

South Wiltshire Domestic Violence Forum

Domestic Violence and Vulnerable Adults

“A frequent perception of domestic violence, perhaps encouraged by media reporting, is of a mother suffering abuse in front of her children. Sadly, whilst that can be common enough, it is far from the full extent of the domestic violence issue. Vulnerable adults too can be victims of the most subtle and vindictive forms of domestic violence, and are every bit as much in need of specialist protection and support as other groups of victims”

– a vulnerable adult support worker

Vulnerable adults are persons aged 18 or over who may be in need of community care services because of mental or other disability, age or illness and who are or may be unable to care for themselves or protect themselves from significant harm or exploitation. This will include some older people, people with physical disabilities, sensory impairment, learning disabilities and mental health needs. Vulnerable adults can experience domestic violence within a relationship with a partner, adult child, parent, other relative or friend.

Domestic violence does not have to involve physical violence such as beating, but can include many forms and acts of abuse that are especially cruel and unkind when carried out towards vulnerable adults. Psychological abuse might include humiliation, deprivation of contact, withdrawal of services and isolation. Financial abuse can involve theft, fraud and coercion over wills, property and inheritance in general, and the misappropriation of possessions and benefits. Neglect and acts of omission may involve ignoring medical or physical care needs, the withholding of medication and access to health services, inadequate nutrition and simple domestic comforts such as heating and availability of clean clothes.

As can often be the case where domestic violence occurs or is at risk of occurring, victims may be unable or unwilling to act to prevent it happening. Agencies and organisations in contact with vulnerable adults have a crucial role to play in recognising situations where there is risk of domestic violence as well as where domestic violence is already occurring. They also are well placed to make timely and appropriate referrals to other agencies where actual or potential victims are identified.

In Wiltshire and Swindon there is a formal Policy & Procedures for the protection of vulnerable adults (*) and agencies providing services to vulnerable adults are required to be signatories. This places an organisational responsibility on the agencies as well as an individual responsibility on all their employees to report all allegations or suspicions of abuse to a vulnerable adult. The Policy and Procedures create the concept of the “alerted person”, being a person from an agency working with vulnerable adults, or any other person who has a suspicion or concern that abuse may have taken place or might take place. The alerted person **must** make the appropriate referral as per the Policy and Procedures directions, thus setting in motion the necessary preventative or protective measures.

(*): This Policy and a separate booklet “No Secrets in Swindon and Wiltshire” are available on the websites of Wiltshire CC (www.wiltshire.gov.uk) and Swindon BC (www.swindon.gov.uk).