

Everybody's business? Adult safeguarding in Northern Ireland

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Over the past 20 years there has been a growing realisation that, in addition to the risks to children and young people, certain adults are at increased risk of harm, abuse or neglect due to their personal characteristics, life circumstances, and the actions of others. Increased public and political awareness has developed alongside research, policy, and professional developments to advance our understanding of the abuse of adults in families, communities, and institutional settings.

Determining the extent of abuse is problematic as it often goes unreported and it is difficult to measure. However, in 2007, the first United Kingdom (UK) prevalence study of elder abuse reported that 4 per cent of older people living in the community were subject to abuse or neglect (O'Keefe et al., 2007). In 2010, a prevalence study of elder abuse in Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Spain and Sweden found that 19.4 per cent of older people aged 60-84 years were exposed to psychological abuse, 2.7 per cent to physical abuse, 0.7 per cent to sexual abuse, and 3.8 per cent to financial abuse (Soares et al., 2014).

Definitions of abuse vary but refer to any action, deliberate or unintentional, or lack of appropriate action that causes harm or distress to an adult with care and support needs. This includes physical abuse (such as hitting or inappropriate

restraint), emotional or psychological abuse (including threats, humiliation, or isolation), sexual abuse (any non-consensual sexual activity), financial abuse (theft or misuse of money or property), neglect (failure to provide necessary care, food, or medication), and institutional abuse (an ongoing culture of ill-treatment).

Across the UK and Ireland, legislation, policies and procedures have been implemented to take steps to prevent abuse and respond appropriately when abuse is suspected or identified. Adult safeguarding in Northern Ireland operates within a policy framework established by the Adult Safeguarding: Prevention and Protection in Partnership framework (2015), although this is soon to be replaced by an Adult Protection (NI) Bill.

Despite this structured approach, public awareness and attitudes toward adult safeguarding remain variable, potentially affecting reporting rates and community engagement. In 2024, the *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)* survey included a set of questions focusing on adult safeguarding. This represents the first comprehensive assessment of public understanding, perceptions, and attitudes regarding adult safeguarding in Northern Ireland, providing crucial insights to inform policy development, education initiatives, and service improvement in social care.

Recognition of abuse

Respondents were presented with six scenarios of potential mistreatment, and were asked to indicate if, in their view, the scenarios should be considered as abuse, exploitation or neglect (see Table 1 for details). As part of the ethical approach to the survey, respondents were reminded that their participation was voluntary, and they could skip any question that they did not wish to answer.

Respondents thought that all six scenarios should definitely or probably be considered as abuse, exploitation or neglect. In relation to the events involving Elena, Angela, Louise and Debbie, at least four out of five respondents said it definitely fell into that category. However, respondents were more equivocal about the situations involving Denis and Bridie (42% and 32% respectively), both of which took place in a care home.

Table 1: Should scenario be considered as abuse, exploitation or neglect?

	%				
	Yes, definitely	Yes, probably	No, probably not	No, definitely not	I don't know
Elena is 22 years old and has a physical disability. She travels by taxi to a day centre. She said the taxi driver put his hand between her legs and she felt scared.	94	4	1	0	1
Angela works in a day centre for people with learning disabilities. She took a video of David, a daycentre member, when he was distressed. She added the caption 'he's kicking off now', and shared this video on social media with her colleagues.	85	11	3	1	1
Louise suffers from low self-esteem and depression. She believes she is talking to a famous singer on Facebook and has been sending him money via an app.	82	12	4	1	2
Debbie is 74 and lives with her 50-year-old son Mark. She told a community nurse that Mark verbally abuses her especially when he is drinking. She said that this makes her feel frightened and nervous every day.	79	18	1	0	1
Denis lives in a care home. He told his sister that he is bored as all he does is watch TV, and he is made to go to bed early. He also said that no one comes when he presses the buzzer when he needs something.	43	42	12	<0.5	3
Bridie has dementia and lives in a care home. She told a relative that a staff member was 'very rough' when helping her to the toilet.	32	46	12	1	10

Table 2 focuses on the proportion of respondents saying that each scenario was definitely a situation of abuse, exploitation or neglect. For the scenario involving Elena being subjected to non-consensual sexual activity, there was little or no variation in responses across

different demographic groups. However, in four of the scenarios (relating to Angela, Louise, Denis and Bridie), the youngest and oldest respondents were least likely to say ‘yes, definitely’. For example, 75 per cent of 18-24 year olds and 77 per cent of those aged 65 years

or over said ‘yes, definitely’ in relation to Angela’s situation, compared with 92 per cent of those aged 25-34 years. In relation to Angela, Debbie, Denis and Bridie, males were less likely than females to say ‘yes, definitely’.

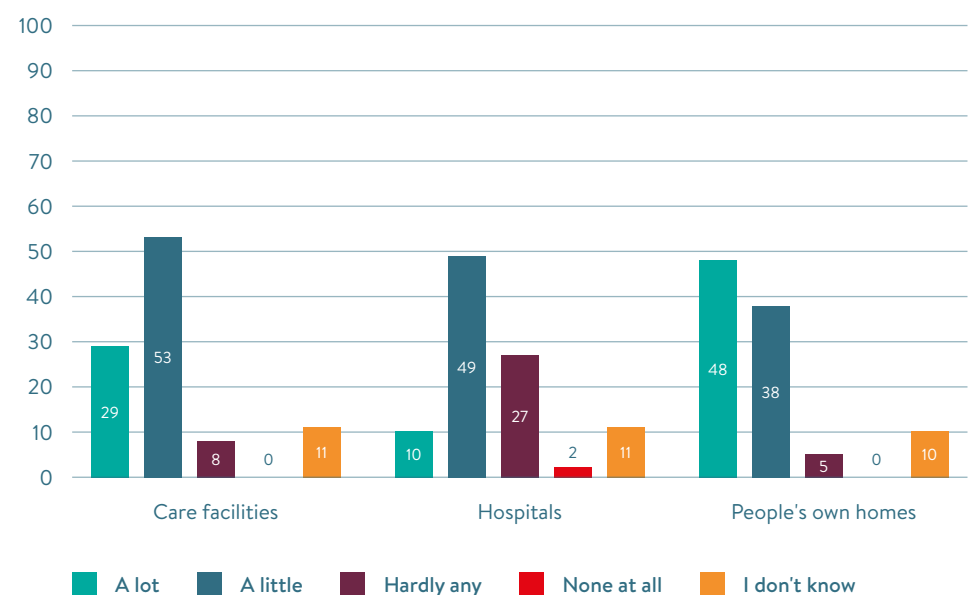
Table 2: Perception of abuse, exploitation, or neglect

	% saying ‘yes, definitely’					
	Elena	Angela	Louise	Debbie	Denis	Bridie
All	94	85	82	79	43	32
Age						
18-24	94	75	74	90	35	31
25-34	96	92	82	87	49	29
35-44	95	84	84	74	38	24
45-54	94	86	83	79	52	38
55-64	96	89	82	80	44	38
65-74	91	77	85	71	34	30
75+	92	77	73	73	33	29
Sex						
Male	94	78	81	75	36	28
Female	95	91	82	82	48	35

Level of harm

Respondents were then asked about their perceptions of the prevalence of abuse, exploitation and neglect of adults in three settings, namely, care facilities, hospitals and the home. As evident in Figure 1, a majority of respondents felt that it took place to some degree in care facilities, hospitals and/or in people’s own homes. In particular, nearly one half of respondents (48%) felt that adults were likely to suffer ‘a lot’ of harm in their own homes, with 29 per cent thinking this in relation to care facilities, and 10 per cent to hospitals. Approximately one in ten respondents said that they did not know.

Figure 1: Perception of harm occurring (%)



Perceptions of the prevalence of harm in each setting differed according to the age of respondents. Those in the youngest age groups (18-24 years) were most likely to think that adults suffered ‘a lot’ of harm in these locations: 45 per

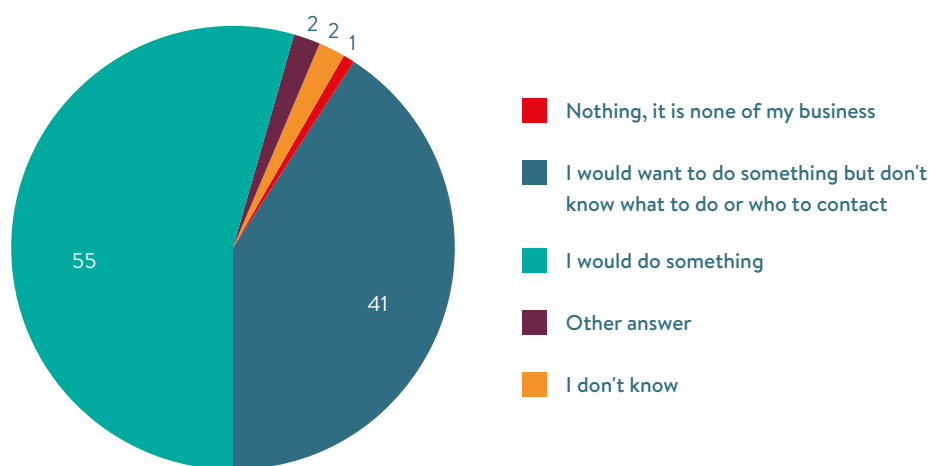
cent in relation to care facilities, 22 per cent in relation to hospitals, and 63 per cent in relation to an individual’s home. In contrast, the figures for respondents in the oldest age group (aged 75 years or more) were 18 per cent, 2 per cent and 35

per cent respectively. Likewise, females perceived more harm than males. For example, 57 per cent of females thought there was ‘a lot’ of harm experienced in an individual’s home, compared with 37 per cent of males.

Public response

Safeguarding is everyone's business, as many adults depend on members of the public, family members, and neighbours speaking up or reporting situations of risk that they have observed or are made aware of. As such, understanding how to recognise and respond to adult abuse is essential. To explore the protective role the public may play, respondents were asked how they might respond if they were aware of an adult being harmed as a result of abuse, exploitation or neglect. Figure 2 shows that only a very few respondents (1%) said that they would do nothing, as it is none of their business. Four in ten respondents (41%) said that they would want to do something but would not know what to do. However, just over one half of respondents (55%) said that they would do something to highlight their concern.

Figure 2: Response if aware of harm (%)



Variations in responses across groups were evident. Just over one half (54%) of the youngest respondents (18-24 years) said that they would want to do something but would not know what to do or who to contact. Older respondents were surer of how to act with 63 per cent of the oldest age group (75+) saying that they would do something, compared with 40 per cent of the youngest age group. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63%) who provided care for someone else said they would do something.

Respondents were offered the opportunity to provide free-text responses to indicate how they would respond if they encountered situations of abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Although some expressed uncertainty about appropriate contacts for different scenarios, these 'open' responses tended to demonstrate a reasonable level of public awareness of official reporting mechanisms. The most common response involved making immediate contact with authorities, albeit many respondents did not identify which authorities. Nevertheless, to a large extent, contacting the police emerged as the primary response, with many respondents also indicating that they would contact the police and social services.

A significant portion of respondents indicated their actions would depend on specific circumstances, suggesting a somewhat nuanced understanding that different situations may require tailored responses depending on context. Thus, relationship factors including proximity to the victim or perpetrator, and location factors, including where the potential abuse occurred and in what settings were also deemed to impact respondents' responses.

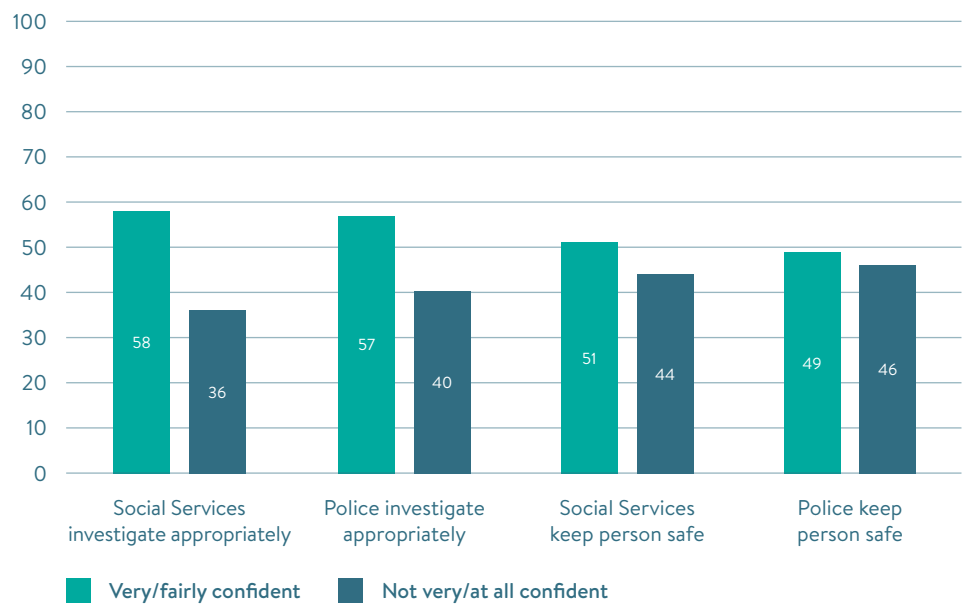
While most respondents felt that they should do something if they were aware of someone experiencing harm, there was also a strong sense that adults experiencing harm should be asked whether or not such harm should be reported to the police or social services: 80 per cent of respondents agreed (strongly agree or tend to agree) to this. The youngest respondents (18-24 year olds) showed the lowest level of agreement (62%), although 12 per cent said that they did not know. Conversely, 85 per cent of respondents aged 65 years agreed that those experiencing such harm should be asked if they wished it to be reported to the police or social services or not.

There was very strong support (93%) for the idea that it is everybody's business to be alert for instances of harm or abuse of adults. While still very high, the youngest respondents showed the lowest level of agreement in this regard (82%). Nevertheless, there was concern among around three quarters of respondents (78%) that if they reported an incident of harm, that the person experiencing the harm could be victimised by the perpetrators. The lowest level of concern regarding potential victimisation was among those aged 65-74 (65%).

Confidence in authorities

While social services and the police were mentioned as the relevant authorities for reporting abuse, there is only moderate confidence in them. Approximately six in ten respondents (58%) thought that if they reported an adult experiencing harm due to abuse, exploitation or neglect, they would be very or fairly confident that social services would investigate such harm appropriately (Figure 3). A similar proportion thought this in relation to the police (57%). A slightly lower proportion felt some degree of confidence that social services and police would keep the person safe following the complaint (51% and 49% respectively). In particular, the youngest respondents were less likely to express confidence in the responses of these statutory agencies.

Figure 3: Confidence in authorities (%)



Discussion

This Northern Ireland Life and Times survey represents the first comprehensive record of public awareness, attitudes, and perceptions regarding adult safeguarding in Northern Ireland. The findings provide valuable insights that can inform future policy development, public education initiatives, and service improvements.

While there was general recognition of harm across different scenarios,

significant variations exist across demographic groups, with younger and older respondents and males less likely to definitively identify certain situations as abusive. Almost half of NILT respondents (48%) perceived that substantial harm to adults was occurring in individuals' homes, with lower proportions thinking it occurred in care facilities (29%) and hospitals (10%). Despite a reported willingness to act, four out of ten respondents indicated they would not know what to do or who to contact if they witnessed abuse, exploitation or neglect,

suggesting a significant knowledge gap and uncertainty in responding. Whilst there is widespread agreement that safeguarding is everybody's business, there is strong support (80%) for respecting adults' autonomy in reporting harm they may have experienced. Considerable public concern exists about potential victimisation of those who report abuse, and only moderate confidence (approximately 60%) in the investigative role of Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and social services.

Policy recommendations

In line with the launch of the new Adult Protection (NI) Bill, the following policy initiatives should be considered to address identified public knowledge gaps and concerns:

- **Targeted Public Education Campaigns:** Develop demographic-specific awareness initiatives, particularly focusing on younger adults (18-24), older adults (75+) and males, as these groups showed lower recognition of certain forms of abuse.
- **Clear Reporting Pathways:** Establish and widely publicise straightforward reporting mechanisms to address the significant proportion of respondents who would want to act but lack knowledge of appropriate steps.
- **Enhanced Professional Training:** Increase confidence in social services and police responses by improving training and public communication about investigation procedures and protective measures for victims.

This research underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach to adult safeguarding that balances respect for individual autonomy with effective protection mechanisms. By addressing the identified knowledge gaps and building public confidence in reporting and response systems, policymakers can enhance safeguarding effectiveness while fostering a society where protection of vulnerable adults is truly seen as "everybody's business."

Key Points:

- 48% felt there was a lot of harm as a result of abuse, exploitation or neglect in people's own homes. 29% thought this in relation to care facilities, and 10% in relation to hospitals.
- 55% of respondents said that would do something if they were aware of someone experiencing harm. 41% said they would want to do something but would not know what to do. This was the case for 54% of 18-24 year olds.
- 80% agreed that an adult experiencing harm should be asked if this harm should be reported to the police or social services.
- 93% supported the idea that it's everybody's business to look out for harm or abuse of adults.
- 78% were concerned that if they reported an incident of harm, then the victim could be victimised by the perpetrators.
- 58% felt that social services would investigate a report of harm appropriately, and 57% felt this in relation to the police.
- One half of respondents felt that social services or police would keep someone safe during an investigation of harm.

References

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2024, 1,199 people aged 18 years or over took part.

NILT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt



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