

Volunteering with Safety

Exercise: Spotting the signs of harm

Volunteers can play a key role in spotting the signs of harm and abuse. In the current crisis, the chances of certain types of harm are increased as the pressure of isolation, fear of illness, concern for others, financial stress and so on can lead to individuals becoming violent, seeking release in sexually abusive behaviour or becoming neglectful of children or other loved ones. Most abuse happens in the home, and at this point volunteers may be the only people who have any insight on the home environment.

The current exercise offers you a number of scenarios which might be encountered as part of volunteering work. In each case, you need to say whether the signs you're seeing require immediate action in the form of reporting to the Police or Local Safeguarding Partnership, no action, or further information gathering or discussion. It's important you take the time to justify your answers – what is it about the situation which is concerning and why? Our answers are at the end of the exercise.

1. You're doing doorstep deliveries of food. When the door opens you see an adult and a child. The child has visible bruises on their arms and is hiding behind the adult's leg.

Immediate action

No action

Further information

2. At another of your doorstep deliveries the door is answered by an older person who is unwashed and smells of urine.

Immediate action

No action

Further information

3. When you ring someone as part of your befriending role they sound nervous. In the background you can hear someone asking who is calling and, early in the call, encouraging them to finish the call.

Immediate action

No action

Further information

4. When you make another call, the phone isn't answered.

Immediate action

No action

Further information

5. You're delivering medicine and the door is not answered by the patient but by another adult. They say they'll look after the medicine.

Immediate action

No action

Further information

6. When out on your rounds you see a group of children congregating on an open part of the estate. They are not socially distancing and do not seem to be supervised.

Immediate action

No action

Further information

7. The group of children mainly look quite young, but there are a number of teenagers with them. One is smoking and another seems to have a bottle of cider.

Immediate action

No action

Further information

8. When an older person answers the door to you, they ask if you are the person who will "bring the face masks".

Immediate action

No action

Further information

9. A woman answers the door with a black eye.

Immediate action

No action

Further information

10. When you knock on the door you get no answer. Looking through the curtains you see an unattended child.

Immediate action

No action

Further information



1. You're doing doorstep deliveries of food. When the door opens you see an adult and a child. The child has visible bruises on their arms and is hiding behind the adult's leg.

Further information. This is a concerning situation with obvious warning signs – bruises can indicate physical abuse, hiding can indicate fear of strangers or of further violence by adults. However, at the same time children bruise themselves all the time as part of their day-to-day activities and it is normal for children to be wary of strangers.

Thinking about the bruises, we would be more concerned if there was a large number of them, if they were in places which are less likely to be knocked by a child running around or tripping, if they were patterned like a handprint or physical object like a belt buckle, or if there were multiple bruises at different stages of healing. If that's not the case, we need to remain alert – we can try to talk to the adult and possibly the child and find a gentle way of questioning the bruising. We can also make a note of the bruising and compare that with the next time we see the child.

2. At another of your doorstep deliveries the door is answered by an older person who is unwashed and smells of urine.

Immediate action. Here we need to establish whether the adult should be being cared for, and where that carer is. We can do this by talking to the adult – did we interrupt them as they were going to clean themselves, are they waiting for a scheduled appointment by a mobile carer, or has an appointment been missed? If they're unable to explain at all, and if they're distressed, it increases the likelihood that someone should be looking after them but isn't. If they're someone we also befriend, this can be a secondary source of information. If we have concerns, we need to escalate them to a manager within our organisation and on to the Local Safeguarding Adults Partnership (which is sometimes the Local Safeguarding Children and Adults Partnership).

3. When you ring someone as part of your befriending role they sound nervous. In the background you can hear someone asking who is calling and, early in the call, encouraging them to finish the call.

Further information. Even at this time when we have little to do and a long time to do it, it is possible to ring at a bad time and so our clients may want us off the phone to do other things. We will have questions though – who is it that is with the client, are they someone previously known to them and if so how, what is it that they want? Does this become a pattern



of behaviour – are there other things the client says are being controlled by this person, do they stop answering our calls?

There may be very good reasons why another individual is trying to control parts of a vulnerable adult's life – for instance to protect someone who can't make decisions any more – but we should be concerned when this happens suddenly from someone we were previously unaware of.

4. When you make another call, the phone isn't answered.

Immediate action. The point of a befriending service is to give social contact to those who otherwise have little or none. So when a call is missed, that's a warning sign – our client may be ill, may be suffering a bout of acute depression, may be neglecting numerous aspects of their life simultaneously. At the very least, we're going to want to call them again later in the day or the week to try and get hold of them; we may want to pay a doorstep visit; if we know the individual has caring relationships with other organisations such as a sheltered living provider we are going to want to escalate this to them.

5. You're delivering medicine and the door is not answered by the patient but by another adult. They say they'll look after the medicine.

Further information. This is a situation with a clear set of possible positive explanations – where multiple people live in the same house, or where there is an adult being cared for, we will not be surprised to have the door answered by a different person. Talking to them gives us an opportunity to sound out whether that positive explanation is the right one. What does the adult say about their relationship with our client and what is your gut feeling about this? Will the person let you see the client and, if so, how do they interact with the adult?

6. When out on your rounds you see a group of children congregating on an open part of the estate. They are not socially distancing and do not seem to be supervised.

No action/Immediate action. There is the potential in this situation for concern, but realistically there is no way to prevent children from gathering together. If we go by the letter of the Government advice, this gathering would necessitate a call to the Police as the children could act as vectors for the virus from infected to non-infected households. At the same time,

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forcing them into their homes may be putting them into situations that are not safe for other reasons. This is a judgement call you will need to make.

7. The group of children mainly look quite young, but there are a number of teenagers with them. One is smoking and another seems to have a bottle of cider.

Immediate action. This situation is more concerning – it could be a group of young children being supervised by their older siblings, who are taking the opportunity to let their hair down. It could also be teenagers grooming younger children for sexual or criminal purposes. We are not in a position to make that judgement, it has to be one for the Police in the first instance.

8. When an older person answers the door to you, they ask if you are the person who will “bring the face masks”.

Further information. There are a number of doorstep scams in which vulnerable people are persuaded to part with money for either faulty personal protective equipment or for delivery of goods which never come. So if an older person is expecting a delivery that isn't coming via you, you should talk to them about who that expected person is. Do they know them or are they unfamiliar? From their description, do they sound legitimate? Did they show any identification? What were they offering? Does the offer sound believable? Did they threaten the client in some way, for instance by saying purchase was compulsory? If you're worried about scam artists operating in an area, you need to raise that with the Police as soon as you can.

9. A woman answers the door with a black eye.

Immediate action. It's possible to get a black eye through clumsiness or household injury, but it's much easier to get it through violence. How does the client explain it when you ask about it? Do they seem worried and eager to avoid discussing it? Are they accompanied by anyone who is doing their talking for them?

Remember that domestic abuse can happen to people of any age, any gender, any sexuality and any race. In this scenario we've picked a woman as they are the most common victims, but a man with a black eye would also be a matter for concern.

10. When you knock on the door you get no answer. Looking through the curtains you see an unattended child.

Immediate action. If there's an unattended child in the house, especially if it's a young one, we don't want to leave until we've satisfied ourselves that they are being looked after by someone competent. (We can also imagine a version of this scenario in which the child opens the door and takes delivery, and can't tell us where their carer is.). Although this is ultimately a matter for the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership, in the short term we need to contact the Police so they can protect the child and investigate their circumstances.