the centre of the decision-making process and were not encouraged to make informed choices.**

 The second research study undertaken in 2015 by the researchers at the Centre , informing the development of the Dewis Choice Initiative was the Pan-Wales ‘Crimes Against and Abuse of Older People’ . This second study was commissioned by the Older People’s Commissioner for Wales. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 44 practitioners and managers from 21 of the 22 local authorities, four representatives from the four regional police forces and two members of the Crown Prosecution Service. The primary aim of the study was to explore professionals’ perceptions of structural and organizational barriers to help-seeking for victim-survivors of domestic abuse in later life.

 The study identified a paucity of knowledge in health, social care and criminal justice practitioners’ knowledge of, and subsequent responses to, domestic violence and abuse and coercive control in the older age cohort. This research also revealed a gap in the provision of services for older people who did not reach the adult safeguarding threshold (Wydall & Zerk, 2015; 2017). Furthermore, responses for older victim-survivors were often restricted to single agencies who lacked knowledge about how to support the complex needs of older victim-survivors. The large-scale study brought into focus the s**ystemic invisibility of older victim-survivors ‘lived experiences ‘ in domestic abuse research, policy and practice.** This highlighted the need for a longitudinal research of older survivors help-seeking and justice seeking experiences.

The two key studies above demonstrate **a ‘welfareising’ approach by practitioners who do not routinely explore possible civil or criminal justice options with older victim-survivors but divert them away from specialist domestic abuse resources and the appropriate risk assessment processes.** For both adult services and criminal justice agencies, it appears that the choice of approach used was centred around the favoured process ‘pathways and ideologies underpinning them, rather than **focussing on the specific needs of the individual client.**

Taking these initial findings together, Sarah Wydall, Alan Clarke and John Williams, designed a research proposal ‘the Dewis Choice Initiative’ **that prioritised a human rights lens,** where people aged 60 years and over were central to the design of the model. A dedicated service **where informed choice** was integral to the support provided to older victim-survivors**.** Furthermore, older victim-survivors **‘lived experiences’ would be made visible by incorporating a longitudinal prospective study.** Thus, clients referred into the service could choose to share their experiences from crisis through to recovery over time with the research team.NHS ethical clearance also allows **domestic abuse survivors living with dementia to have a voice i**n their help-seeking and justice seeking experiences. ‘Big Innovation’ National Lottery scheme awarded £1.3M to the team, since this award a further £1,3 M has been awarded by The Ministry of Justice, Comic Relief, The Covid Emergency National Communities Fund and Moondance.

THe findings from the longitudinal study serve to challenge entrenched views about older people’s perspectives on accessing justice, civil, criminal or restorative. The research suggests that the barriers to ‘help seeking’ and ‘justice seeking’ are primarily caused by extrinsic vulnerabilities such as systemic ageism, multiple intersecting forms of discrimination including service poverty.

To date longitudinal data has been gathered on 200 older people who have shared their lived experiences. Approximately 50% have a disability, a fifth of the cohort experience domestic abuse alongside living with dementia, a third are male victims and almost half the clients experience intimate partner violence . For further information on intersections see Wydall , (2021) ( Ref below )

Please feel free to contact the team for further thematic information

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