THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF VULNERABLE ADULTS
The aim of this briefing paper is to raise awareness of the sexual abuse of vulnerable adults and how to respond to actual or suspected incidents of abuse.

Who is a vulnerable adult?
‘A vulnerable adult is any person aged 18 years or over who is, or may be, unable to take care of him or herself against significant harm or exploitation. This may be because he or she has a mental health problem, a disability, a sensory impairment, is old and frail, or has some form of illness. Because of his or her vulnerability, the individual may be in receipt of a care service in his or her own, in the community or be resident in a residential care home, nursing home or other institutional setting’ - ‘Adult Abuse – Guidance for Staff’

Prevalence of sexual abuse of vulnerable adults
Although there has been little research to date about the prevalence of abuse amongst vulnerable adults, some studies in the field of learning disability suggest that adults with learning disabilities are at much greater risk of sexual abuse and assault. Research shows that the incidence of abuse among people with disabilities is as much as four times higher than it is among the non disabled population (Behind Closed Doors 2001).

One of the first studies to be carried out in the UK involved questionnaires being sent to 34 consultant psychiatrists involved with people with learning disabilities (Cooke 1989). The average prevalence of definite experience of abuse was found to be 4-5% of individuals. However, many consultants felt that there was likely to be a much higher hidden prevalence.

(Brown & Craft 1992) found that people with learning disabilities have an increased vulnerability to abuse because of their dependence on other people for personal care; an ‘imbalance of power’ between the carer and the person being cared for; difficulties in communicating; lack of sexual knowledge and assertiveness; and guilt and shame at being disabled.

A further study carried out with the South East Thames Regional Health Authority found that 73% of learning disabled victims in their study were female and 98% of the perpetrators were male. Many of the cases involved one perpetrator offending against several people with learning disabilities. The perpetrator was already known to the victim in 87% of cases. Perpetrators were noted in the following categories: other individuals with learning disability (42%); family members (18%); staff/volunteers (14%); other known adults (17%) and the remaining were unknown.

Sex offenders consider people with a learning disability to be an easy target because they are vulnerable and may be unwilling to bring cases against their abusers (Behind Closed Doors 2001).
Legislation
The key legislation in relation to the sexual abuse of adults with learning disability is The Sexual Offences (NI) Order 2008.

The Order provides a legislative framework for sexual offences, including offences against people with a ‘mental disorder’, as defined in the Mental Health (NI) Order 1986 (‘mental illness, mental handicap and any other disorder or disability of the mind’).

The Order also relates to offences against people who cannot legally consent to sexual activity because of a mental disorder. It also provides added protection for those who have capacity to consent but might be vulnerable to exploitation through inducement, threats or deception.

Further information about this and other legislation relating to safeguarding and protecting vulnerable adults can be accessed through www.opsi.gov.uk.

How might staff/volunteers become alerted to the sexual abuse of vulnerable adults?
Sexual abuse includes direct or indirect sexual activity where the vulnerable adult cannot or does not consent to it. A vulnerable adult may disclose to you that they are being sexually abused or someone else may tell you of their concerns or something that causes you concern. Alternatively, the vulnerable adult may show physical symptoms such as genital itching or soreness; having a sexually transmitted disease or the individual may show changes in appearance.

A vulnerable adult’s demeanour/behaviour may change including using bad language; not wanting to be touched or behaving in a sexually inappropriate way or the behaviour of a person close to the vulnerable adult may make you feel uncomfortable (this could include another staff member, a volunteer, peer or family member).

What if a vulnerable adult discloses?
If a vulnerable adult discloses abuse, it is important that staff/volunteers know how to react appropriately:
Do

- Listen to the person and hear what the person is telling you.
- If there are communication difficulties, be open to and use a range of non verbal communication methods.
- Let the person know that the information will be taken seriously.
- Ensure the safety of the person.
- If urgent medical/police help is required, call the emergency services.
- Be aware that medical and forensic evidence may be needed.
- Record in writing & report to your Line/Nominated Manager without delay.

Do not:

- Stop someone disclosing.
- Promise to keep secrets.
- Press the person for more details or to repeat the story.
- Gossip about the disclosure or pass on the information to anyone who does not have a legitimate need to know.
- Contact the alleged abuser.
- Attempt to investigate.
Reporting Procedures
All organisations should have a written procedure for staff/volunteers for responding to, recording and reporting concerns about actual or suspected adult abuse to their Line Manager/Nominated Manager. When a Nominated Manager is alerted to concerns, s/he should act promptly in accordance with the agreed reporting procedure and consult with the Designated Officer in the local HSC Trust and/or PSNI where necessary (contact numbers below). If the service being provided is a regulated one there may be input from the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA).

Risk Assessment and Management
In safeguarding terms, the aim of risk assessment and management is to prevent abuse occurring, to reduce the likelihood of it occurring and to minimise the impact of abuse by responding effectively when it does occur.

For the individual, the level of risk, that is the likelihood of an event occurring and the impact it might have depends on the nature and extent of their vulnerability, their relationships with others, the choices open to them and the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Risk to vulnerable adults is known to be greater when: the vulnerable adult is emotionally or socially isolated; a pattern of violence exists or has existed in the past; drugs or alcohol are being misused and when relationships are under stress.

In addition to the known risk factors, other factors may increase the likelihood of abuse. For example; where an illness causes unpredictable behaviour; where the individual is experiencing communication difficulties; where a carer has been forced to change their lifestyle as a result of becoming a carer and where a carer themselves has become isolated and is offered no relief from a demanding role.

For the organisation, the level of risk will depend on the balance achieved between the right of a vulnerable adult to be safeguarded, the duty of care owed to the vulnerable adults served by the organisation; the duty of care owed by the organisation to its staff/volunteers; the legal duties of statutory bodies and service providers; and the right of the vulnerable adults to make informed lifestyle choices and take part in activities. When care services are provided, abuse is more likely to occur if staff/volunteers are inadequately trained; poorly supervised; and lacking support or working in isolation. The number of qualified and skilled staff/volunteers available is crucial. How and where services and activities are organised can also heighten or lessen the level of risk.

Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults Policy
If implemented effectively, a safeguarding policy has the potential to reduce both the likelihood and impact of abuse by, for example:

- Preventing unsuitable people from joining the organisation through good recruitment and selection practice;
- Making staff and volunteers aware of the indicators of vulnerability and risk and the possible signs of abuse and equipping them to respond quickly to concerns about actual, alleged or suspected abuse;
- Ensuring that staff and volunteers are properly inducted, trained and supported and supervised in their work with vulnerable adults;
- Ensuring that staff and volunteers know what constitutes acceptable behaviours and good practice and that they are supported when they challenge poor practice;
Promoting a culture of inclusion, transparency and openness throughout the organisation and its services and activities;

Having in place good overall organisational management and practice supported by a range of organisational policies and procedures.

‘Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults, A Shared Responsibility’
In 2009 Volunteer Now was commissioned by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to develop minimum standards and good practice guidance for organisations working with vulnerable adults in the voluntary, community and independent sectors. Endorsed by DHSS&PS, the guidance contains 8 safeguarding standards with supporting information for each standard and is applicable to a wide range of organisations representing different vulnerable adult groups.

The publication will be useful for small voluntary and community organisations that have no safeguarding policy in place and those reviewing their existing safeguarding policy. It will also be useful for organisations providing Regulated Services, who will find that adherence to these standards will enable their compliance with the requirements for the Protection of Vulnerable Adults set out in the Minimum Standards as published by the DHSSPS and in the Quality Assessment Framework under Supporting People.

To download a copy of ‘Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults, A Shared Responsibility’ log on to www.volunteernow.co.uk/publications/?category=7&type=0&Search.x=26&Search.y=12

Useful Numbers

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<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Northern HSC Trust</td>
<td>028 2563 5558</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Eastern HSC Trust</td>
<td>028 9266 5181</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern HSC Trust</td>
<td>028 3083 2650</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belfast HSC Trust</td>
<td>028 9056 5707</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western HSC Trust</td>
<td>028 7131 4090</td>
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<td>Volunteer Now</td>
<td>028 9023 2020</td>
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<td></td>
<td><a href="http://www.volunteernow.co.uk">www.volunteernow.co.uk</a></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><a href="mailto:info@volunteernow.co.uk">info@volunteernow.co.uk</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Police Service of Northern Ireland</td>
<td>Non Emergency 0845 6008000</td>
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<td>Emergency 999</td>
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<td>Stop It Now! – Working to prevent sexual abuse. If you have concerns about your own thoughts and behaviours towards children or are concerned about others contact the Stop it Now Helpline:</td>
<td>Freephone Helpline 0808 1000 900</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Protection Arrangements in Northern Ireland (PPANI) Strategy &amp; Administration Office:</td>
<td>028 9025 9612</td>
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<tr>
<td>Probation Board for Northern Ireland</td>
<td>80 to 90 North Street, Belfast BTI 1LD. Tel no: 02890262400</td>
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<td>Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority</td>
<td>Belfast 028 9051 7500</td>
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<td>Omagh 028 8224 5828</td>
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For further information about NOTA please visit: www.nota.co.uk

Information Note 9 (Updated Sept 2012)