



Northern Ireland
Assembly



QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST



The Open
University
Ireland



STRANMILLIS
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast



St Mary's
University College
A College of Queen's University Belfast

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

KESS SERIES 9 PROGRAMME

Public Understanding of Adult Safeguarding in Northern Ireland

Lorna Montgomery and Paula Devine;

l.montgomery@qub.ac.uk

p.devine@qub.ac.uk

7 October 2026

KESS Policy Briefing

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-informed policy and law-making within Northern Ireland

Key points:

- Effective Adult Safeguarding depends on public and community support in identifying and reporting harm, abuse or neglect of certain adults. However, little is known about the public's willingness to help or their knowledge of how to act if they have concerns.
- This is particularly relevant for the upcoming Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill, with consideration of the needs of vulnerable victims and witnesses.
- The 2024 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey asked a representative sample of 1,199 respondents aged 18 years or over about their recognition of abuse, their perceived levels of harm and responses to abuse. This is the first comprehensive record of public awareness, attitudes, and perceptions regarding Adult Safeguarding in Northern Ireland.
- The findings reveal that the public perceives substantial harm occurring to adults particularly in private homes.
- Despite a reported willingness to act, many respondents indicated they would not know what to do if they witnessed potential abuse, suggesting a significant knowledge gap.
- Concern about potential victimisation of those who report abuse was identified, with only moderate confidence in trusting the investigative role of Social Services and the police

Recommendations:

- Targeted Public Education Campaigns: Develop demographic-specific awareness initiatives, particularly focusing on younger adults (18-24), older adults (75+), and male populations who showed lower recognition of certain forms of abuse. In so doing, promote understanding of the protections available to victims and witnesses as outlined in the pending Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill.
- 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.

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

Background

Over the past 20 years there has been a growing realisation that, in addition to the risks to children and young people, some adults within our communities 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 abuse often goes unreported and is difficult to measure. Whilst definitions of abuse vary, they tend to 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. A set of policies, and procedures designed to recognise adults at risk, and take steps to prevent and respond appropriately when abuse is suspected or identified have been identified. The Adult Safeguarding: Prevention and Protection in Partnership framework (2015), seeks to protect adults at risk from abuse and harm. More recently the pending Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill seeks to strengthen the support, protection and participation rights available to those adults with care and support needs when they become victims or witnesses within the criminal justice system. The Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill and the Adult Safeguarding: Prevention and Protection in Partnership (PPiP) Policy (2015) are not directly linked in law, but nevertheless, they are highly complementary in their aims and approach to protecting vulnerable victims and witnesses in Northern Ireland.

The Bill largely focuses on improving experiences after a crime has been reported, ensuring that victims and witnesses are protected and supported throughout the justice process. However, these protections can only benefit individuals if crimes are first recognised and brought to the attention of relevant agencies.

Public awareness therefore represents a critical upstream factor in achieving the Bill's objectives. This issue is highly relevant as the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill seeks to create a more victim-centred and protective criminal justice system through measures such as an independent Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses, enhanced protections for vulnerable victims, expanded special measures, and strengthened support for individuals involved in criminal proceedings.

The relationship between the Bill and the PPiP Policy is particularly important for adults at risk of harm who may face additional barriers to self-reporting due to disability, cognitive impairment, mental ill-health, fear of reprisals, dependence on perpetrators, social isolation, or communication difficulties. In such circumstances, family members, neighbours, friends, community groups and frontline workers often act as the first line of detection and protection.

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

Despite these concerns, public awareness and attitudes towards safeguarding adults remain variable, potentially affecting reporting rates and community engagement. In such circumstances, some crimes against adults at risk of harm may remain hidden and victims may never access the protections envisaged by the Bill.

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

Founded in 1998, the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey is an annual survey recording the attitudes, values and beliefs of adults aged 18 years or older in Northern Ireland to a wide range of social policy issues. The survey is an integral part of ARK, an established and respected social policy resource that is run jointly by Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University (<https://www.ark.ac.uk>). In 2024, the survey included a set of questions focusing on four key areas relating to Adult Safeguarding: recognition of abuse; the perceived level of harm within different settings; potential responses if respondents were aware of an adult being harmed as a result of abuse; and confidence or trust in investigative powers of police and social workers. These questions were designed with input from key stakeholders (Montgomery and Devine, 2026). 1,199 respondents aged 18 years or over participated in the 2024 survey, providing a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population (Devine, 2025).

Recognition of abuse

NILT respondents were presented with six vignettes focusing on specific scenarios of Adult Safeguarding concerns, and they were asked to indicate if, in their view, each scenario should be considered as abuse, exploitation or neglect. The scenarios were nuanced in terms of whether or not they met the threshold for abuse, and were also set in a variety of locations. One fifth (20%) of respondents skipped these questions, which is normal for questions on a sensitive topic.

As shown in Table 1, respondents considered definitely or probably that abuse, exploitation or neglect had occurred for all scenarios. However, respondents were more equivocal about the situations involving Denis and Bridie, both of which were set in a care home. There were significant differences in responses according to age, with the youngest and oldest respondents being least likely to identify abuse, exploitation or neglect. Males were less likely than females to identify these scenarios as definitely abusive. However, there was little variation in response depending on whether or not respondents had a caring responsibility.

Table 1: Recognition of abuse scenarios

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2026

	%				
	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

Perception of level of harm

The second block of questions asked respondents to identify the level of harm as a result of abuse, exploitation or neglect by another person that happens to adults in Northern Ireland across three different locations. Overall, there was a perception that such harm is prevalent in care facilities, hospitals or in people's own homes. In particular, nearly one half of respondents (48%) felt that there was a lot of such harm experienced in people's own homes, with 29 per cent thinking this in relation to care facilities, and 10 per cent in hospitals. Approximately one in ten respondents said that they did not know.

Perception of the level of abuse within all three locations was highest among the youngest respondents, and among females compared with males. However, there was little variation within other groups.

Public response

As highlighted earlier, family members, neighbours, friends, community groups and frontline workers can act as an important first line of detection and protection. However,

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

this depends on them knowing the appropriate action to take. Thus, NILT respondents were asked about their potential response if they were aware of an adult being harmed as a result of abuse, exploitation or neglect. Only a very few respondents said that they would do nothing, as it is none of their business (1%). In contrast, just over one half of respondents (55%) said that they would do something to highlight their concern. Nevertheless, four in ten respondents (41%) said that they would want to do something but would not know what to do.

Variations in responses across groups were evident, with statistically significant differences according to age group, sex, and carer status. Just over one half (54 per cent) of those aged 18-24 years said that although they would want to do something, they were unsure about what to do or who to contact. However, older respondents were more certain of how to act if they were aware of an adult being harmed as a result of abuse, exploitation or neglect. Nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of respondents aged 75 years or more said that they would do something, compared with 40 per cent of the youngest age group (aged 18-24 years). Nearly two-thirds of respondents who provided care for someone else (63 per cent) said they would act if they became aware of an adult being harmed, compared with 51 per cent of non-carers.

However, many respondents indicated that their actions would depend on the specific circumstances, suggesting a nuanced understanding that there is a need for tailored responses depending on context. Such nuances include the relationship between the respondent, victim and perpetrator. Location was also important, such as where the potential abuse occurred and in what settings (for example, home, care setting or hospital).

Respondents were also asked to rate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with specific responses to adults who were harmed. Eight out of ten respondents agreed ('strongly agree' or 'tend to agree') with the statement that 'adults should be asked whether or not any harm that they have experienced should be reported to the police or Social Services'. There were significant differences according to age, with the youngest respondents (18-24 year olds) showing the lowest level of agreement (62%). Notably, 12 per cent of this age group said that they did not know. In addition, carers were more likely to agree with this statement than non-carers.

There was very strong support for the idea that it's everybody's business to look out for harm or abuse of adults. Again, the youngest respondents showed the lowest level of agreement, although even that was very high (82%). There was some concern among respondents (78%) that if they reported an incident of harm, they would be worried that the person experiencing the harm could be victimised by the perpetrators. The lowest level of concern was among those aged 65-74 (65%).

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

Trust in statutory responses

In terms of trust in statutory responses, respondents recognised that Social Services and the police were the appropriate authorities to which abuse should be reported. Nevertheless, there is only moderate confidence in these agencies. Approximately six in ten respondents (58%) thought that if they reported an adult experiencing harm as a result of abuse, exploitation or neglect, they would be very or fairly confident that social services would investigate such harm appropriately. A similar proportion (57%) thought this in relation to the police. A slightly lower proportion (around one half of respondents) felt some degree of confidence that social services and police would keep the person safe as a result of the complaint. Younger respondents indicated less confidence than older respondents.

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.

Policy Recommendations

This Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey represents the first comprehensive public awareness of attitudes and perceptions regarding Adult Safeguarding in Northern Ireland (Montgomery and Devine, 2025). The findings provide valuable insights that can inform future policy development, public education initiatives, and service improvements.

In line with the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill, the following policy initiatives should be considered in order 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, all of whom showed lower recognition of certain forms of abuse. In so doing, these should promote understanding of the protections available to victims and witnesses as outlined in the pending Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill.

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.

Community-Based Prevention: Given the high perception of abuse occurring in private homes, strengthen community-based prevention strategies and support networks.

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2026

For more information on the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, see

<https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt>

Lorna Montgomery and Paula Devine are based in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast

Lorna Montgomery is Professor of Social Work and Adult Safeguarding.

Paula Devine is Co-director of ARK, and director of the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey

References

Devine, P. (2025) 2024 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey. Technical notes. Belfast: ARK. Available at <https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2024/tech24.pdf>

Montgomery, L. & Devine, P. (2026). Everybody's business? Public understanding of adult safeguarding in Northern Ireland. The British Journal of Social Work, bcag182.

Montgomery, L. & Devine, P. (2025) Everybody's business? Adult safeguarding in Northern Ireland. ARK Research Update 163. Available at <https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2025-06/update163.pdf>

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the respondents who took part in the 2024 NILT survey.

We are grateful to The Office of Social Services, Department of Health for funding these questions.

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.