

# North Lincolnshire Safeguarding Adults Board



## Appropriate language for working with and safeguarding adults

### Introduction

This guidance is designed to support professionals on the appropriate use of language when safeguarding adults at risk of abuse and neglect. The guidance should be applied when both discussing and documenting concerns about the adults at risk.

Some of the information contained in this document has been taken from [the Appropriate Language Guide for Safeguarding Adults](#) produced by Hillingdon Safeguarding Adults Board.

### Why does language matter?

The language used when speaking to or about the adults we support plays a crucial role in how effectively we can help them. Language is how we connect, understand, and communicate, so it must be used with care, especially when referring to people who have been abused, exploited or are at risk of harm.

Terminology should accurately reflect the coercion, manipulation, and lack of control that people experience in abusive or exploitative situations. It must also acknowledge the seriousness and trauma of the harm they have faced. This applies not only to spoken interactions but also to written language in files, referrals, assessments, and reports.

Inaccurate or insensitive language can silence people. It can blame, shame, or oppress them, reinforce the messages of perpetrators, and retraumatise those who have already been harmed. It may also discourage individuals from disclosing abuse if they fear being judged or blamed by professionals.

The language used among professionals shapes the quality of support offered. Poorly chosen words can normalise or minimise abuse, dehumanise the person's experience, and lead to inadequate responses or a lack of trauma awareness. In written records, inappropriate language can even affect whether cases progress to court or be used against victims by the defence.

Professionals also need to recognise that any written record may be disclosed to third parties if a criminal court case takes place. The use of inappropriate or inaccurate language can carry serious consequences in court and may even affect the outcome of a conviction.

It is equally important to avoid stereotyping language when working with people of different genders, LGBTQIA+ communities, and ethnic minority groups.

Adult social care has its own distinctive language and a way of speaking and writing that protects dignity, promotes independence, and supports shared understanding. Strong practitioners use language that is clear, respectful, person-centred, and grounded in evidence rather than assumption.

A helpful way to think about this is through the core elements that consistently appear in high-quality adult social care communication:

- **Person-centred focus** – Placing the individual at the heart of all communication and decision-making, recognising their wishes, feelings, experiences, and rights, and ensuring language reflects their perspective rather than professional assumptions.
- **Strength-based framing** – Highlighting a person’s abilities, resources, resilience, and potential rather than focusing solely on problems, deficits, or risks.
- **Clarity and using plain English** – Using simple, direct, and accessible language that avoids jargon, acronyms, or overly technical terms.
- **Respectful and non-judgemental** – Communicating with dignity, empathy, and fairness, avoiding blame, stereotypes, or moral judgement.
- **Evidence-based and factual** – Recording information that is accurate, specific, and supported by observable evidence, clearly distinguishing between fact, opinion, and reported information.
- **Collaborative and inclusive** – Reflecting partnership working with the person, their family or carers, and other professionals, and promoting shared understanding and joint decision-making.
- **Safeguarding-aware language** – Using words that reflect the realities of abuse, exploitation, coercion, and harm, avoiding victim-blaming, and recognising power imbalances.
- **Outcome-focused** – Identifying the goals, changes, or improvements the person wants to achieve and emphasising progress and practical steps.
- **Consistency with legal and policy frameworks** – Ensuring language aligns with statutory duties, safeguarding legislation, organisational policies, and recognised terminology.

## No blame and no shame

Victim-blaming or shaming language can sometimes be used by professionals without realising it. It often appears in responses to disclosures of abuse and in the way a victim-survivor’s choices or decisions are described.

This type of language suggests that a vulnerable adult is partly responsible for the abuse or neglect they have experienced, or that they could have prevented it. Such framing can be deeply hurtful and retraumatising, and it reflects a misunderstanding of the coercion, control, and power dynamics that underpin most forms of abuse.

Using victim-blaming language can also prevent professionals from recognising their own responsibility to safeguard the adult, while shifting attention away from the actions of the perpetrator. It can undermine trust, making it harder for adults at risk to feel safe with the people who are meant to protect them.

Supervision provides an important space to identify and reflect on victim-blaming language. This reflection can strengthen the support offered to adults at risk and highlight areas where professionals may need further development.

Adults at risk may also use self-blaming language, which can reinforce feelings of guilt and shame. Supporting someone to change the way they talk about their experiences can help them reframe what has happened and begin to feel more empowered.

### Describing and identifying people

Accuracy and scrutiny of the people involved in an adult's life are essential for a thorough risk assessment. Avoid relying on first names or making assumptions about someone's role or relationship with the adult. If an individual is involved in providing support or expresses an interest in the adult's care, record their full name, address, relationship, contact details, and date of birth as early as possible. If they decline to provide this information, document this clearly and explore the reasons. Check any details they give against your agency's records.

Always verify claims that someone is providing care. Establish what support they are offering and whether they are genuinely willing and able to provide it. If you have concerns about their reliability or integrity, seek additional information—this may include requesting relevant information from the police.

"I spoke to [full name, address, phone number, date of birth, relation to adult at risk] about..."

### Language around engagement

There are many reasons why an adult at risk may struggle to accept or engage with support. These can include coercive control by another person, mental illness, cognitive impairment, mobility issues, shame, fear, or reduced mental capacity.

Refusal of help or difficulty engaging is often linked to the type of support being offered, how it is offered, or fears about the consequences of accepting help. Trauma can also significantly affect a person's ability to trust professionals.

When someone does not attend appointments or declines support despite known or suspected risks, the responsibility remains with professionals to reach out. If the level of risk is unreasonably high, agencies must work together to safeguard the person, even if they feel unable to engage.

Professionals should take time to explore barriers to engagement and build trusting relationships. Concluding that someone "does not want help" should only happen after proactive, sustained efforts to understand their circumstances, reduce barriers, and assess risk.

Intervention should be done **with** people rather than done **to**. Adults should always be empowered to make choices and exercise control.

## Common phrases in safeguarding

There are some common terms and phrases used by professionals when talking and writing about adults at risk and about safeguarding practice. When language humanises the adult at risk and focuses our attention on them and on our power and duty to help, it is likely to improve the work we do. Here are some examples of language which may hinder effective safeguarding interventions and some alternatives.

Phrase	Alternatives
<p><b>I am doing a safeguarding on them</b></p> <p>Reflects an authoritarian mindset and reinforces the idea that the professionals are 'doing to' rather than 'working with'. Also, this language is process focussed rather than person-centred.</p>	<p><i>I am supporting them and their family through a safeguarding process/ section 42 enquiry, to help them stay safe.</i></p>

<p><b>It's a lifestyle choice</b></p> <p>Often used as a justification to cease safeguarding interventions in the context of chronic self-neglect - particularly where substance misuse, homelessness, hoarding, begging, or exploitation pose risk. It implies the adult is free to choose, diverts attention from the role of trauma, potential coercion, and from professional responsibility to safeguard.</p>	<p><i>He's been evicted from the hostel again because of his behaviour. We need to understand the factors contribute to his behaviour by working together with people who know him and find out what we can about his personal history. Then we can plan support.</i></p> <p><i>We need to assess her executive capacity to address her hoarding/housing/substance misuse.</i></p>
<p><b>My case/ the case</b></p> <p>Referring to people as 'cases' can dehumanise the adult at risk. It can reduce compassion/empathy by obscuring the shared humanity between professionals and the people we are there to support.</p>	<p><i>The person I am supporting.</i></p> <p><i>The person I am making safeguarding enquiries for.</i></p>
<p><b>XX won't engage / XX refuses help</b></p> <p>Assumes XX is able to engage with support. Gives them the responsibility for 'engaging' and trusting professionals they barely know, rather than giving professionals the responsibility to find ways to build trust and rapport.</p>	<p><i>XX is reluctant to accept help from me/our service. I am not sure of her reasons.</i></p> <p><i>XX may find it easier to accept help from someone they already trust. I am liaising with other professionals who know them better to explore options and alternatives.</i></p> <p><i>XX is hard to reach. We need to work creatively to build trust and explore barriers to engagement.</i></p> <p><i>XX has missed 4 appointments this month. We need to review their ability to attend appointments and explore barriers.</i></p>
<p><b>...putting themselves at risk</b></p> <p>Implies the victim is responsible for the risks presented by the perpetrator and that they can make free and informed choices.</p>	<p><i>They are at risk from...</i></p> <p><i>The perpetrator(s) pose a risk of...to this person</i></p>

## Responding to disclosures

The way professionals respond to disclosures of abuse, neglect, or self-neglect can significantly influence how adults at risk feel and how much they trust us to understand their situation and offer effective support.

Some common professional reactions can unintentionally suggest that the victim is responsible for the abuse continuing, or that they could have stopped it sooner. Other responses may imply disbelief or show a limited understanding of the risks, pressures, and dilemmas that victims face.

There are many valid reasons why adults at risk may hesitate to seek help or delay disclosing abuse. They may have previously reached out and been met with blame, shame, or inaction. They may have experienced increased danger after telling someone, or fear that a poorly planned intervention could make their situation worse.

Blame / shaming disclosure responses	Alternatives
<p><b>Why didn't you tell me/ someone sooner?</b></p> <p>Implies that the person has done wrong or is responsible for the continuation of the abuse/neglect and could have stopped it sooner.</p>	<p><i>I can see how difficult it must have been to share this.</i></p> <p><i>You've done a really good job opening up about what's going on.</i></p> <p><i>Thank you for trusting me with this. I'm here to support you however I can.</i></p> <p><i>I know this isn't easy to talk about, and I appreciate you being willing to share it with me.</i></p>
<p><b>Why didn't you call the police?</b></p> <p>Indicates you do not understand how difficult it can be to contact police</p>	<p><i>I can understand why reaching out to the police might feel overwhelming. If you'd like support with that, I'm here with you.</i></p> <p><i>Have you ever been in a position where you felt able to contact the police before? I'm interested in how that experience was for you.</i></p>
<p><b>That's a very serious allegation. Are you sure?</b></p> <p>Fuels anxiety about having told you. Implies the person might be lying and implies it would be best to withdraw the allegation.</p>	<p><i>That sounds like an incredibly frightening situation to be in.</i></p> <p><i>It comes across as a really distressing experience.</i></p> <p><i>That sounds like something anyone would find deeply worrying</i></p>
<p><b>What do you expect me to do about that?</b></p> <p>Suggests they have done something wrong by telling you. Reinforces their sense that no one can/will help.</p>	<p><i>I'm here to support you in any way I can. Tell me what would feel most helpful for you right now.</i></p> <p><i>I'm ready to help however you need. What would make things a little easier for you at this moment?</i></p>

## Language relating to sexual abuse and exploitation

When you're preparing to speak with victim-survivors of sexual abuse, or documenting what they've shared, it can help to pause and reflect on a few key considerations.

- Who held the power in the situation?
- Am I placing responsibility for the abuse squarely on the person who caused the harm, rather than on the victim-survivor?
- Could anything I'm writing or saying unintentionally suggest that the victim-survivor had control, choice, or responsibility in a situation where they did not?
- Is there any way my language might be interpreted as blaming or shaming them?
- What wording can I use that supports them, validates their experience, and helps them feel genuinely heard?

<b>Blame / shaming disclosure responses</b>	<b>Alternatives</b>
<p><b>She had sex/sexual relations with a carer</b></p> <p>Indicates that the victim is somehow responsible for or chose the sexual abuse. Obscures the significant power differential between adults at risk. It is best to state what the person or anyone else told you clearly and without euphemisms</p>	<p><i>The carer reportedly raped/sexually assaulted them.</i></p> <p><i>They said the carer touched her breasts/genitals.</i></p> <p><i>The paid carer (stipulate identity if known) reportedly showed his penis to them.</i></p>
<p><b>Did you say ‘no’? Did you tell them to stop?</b></p> <p>Implies that victim may have been responsible for the abuse or that they had the power to stop the abuse. These questions imply they could have prevented the abuse by saying ‘no’ and chose not to. Don’t ask about the adult at risks’ behaviour or responses at all. Instead be curious about their experience.</p>	<p><i>I can imagine that was hard. Would you like to tell me more?</i></p>
<p><b>They are known to be promiscuous</b></p> <p>‘Promiscuous’ is a judgemental term based on cultural norms and mores. It isn’t appropriate in any context when discussing an adult at risk. It’s inappropriate to comment on the number of sexual partners a person has where there is a suspicion of sexual abuse. Occasionally it’s necessary to describe sexual behaviour, for example when making best interests decisions about sex with others. State facts as simply and clearly as possible, without judgement.</p>	<p><i>They reports multiple sexual partners in (specific period)</i></p> <p><i>They say that they rarely use condoms.</i></p> <p><i>They say that they have had sex with people they have not met before.</i></p>
<p><b>Offering him/her drugs seemingly in return for sex.</b></p> <p><b>They engage in sex work/prostitution</b></p> <p>This implies that the adult is responsible for the abuse and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<p><i>The adult is being sexually exploited.</i></p> <p><i>There are concerns that the adult has been raped.</i></p> <p><i>Perpetrators are sexually abusing the adult.</i></p> <p><i>The adult is being sexually abused.</i></p> <p><i>The adult’s vulnerability regarding drug and or alcohol use is being used by others to abuse them.</i></p> <p><i>The perpetrators have a hold over the adult by the fact that they have a drug dependency</i></p>

## Language relating to domestic abuse

The language professionals use has a significant impact on the quality of support and intervention offered to survivors of domestic abuse. Using compassionate, non-judgmental wording reflects the best-practice guidance promoted by organisations such as SafeLives.

A strong understanding of the complex dynamics of abuse and the many barriers that can prevent someone from leaving is essential. By choosing language that conveys respect, insight, and empathy, professionals can create a safer, more validating environment that empowers survivors and supports their path toward safety and healing.

Blame / shaming disclosure responses	Alternatives
<p><b>XX refuses to leave the relationship</b></p> <p>Frames the survivor's decision as a refusal implies stubbornness or poor judgment. Places the responsibility with him/her to solve the problem, rather than the perpetrator. Obscures the complexity of the situation. Leaving an abusive relationship heightens risk so it shouldn't be assumed that it's the best option unless the right support and safety plan is in place.</p>	<p><i>XX doesn't feel safe or able to leave the relationship now. We will continue exploring safety strategies. We need to understand what has happened if they have tried to leave previously We need to understand what XX thinks partner will do if they leave.</i></p>
<p><b>What did you do to make him/her angry?</b></p> <p>Implies blame and accountability for the abuse lies with the victim-survivor and not with the perpetrator. There are no excuses or justifications for domestic abuse. Questions like this collude with abusers tactics of shaming and blaming victim-survivors for the abuse.</p>	<p><i>That sounds really scary. You're not responsible for abuse. It is never your fault... Are you able to identify common triggers for their behaviour?</i></p>
<p><b>Why don't you leave?</b></p> <p>Blames the victim survivor rather than the perpetrator for ongoing abuse. Shows the victim survivor that you do not understand the enormous risks and challenge involved in leaving an abusive relationship and the likelihood of risks increasing and persisting after the relationship is ended.</p>	<p><i>If you've tried to leave before, what happened? If you were to move out, what do you think might happen? Has they ever made threats about what he would do if you leave?</i></p>
<p><b>XX doesn't want help/doesn't engage/doesn't cooperate with services</b></p> <p>Labelling a survivor as someone who 'doesn't engage' or 'uncooperative' is judgmental and also encourages a sense of helplessness and hopelessness for both the survivor and the professional network. Such statements blame and problematise the survivor, rather than acknowledge the high risks and complexity and dilemmas facing survivors in negotiating their safety.</p>	<p><i>XX is hesitant to engage with services. We will explore with them why this is. I will ask what their experiences of support have been like before. We need to work on building trust and understanding with them. It may take time for XX to feel able to accept our help.</i></p>

## Language relating to criminal exploitation and cuckooing

Most exploitation occurs in contexts outside the family, such as neighbourhoods, education or employment settings, online spaces, and peer groups. Friends, family and carers often have little influence over these environments, and extra-familial harm can strain or damage their relationships with the person being

exploited. For this reason, thoughtful, non-blaming language is essential when speaking about adults at risk, families, and carers.

<b>Blame / shaming disclosure responses</b>	<b>Alternatives</b>
<p><b>They allow people to deal drugs in their house/stay in their house</b></p> <p>Implies the adult has the power to prevent people from coming into the house and/or that they have a choice in what people do in their home.</p>	<p><i>People enter their house. We need to find out what they fear would happen if they tried to stop them. When/if they ask them to leave, how did they react?</i></p>
<p><b>Has been contacting/seeking relationships with people of concern via social media/online.</b></p> <p>This implies that the adult is responsible for the communication and does not reflect the abusive or exploitative context. You may also need to consider a Mental Capacity Act assessment regarding the use of social media.</p>	<p><i>People of concern may have been contacting/ targeting the adult.</i></p> <p><i>The adult may have been groomed/targeted via social media.</i></p> <p><i>There are concerns that the alleged perpetrator is facilitating communication with the adult.</i></p> <p><i>The adult is vulnerable to online perpetrators.</i></p> <p><i>There are concerns that others may be using online technology to access or abuse the adult.</i></p>
<p><b>Spending time/associating with individuals of concern.</b></p> <p>This implies that the adult is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<p><i>The adult says that they are friends with a person and there are concerns about that person's age, the imbalance of power, exploitation and/or offending.</i></p> <p><i>There are concerns that the adult has been groomed, exploited and/or coerced and controlled.</i></p>
<p><b>They are drug running or are recruiting others to deal drugs.</b></p> <p>This implies that the adult is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context.</p>	<p><i>The adult is being criminally exploited</i></p> <p><i>There are concerns that the adult is being trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation.</i></p>
<p><b>XX is in/affiliated with a gang. XX allows people to use their property for criminal activity.</b></p> <p>This implies that the adult is responsible for the exploitation and has the capacity to make a free and informed choice. It does not recognise the abusive or exploitative context or powerful.</p>	<p><i>The adult is being criminally exploited.</i></p> <p><i>The person is a victim of Cuckooing.</i></p> <p><i>There are concerns that there is a power imbalance and powerful grooming forcing or compelling the adult to act in this way.</i></p> <p><i>There are concerns regarding other influences on the adult.</i></p>

## Inappropriate terms and person centred alternatives

There are also some common terms which are often seen in recording which could be further strengthened using strengths based and person centred language. The table below shares some examples of this type of language and suggests alternatives.

Inappropriate term	Areas to develop	Example Alternatives
<b><i>“He’s a dementia patient”</i></b>	Describing the person	<i>“He is a person living with dementia.”</i>
<b><i>“She’s bedbound”</i></b>	Describing the person	<i>“She currently needs support to move safely in and out of bed.”</i>
<b><i>“She refused to wash again”</i></b>	Tone and judgement	<i>“She declined support with washing today and said she preferred to do it later.”</i>
<b><i>“He was being difficult”</i></b>	Tone and judgement	<i>“He appeared anxious and raised his voice when discussing his medication.”</i>
<b><i>“The house was a mess and it was disgusting”</i></b>	Clarity and factual recording, tone and judgement	<i>“There were unwashed dishes on the worktop and clothes on the floor in the hallway.”</i>
<b><i>“She was aggressive”</i></b>	Clarity and factual recording	<i>“She shouted and pushed the chair away when approached.”</i>
<b><i>“She can’t do anything on her own”</i></b>	Strengths-based language	<i>“She prepares cold meals independently and needs support with cooking hot meals.”</i>
<b><i>“She relies on us for everything”</i></b>	Strengths-based language	<i>“She uses her neighbour and church group for social support and receives care visits for daily tasks.”</i>
<b><i>“We had to feed him”</i></b>	Respect and dignity	<i>“We supported him to eat by offering small spoonfuls at his pace.”</i>
<b><i>“She was incontinent again”</i></b>	Respect and dignity	<i>“She needed support with changing after an episode of incontinence.”</i>
<b><i>“There was a small bruise”</i></b>	Be specific	<i>“A 3cm purple bruise was observed on the left forearm. The person said it happened when...”</i>
<b><i>“He’s being neglected”</i></b>	Be specific	<i>“Concerns raised: the person reported not receiving meals or medication support as agreed.”</i>
<b><i>“We decided he should move to a care home”</i></b>	Collaboration and choice	<i>“After discussing options, he said he would like to explore residential care.”</i>
<b><i>“She needs to do what we tell her”</i></b>	Collaboration and choice	<i>“We discussed the risks and she chose to continue living independently with additional support.”</i>

## Further information, advice and guidance

- [Adult Social Care language guide May 2024-1.pdf](#) – A guide produced for Adult Social Care by the City of Doncaster Council.
- [Appropriate Language Guide in Safeguarding Adults](#) – A guide produced for Hillingdon Safeguarding Partnership website.
- [Language-matters-guide-Nov-24\\_compressed.pdf](#) – A guide produced for the Safeguarding Solihull website.
- [Adult Exploitation Language Guidance Revised 2023](#) – A revised version of the guidance produced for Newcastle’s Safeguarding Adults Board.
- [Gloriously Ordinary Language](#) – A website designed to emphasise the need for ordinary language in social care.
- ['Accessing the Community' - Service Speak](#) – A video demonstrating the use of ‘Professional’ language to organise a night out.