

Professional development

Developing the right skills and knowledge to respond effectively to vulnerable individuals

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Professional development – guideline introduction

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

Essential elements include:

- enabling and supporting opportunities for staff to develop their knowledge and skills on responding to vulnerability-related risk
- multi-agency working that incorporates building strong partnerships and exploring appropriate organisational learning opportunities
- providing appropriate training that enhances communication skills for staff
- developing and implementing processes that capture, analyse and disseminate relevant organisational learning to enhance practice, such as:
 - review of body-worn video (BWV) footage
 - debriefing
 - identifying and responding to compassion or empathy fatigue

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.

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 the following:

- cultural awareness
- awareness of impact and needs – for example, relating to disabilities, mental health
- appreciation of intersectionality and the multiple barriers experienced by marginalised individuals or groups – for example, women from ethnic minority groups or people with disabilities from ethnic minority groups
- understanding of coercion and control
- understanding of the impact of trauma on recall and ability to provide statements

Specialist practitioners working in the field of domestic abuse or victim services also identified that police responders sometimes did not fully understand more complex incidents when reported by victims or witnesses. Examples of complex incidents include stalking and coercive control.

The studies in this guideline

The evidence was based on 64 studies. Of these, 34% were based in the UK and 53% were based on interviews with victims of domestic abuse and serious sexual offences, police officers, police staff and other support providers.

The 64 studies in this guideline originate from the following thematic evidence summaries: knowledge and awareness (44 studies); communication and encouraging disclosure (30 studies). Numbers may not add up due to an overlap of studies across multiple themes.

Empirical evidence

Moderate

Practitioner evidence

Available

Skills

Advanced communication is fundamental to creating an environment in which individuals feel able to disclose information that may help officers or staff to identify any vulnerability.

There is some evidence that communication skills can be taught. For example, the victim experience can be improved by training that seeks to teach officers a series of practical techniques and improve their general communication skills (Wheller and others, 2013).

There could also be opportunities to learn from other sectors. For example, core communication skills are considered essential in healthcare. Open-ended enquiry, reflective listening and empathy are used to respond to the unique needs, values and preferences of individual patients (Moore and others, 2018).

Advanced communication requires a cluster of particular skills, behaviours and approaches. It 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

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 to identify the topic areas that could be relevant. For example:

- the relationship between vulnerability and protected characteristics
- understanding the impact of mental or physical illnesses, physical disabilities, learning difficulties or reduced mental capacity, or neurodivergence (for example, autism) on communication
- non-verbal communication awareness and skills
- the impact of unconscious bias
- the role of reflective practice

Other potential topic areas include:

- statutory responsibilities associated with different public protection strands
- referral routes to other agencies

- how to take relevant action – for example, when and how to pursue evidence-led prosecutions
- the relationship between the guidelines and other vulnerability-related strategies – for example, the national vulnerability action plan (NVAP) and approaches such as trauma-informed approaches

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

Resources

These resources are available via [CollegeLearn](#) (you will need to log in).

- One-day vulnerability training package – supports a shift in perspective, 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 focusing 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. This exercise explores decision making while also providing an opportunity for collaborative learning and networking.
- Specialist child abuse investigation development programme (SCAIDP) 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 and other organisations 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.

Multi-agency working

Chief officers should influence and build strong multi-agency partnerships. This should include developing a shared understanding of the police role and remit in responding to vulnerability, including limitations. Officers and staff will often interact with partner agencies, for example, to make referrals. They therefore need to understand the referral options and referral routes.

To enhance multi-agency working, chief officers could also explore and encourage professional development and organisational learning opportunities arising from:

- multi-agency debriefing
- joint CPD with other agencies
- collaboration opportunities, for example:
 - developing and agreeing pathways for referral
 - agreeing protocols for accessing and sharing information
 - ensuring that staff understand how to communicate relevant information across partners

Organisational learning

To capture relevant organisational learning, committee members highlighted the following as potentially useful mechanisms:

- debriefing sessions
- peer review
- structured time for reflection
- learning from errors and near misses

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 on and review actions and decisions can develop a culture of learning and improvement. Committee members recognised the challenge of operational complexity and high demand. However, creating time and space for this learning should be considered an essential investment.

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 that responders take and where any learning about how to deal with complex or difficult situations can be shared
- consider opportunities for officers and staff to receive and act on feedback from any referrals they make – for example, multi-agency safeguarding hubs, partners
- analyse service user and third-party feedback and complaints to improve the service provided to individuals
- use formal operational debriefing techniques to review and identify good practice and to address near misses and staff wellbeing concerns – for example, 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 (HMICFRS) recommended that initial investigations involving vulnerable victims could be improved by giving all responding officers access to this equipment (HMICFRS, 2019).

Footage from BWV can be more widely used to review responders' initial interactions with vulnerable individuals. This can facilitate organisational learning and sharing of practice in terms of how to deal with complex or difficult situations (Grossmith and others, 2015).

Debriefing

Staff from interviewed partner organisations reported having many opportunities for informal briefing and reflection throughout the day. This was in addition to more formal processes, for example, monthly or quarterly supervision.

In comparison, police practitioners stated that despite protocols being followed, debriefing often only happened when something went wrong.

Debriefs are useful for both identifying areas for improvement and understanding what has gone well.

They allow responders to reflect on specific incidents and to consider or share any learning from them. Debriefs can:

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

See also debriefing highlighted in the [Conflict management guidelines](#).

Compassion or empathy fatigue

Compassion fatigue is described as ‘the cost of caring’ for those in professions who regularly see and care for others in pain and trauma [Figley (2002) and Figley (1999)].

Those who work in these fields (for example, police, emergency hospital workers, nurses) have direct exposure to traumatic events. They can also experience secondary exposure, for example, through listening to victims’ experiences and child protection issues. Compassion or empathy fatigue can be experienced by anyone who persistently deals with individuals suffering from depression, addiction, poverty – or any combination of circumstances that creates hardship or feelings of despair and helplessness (including vulnerability) [Turgoose and others (2017)].

Committee members highlighted the importance of chief officers being alert to compassion or empathy fatigue and wellbeing concerns, where staff and officers face 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 communicate effectively and to investigate vulnerability and harm. For example, empathy fatigue may cause responders to become insensitive to the risks faced by vulnerable people, because they have seen similar situations so often. This may result in simply recording vulnerability and risk, without taking effective action to make the vulnerable person safer.

See the [Oscar Kilo website](#) for more information and support.

Tags

Vulnerable people Risk Evidence-based policing