

‘We’ve got 82 cases on the screening list’: How adult social workers assess and manage adult safeguarding referrals under the Care Act 2014

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Introduction

Introductionn

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Alarm bells ring as Lincoln sees surge in adult safeguarding referrals

Complexity and severity of cases cause concern as numbers double



Image: Adobe Stock

Introduction

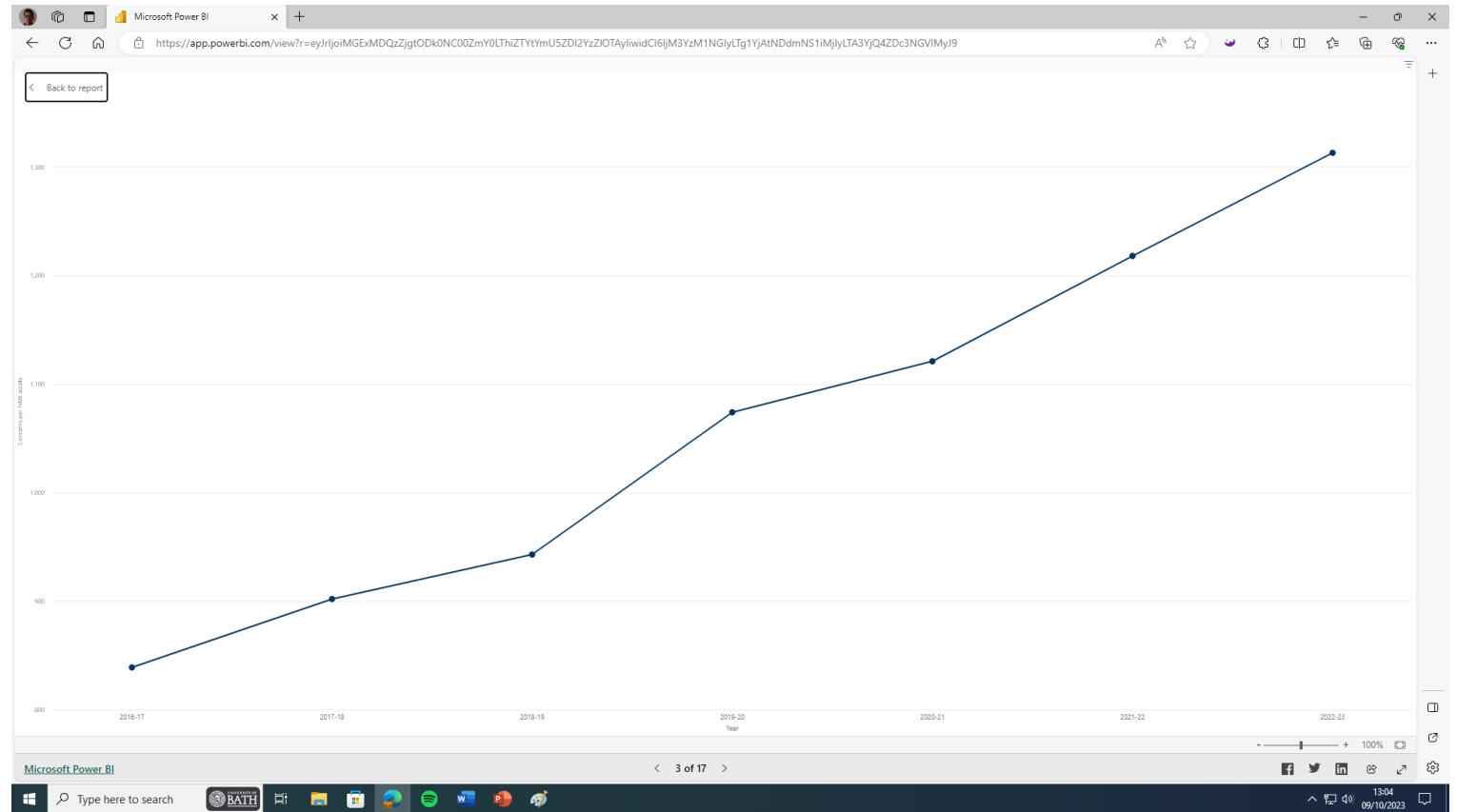
- The Safeguarding Adults Collection in England reports on Local Authority data between April 2022 and March 2023. These findings reveal that approximately 587,965 concerns of abuse against adults had been raised, which was an increase of 9% on the previous year.
- This data also showed that there had been 161, 925 safeguarding enquiries under section 42 of the Care Act 2014, across this period. This was an increase of 6% from the previous year and involved 129, 685 individuals.
- These figures represents a consistent rise in safeguarding concerns and enquiries since 2016 (NHS Digital, 2023).



The screenshot displays the NHS Digital website interface. At the top, the NHS Digital logo is on the left, and navigation links for 'Services', 'Data', 'Cyber', and 'Developer' are on the right. Below the navigation bar, a breadcrumb trail reads: 'NHS Digital > Data > Publications > Safeguarding Adults > Safeguarding Adults, England, 2021-22'. The main content area has a blue header with the text 'Publication, Part of [Safeguarding Adults](#)' and the title 'Safeguarding Adults, England, 2021-22'. Below the title, it says 'Official statistics'. A table provides key details about the publication:

Publication Date:	25 Aug 2022
Geographic Coverage:	England
Geographical Granularity:	Country, Regions, Councils with Adult Social Services Responsibilities (CASSRs)
Date Range:	01 Apr 2021 to 31 Mar 2022

Introduction –
Number of
safeguarding
concerns received
nationally between
2016-17 to 2022-
2023 (NHS Digital,
2023)



Introduction

- The purpose of this presentation is to consider:
 - How do social workers interpret new safeguarding duties as laid out by the Care Act 2014?
 - How are safeguarding risks conceptualised by workers and which risks are prioritised?
 - What sources of information do social workers draw on when assessing adult safeguarding risks?



Law and Policy

Adult Safeguarding law and policy

- Recognition of adult abuse as a social problem has lagged behind child abuse in the UK (Dixon, 2023). Several key milestones can be observed regarding the recognition of adult abuse and neglect. These include:
 - Campaigns by groups advocating for the rights of older adults and people with learning disabilities who had been abused in the 1980s.
 - Reviews of adult care law by the Law Commission in the 1990s.
 - The publication of *No Secrets: Guidance on Developing and Implementing Multi-Agency Policies and Procedures to Protect Vulnerable Adults from Abuse* (Department of Health, 2000), which had the status of guidance.
 - The Care Act 2014, which provided a statutory duty in regard to 'adults at risk' for the first time.

The Care Act 2014

- The legal criteria for safeguarding is now set out under the Care Act 2014. Section 42 of the Act states:
 1. “This section applies where a local authority has reasonable cause to suspect that an adult in its area (whether or not ordinarily resident there) –
 - Has needs for care and support (whether or not the authority is meeting any of those needs)
 - Is experiencing, or at risk of abuse or neglect, and
 - As a result of those needs is unable to protect himself or herself against the abuse or neglect or the risk of it.
 2. The local authority must make (or cause to be made) whatever enquiries it thinks necessary to enable it to decide whether any action should be taken in the adult’s case (whether under this part or otherwise) and if so, what and by whom...”.

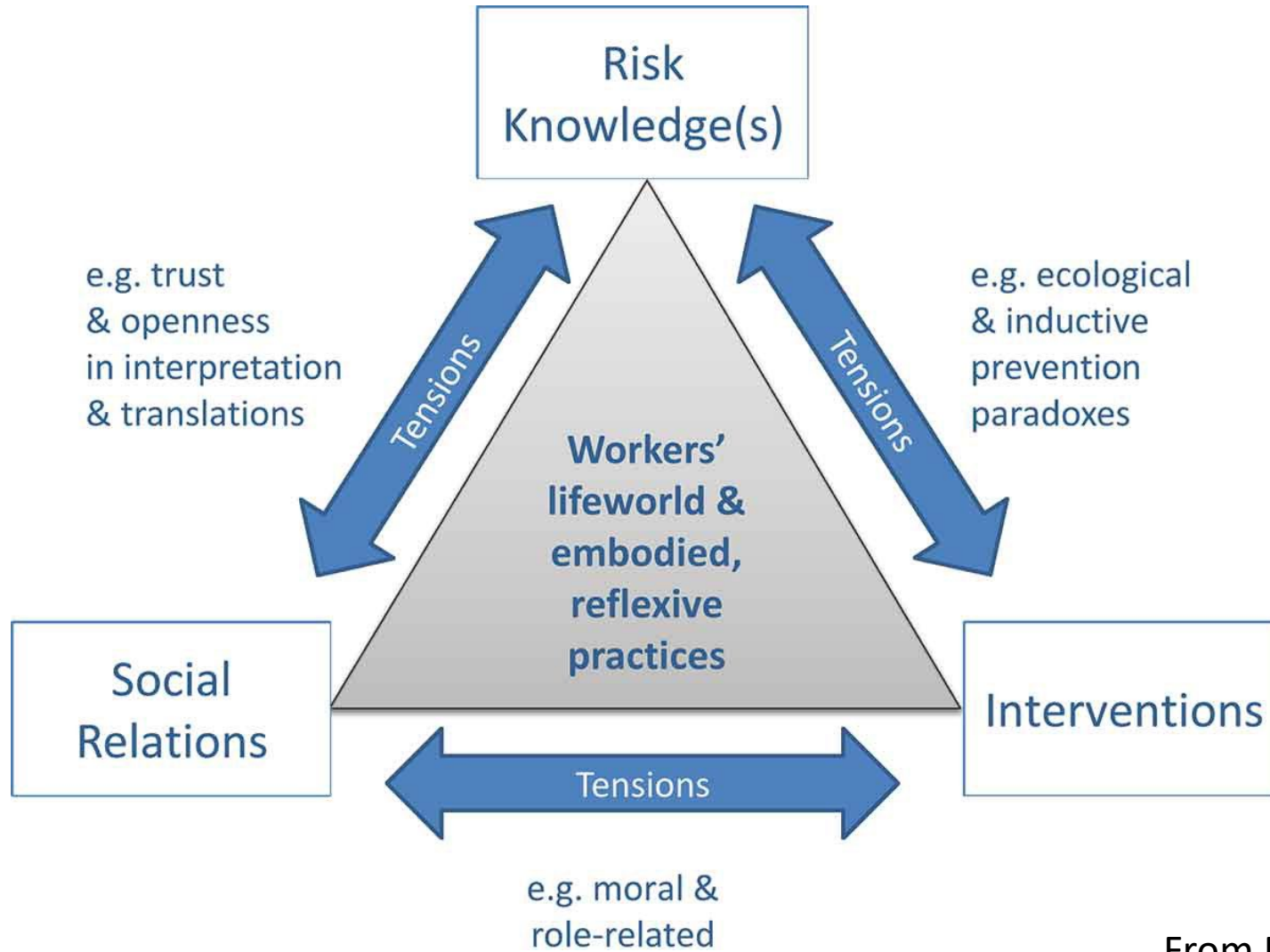


Theory, previous research and Methods

Theory and methods

- The key social theorists in relation to risk are Ulrich Beck (risk society), Mary Douglas (cultural theories of risk) and Michel Foucault (governmentality).
- Social work theorists have drawn on this work to suggest that actuarialism and neo-liberal agendas are driving risk thinking within social work (Kemshall, 2010; Webb, 2006).
- Horlick-Jones (2005) suggests that whilst risk theorists are concerned with the distribution of 'bads' within society, they also need to map the way in which individuals interact with risk practices.
- He identified the danger of risk analysis analysis being de-contextualized from the site at which they were taking place.





Risk work

From Brown and Gale (2018)

Previous adult safeguarding research prior to the Care Act 2014

- Risk knowledge:
 - Health and social care professionals' conceptions of risk are shaped by legal and policy knowledge (Stevens et al, 2018; Stevenson and Taylor, 2017)
- Interventions:
 - Different safeguarding models have been observed within Local Authorities, namely a. safeguarding specialists placed in locality teams b. safeguarding specialists used where high risks were identified c. Safeguarding completed by all workers (Graham et al, 2017).
- Social Relations:
 - Tensions between agencies have been documented as occurring, with agencies adopting definitions which suit their own self-interests (McCreadie et al, 2008).

Methods

- I adopted an ethnographic approach. I observed and then interviewed qualified social workers doing initial screening assessments. I also interviewed social workers engaged in longer term safeguarding work.
- The research participants were located in three local authorities in England, which I have named Fosborough, Gainsborough and Almsbury.
- I interviewed thirty-one workers. Twenty-seven were female and four were male. Five were employed as team managers, sixteen were senior practitioners and ten were social workers.
 - Seventeen were responsible for conducting initial screening assessments (triage workers).
 - Fourteen were involved in long-term safeguarding work.



Findings

Findings – The legal status of the Care Act and the significance of new categories of abuse

- Social workers saw the Care Act 2014 as a significant milestone in making safeguarding a statutory duty for the first time.
- Section 42 of the Act was seen to support values that social workers had historically held:
 - “There has been an increase in the number of referrals. I think the Care Act has highlighted that [legal] duty to care providers, but the local authority has always done that anyway, has always wanted referrals to come in” – Mike (Senior Practitioner)
- However, the Care and Support Statutory guidance was seen to have expanded the remit of adult safeguarding.

Findings: Interventions to manage assessments

Local Authority	Initial Screening	Initial and short-term safeguarding work	Long-term safeguarding work
Fosborough	Initial referral team	Safeguarding team	Adult community teams
Gainsborough	Initial referral team	Safeguarding team	Safeguarding team in conjuncture with adult community teams
Almsbury	Initial referral team	Safeguarding team	Safeguarding teams in conjuncture with adult community teams

Findings: Interventions to manage assessments

- The volume of referrals which social workers needed to work through was striking. Each local authority had to design formal and informal strategies to stay on top of these. One participant commented:
 - “Today, we have got 80, 82 cases on the screening list...We are not able to go into depth. So, if we think a patient is vulnerable [and] that [there] is some kind of ongoing concerns of risk...then we may think that this needs to be looked at further, and therefore the strategies for a risk assessment will be required” – Ram (Senior Practitioner)
- Social workers engaged in initial screening work, were required to work very quickly through assessments to establish whether they required a full assessment.
- This led to debates within Local Authorities about the right thresholds for a section 42 enquiry.

Findings: “The computer system's appalling”

- Agency computer systems acted as a source of ‘risk knowledge’ in that they contained case information which was needed to assess safeguarding risks. However, social workers frequently such systems were difficult to navigate. For example:
 - “The computer system’s appalling, especially the safeguarding forms on it are terrible...sometimes you click on the safeguarding enquiry or the case notes and the information’s just not there. There are some forms that are completely blank. I think there’s historical information that I don’t seem to ever be able to find...and then the information you get seems to be different depending on which bit you click on the form...” – Louise (social worker)
- Priority levels set by the system were not viewed as binding and were subject to professional discretion.

Building a picture: Assessing safeguarding risks

- Social workers identified a need to make sense of the pieces of information which they had been given. For example:
 - “So you are reading through, you are taking in the information to build up a picture...” – Alice (social worker)
- Social workers then had to weigh their knowledge of the case against the Care Act criteria. However, this was seen to be difficult in the light of current law. For example:
 - “When you look at section 42 of the Care Act, it seems a bit woolly” – Rachel (senior practitioner)
- Some agencies had policies or tools to guide decision-making. These were sometimes viewed as useful, but at other times viewed with suspicion and ignored or adapted.

Findings: Professional judgement and team cultures

- Observations with social workers identified that they were using two processes when deciding how to intervene:
 - Making judgements about the severity of the risk:
 - “...he was saying that he didn’t want to go home, because he had been assaulted by his brother and he was scared...so even before we got that onto the [computer] system, I thought actually, we need to do something about that...” – Nicola (senior practitioner)
 - Looking for patterns of risk across referral information:
 - “That’s what I’m looking for – to see whether there’s been any other, whether there’s a spike anywhere in unwitnessed falls...those sorts of things, just to try and get patterns, really” – Mavis (senior practitioner)
- Workers retained a high degree of agency in their role but sought to regulate their practice against other team members.

Findings: 'Inappropriate referrals'

- 'Inappropriate referrals' were seen to come about due to general concerns about a person's care and support needs:
 - "Well, I'd say that our health colleagues perhaps mix up concerns they have about cases with what we would call safeguarding issues. I mean of course, you know, they flag up cases where social work input might be useful or housing might be useful, but it isn't necessarily safeguarding" – Karen (senior practitioner)
- In addition, defensive practice was seen to play a part:
 - "I think providers are really worried about any repercussions, because it is better or them, because once they are referred, it's a weight off their shoulders...And we will berate them if they don't. This [is] the problem" – Patricia (social worker)
- Lastly, social workers claimed that some other referrers were trying to game the system.

Findings: Discouraging or encouraging referrals

- Most social workers were of the view that a high proportion of safeguarding referrals did not meet the criteria for a safeguarding enquiry. There were two contrasting views on how this should be managed:
 - Some participants identified the need to educate others about the criteria:
 - “[we should] also be open and educate the public and go out to nursing homes ...and kind of give feedback about the referrals we receive from care providers...” – Rebecca (senior practitioner)
 - Others, spoke of the need to encourage referrals:
 - “we want to hear if there’s a concern and that it is not necessarily an admission of fault or that somebody is to blame for what has happened but it may just be that there has been an accident or something has happened that we need to be aware of” – Mike (senior practitioner)



Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion and conclusion

- Many social work authors have drawn on Beck's contention that risk has replaced need in contemporary society, to argue that risk has replaced need in social work practice (Alfandari et al, 2023).
- The concept of risk has been seen in largely negative terms as it is seen to shift the focus away from present need to what might happen (Webb, 2006; Green, 2007). It has also been seen to reflect neoliberal notions of choice (Kemshall, 2016).
- The concept of risk work is useful, as it has the potential to challenge grand theories of risk and to identify how risk thinking operates 'on the ground' (Horlick-Jones, 2005; Brown and Gale, 2018).

Discussion and Conclusion

- This presentation, focussing on referrals and assessments, has revealed several new findings about the way in which risk work is conducted by social workers in adult safeguarding.

Risk knowledge

- In line with previous research, safeguarding law and policy was central to the knowledge social workers used when identifying whether risk was present (Stephenson and Taylor, 2017; Stevens et al, 2018). However, some guidance was viewed as 'woolly'.
- Computer systems acted as a key source of knowledge for social workers., alongside other referral information

Interventions

- The three local authorities in the study used two intervention models which differed from those identified previously (Graham et al, 2017). However, blockages occurred in some systems.
- The logics contained within computer systems did not drive risk assessment and management in reductive ways, as has often been suggested (Webb, 2006; Parton, 2008; Rogowski, 2011; Harris, 2022). Relationship-based social work was viewed to be key to good assessments.

Discussion and Conclusion

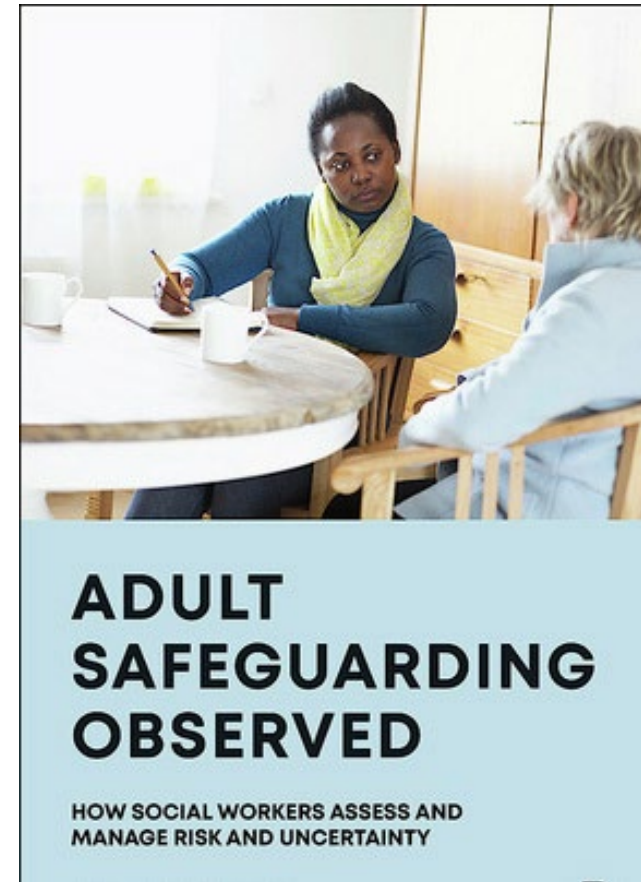
Social relations

- When assessing safeguarding referrals, social workers were not only trying to assess the information they had received but also referrers' motivations.



Adult Safeguarding Observed

- This presentations draws on the chapter 'Referrals and Assessments' from my Policy Press book, *Adult Safeguarding Observed: How social workers assess and manage risk and uncertainty* (Dixon, 2023).
- This chapter and two others are available open access at: [Adult Safeguarding Observed \(oopen.org\)](https://oopen.org)
- The book can be purchased from Policy Press in paperback, hardback or e-book from the publisher and other booksellers at: [Policy Press | Adult Safeguarding Observed - How Social Workers Assess and Manage Risk and Uncertainty, By Jeremy Dixon \(bristoluniversitypress.co.uk\)](https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk)





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