

# Recognising and responding to vulnerability related risks

**Guidelines**

Consultation



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# Contents

<b>Chair's foreword</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Summary of the guidelines</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Organisational focus</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Guidelines for police responders</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
What are these guidelines for?	9
What do we mean by vulnerability?	9
Who developed these guidelines?	9
How evidence-based are these guidelines?	10
Who are the guidelines for?	10
<b>Guideline 1: Professional development</b>	<b>11</b>
Evidence summary	11
Skills	12
Developing knowledge and skills on responding to vulnerability related risk	12
Resources	12
Organisational learning	13
Body-worn video	14
Debriefing	14
Compassion or empathy fatigue	14



<b>Guideline 2: Clues</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>Guideline 4: Curiosity</b>	<b>28</b>
Evidence summary	16	Evidence summary	28
Understanding the barriers to disclosure and looking for clues	17	<b>Appendix 1 - Actions</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Guideline 3: Communication</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>31</b>
Evidence summary	22		
Building rapport	23		
Active listening	25		
Using a procedurally just approach	25		
Minimising bias and preconceptions	26		
Awareness of internal motivations for disclosure	26		



# Chair's foreword

These guidelines focus on supporting officers and staff respond to vulnerability. They specify the actions that officers and staff need to take to recognise, understand and respond to vulnerability. They also set out the actions chief officers need to take at the organisational level to enable their staff to respond effectively. Vulnerability related demand has increased for the police service and a proportionate and effective response is required to manage it.<sup>1</sup>

These guidelines focus specifically on the policing response but the police are one part of a broader system responsible for protecting vulnerable people. Senior leaders across the system should work together to make sure that people needing help get it from the professionals with the right skills. Policing should contribute in circumstances when policing skills are most appropriate.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information on the background and rationale for undertaking the development of these guidelines is available from College of Policing (2019) 'Recognising and responding to vulnerability related risks - Scope of practice guidelines'.

A number of assumptions underpin the development of the guidelines.

- The focus is on vulnerability<sup>2</sup> rather than individual public protection strands.
- Police officers and staff undertake vulnerability related risk assessment and risk management as part of their role. They do not do this in isolation: they are part of a system that involves other agencies.

The Guideline Committee strongly supported the articulation of clearer roles, responsibilities and parameters for policing and other organisations in responding to vulnerability related risks and harm. This has been explored and articulated across different public protection strands, for example, missing

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<sup>2</sup> The College of Policing has adopted the THRIVE definition of vulnerability, ie, 'a person is vulnerable if, as a result of their situation or circumstances, they are unable to take care of or protect themselves or others from harm or exploitation.'

persons<sup>3</sup> or when considering the police response to mental health<sup>4</sup>.

From a wider vulnerability perspective, and therefore in alignment with a key assumption underpinning these guidelines, it is timely for chief officers to work in collaboration with the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, the College of Policing, the wider police service, relevant partners, academics and government to implement a collective understanding of the duties and responsibilities of the police in this area, recognising where other agencies might have a primary or supporting responsibility. This has the potential to influence the wider system in a way that enables a more effective response at an individual level while also helping the police service manage demand.

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3 See 'Joint responsibility' ([app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/#joint-responsibility](https://app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/#joint-responsibility))

4 See 'When do the police have a duty to respond?' ([app.college.police.uk/app-content/mental-health/introduction-and-strategic-considerations/#when-do-the-police-have-a-duty-to-respond](https://app.college.police.uk/app-content/mental-health/introduction-and-strategic-considerations/#when-do-the-police-have-a-duty-to-respond))



# Summary of the guidelines

These College of Policing guidelines focus on supporting officers and staff to recognise individuals at risk of harm, better understand the vulnerabilities of all those they encounter (rather than thinking about risk in relation to individual forms of harm such as child abuse or domestic violence in isolation), and interact with vulnerable people in a way that maximises opportunities for disclosure.

The guidelines consist of:

- one strategic-level guideline for chief officers
- three practical guidelines for police responders

Recognising vulnerability related risk requires two steps.

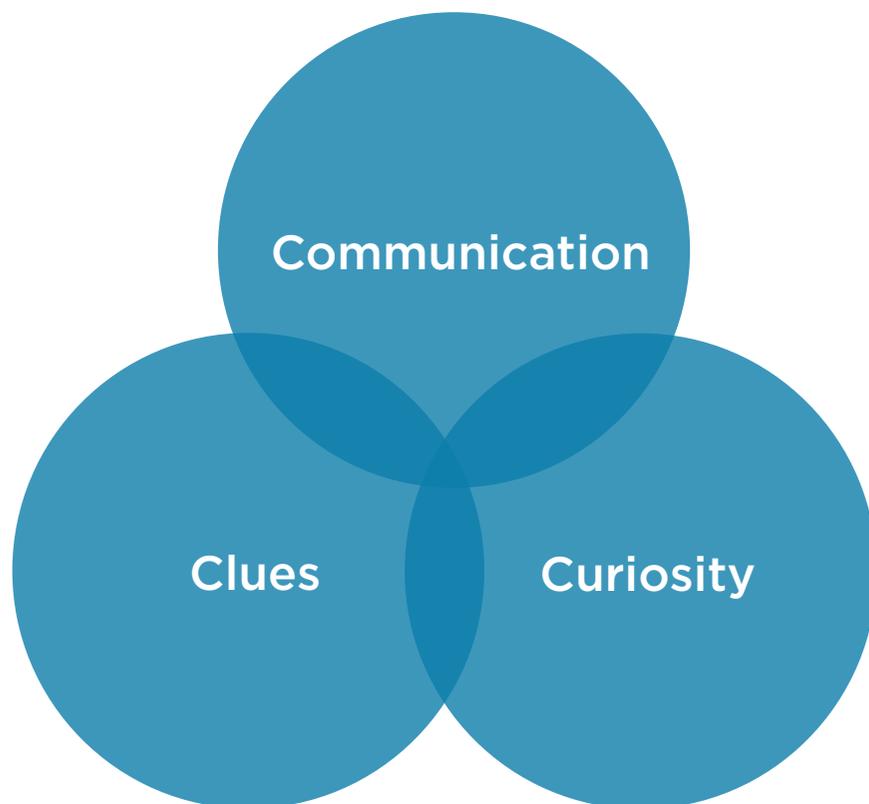
1. Identify the vulnerability/vulnerabilities that caused a person to come to harm or to be at risk of harm.
2. Identify if the risk of harm is continuing and what level of risk that poses.

To help with recognition, responders have over the last decade been reliant on checklists and risk tools to identify and assess risk. The review of the research evidence undertaken in developing these guidelines identified a lack of evidence associated with the

effectiveness of these checklists and tools. Most people who need help will be vulnerable in more than one way and a single tool is unlikely to address all vulnerabilities. This does not mean, however, that checklists and tools have no value. They can inform and guide a responder on the nature and origin of risks. But decisions about the level of risk and what action to take relies on responders using 'professional judgement'.



The evidence base is stronger in identifying themes that cut across public protection strands and can positively inform and influence professional judgement. This evidence base is reflected in three responder-focused guidelines:



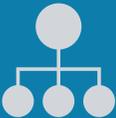
It is important to note that these are not hierarchical, ie, one is not more important than the other. Each area should not be applied in isolation: applying all three in combination will lead to better informed professional judgement. Secondly, the three areas are potentially self-reinforcing. For example, good communication can reveal more clues that open up more avenues for investigation (curiosity). This can then lead to more focused communication and so on. Listening to people, spotting potential indicators of risk and being curious about these, should help officers and staff to identify those requiring higher levels of intervention and support, but also those that do not.

Responding effectively to manage a person's vulnerabilities so that they do not suffer harm requires an assessment of the capacity and resilience of the individual and the people around them. Individuals are resilient and resourceful to different degrees. They are supported by families, friends and communities to different levels. The police form part of a broader system that should work together to make people safer, building on the resilience of the individual and those around them.

The framework for support from the broader system can be understood as operating at three levels.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This framework is informed by the College of Policing's (2013) 10 principles of risk in 2013.

Level	Principle	Description and link to risk principles
<b>Individual</b> 	Making risk-based decisions is a core professional requirement.	Although the risk of harm can never be totally removed ( <b>Principle 4</b> ), all members of the police service must make decisions in conditions of uncertainty (ie, risk taking) ( <b>Principle 1</b> ) to achieve the safety, security and wellbeing of individuals and communities ( <b>Principle 2</b> ).
	Recording and/or referring risk decisions requires professional judgement.	Decision makers are required to consider the value and likelihood of the possible benefits of a particular decision, against the seriousness and likelihood of the harm ( <b>Principle 3</b> ). Whether to record risk decisions and whether to share them with partner agencies ( <b>Principle 9</b> ) should be left to professional judgement, after considering the likelihood of harm occurring and its seriousness ( <b>Principle 7</b> ).
<b>Organisation</b> 	Evaluating risk decisions should focus on the quality of the decision making, not the outcome.	Realistically and fairly reviewing others' risk decision making necessitates taking into account any dilemmas or emergencies, whether they were part of a sequence of decisions, and/or might be appropriately taken by other agencies ( <b>Principle 5</b> ). The standard expected of risk decisions should be consistent with what officers of similar rank, specialism or experience would have taken in the same circumstances ( <b>Principle 6</b> ).
	Learning from risk decisions is necessary to reduce risk aversion and improve decision making.	The police service can encourage a more positive approach to risk by openly supporting decision makers and building their confidence in taking risks ( <b>Principle 10</b> ). Recognising good risk taking promotes a culture that learns from successes as well as failures ( <b>Principle 8</b> ).
<b>Wider system</b> 	The police should not assume, directly or indirectly, responsibility for all forms of risk.	This underpins the 10 risk principles as other agencies may have more appropriate skills (eg, in risk assessment), resources (eg, ability to provide long-term interventions) and legal powers.

This framework links directly across to the guidelines. For example, communication, clues and context offer an evidence-based opportunity to inform professional judgement. The first guideline (**Professional development**) is aimed at senior leaders to drive organisational learning that can help underpin an effective response at an individual and organisational level.

The type and strength of the evidence underpinning each guideline is shown. The supporting information that follows includes a brief summary of the evidence and explains what the guideline might mean in practice. These guidelines should be read in conjunction with the Chair's foreword to understand how they might contribute to a wider debate on the police role in recognising and responding to vulnerability related risk.



# Organisational focus

## 1 Professional development



**Chief officers** should monitor and review the response to vulnerability to support and implement professional development and organisational learning.

Essential elements include:

- provision of appropriate training that enhances communication skills for staff
- enabling and supporting opportunities for staff to develop their knowledge and skills on responding to vulnerability related risk
- development and implementation of processes to capture, analyse and disseminate organisational learning to enhance practice. Examples could include:
  - review of body-worn video (BWV) footage
  - debriefing
  - identifying and responding to compassion or empathy fatigue

### Evidence-base:

empirical evidence

good|**moderate**|limited

practitioner evidence available



# Guidelines for police responders

## 2 Clues >

**Officers and staff** should be alert to and understand the clues that indicate vulnerability related risk (including exploitation and abuse). They should understand the reasons why individuals may not disclose their vulnerability. These include:

- fear, bullying or coercion
- disempowerment
- dependence
- lack of recognition of abuse
- cultural (and societal influences)
- perception of authority
- experience
- feeling blamed or not believed
- impact of trauma

### Evidence-base:

empirical evidence  
good|**moderate**|limited



practitioner evidence available



## 3 Communication >

**Officers and staff** should develop and use advanced communication skills to establish trust quickly, build rapport and encourage individuals to be open about their potential risk/vulnerability, including any experience of abuse.

Key skills include:

- building rapport
- active listening
- using a procedurally just (eg, open, respectful and honest) approach
- minimising biases/judgement
- awareness of internal motivations for disclosure

### Evidence-base:

empirical evidence  
good|**moderate**|limited



practitioner evidence available



## 4 Curiosity >

**Officers and staff** should exercise professional curiosity to identify and investigate vulnerability related risks so they can deliver the appropriate policing response.

Professional curiosity includes:

- exploring and understanding what is happening by asking questions and maintaining an open mind
- not necessarily accepting things at face value, enquiring more deeply and challenging one's own assumptions
- understanding one's own responsibility to investigate and knowing when and how to take action

### Evidence-base:

empirical evidence  
good|**moderate**|limited



practitioner evidence available



# Introduction

## What are these guidelines for?

The College guidelines are designed to provide clear evidence based guidance on identifying and responding to vulnerability related risks. These guidelines focus on spotting the signs associated with vulnerability (clues), and creating a safe, trusting environment to identify risk, encourage the disclosure of harm and elicit the information required to inform appropriate actions to keep people safe (communication). These guidelines are underpinned by the **Code of Ethics**.

Responding officers and staff often come into contact with people in crisis, who have already suffered or are at risk of harm. These initial police interactions present crucial opportunities for appropriate action (eg, safeguarding). Responding to these opportunities requires the ability to recognise vulnerabilities and risks of harm, maintain an open and enquiring mind, understand your own responsibilities and know the most appropriate action to take.<sup>6</sup>

The aim of these guidelines is to support all officers and staff to:

- spot the clues associated with vulnerability related risk

<sup>6</sup> **Appendix 1** presents examples of action that may be appropriate when responding to these types of incidents.

- create an environment that encourages individuals to disclose relevant information
- be curious and obtain a rich picture of circumstances associated with an incident

This will help responders deliver an appropriate policing response, irrespective of crime or incident type. For the guidelines to be implemented effectively, there must be suitable professional development opportunities for all staff.

## What do we mean by vulnerability?

The following definition of vulnerability, which has been adopted by the College, is used for these guidelines:

A person is vulnerable if, as a result of their situation or circumstances, they are unable to take care of or protect themselves or others from harm or exploitation.

## Who developed these guidelines?

These guidelines were developed collaboratively by a College Guideline Committee consisting of frontline practitioners, subject matter experts and academics. The committee was supported by College of Policing specialist staff. The role of the committee was to develop the scope, consider the evidence and draft the guidelines, taking into

account the views of stakeholders. Officers, staff, specials and volunteers can also use the guidelines to understand the support they should expect from their supervisors.

### **How evidence-based are these guidelines?**

The guidelines and supporting information draw on the best available evidence, in this case an extensive review of the relevant research along with insights from police officers and staff.

Although there is a large evidence base in this area, the largest proportion of studies included in this review focused on domestic abuse and serious sexual abuse victims. However, these studies do provide useful findings to help responders recognise more complex factors (such as coercive control) which span a range of vulnerabilities. There was sufficient consistency across the studies reviewed for the committee to give a clear steer as to the skills officers and staff need as well as the clues and signals they should be aware of.

The supporting information has been developed using practitioner expertise (face-to-face interviews and calls for practice), generally applicable suggestions extracted from existing guidance on achieving best evidence, and relevant information from the research evidence.

### **Who are the guidelines for?**

The guidelines are aimed at policing responders who, as part of their role, identify and protect vulnerable people.

Policing responders is used to mean police officers or staff in initial encounter situations with members of the public, eg, frontline officers, call handlers or front counter staff.

These guidelines may also be useful for specialist officers and staff conducting secondary risk assessments. They may also be useful for individuals who are responsible for supporting responders and/or developing organisational policy and strategy related to vulnerability related risk (eg, senior leaders).

Although these guidelines have been developed primarily for face-to-face interactions, the issue of identifying and responding to vulnerability is relevant in other forms of interactions, eg, telephone calls, contact via social media. Officers and staff involved in these roles may also find a number of the guidelines relevant to their role.

# Guideline 1:

## Professional development

Chief officers should monitor and review the response to vulnerability to support and implement professional development and organisational learning.

Essential elements include:

- provision of appropriate training that enhances communication skills for staff
- enabling and supporting opportunities for staff to develop their knowledge and skills on responding to vulnerability related risk
- development and implementation of processes to capture, analyse and disseminate relevant organisational learning to enhance practice, examples of which could include:
  - review of BWV footage
  - debriefing
  - identifying and responding to compassion or empathy fatigue

### Evidence-base:



Empirical evidence: good|**moderate**|limited



Practitioner evidence: **available**



Recognising and responding to vulnerability related risks guidelines: Consultation

### Evidence summary

There was some evidence exploring knowledge and awareness of vulnerability related risks. In this context, the evidence suggests that more could be done to enhance: cultural awareness; impact and needs awareness (eg, relating to disabilities, mental health); the appreciation of 'intersectionality'<sup>7</sup>; the understanding of coercion and control; and understanding the impact of trauma on recall and ability to provide statements.

The evidence was based on 64 studies<sup>8</sup>, of which 34% were based in the UK. 53% were based on interviews with domestic abuse and serious sexual offences victims as well as police officers/staff and other support providers.

Specialist practitioners (working in the field of domestic abuse or victim services) also identified that police responders sometimes failed to fully understand more complex incidents (eg, stalking, coercive control) when reported by victims or witnesses.

<sup>7</sup> Multiple barriers experienced by marginalised individuals or groups, for example, women who are non-white, or people who are non-white and disabled.

<sup>8</sup> The 64 studies included in this guideline originate from the following thematic evidence summaries: knowledge and awareness – 44 studies; communication (encouraging disclosure) – 30. NB: Numbers may not add up due to an overlap of studies across a number of themes.

Professional development is key to ensuring that officers and staff possess the right skills and knowledge to respond effectively to vulnerable individuals who are at risk of harm. In addition, the ability to capture, assess and disseminate relevant organisational learning can improve future practice.

Chief officers should provide relevant professional development opportunities for their staff and ensure that their force can make best use of organisational learning opportunities.

## Skills

Advanced communication is fundamental to creating an environment in which individuals feel able to disclose information which may help officers or staff to identify any vulnerability. There is some evidence that communication skills can be taught. For example, training which seeks to teach officers a series of practical techniques and improve their general communication skills can improve the victim experience.<sup>9</sup> There could also be opportunities to learn from other sectors. For example, core communication skills are considered essential in health care. Open-ended enquiry, reflective listening and empathy are used to respond to the unique needs, values and preferences of individual patients.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Wheller et al (2013).

<sup>10</sup> Moore et al (2018)

Advanced communication requires a cluster of particular skills, behaviours and approaches, and is underpinned by appropriate attitudes and values. Chief officers have a key role in implementing, modelling, and embedding advanced communication skills within their forces, supported by the National Police Curriculum.

## Developing knowledge and skills on responding to vulnerability related risk

Chief officers are encouraged to create and promote opportunities for officers and staff to enhance their subject matter knowledge and skills relating to vulnerability. This can be achieved through various mechanisms, for example, briefing, policy, continuing professional development (CPD) and training. The content included and referenced in this set of guidelines can help identify the topic areas that could be relevant.

The College has developed a range of vulnerability related products that can help.

## Resources

- One-day vulnerability training package – supports a culture change in forces, encouraging frontline officers and staff to look beyond the obvious and feel empowered to use their professional curiosity when dealing with those who are vulnerable.



- Vulnerability CPD package – containing nine programmes, each focuses on an interview with or about a vulnerable person.
- Force self-assessment health check – to help identify areas for improvement and put in place the necessary structures to support officers and staff to respond to the needs of vulnerable individuals.
- Multi-agency critical incident exercise – for child safeguarding specialists, it explores decision making while also providing an opportunity for collaborative learning and networking.
- Specialist Child Abuse Investigation Development Programme module – to develop officers’ understanding of the multi-agency working approach in child abuse investigations.
- DA matters – A programme developed with the support of SafeLives to enhance the skills, knowledge and effectiveness of first responders in dealing with domestic abuse.
- Public Protection Menu of Tactical Options (PPMTO) – a tactical menu of interventions that can be aimed at victims and perpetrators.
- Public Protection National Agencies Document – a directory of agencies relevant to different public protection strands.

## Organisational learning

To capture relevant organisational learning, committee members highlighted: debriefing sessions, peer review, structured time for reflection, and learning from errors and ‘near misses’ as potentially useful mechanisms. Committee members also reflected that the **Competency and Values Framework** (CVF) identifies that how tasks are achieved is just as important as what is achieved, and what actions are taken.

Therefore, providing the opportunities for practitioners to reflect and review actions and decisions can begin to develop a culture of learning and improvement. However, the challenge of creating the space and time to put this into practice, particularly within the current operational context, needs to be recognised.<sup>11</sup>

To help understand the extent and impact of communication skills and knowledge in practice, chief officers could:

- review evidence from BWV to understand effective actions responders take and where learning of how to deal with complex/difficult situations can be shared
- analyse service user and third-party feedback and complaints to improve the service provided to individuals/victims

<sup>11</sup> Police Foundation (2018)

- use formal operational debriefing techniques to review and address near misses and staff wellbeing concerns (eg, empathy fatigue)

## Body-worn video

Most forces in England and Wales have employed BWV cameras that allow officers and staff to capture and record operational footage. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services<sup>12</sup> recommended that initial investigations involving vulnerable victims could be improved by giving all responding officers access to this equipment. Furthermore, footage from BWV can be more widely used to review responders' initial interactions with vulnerable individuals, including the actions they take to facilitate organisational learning and sharing of practice of how to deal with complex or difficult situations.<sup>13</sup>

## Debriefing<sup>14</sup>

Interviewed partner organisations reported having many opportunities for informal briefing and reflection throughout the day (in addition to more formal processes, for example, monthly/quarterly supervision). In comparison, police practitioners stated that, despite protocols being followed, debriefing often only happened when 'something went wrong'.

<sup>12</sup> HMICFRS (2019)

<sup>13</sup> Grossmith et al (2015)

<sup>14</sup> Debriefing is also highlighted in the **Conflict management guidelines**

Debriefs are useful for both identifying areas for improvement and understanding what has gone well. They allow responders to reflect on specific incidents and consider or share any learning from them. Debriefs can:

- highlight negative and positive operational performance of a team or individual officers/staff members
- help understand what happened, why it happened and what could have been done differently
- prevent mistakes recurring
- identify issues with stress and wellbeing among officers and staff
- help officers and staff share intelligence and other information, and to raise any concerns
- capture and disseminate good practice

## Compassion or empathy fatigue

Compassion fatigue is described as 'the cost of caring' for those in professions that regularly see and care for others in pain and trauma.<sup>15</sup> Those who work in these fields have either direct exposure to traumatic events (police, emergency hospital workers, nurses, etc.) or even secondary exposure (listening to victims' experiences, child protection issues, etc.). Anyone who persistently deals with individuals suffering from depression, addiction, poverty or any combination

<sup>15</sup> Figley (2002) and Figley (1999)



of circumstances that creates hardship or feelings of despair and helplessness (including vulnerability) can experience compassion or empathy fatigue.<sup>16</sup>

Committee members highlighted the importance of chief officers being alert to compassion or empathy fatigue and wellbeing concerns of staff and officers facing repeated exposure to vulnerable individuals and vulnerabilities. The impact on staff morale and professional curiosity was considered important as this can affect the ability to effectively communicate and investigate vulnerability and harm.

## Resources

➤ [Oscar Kilo](#)

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<sup>16</sup> Turgoose et al. (2017)

# Guideline 2: Clues

Officers and staff should be alert to and understand the clues that indicate vulnerability related risk (including exploitation and abuse). They should understand the reasons why individuals may not disclose their vulnerability. These include:

- fear, bullying or coercion
- disempowerment
- dependence
- lack of recognition of abuse
- cultural (and societal influences)
- perception of authority
- past experience
- feeling blamed or not believed
- impact of trauma

## Evidence-base:



Empirical evidence: **good**|moderate|limited



Practitioner evidence: **available**

## Evidence summary

There is good evidence on some of the main barriers to the disclosure of risk and vulnerability. Knowledge of these barriers may help the search for and revelation of clues relating to the presence of vulnerability.

The research identified barriers to disclosing abuse that were related to wider contextual factors, rather than the victims' direct experience of abuse. These concerned cultural influences, general perceptions of the police and other agencies, and past experiences of engaging with agencies. The research also highlighted barriers to disclosing abuse directly related to the victims' experiences of abuse and its impact, including shame and stigma, fear and dependence, and self-blame. Interviews with practitioners identified similar themes as being important barriers to disclosure.

The evidence was based on 110 studies<sup>17</sup>, of which 35% were based in the UK, and 73% were based on interviews with domestic abuse and serious sexual offences victims.

<sup>17</sup> The 110 studies included in this guideline originate from the following thematic evidence summaries: fear and coercive control – 74 studies; external barriers to disclosure – 69 studies; internal barriers to disclosure – 72 studies; being believed – 57 studies. NB: Numbers may not add up due to an overlap of studies across a number of themes.



## Understanding the barriers to disclosure and looking for clues

Vulnerability related risk may not always be obvious when responding to incidents: identifying vulnerability can be difficult. The barriers to the disclosure of risk and vulnerability may manifest as clues, typically associated with an individual's behaviour that officers and staff should be aware of. In particular, these clues may be informed by an awareness of why an individual:

- may not want to disclose their vulnerability
- may not see themselves as having vulnerabilities

The evidence review highlighted a number of behaviours used by perpetrators and the effect of these behaviours on victims' ability to disclose their experiences and seek help, including using coercive and controlling behaviour.

**Coercive control** is a range of abusive behaviours intended to keep a victim subordinate and create a state of entrapment. Coercive and controlling behaviour can be present across all areas of vulnerability and is not just restricted to domestic abuse cases.

Awareness of behaviours, therefore, will help responders identify potential vulnerability related risk. These can include:

- **Fear:** Victims frequently displayed fear of their abuser, and a consequent reluctance to disclose abuse or seek help. This fear may be based both on threats and other abusive behaviours. Threats

may be wide-ranging and aimed at the victim either directly or indirectly. Responders need to be aware that both threats of and actual violence are designed to put the victim in a state of dependence or suppression which may make them less willing to disclose their abuse.

- **Disempowerment:** Clues that a victim is disempowered may include lack of confidence, low self-esteem, depression, and feelings of worthlessness. This may stem from an abuser's manipulative behaviour, for example:
  - presenting the victim as mentally unstable
  - telling the victim that the police won't help
  - playing on the victim's fears and lack of self-confidence to discourage them from seeking help
  - speaking for a victim who can't speak English
  - not allowing the victim to speak with police or other agencies by themselves
- **Dependence:** Victims discussed their dependence on the perpetrator as a barrier to disclosing abuse. Dependence can take a variety of forms, for example:
  - financial
  - for housing, transportation, child care/family relationships
  - child care/or as a carer

- immigration status
- debt bondage/not wanting to return home (human trafficking)
- loss of access to goods and services in a community, or community support

Abusers can also restrict a victim's movements by discouraging or preventing them from contacting family, friends and agencies, leading to isolation.

- **Recognition of abuse:** Victims may not see what they have experienced as abuse, or as something that is legitimate to report to the police. Reasons why victims may not recognise that they have experienced abuse include:
  - uncertainty about what has happened
  - being unsure or unaware that the experience qualified as a crime (eg, unfamiliarity with the criminal justice system; exploitation; an experience that wouldn't be considered a crime in a different country)
  - uncertainty whether the abuse is 'bad enough', especially in relation to non-physical abuse such as controlling behaviour, lower-level physical abuse (pushing, shoving, slapping), or sexual offences perpetrated by someone who is known to the victim

- **Cultural (and societal influences):** Responders need to be aware that in some cultures abuse may be regarded as customary, common or acceptable and that victims may fear being criticised for not respecting the cultural norm of family privacy, or for bringing shame or unwanted attention to the relationship, family, or the wider community. Others may fear breaking up the family, or believe that seeking help represents failure. They may fear insensitive responses, being ostracised, or that their victimisation reflects badly on them.
- **Perception of authority:** Pre-existing negative perceptions of authority figures, including a lack of trust in the system and fear of the police can make an individual less willing to disclose abuse or harm. Victims may also be reluctant to disclose for fear that nothing would be done about their abuse. Responders should be aware that perceptions of the legal system more generally may also impact decisions to disclose: some victims may not understand the process or lack faith in the criminal justice system, or feel the time, energy and resource required to pursue legal action is not worthwhile.
- **Experience:** Victims may be hesitant to trust police and feel that additional disclosures would be harmful rather than helpful. Negative experiences can affect future decisions about whether to

approach the police, and may extend to experiences with the wider criminal justice system as well as other professionals (eg, healthcare providers, social services), and friends or family.

- **Feeling blamed or not believed:** Feeling believed was reported to be one of the most important aspects of the interaction for victims as it confirms their experience and that they were right to disclose. Fear of not being believed was consistently cited as a barrier to reporting, and victims reported experiences of police appearing to doubt their accounts.

Perceived reasons for being doubted included:

- victims knowing the perpetrator or being unwilling to leave the perpetrator
- victims having their credibility questioned due to the circumstances of the offence (eg, alcohol was involved)
- victim's life circumstances or characteristics (eg, age, mental health)
- victims being uncertain of specific details/ inconsistencies in victims' accounts
- police placing more trust in other people's accounts than the victim's
- victims being accused of exaggerating/being hypersensitive

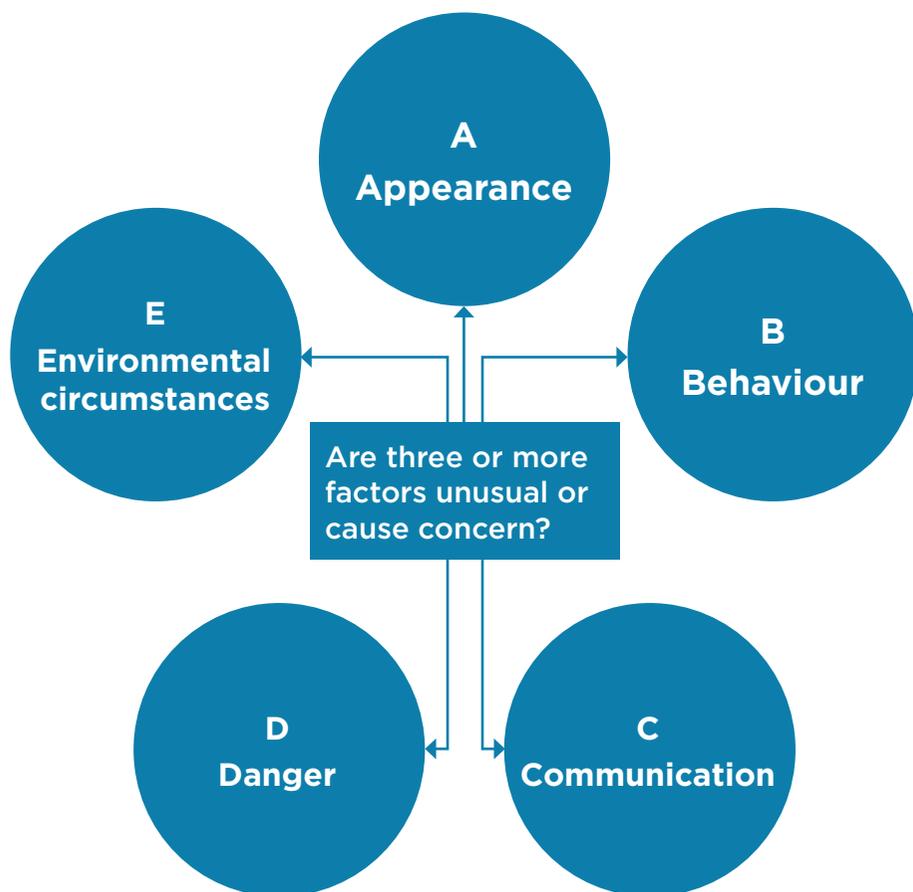
- victims being questioned as to why they didn't fight back
- victims being told they would be charged if found to be lying
- perpetrators giving false accounts or manipulating the police
- victims' behaviour not being considered appropriate, eg, if they have a calm reporting demeanour
- victims' reluctance to go to the police immediately

Police were seen to demonstrate belief in the victim's account both directly, through verbal reassurance, and also indirectly, by how they treated the victim more generally and how thoroughly they investigated the report.

- **Impact of trauma:** Responders need to be aware that trauma may affect victims' responses in different ways, for example, how they present to officers and staff, whether and how they display emotions, and possible impact on memory and recollection. These factors may impact on them and may lead to inconsistencies in their account.

## Practical advice – Vulnerability Assessment Framework

The **Vulnerability Assessment Framework**<sup>18</sup> was considered useful by practitioners to guide their identification of vulnerability.



<sup>18</sup> The framework was developed by academics at the University of Central Lancashire and is included in Authorised Professional Practice. For further information, see Wright, K. and McGlen (2012) Mental health emergencies: using a structured assessment framework.

**Appearance** (eg, visible injuries, state of their clothing, body language)

1. Is there something about their appearance that is unusual or gives cause for concern? Do they look ill, injured, unsettled or anxious?
2. What can be observed immediately about the person in distress?
3. What is the demeanour of the person?

**Behaviour** (eg, aggression, denial, emotional, nervous, scared, shock)

1. Is there something about their behaviour that is unusual or gives cause for concern?
2. Are they excitable, irrational, manic, slow or furtive?
3. What are they doing and is it in keeping with the situation?

**Communication** (eg, cadence, sentence structure, type of language used, vocabulary, pattern of speech, tone of voice, asking questions, active listening)

1. Is there something unusual about the way they communicate that gives cause for concern?
2. Is their speech slurred, slow or fast? Are their eyes glazed, staring or dilated? What is their body language and are they displaying any subtle signs of stress or fear?
3. Do they understand your questions?
4. Does the person appear to have capacity or are there any identified/noticeable issues?

**Danger** (eg, are they in immediate danger, what's their physical location, what time of day is it?)

1. Is there a risk of danger/harm to themselves or another?
2. What is the time of day? Where do they live?  
Can they get home?

**Environment** (eg, what company are they keeping, who are they hanging out with, are there provisions in the cupboards?)

1. Is there something about the environment that is unusual or gives cause for concern?
2. Has the incident they are involved in significantly affected their circumstances?
3. What are the circumstances? Are they unusual or out of the ordinary? Does anything give cause for concern?

In addition, practitioners identified other factors which they felt were important when considering someone's vulnerability including:

- protected factors (eg, age, disability, gender, mental health, religion, sexuality)
- substance abuse
- homelessness

The use of the Vulnerability Assessment Framework can be enhanced by gathering as much information as possible, knowing whether partner agencies are already involved and using information sources such as:

- computer systems
- force checklists/frameworks/policies
- lessons learned
- history/priors
- local knowledge

# Guideline 3: Communication

Officers and staff should use advanced communication skills to quickly establish trust, build rapport and encourage individuals to be open about their potential risk/vulnerability, including any experience of abuse.

Key skills include:

- building rapport
- active listening
- using a procedurally just (eg, open, respectful and honest) approach
- minimising biases/judgement
- awareness of internal motivations for disclosure

Applying these skills will develop a better understanding of relevant vulnerabilities especially during the initial stages of information gathering and identification of risk.

While many officers and staff already have excellent communication skills, organisational support may be needed to further enhance and maintain these skills.<sup>19</sup> See [professional development](#).

<sup>19</sup> For information, communication skills are also covered in other guidelines. For example, see: [Conflict management guidelines](#).

## Evidence summary

There is good evidence on the importance of effective communication (covering language, building rapport and asking questions) in building a relationship with victims or vulnerable people to encourage the disclosure of abuse or harm. Interpersonal treatment, specifically the importance of sensitivity in interactions and a procedurally just approach was strongly supported by the evidence.

The evidence was based on 102 studies<sup>20</sup>, of which 31% were based in the UK, and 66% were based on interviews with victims of domestic abuse and serious sexual offences. Practitioners identified communication as an important factor when developing a relationship with the victim and encouraging the disclosure of abuse and/or harm.

### Evidence-base:

 Empirical evidence: **good**|moderate|limited

 Practitioner evidence: **available**

<sup>20</sup> The 101 studies included in this guideline originate from the following thematic evidence summaries: bias and preconceptions – 65 studies; communication – 44 studies; interpersonal treatment – 68 studies; fairness and process – 53 studies; victim empowerment – 22 studies. NB: Numbers may not add up due to an overlap of studies across a number of themes.

## Building rapport

Building rapport<sup>21</sup> with individuals was shown to be important in eliciting information and encouraging the disclosure of abuse/harm for all vulnerabilities. Practitioners described rapport as ‘building a human connection’, ‘developing a relationship’ and ‘encouraging trust’. It was suggested that building rapport takes time and can be improved by consistency of support when there is a series of encounters, both in terms of the approach and the number of different staff involved. In relation to children in particular, police need to avoid appearing as intimidating/authority figures. Practitioners felt that rapport building was vital in developing a relationship with an individual which enabled the disclosure of information and allowed the collection of a more complete picture of the situation.

<sup>21</sup> Rapport building was also highlighted in **Obtaining initial accounts from victims and witnesses guidelines**

## Practical advice: developing relationships/rapport

Practitioners highlighted the importance of creating a safe space and developing a relationship to encourage the sharing of information. Investing time, providing space and building trust were considered vital to building good relationships.

Practical examples of this included:

- offering drinks, tissues, breaks, and/or a seat
- giving them time to think
- offering encouragement
- offering alternatives, eg, female/male officer, interpreter
- considering the impact of attending a police station/being sensitive to the situation
- managing their expectations
- developing a dialogue and using language they understand
- demonstrating a genuine interest in them
- demonstrating empathy and compassion
- listening actively

Barriers to effective communication included:

- taking everything at face value/not reading between the lines
- asking questions by rote/parroting back answers
- interrogating the individual
- not recognising peculiarities in language or content



### Practical advice: developing relationships/rapport

To improve communication, practitioners recommended:

- adapting the language to the person/situation
- having an approachable manner
- showing compassion and empathy
- having awareness of body language/non-verbal cues (not just the individual's but also their own)
- monitoring their tone of voice
- being sensitive and patient

Although rapport building has been shown to be important, there is little information in the research on what this means in practice and techniques for building rapport vary considerably.

The use of appropriate language, however, contributes to building rapport. Officers and staff should ensure that:

- relevant facilities and support services are available for individuals who may require them (eg, interpretation and translation services)
- they use the individual's preferred terminology (eg, survivor)
- they use gender-inclusive language
- they avoid jargon and don't assume prior knowledge of the criminal justice system

### Hints and tips from existing guidance – verbal and non-verbal communication<sup>22</sup>

#### Verbal

- Introduce yourself, ask the person their name and use it.
- Use open questions to engage the person.
- Explain why you are taking the action you are.
- Be honest about what is going to happen next.
- Speak clearly, use simple language, avoid using jargon and slang and check understanding.
- Minimise the number of people needed to deal with the situation.

#### Non-verbal

- Allow the person time to speak.
- Be aware of your own non-verbal signals and the potential impact this may have on encouraging disclosure.
- Stay silent during pauses or make simple sounds (not words) to encourage the witness to continue.

Ensuring that actions (eg, what at-risk individuals can expect to happen) and processes (eg, what follow-up information they might receive and who else might have to be involved) are properly explained was considered by guideline committee members to be an important factor in the fair and respectful treatment of an individual.

<sup>22</sup> **Conflict management guidelines**

## Active listening

Active listening lets the individual know you have heard and understood them. It can be done by repeating back to the witness what they have just communicated, taking care not to inadvertently approve or disapprove of the information just given. Active listening and open questioning also demonstrate an interest in the individual and their circumstances.

### Hints and tips from existing guidance - active listening

- Be open, receptive, unbiased and fair and avoid making assumptions.
- Stand/sit at a comfortable distance from the person and slightly side-on to promote cooperation.
- Look at the person to show you are listening.
- Make it clear that you have plenty of time for the conversation.
- Use open questions to encourage conversation.
- Use pauses appropriately to allow the person to respond.
- Nod your head to indicate understanding or to encourage the person to keep talking.
- Listen to the whole message, take notice of use of words, tone and body language.
- Paraphrase what they have told you and check understanding.
- Show empathy and demonstrate understanding.

## Using a procedurally just approach

Research<sup>23</sup> on procedural justice has highlighted that positive interactions with individuals can be supported by officers or staff:

- giving people a 'voice', letting them tell their side of the story, and listening
- making impartial decisions and explaining how they were reached
- showing trustworthiness by being open and honest
- treating people with dignity and respect

Findings from the research evidence suggested some victims found the simple opportunity of being listened to and giving their account in their own words empowering. The importance of empowering victims by giving them as much control as possible over the process and choices in how to proceed was also emphasised.

23 Mazerolle, L., Bennett, S., Davis, J., Sargeant, E., & Manning, M. (2013) Legitimacy in policing: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 9(1)

## Hints and tips from existing guidance – promoting procedural justice in practice

These include:

- offering people the chance to ask questions and responding to what they say
- explaining how processes work
- explaining how decisions are made before a process starts and what is considered
- summarising and paraphrasing what people say to assure them they have been heard
- explaining reasons behind decisions
- making a conscious effort to be approachable and not intimidating

What might make people feel that their treatment is not procedurally just?

- When procedures, or use of authority, feels automatic, with little explanation, personal engagement or collaboration.
- When procedures which impact people are seen as a ‘tick box exercise’.
- When reasons for decisions are superficial or lead to more questions.
- When it’s not clear why a process exists, or why a rule exists.

## Minimising bias and preconceptions

Practitioners identified the importance of minimising personal biases and preconceptions as these were considered a major barrier to the effective disclosure of information. They noted aspects such as:

- poor demeanour/attitude towards the individual by first responders
- frustration with repeatedly having to give statements
- subjective personal bias
- unconscious bias or judgement in relation to the individual’s behaviour and/or personal characteristics or circumstances, including:
  - awareness of compassion fatigue and desensitisation to scenarios as particularly relevant

## Awareness of internal motivations for disclosure

It is important to be aware of the potential internal motivations that may encourage individuals to disclose information. Internal motivations may include:

- to help catch the perpetrator and have them prosecuted (retribution, justice, to send a message)
- validation/to have a voice and be heard

- moral or ethical obligations (to protect others/sense of duty)
- to protect themselves
- being ready to leave the abuser
- reaching a breaking or turning point where they've had enough, sometimes triggered by an escalation in abusive behaviour
- impact of the abuse on others, especially children
- persuaded by others/when they received an 'extra push' from others

## Guideline 4: Curiosity

Officers and staff should exercise professional curiosity to actively identify and investigate vulnerability related risks so they can deliver the appropriate policing response.

Professional curiosity includes:

- exploring and understanding what is happening by asking questions and maintaining an open mind
- not necessarily accepting things at face value, enquiring more deeply and challenging one's own assumptions
- understanding one's own responsibility to investigate and knowing when and how to take action

### Evidence-base:



Empirical evidence: good|**moderate**|limited



Practitioner evidence: **available**

### Evidence summary

The review findings concerning barriers to disclosing/reporting abuse suggest the notion of 'professional curiosity' – challenging assumptions and exploring and understanding the potentially complex dynamics of a situation rather than taking things at face value – is particularly important in relation to identifying risk of harm. The literature on coercive control, in particular, shows how perpetrators seek to manipulate situations, and how victims may minimise abuse for a number of reasons including shame and coercion and threats from the perpetrator.

In line with evidence supporting guideline 3 good communication skills – including active listening and displaying empathy – are needed to exercise professional curiosity and facilitate procedurally fair encounters. Good communication skills are key both to identifying and encouraging disclosure of abuse, and to engaging victims and vulnerable people in ongoing safeguarding and investigations.



**Professional curiosity** was considered to be important in eliciting information and encouraging the disclosure of abuse/harm for all risks. Professional curiosity may also require practitioners to ‘think outside the box’ and consider the circumstances more holistically. When practitioners come into contact with individuals who may be at risk of harm, this presents a crucial opportunity for protection. The lack of evidence relating to effectiveness of frontline-focused risk assessment tools further enhances the importance of professional curiosity.

The National Vulnerability Action Plan states that by adopting a principle of ‘professional curiosity’ potential indicators of vulnerability can be identified at an early stage and inform the appropriate steps to make vulnerable people safe, including where partners should be involved.

Practitioners and committee members considered it important that officers and staff used professional curiosity in conjunction with the tools (eg, checklists, risk assessment tools) and systems (eg, computer systems) available to them to guide their investigation and determine any follow-up actions (examples of actions are provided in **Appendix 1**).

### Hints and tips from other sectors – encouraging professional curiosity

Professional curiosity can be enhanced if practitioners:

- are supported by good quality training to help them develop
- have access to good management, support and supervision
- consistently challenge and check information
- display empathy
- remain diligent and develop professional relationships to understand what has happened and its impact
- use reflective practice, collaboration and supervision, so practitioners work together to explore alternative explanations behind situations
- are willing and able to obtain and combine information from a range of sources, identifying alternative explanations and risks to enable more effective responses

# Appendix 1 – Actions

The combination of clues, communication and curiosity will result in action. Responders should be aware of what actions they can take, what support is available (including support from other organisations), and their responsibility to clearly explain the next steps to individuals without jargon or assumed prior knowledge of the criminal justice system.

Examples of relevant action include:

- police response (eg, deploying someone, police protection, arrest, charge, interview, parking marked police vehicles outside victims' houses)
- providing information/signposting (including, for example, provision of information on domestic abuse, religious crime, out-of-hours numbers, places of refuge, residency orders, counselling refugees, homeless charities, action fraud, victim support, crime prevention, but also collection of case information/intelligence)
- contacting/referring to partner organisations (including, for example, ambulance services, health services, local GPs, social services, mental health triage nurses, crisis team, vulnerable adult team, adult protection team, children's services,

probation, youth services, housing services, victim support, charities, national helplines, etc.).

- using legislative powers (including, for example, emergency legal order, compulsory supervision order, use of bail conditions/domestic violence protection notices/local places of safety provision)
- providing shelter/safeguard (including, for example, police station, safety plan, action plan, removal of victim)
- provision of alarms/surveillance (including, for example, personal attack alarms, house alarms, CCTV, police community support officer welfare checks, mobile phones)

The research highlighted that victims reported more positive experiences when the actions taken by police responders were reassuring, empathetic, supportive, and focused on their needs.

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