

Supporting our people – guidance on safeguarding

This document sets out the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Group’s (“the Group”) approach to recognising and reporting safeguarding concerns.

It seeks to assist those employed by or otherwise working on behalf of the Group (this includes, for example, temporary agency workers and off-payroll workers, but does not include accredited representatives) to understand their part in, and to provide guidance and signposting on, safeguarding. This is to ensure that the Group plays a full role in protecting the children, young people and adults in need who come into contact with it.

Throughout this document the term “adults in need” is intended to have the same meaning as the term “vulnerable adults”.

It is published on the RCN Group intranet to ensure it is available to all who work for and on behalf of the Group – those individuals are responsible for ensuring they are familiar with this document and its content. It is also available on the RCN, RCNi and RCN Foundation websites so that children and adults in need, as well as parents and carers, know how to voice their concerns and get help in relation to safeguarding issues.

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What is safeguarding?

Safeguarding is about promoting the welfare, health, wellbeing and development of children and adults in need, and taking every reasonable precaution to prevent and protect them against abuse, neglect or any form of harm during our interactions with them.

This means considering, as far as we can and in recognition of the relevant legislation as well as in the professional obligations of many of our people, what is in the best interests of the child or adult in need.

Whilst there are some differences in the legislation across the UK that governs safeguarding, for the purposes of this document children are anyone below the age of 18 years (noting in Scotland that the age of legal capacity is 16). A adult in need is anyone aged 18 years or over who has needs for care and support, is experiencing, or is at risk of, abuse or neglect, and is unable to protect themselves.

In centring upon the prevention of, and protection from, abuse, harm or neglect, it is recognised that these can take many forms including, but not limited to, physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, financial or material abuse, neglect and acts of omission, self-neglect and domestic abuse. More information about types of abuse, harm and neglect can be found [here](#).

Why is it important to the RCN Group?

As an organisation that provides services and products to members and the general public, the Group seeks to achieve the following in relation to those with whom it comes into contact:

- Promote the general welfare, health, wellbeing and development of children and adults in need;
- Prevent harm and reduce the risk of abuse or neglect;
- Protect, maintain and uphold the human rights of all, including children and adults in need; and
- Where possible, recognise and report abuse, harm and neglect.

As a trade union and professional body within the health and social care sector, we seek to role model good practice in relation to safeguarding.

Our commitment is underpinned by relevant legislation across the UK which requires those working in particular ways with children and adults in need to go through a vetting process to [check for any previous criminal convictions](#). And it aligns with the [RCN Group Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Statement](#), the [RCN Respect Charter](#) and the Group's responsibilities under the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

This document should be read alongside the [Suicide and Emergency Response Guidance](#) which provides information and support for those who may have to deal with member emergency situations, such as suicide or self-harm threats or other safeguarding crises where there is a risk of actual harm.

What is the role of employees and others working on behalf of the Group?

Whilst for many, it is unlikely that they will have contact with a child or adult in need in the course of their work, all employees and others working on behalf of the Group have a personal responsibility for safeguarding the welfare and wellbeing of all children and adults in need.

Except [where the alleged abuser works for or on behalf of the Group](#) and relevant procedures are followed, no one working for or on behalf of the Group should investigate concerns about individual children or adults in need who are or may be being abused or who are at risk. But we shouldn't ignore where this is, or might be, happening. We can all play a part in spotting the signs and ensuring concerns are acted upon. This section explains what our people should, and are empowered to, do.

Group employees who are NMC registrants should make sure they are able to satisfy [the NMC Code, standards and their underpinning guidance on raising concerns](#) in relation to safeguarding.

It is recognised that some of our people do, or are more likely to, provide services directly to young people and/or adults in need. Additional provisions for those in these roles are set out [here](#).

Having a conversation about a safeguarding issue, for example where a member discloses abuse they have experienced or perpetrated during a telephone call, is very likely to be an extremely challenging situation. Being aware of the Group's expectations around responding to and reporting such concerns will help someone to handle this in the moment, along with developing communication skills – for example active listening, questioning and summarising – through [the online learning portal](#).

Build understanding

All who work for or on behalf of the Group should read this guidance as part of onboarding, and each time it is updated, in order to have a basic level of knowledge about safeguarding, how to recognise potential signs of abuse, harm and neglect, and what to do where these are noticed or where a safeguarding issue is disclosed. Further information can be found in the RCN's intercollegiate guidance available [on the RCN website](#) which sets out the recommended minimum knowledge, skills and competence for those working in health and social care settings.

Building understanding helps us to prevent abuse from occurring, respond appropriately to issues, including taking a person-led approach, and protect those in need by knowing how to [spot the signs](#), [handle disclosures](#), provide support and [raise concerns](#).

Be aware

Be alert to and recognise the signs of harm, abuse or neglect.

Being aware of the potential signs of harm, abuse or neglect is crucial. Some potential signs (and this list is not exhaustive) include:

- changes in behaviour, demeanour or mood e.g. becoming withdrawn, appearing overly anxious or being/becoming angry or aggressive
- changes in their appearance e.g. clothing, use of make up, weight loss, etc.
- reporting financial concerns
- showing signs of physical injury e.g. bruising
- in children, sexually explicit language or behaviour, inappropriate to their age or development.

Where there are potential signs this should be [reported](#).

Receiving a disclosure of abuse, harm or neglect

If a child or adult in need says that they have suffered harm, abuse or neglect, you (the person receiving the disclosure) should try to involve [the safeguarding lead](#) at the earliest opportunity, following the steps and advice below until it has been reported to them:

1. Listen to what the individual is saying.
2. Don't make any promises to keep the information confidential.
3. Call 999 if the individual is at immediate risk of harm or has been harmed, i.e. serious sexual or physical assault – if the disclosure has occurred during a telephone or video call, ideally ask a colleague to call 999 while you keep the individual on the call with you. If the individual is likely to be unsafe if they leave where they are, encourage them not to leave until plans have been made for their safety.
4. Tell the individual that the information will be shared with the RCN's safeguarding lead; it is important not to share this wider than absolutely necessary.
5. Don't judge the individual or show emotions e.g. do not show shock at what is being said, and don't give views about the allegations or the person about whom allegations are being made.
6. Reassure the individual that they have done the right thing in speaking about what they are experiencing and that what is happening to them is not their fault.
7. Only ask questions to seek clarification. Do not ask leading or probing questions or try to investigate it further – this will be done by safeguarding professionals.
8. If the disclosure is from an adult, ask them what they would like to happen.
9. If possible, note down what the individual is saying - if it is not possible to take notes at the time, make a note as soon as possible after the disclosure while all the information is still fresh. This should be written as objectively as possible in describing what you've heard/received.
10. Report what you've heard/received immediately – either in person or by phone – to [the safeguarding lead](#)
11. Send the written record to [the safeguarding lead](#) at the earliest opportunity.

Witnessing abuse, harm or neglect

If an employee or other person working on behalf of the Group witnesses abuse or harm you (the person who has witnessed this) should:

1. Arrange for any immediate medical treatment that may be needed – for example by contacting a first aider or calling 999.
2. Take action where possible to ensure the safety of those in the area.
3. Produce a written record of this as soon as possible. This should be written as objectively as possible in describing what has been seen/heard.
4. Report what has been witnessed immediately – either in person or by phone – to [the safeguarding lead](#). If you are at another employer's premises at the time you should report this in line with that organisation's safeguarding policy/guidance.
5. Send the written record to [the safeguarding lead](#) at the earliest opportunity.

Reporting concerns

Where an employee or other person working on behalf of the Group has concerns or suspects there may be a safeguarding issue they should, and [will be supported to](#), raise these as indicated above. This includes where a disclosure is made. It is acknowledged that reporting such concerns can be incredibly difficult but it is important to do so.

Under no circumstances should anyone other than the [Safeguarding Lead](#) investigate any safeguarding concerns themselves as this can cause further harm.

The three key steps are for someone reporting concerns are to:

1. Produce a written record of the concerns as soon as possible. This should be written as objectively as possible in describing what has been observed/heard.
2. [Report what has been witnessed/disclosed](#) immediately – either in person or by phone – to [the safeguarding lead](#). If you are at another employer's premises at the time you should report this in line with that organisation's safeguarding policy/guidance.
3. Send the written record to [the safeguarding lead](#).

For NMC registrants, the Group considers reporting safeguarding issues in line with this guidance as discharging the individual's duty under the NMC Code.

Those making reports may not know what happens after their report is submitted but should receive confirmation that their report has been received.

[The safeguarding lead](#), with appropriate advice where needed, will handle the disclosure from this point onwards, including referring to appropriate external agencies and seeking support from local authority services who will lead any next steps. Only at this level may decisions be taken to breach the confidentiality of the individual concerned where there are genuine concerns about their safety or the safety of others. This might include reporting a crime, or suspected crime, to the police as well as to any regulatory bodies. [The safeguarding lead](#) is also responsible for reporting any issues to the service provider (for example where the issue has arisen in a hospital) or the school where it affects a child.

Workplace issues

If there is a workplace issue at another employer that may be placing members of the public at risk (for example, a system that is potentially dangerous), and it has been brought to the attention of an employee or other person working on behalf of the Group, then the Group will consider sending the establishment in question a 'Professional Letter of Concern.' This action will be considered and taken only by [the safeguarding lead](#) who should be contacted in such circumstances.

Seeking support

Hearing about or witnessing abuse, harm or neglect may have an impact on the wellbeing of the individual. Individuals are encouraged to [access support](#) where this is the case.

Safeguarding Lead

The RCN Director of Nursing, or Deputy in their absence, is the Group's safeguarding lead who will provide guidance where any employee or other person working on behalf of the Group has concerns about a safeguarding issue, and will receive and act upon any reports of safeguarding issues received from or about anyone who works for or on behalf of the Group.

Where the Safeguarding Lead is the perpetrator of safeguarding concerns being reported, advice should be sought and reports submitted to their manager.

Role specific guidance

Those who work in the following teams or roles do, or are more likely to, provide services directly to young people and/or adults in need:

- Counselling team – this includes off-payroll workers who are provided with additional guidance as part of their contracting arrangements with the RCN.
- Welfare, Lamplight and Immigration teams
- Legal Officers and Senior Legal Officers
- Prince of Wales Cadet Scheme team members
- RCN Contact Centre Advisers
- RCN Officers, Senior RCN Officers and patch administrators (and their equivalents across the four countries)
- Professional Leads in the Nursing directorate and equivalents in the Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales
- Reception staff

For individuals in these teams or roles, online safeguarding training is provided as part of onboarding to support these individuals given the higher likelihood of safeguarding issues arising in their day to day work. This must be refreshed every three years, or sooner if there are changes. This training should offer individuals more confidence, knowledge and skills in identifying, discussing and reporting safeguarding issues. It is also noted that Group employees may host work experience placements with a young person under the [Work Experience Procedure](#). Before hosting such a placement, the placement manager and others involved in supporting the young person should ensure they are fully familiar with this guidance and undertake the online safeguarding training.

It is recognised that the provision of counselling (including over the telephone) constitutes a regulated activity under the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 (SVGA), as amended by the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 (PoFA) in England and Wales. The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 (SI 2007/1351) largely replicates provisions in the Act that do not extend to Northern Ireland. Scotland has instituted its own system (under the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007). Management and supervision of people carrying out these activities are also within scope of the definition of regulated activity. For individuals undertaking regulated activity on behalf of the Group, training on safeguarding will be provided at the outset of employment or engagement with the Group, with refresher training undertaken every three years. See below regarding [Disclosure and Barring Service \(DBS\) checks](#).

Those involved in fundraising with RCN Foundation activity must ensure they are familiar with the Foundation's Fundraising Communications with Vulnerable Supporters policy.

What support is available?

This document is intended to provide support to all employees and others working on behalf of the Group by providing information and guidance. It is supplemented for those in particular roles with learning interventions as described above, and is available alongside the [Suicide and Emergency Response Guidance](#).

For RCN Group employees, and in some cases others working on the Group's behalf, a range of support is available to those who may be involved in safeguarding issues – this includes those who might have been impacted by hearing about the experiences of

members or others they are supporting or representing. The below are available at no cost to employees:

- management support – people managers should ensure that any team member who has received a disclosure or witnessed abuse or harm is offered the opportunity to talk about what has happened and to take some time out to recover. All are encouraged to talk to their manager. Managers are not generally expected to be experts in this area and will not provide counselling, but if they know what their team member is dealing with and how they are feeling, they will be better able to provide support. Managers should provide signposting and can make referrals for support such as through [the EAP](#) or [Occupational Health](#).
- the [employee assistance programme \(EAP\)](#) – this 24/7 confidential service offers an advice line on a range of matters including legal, money and care issues. The programme also provides up to six counselling sessions. The EAP is not just for employees – an employee's partner and dependent relatives at home can access it, along with dependent children between the ages of 16 and 23 as well as younger children in certain circumstances and with consent and supervision.
- [Help@Hand](#) – through our current [Group Income Protection](#) policy with provider Unum, employees and some family members can access four key support services including mental health support.
- approaching a [Mental Health First Aider](#) who can listen and guide individuals to further support.

What other measures are in place?

Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)

The DBS maintains a list of people barred from working with children and adults in need. It is a criminal offence for an employer to knowingly allow a barred individual to work in a regulated activity with children or adults in need.

The Group will apply for enhanced DBS checks, with barred lists check, of all those who will undertake regulated activity (as defined by DBS and safeguarding legislation) – whether they are directly employed by the Group or working on its behalf. These will be undertaken at the outset and repeated every three years. Where the individual refuses to agree to a DBS check being made, refuses to allow the Group to see the DBS certificate, or the DBS check results in an outcome unsatisfactory to the Group, the offer of employment or other engagement will be withdrawn – and where the employment or engagement has already commenced, this will be terminated with immediate effect.

The Group will fulfil its [duty to refer](#), that is to pass information to the DBS, where an employee who carries out regulated activities has resigned or been dismissed, or would or could have been dismissed, because they have harmed, or may harm, a child or adult in need.

Working with others

The Group requires all its partners with whom it contracts to share this commitment to safeguarding and will seek evidence of this before any partnerships are agreed or continue.

Risk assessments

Senior managers are responsible for ensuring safeguarding risks are assessed and documented when planning and delivering work, activities and events, and any actions taken reported to relevant parties. This may form part of [Equality Impact Assessments](#).

Reporting and record keeping

As described above, all have a responsibility to report safeguarding issues to [the safeguarding lead](#). The form to be used is available for staff on the RCN Group intranet.

Where incidents are reported in line with the procedure above, these will be reviewed by [the safeguarding lead](#) and action taken as described above.

In receiving reports, [the safeguarding lead](#) will:

- Clarify that the child, young person or adult in need is safe.
- Address any gaps in the information provided to the extent that it is appropriate to do so at that stage.
- For adults in need, check that their views have been clearly sought and recorded and that they are aware what action will be taken, and check that issues of consent and mental capacity have been addressed. In the event that a person's wishes are being overridden, they will check that this is appropriate and that the adult understands why.
- If the concern arises outside the Group's premises (such as in a hospital), they will liaise with the relevant establishment with a view to ensuring that their safeguarding policy/procedure has been followed, to the extent that it is appropriate to do so at that stage.
- Make a referral to the local authority designated officer or the adult social care team of the relevant local authority and follow any instructions or advice which they give. It may be that the circumstances require that this is undertaken before the actions set out above.
- Consider whether information needs to be shared with any other member of staff e.g. in some circumstances report to the manager of the team where the concern has arisen.
- Make sure action is taken to safeguard other people if appropriate to do so and agreed with the adult social care team/local authority designated officer – if the allegation is against someone employed by or otherwise working on behalf of the Group, advice should be sought from the HR Business Partner.
- If a criminal offence has occurred or may occur, contact the police, in conjunction with advice or guidance from the Adult Social Care team/Local Authority Designated Officer.
- Consider whether any referral needs to be made to the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) (or Disclosure Scotland or Access NI, as relevant) and any professional regulator (e.g. the NMC), and keep this under review.
- Where there is a connection to the RCN Foundation, report to the Foundation trustees (in an anonymised or pseudonymised format, if the context requires), so that they can consider whether a Serious Incident Report to the Charity Commission for England and Wales, Northern Ireland and/or the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) is required.

[The safeguarding lead](#) will review reports collectively on an annual basis, or sooner, to identify and address any trends.

Records will be retained securely and for no longer than is needed in line with [the RCN's privacy notices, data protection policy and retention schedule](#). Those making reports should destroy these once confirmation is received that the report has been made – e.g. email acknowledgement from [the safeguarding lead](#).

The disclosure of personal information without the consent of the subject will be made in certain conditions, including for the purposes of the prevention and detection of a crime, for example where there is a safeguarding concern. The welfare and safety of adults in need and children comes first but disclosures must be made within the framework of data protection legislation.

What happens if there are concerns about Group employees or others relating to safeguarding?

Where there are concerns about any employee or other person working on behalf of the Group in relation to safeguarding, these should be reported. The Group will support all those who report such concerns.

Where concerns are held by someone outside of the Group, these should be raised in line with the guidance available [here](#) for where this relates to the RCN, [here](#) for where this relates to RCNi or [here](#) where it is RCN Foundation.

For employees of the Group, and others as relevant, the [RCN](#) or [RCNi](#) Grievance Policy should be considered alongside the [RCN Group Whistleblowing Policy](#) where this is appropriate. Where someone may be at immediate risk as a result of a colleague's behaviour, please speak to [the safeguarding lead](#) immediately – or should the concerns relate to that person, speak to their manager.

Where concerns about a Group employee are upheld following initial exploration, this may be considered misconduct and handled through the [RCN](#) or [RCNi](#) disciplinary policies. These policies also set out the approach to be taken where an employee is charged with, or convicted of, a criminal offence, or where misconduct constitutes a matter that warrants the reporting to the police or to a regulatory, professional or other external body. Where a Group employee discloses that they have been perpetrating abuse, harm or neglect towards a child or adult in need, this will be taken on board in determining how the RCN or RCNi responds.

Other relevant policies and arrangements will be followed where the concerns are about a person who is not employed by the Group but otherwise works on its behalf.

This guidance was prepared by the RCN's Head of People & OD with input requested from various others including the Deputy Director Nursing, Head of Member Support Services, the Professional Leads for Care of Older People and Dementia and Children and Young People, Education and Life Long Learning Adviser (Wales), Head of Legal (Regulatory), Head of Prince of Wales Cadet Scheme, the Directors of RCN Northern Ireland and RCN Scotland, members of the People & OD Management Team, nominated GMB representative, Head of RCN Foundation and the Head of HR (RCNi).

It will be reviewed on or before July 2024.