

North Somerset Multi-Agency Adult Safeguarding Procedures



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Professional curiosity guidance

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Introduction

The skills required to be professionally curious are vital in helping to identify abuse and neglect in cases where this may be less obvious. [Practicing professional curiosity to a high standard could prevent abuse and neglect from happening or worsening](#). This guidance document will support partners to be professionally curious and will provide guidance as to how to report your concerns.

Safeguarding is everyday business, even if it is not in your job title.

What is professional curiosity?

Some people find it difficult to protect themselves from abuse and neglect.

Professional curiosity is about having the confidence, foresight, and communication skill to explore and understand what is happening for a person with care and support needs. It is about enquiring deeper and using proactive questioning and appropriate challenge. Professional curiosity is therefore a core responsibility of all people providing care and support to others.

Sometimes people feel as though they are being intrusive or that they may be overstepping their role if they ask that extra question, if they consider alternative explanations, and/or if they start contacting others to check out their concerns. This is not the case. Professional curiosity is about understanding your responsibilities and knowing when to act, rather than making assumptions, or taking things at face value.

Barriers to professional curiosity

It is widely recognised that there are many barriers to being professionally curious. Some of these are set out below.

Disguised compliance

Disguised compliance occurs when someone gives the appearance of co-operating with someone supporting an adult with care and support needs to avoid raising suspicions, to allay professional concerns and ultimately to reduce professional involvement. It is important to

- Establish the facts and gather evidence about what is happening.
- Focus on outcomes rather than processes to remain person centred.

The 'rule of optimism'

The 'rule of optimism' is a well-known dynamic in which professionals can tend to rationalise away new or escalating risks despite clear evidence to the contrary.

Accumulating risk – seeing the whole picture

Reviews repeatedly demonstrate that professionals tend to respond to each situation or new risk on its own, rather than assessing the new information within the context of the whole person or looking at the cumulative effect of a series of incidents and information.

Normalisation

This refers to social processes through which ideas and actions come to be seen as 'normal' and become taken-for-granted or 'natural' in everyday life. Because they are seen as 'normal' they stop being questioned and so are not recognised or assessed as potential risks.

Professional deference

People who have most contact with the individual are in a good position to recognise when the risks to the person are escalating. However, there can be a tendency to defer to the opinion of a 'higher status' professional who has limited contact with the person but who views the risk as less significant. Those who have the most contact should be confident in their own judgement and outline their observations and concerns to other professionals. They should be courageous and challenge others' opinions of risk if it varies from their own. You can escalate any ongoing concerns through your manager. See the Resolution of Professional Differences (Escalation) Policy and Procedure for more information.

Confirmation bias

This is when we look for evidence that supports or confirms our pre-held view and ignore information that doesn't support that view. It happens when we filter out potentially useful facts and opinions that don't match our preconceived ideas.

'Knowing but not knowing'

This is about having a sense that something is not right but not knowing exactly what, so it is difficult to grasp the problem and act.

Confidence in managing tension

Disagreement, disruption and aggression from families or others, can undermine confidence and divert meetings away from topics the practitioner wants to explore and back to the family's own agenda.

Dealing with uncertainty

Contested accounts, vague or retracted disclosures, deception and inconclusive medical evidence are common in safeguarding practice. People are often presented with concerns which are impossible to substantiate. In such situations, 'there is a temptation to discount concerns that cannot be proved'.

Other barriers to professional curiosity

- Poor and/or infrequent supervision.
- Complexity and pressure of work.
- Repeatedly 'starting again' due to staff changes.
- Ceasing engagement with people with care and support needs too quickly.
- Fixed thinking; preconceived ideas.
- Values, and a lack of openness to new knowledge are also barriers to a professionally curious approach.

Developing skills in professional curiosity

It is important to:

- Be flexible and open-minded, not taking everything at face value.
- Check your own emotional state and attitudes.
- Leave time to prepare yourself for managing risk and uncertainty and processing the impact it has on you.
- Think the unthinkable; believe the unbelievable.
- Consider how you can articulate 'intuition' into an evidenced, professional view.
- Review records, record accurately, check facts and feedback to the people you are working with and for.
- Never assume and be wary of assumptions already made.

- Use case history and explore information from the person themselves, family, friends and neighbours, as well as other professionals (triangulation).
- Pay as much attention to how people look and behave as to what they say.
- Actively seek full engagement.
- If you need more support to engage the person or their family, think about who in the network can help you.
- Consider calling a multiagency meeting to bring in support from colleagues in other agencies.
- Take responsibility for the safeguarding role you play, however large or small, in the life of the person in front of you.

Professional curiosity is likely to flourish when practitioners:

- Attend good quality training to help them develop.
- Have access to good management support and supervision.
- Have empathy ('walk in the shoes') of the person to consider the situation from their lived experience.
- Remain diligent in working with the person and their family/network, developing professional relationships to understand what has happened and its impact on all involved.
- Are able to see the person separately, where this is reasonably practicable.
- Listen to people who speak on behalf of the person and who have important knowledge about them.
- Be alert to those who prevent professionals from seeing or listening to the person.
- Do not rely on the opinion of only one person, wherever possible.
- Have an analytical and reflective approach.
- Develop the skills and knowledge to hold difficult conversations.

Holding difficult conversations and challenging

Tackling disagreements or hostility, raising concerns or challenge, and giving information that will not be well received are recognised as hard things to do. Here are some tips on how to have difficult conversations:

- Plan to ensure there will be time to cover the essential elements of the conversation.

- Keep the agenda focused on the topics you need to discuss. Be clear and unambiguous.
- Have courage and focus on the needs of the service user
- Be non-confrontational and non-blaming; stick to the facts.
- Have evidence to back up what you say, make sure decision-making is justifiable and transparent.
- Show empathy, consideration and compassion – be real and honest.
- Demonstrate ‘congruence’ - make sure your tone, body language and content of speech are consistent.
- Acknowledge ‘gut feelings’, share these with other professionals, and look for evidence.
- Understand the elements and indicators of behavioural change.
- Hold a healthy scepticism.
- Understand the complexities of disguised compliance.
- Apply professional judgment.
- Never be concerned about asking the obvious question
- Share concerns with colleagues and managers.
- Remember, a fresh pair of eyes can help organisations to maintain a clear focus on good practice and risk assessment and develop a critical mindset.

How managers, senior staff, and supervisors can support professionally curious practice

Managers, senior staff, and supervisors can maximise opportunities for professionally curious practice to flourish by:

- Providing high quality and regular reflective supervision.
- Playing devil’s advocate – asking ‘what if?’ questions to challenge and support practitioners to think more widely about peoples experiences.
- Question whether outcomes have improved for the person and evidence for this.
- Present alternative hypotheses about what could be happening.
- Provide opportunities for group supervision which can help stimulate debate, allowing staff, volunteers, and students to learn from one another’s experiences.

- Ask their staff/supervisees what led them to arrive at their conclusion and support them to think through the evidence.
- Monitor workloads and encourage practitioners to talk about and support them to address issues of stress or pressure.
- Support practitioners to recognise fatigue and when to ask for help and/ or a fresh perspective on a person's situation.
- Expose staff and supervisees to the Look, Listen, Ask, and Checkout model.

Look, listen, ask, checkout

The look, listen, ask, checkout model can be very effective in supporting professionally curious practice and identifying causes for concern. Ask yourself these questions to help you think in a professionally curious way:

Look

- Is there anything about what you see that makes you feel uneasy?
- Could what you see be a sign or symptom of abuse, neglect or self-neglect?
- Consider why someone is behaving a certain way; think broadly about what this might mean?
- Does what you see match with what you are being told? Could there be an alternative explanation?
- Be aware of people's responses to questions and read body language; are they seeming reluctant to answer the question, is something being held back? If so, why might that be?

Listen

- Does something not sound right?
- Are you being told anything which needs further explanation?
- Have you spoken to the person that you are concerned about? Are they free to give their views? Can you talk to them on their own?
- Does what you hear, match with what you have seen? Could there be an alternative explanation?

Ask

- Are there questions you can ask, to explore what you have seen or been told?

- Maintain an open mind - Try to avoid making assumptions, taking information at face value and jumping to conclusions.
- Is your use of language, clear, accessible, understandable to the person you are talking to?

Check out

- Treat what people say with 'respectful uncertainty'. This means take what people say seriously, but then look for other information that confirms or challenges what you have been told.
- Be the first to check out your concerns, be proactive, don't wait for others to ask you. Can you build a picture of what is happening?
- Are other professionals involved? Have other professionals seen or been told the same as you? Are there family members you could speak to?
- Are others concerned? If so, what action has been taken so far?
- Have you recorded your concerns? Have you discussed them with a manager?
- Is there anything else which should or could be done by you or anyone else?
- Check out your organisation's policy and procedures, what should you do next?
- Consider the need to raise a safeguarding concern.

Raising a concern

Please read our Threshold Support Tool which aims to support partners in making decisions on when to raise safeguarding adults' concerns. It does this by separating out the 'vulnerability' of an adult at risk and the 'seriousness of the act'.

Threshold support tool

This document is intended to be read as practice guidance. It does not replace professional curiosity, or professional judgement. It aims to support partners in making decisions on when to raise safeguarding adults' concerns. It does this by separating out the 'vulnerability' of an adult at risk and the 'seriousness of the act'.

<https://nssab.co.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/Threshold%20Support%20Tool%20September%202024.docx>

Threshold support tool quick guide

This document provides a quick guide to in relation to when to raise a safeguard concern. When in doubt, always refer.

<https://nssab.co.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/NSSAB%20Threshold%20Support%20Tool%20Quick%20Guide%20-%20ACC.docx>

Threshold Support Tool Decision matrix outcome record

<https://nssab.co.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Decision%20making%20record%20Incidents%20between%20people%20using%20a%20care%20service%20V1%20-%20ACC.docx>

If you think that a person has care and support needs and is experiencing or is at direct risk of abuse or neglect, you should raise a concern with North Somerset Council by ringing Care Connect on 01275 888 801 or by using the referral form.

Please consult your local policies and procedures.

If a person is in immediate danger, dial 999.