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Assessment tools utilised in Adult Safeguarding practice within the UK and Ireland: Results from a small-scale qualitative study.

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Title: Assessment tools utilised in Adult Safeguarding practice within the UK and Ireland: Results from a small-scale qualitative study.

Abstract
Purpose:

Across the UK and Ireland there are a range of processes and interventions offered to adults who, because of personal characteristics or life circumstances, require help to keep themselves safe from potential harm or abuse. The ways in which the statutory and voluntary sectors have chosen to safeguard these adults varies. Different models of intervention and the utilisation of a range of assessment tools, frameworks and approaches have evolved, often in response to policy and practice wisdom. Empirical research in this area is limited. The primary research purpose of the project on which this paper is based, is to gather information on the range of tools and frameworks that are utilised in adult safeguarding practice across the UK and Ireland. In so doing, it seeks to contribute and inform the future development of an evidence based adult safeguarding assessment framework.

Design/Methodology /Approach:

A team of academics from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Ireland wanted to explore the possibility of adapting a pre-existing assessment framework currently in use in family and childcare social work to consider its utility in assessing carers involved in adult safeguarding referrals. This paper reports on a small pilot study which sought to inform the adaptation of this framework for use in adult safeguarding. It is based on a qualitative study involving 11 semi-structured telephone interviews with adult safeguarding social work managers and experienced practitioners. Two to four professionals from each region of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Ireland were interviewed to elicit their perceptions and experiences of engaging in adult safeguarding assessment processes and their views about models of assessment.

Findings:

This study identified considerable variation in and between the nations under review, in terms of the assessment frameworks and tools used in adult safeguarding practice. To a large extent, the assessment frameworks and tools in use were not evidence-based or accredited. Participants acknowledged the value of using assessment frameworks and tools whilst also identifying barriers in undertaking effective assessments.

Originality/Value:

There is limited evidence available in the literature regarding the utility of assessment frameworks and tools in adult safeguarding practice. This primary research identifies four themes derived from professional's experiences of using such frameworks and identifies broader recommendations for policy and practice in this area.

Keywords: assessment, adult safeguarding, models, frameworks, tools, approaches, carers

Introduction

Across the UK and in Ireland there are a range of adult safeguarding approaches to working with adults who, because of personal characteristics or life circumstances, require help to protect themselves from potential or actual harm or abuse (MacIntyre *et al.,* 2017). Approaches vary as each country has developed its own unique legal and/or policy framework. There is also variation across local authorities or agencies as each seeks to improve practice by developing guidance, tools, or models in relation to initial screening of referrals or alerts, further inquiries, and the assessment of risk. These might be informed by empirical evidence but also from practice wisdom. Notwithstanding these variations, at its core, adult safeguarding requires an assessment of the individual which not only seeks to determine the extent of harm and severity of risk but more widely to gain understanding about the person's own wishes, values, resources, and life history; and those of any family or informal carers. It will also often require a multi-disciplinary response involving health, social care, criminal justice, police, voluntary and third sector organisations.

This therefore poses a question of whether an adult safeguarding assessment framework could be developed that could be used in any jurisdiction or locality to enhance and standardise practice, whatever the legal or policy context. The authors of this paper have begun to explore this possibility by undertaking a small qualitative interview study across the UK and Ireland to gain insights from practitioners and managers of the assessment tools and processes currently being used. The paper begins with a brief overview of assessment tools, models, and challenges in the adult safeguarding context. It then provides an overview of the project itself before presenting the findings, discussing their implications, and making recommendations for the possible development of an evidence-based adult safeguarding assessment framework.

Assessment in Adult Safeguarding

Adult safeguarding practice across the UK has been shaped by a wider governance framework, delivered through interagency partnership and statutory safeguarding fora (Braye and Shoot, 2012; Messing and Taller, 2015; Robbins *et al.,* 2014). These focus on establishing and maintaining local guidance and procedures, and on statutory reporting of performance. Research evidence on adult safeguarding is at a relatively early stage tending to be rather country specific. For example, Stewart (2016) and Mackay *et al*., (2012) looked at how practitioners and agencies were implementing the Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007. Other publications provide legal and practice advice and are again country specific. For example, Brammer and Pritchard-Jones (2019) and Spreadbury and Hubbard (2020) focus on legal and policy contexts in England. Whilst both types of publications offer good insights and advice, we are perhaps not much further on than when Penhale (2010) noted that little is known about which approaches work best for which population groups and in which setting. A key reason for this, and the challenge for

assessment, is that individuals' circumstances are so varied in relation to age, disability, and other personal characteristics; and in socio-economic status and social connectedness that these complicate attempts to evaluate the efficacy of practitioners' practice and any tools they might use. Three types of developments in relation to assessment in safeguarding can be discerned in the literature: generic safeguarding tools, adaptation of children and family assessment models and tools that are specific to the service user or type of harm involved.

Generic safeguarding tools: Case management and risk assessment processes have formed a significant part of what might be called generic or standard adult safeguarding assessment and intervention across the UK and in Ireland (Messing and Taller 2015; Robbins *et al*., 2014). A key development in England that illustrates this generic approach is the Making Safeguarding Personal [MSP] Programme (Cooper *et al*., 2015) that has been incorporated into national guidance (Department of Health and Social Care, 2022). MSP aimed to embed the outcomes focussed approach of personalisation in safeguarding so that the perspectives and the wishes of the adult would be at the heart of any action(s) taken. Its implementation has been patchy and has been described as in danger of becoming an audit rather than a practice tool (Briggs and Cooper 2018).

Adapting from children and families' models: A range of tools exist in family and childcare social work. For example, outcome tools such as the 'Family Star Plus' have evolved to help structure work with children and families (Good and MacKeith 2021), with other initiatives such as 'The Think Family Toolkit' developed to help improve and support families at risk (Department for Children, Schools and Families, DCSF, 2009).

Service user/type of abuse tools: There would appear to be considerable overlap between the policy and practice arenas of domestic abuse and adult safeguarding and yet the relative needs of older adults (Wydall *et al.,* 2018) and disabled women (Thiara *et al*., 2011) may be overlooked, or they may experience inappropriate responses. Assessment tools developed for domestic abuse situations could prove a useful addition to safeguarding approaches' if appropriately adapted for the safeguarding context' (McLaughlin *et al*., 2018).

Assessing and working with people who self-neglect poses particular challenges for practitioners (Braye *et al.,* 2015). Some work has been done on the development of screening tools to aid practitioner assessments (Dyer *et al.,* 2006, Kelly *et al*., 2008). More recently, while using the English legal framework, Britten and Whitby (2018) have developed a more detailed risk and strengths assessment model based on practice wisdom and expert advice. Likewise, Barnett (2018) offers practical tools and guidance for professionals involved in working with people who self-neglect, with a focus on effective risk assessment. In addressing risk assessment, Preston-Shoot (2016) in his analysis of serious case reviews, argues for the need to consider wider systems that impact this area of work.

Elder abuse has also seen the development of brief tools to assist in the assessment process (Reis and Nahmiash, 1995; Bomba, 2006), There has also been sustained interest in developing more actuarial risk indicator tools (Pillemer *et al.,* 2016) though the systemic reviews and meta-analyses highlight the limitations of

relying solely of a set number of factors, some of which have very weak levels of significance (see Yon *et al.*, 2017). This again emphasises the need for professional curiosity and skilful professional judgment alongside any developed tool, as a tool alone cannot replace an in-depth assessment of the situation (Penhale, 2010). In particular, there is a growing body of evidence that an overfocus on the adult's mental capacity within assessment can lead practitioners and agencies to overlook the impact that early life trauma, poor mental health and substance misuse can have on a person's ability to protect themselves (Preston-Shoot, 2021).

Finally, any consideration of the use of an assessment framework or tools within adult safeguarding requires an awareness of the divergent ways in which safeguarding functions. Whilst much work continues to be carried out within adult social care teams, there are also multi-disciplinary personnel and inter-agency teams being created to screen and initially respond to adult safeguarding referrals across the UK within Multiagency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) that have been developed in certain areas (Shorrock, 2020). This reminds us of the need to consider the use of language and approaches that need to be commonly understood across a range of contexts and professionals.

This overview of the literature has identified the complexity of the assessment of adults at risk of harm and highlighted how different approaches have been taken across different service user groups and types of harm. It has also drawn attention to the lack of empirical research to evaluate the assessment tools and approaches in use across the UK and in Ireland.

Project aims and objectives

The motivation for this project came from one author (LM) who had been involved in the development of a children and families assessment framework known as 'Building Better Futures'(BBF) in Northern Ireland and began to question whether it might be adapted for use in adult safeguarding. BBF is an evidence-based framework of social work assessment for children and families who have reached the threshold for involvement with statutory social services intervention. BBF has been introduced and evaluated as a parental assessment framework in social work across Northern Ireland. The support of the co-authors who are adult safeguarding researchers in England, Scotland and Ireland was enlisted to give the project a wider remit.

The primary purpose of this project was to gather key stakeholder perceptions of the range and efficacy of tools, approaches and frameworks that are utilised in adult safeguarding practice across the UK and Ireland. For the purposes of this paper, practice tools are defined as a set of proforma used to support practitioners to conduct their assessments, by stipulating what information should be gathered, providing a framework for the collation of information, and facilitating recommendations. Assessment tools can also be used to facilitate collaborative processes between practitioners and the adult at risk or carer to work towards agreed outcomes. The terms 'model' or 'tool' appear to be used interchangeably in the literature. Additionally, a practice framework provides schematic templates for practice, whilst integrating

empirical research, social work theory, values and knowledge which help to inform everyday work (Connolly and Healy, 2009).

This project sought to review the range of tools and frameworks that are currently used in adult safeguarding practice across the 4 nations involved in the study and to elicit participant perspectives about the value of safeguarding frameworks, and of the challenges in conducting safeguarding assessments. The impact of devolution and differing policy contexts and structures in the contexts of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Northern Ireland was also considered. To achieve the research aims, the study utilised a small-scale and exploratory qualitative methodology, conducting semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled adult safeguarding stakeholders in each of the four nations.

Methods

The small-scale pilot project used a qualitative methodology, conducting semi-structured interviews with adult safeguarding stakeholders in England, Scotland, Ireland, and Northern Ireland. To contextualise, the project was preceded by a rapid review of the literature to identify the current frameworks/ tools/approaches in operation for assessment and intervention in the context of adult safeguarding, along with a review of caregiving stress. For the purposes of this paper, a summary of the literature has been included, exploring assessment framework and tools, however, the full scope of the rapid literature review will not be discussed in detail here.

The research team included an academic from each of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Northern Ireland and a research assistant. Each academic contacted two to four purposively sampled key stakeholders in their area by email, with an invitation letter, a Participant Information Sheet outlining the nature of the study and a consent form. Participants included adult safeguarding social work managers and experienced practitioners in both operational and leadership roles.

A total of 11 participants were recruited and interviewed by telephone by a researcher. A set of pre-agreed questions sought to explore participant perspectives of the value of safeguarding frameworks, and the utility of safeguarding tools used in practice.

The interview schedule was developed, informed by the literature review, covering the following key areas:

- Personal experiences of practitioners/managers in facilitating adult safeguarding assessments
- Perceptions and views on tools/approaches and frameworks utilised within adult safeguarding
- Strengths and limitations of such assessment tools/approaches and frameworks
- Underpinning knowledge and resources in this area

Participant details are as follows:

Participants were all qualified social workers working in the statutory sector as either experienced adult safeguarding practitioners or managers, as follows:

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Table 1: Basic demographics of participants

The interviews ranged in length from 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with identifiable information removed. A rapid qualitative analysis was utilised (Hamiliton, 2019) in which transcript data was summarised and aligned with the interview questions for analysis and interpretation. This methodology was deployed to support timely data collection and dissemination of findings, which differs to the more traditional thematic qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) Selected participant quotations have been utilised to evidence key themes and findings in the paper.

Ethics

The study was granted ethical approval by the Research Ethics Committee in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University, Belfast. The key ethical considerations for the study included ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation, and data protection. To ensure anonymity of participants, findings have been presented in generic and non-identifiable terms.

Findings

An overview of the findings, based on participants' responses are presented under four core themes, developed from the findings. Following a discussion of these findings, recommendations for practice were identified and are reported. The identified themes are as follows:

1. Models of practice currently in place in adult safeguarding practice in England, Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland.
2. Assessment tools utilised in adult safeguarding practice in England, Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland.
3. Critique of assessment tools utilised in practice
4. Barriers and enablers of effective assessment

Models of practice

Before considering the tools and frameworks used in adult safeguarding, participants were asked to comment on the ways in which safeguarding teams were structured. Participants identified ways in which the statutory sector structure their professional staff to respond to adult safeguarding referrals; these differed both within, and across each jurisdiction. For example, in Northern Ireland, specialist and distinct 'Adult Safeguarding Gateway' teams manage high risk, complex referrals where an adult is deemed to be 'in need of protection'; this includes large scale investigations, or criminal investigations, whilst generic 'locality' teams with non-specialist staff, respond to referrals which are deemed to be of lower risk.

All participants recognised progress in the ways in which adult safeguarding structures and processes have been organised in recent years. The underpinning ethos of these changes seem to reflect differences in the conceptualisation of risk and placed a stronger emphasis on person-centred and partnership-based approaches. Participants identified the following recent progressive developments in adult safeguarding practice:

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- *"We look for all the strengths. It's a strength-based approach" (Social work practitioner)*

- *"There has been a move towards assisted decision making where the person is at the centre of this decision" (Social work manager)*

- *"We use trauma informed practice right at the at the outset in terms of and creating a lens model for that initial visit" (Social work manager)*

- *"There's been a strong emphasis, I suppose over a number of years about human rights". (Social work manager*

This concept of self-determination and strengths of the service user was increasingly emphasised, alongside a non-paternalistic ethos with decision making increasing being mapped to the will, preference, values, and beliefs of the individual.

Assessment tools utilised in practice

Overall, despite differences across jurisdictions, participants identified that each country utilised an idiosyncratic risk assessment framework for safeguarding adults, which had been developed in accordance with their respective legislation, policies, and procedures.

"We have the legislation itself, of course, which underpins absolutely everything" (Social Work manager)

Core differences identified across nations related to a range of tools used to meet individual need within different programmes of care i.e., learning disability, mental health, domestic violence, older people, and physical disability. Different agencies used a range of communication tools to elicit individual need and service user voice, within a range of different governance frameworks.

The table below provides an overview of the findings in relation to assessment tools currently employed in practice, as identified by study participants. These can broadly be divided into the following categories: standardised tools, supplementary tools, communication tools and governance. This was in keeping with the literature relating to safeguarding tools in use in the UK which identified specific generic safeguarding tools and those which have been adapted for use with specific service users or types of abuse such as domestic violence.

Table II: Participant information on tools currently used in adult safeguarding practice across the UK and Ireland

Participants referred to a range of statutory risk assessment and multidisciplinary tools that helped inform their practice. In each of the four Nations under review, Adult Protection Investigation Templates were in operation, as were Adult Safeguarding Risk Assessments and Risk Tools, although these varied. In one jurisdiction, staff had recently piloted their own assessment framework for adult safeguarding service users, adopting tools from a range of other assessment processes including Signs Of Safety (Turnell and Edwards, 1999), genograms (McGoldrick and Gerson, 1985) and scaling questions (Berg and de Shazer, 1993) to help with decision making scenarios and improve quality of practice.

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Some participants described an ongoing process of developing core tools to meet the needs of specific service user groups. However, to a large extent by far most participants perceived limitations in the range and scope of assessment tools, particularly when working with individuals and families with additional learning needs or individuals with more complex visual/sensory or communication needs. Moreover, participants highlighted a lack of accredited or evidenced based assessment tools for adult safeguarding. In response, some participants and their colleagues adapted tools from family and childcare social work and from other areas of adult social work and the social care sector to help inform and develop their practice.

Critique of assessment tools utilised in practice
Participants identified benefits that they perceived relating to the use of assessment tools and frameworks within adult safeguarding practice in several ways, as follows:

Assessment tools offer guidance:

"Having a risk assessment tool helps us clarify" (Social work practitioner)

Participants suggested that assessment tools and frameworks were useful as a guide to practice and to help practitioners gain the confidence to do their work. These were perceived to be fundamental in the processes of helping to keep people safe. Participants also reported that assessment tools supported the reflective process; many reported how it helped them to structure their thinking, clarifying important points in a case, and ultimately was used as an aid to reduce professional bias.

Accountability:

"It does help practitioners to raise, rank and assess reliable predictors and outcomes" (Social work manager)

Several participants indicated that assessment tools helped promote practitioner accountability. They were often perceived as useful in assisting practitioners to make reliable predictions and achieve outcomes that were evidence based. Producing evidential and defensible decision-making decisions in practice was perceived to facilitate better services for the individuals in need of support.

Flexibility: Participants discussed the flexible nature of assessment tools and the ability in some cases for services to devise their own assessment tools, with the potential for iterative revisions in line with new policies and procedures. However, some participants felt that too much flexibility in assessment practice can result in different interpretations across teams and agencies.

"What we find is no matter the tool or the guidance. It's all about interpretation and so you know things can be interpreted differently and in different parts of the country" (Social work practitioner)

There was an acknowledgement that this could often lead to service users receiving different levels of service depending on which postcode they lived in or which team they were involved with. It was for this reason that many participants advocated for the need for standardisation across agencies and nations regarding assessment of adults in need of support and protection.

Administrative and interagency data sharing challenges: The bureaucratic and administrative approach to assessment work in adult safeguarding was perceived by many as being too lengthy to complete or without much space in current assessment tools to expand further.

"So that has been obviously ingrained in people for quite a number of years now, so they're used to this tech (sic) boxy kind of approach" (Social work manager)

This issue, alongside an unwillingness by some professionals and agencies to share information with social services due to perceptions about the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) within the Data Protection Act 2018 were highlighted.

Accessibility of assessment tools: Participants highlighted accessibility challenges at different levels. This was reported as not so much an issue with accessing standardised assessment tools internally within their own agency, but when practitioners sought to consider, or use, external resources such as research, assessment tools utilised in other countries and accessing best practice in this area. Many found it difficult to access such resources as they often require paid subscriptions which they or their agencies did not have had access to. Free resources such as webinars were perceived as a more useful way to access such resources. Others, particularly those working with individuals and families with language and communication challenges, felt there was a lack of accessible tools available that use a range of symbols and easy read formats.

Barriers and enablers of effective assessment
The following were identified by participants as barriers and enablers to effective assessment:

Professional curiosity: This was viewed as the case by some participants because of the highly structured assessment tools required by their agency.

"I mean the thing that I think it boils down to is people's professional curiosity is being diminished" (Social work manager)

Professional autonomy was said to be valued but it was also deemed to be limited by some assessment processes, which did not always enable a holistic exploration of the service user's life, nor encourage an enquiring or curious approach to be adopted.

The balance required between risk and autonomy was further highlighted.

"Alongside the adult protection tools, we need to make sure that we're constantly talking about balance in this field. You know, balancing the person's rights and autonomy against the risks".   (Social work practitioner)

Workload: The challenging and demanding workloads of practitioners was a key theme raised in this study.

"To be honest, we are so overwhelmed with work, and it just becomes survival". (Social work practitioner)

Many participants acknowledged the need to have a framework to facilitate a consistent approach and engage in preventative elements of adult safeguarding,

whilst acknowledging the limitations of such, because of a general lack of investment, limited resources, and lack of legal infrastructure in some jurisdictions. Many participants argued that in the absence of such a framework it was becoming increasingly problematic to effectively assess and support those adults in need of support and protection in practice.

Practitioner anxiety:

"The real assessment tool is the practitioner. And I think I think sometimes that's what gets forgotten". (Social work manager)

Some participants felt that there was heightened anxiety amongst practitioners with regard to assessment and risk assessment, due to the fear and consequences should something go wrong. Many perceived there had been a move away from practitioner skills in assessment work, towards a practice of developing models to follow and a culture where practitioners were wanting to be told exactly what to do.

Workforce planning: Workforce planning, recruitment and retention of social workers were identified as barriers to effective assessment. Some participants suggested that only staff with significant work experience were equipped to undertake such a complex role in which there could be significant risk of harm. However, in some, although not all jurisdictions, there was an increased reliance on temporary agency staff taking on these complex roles.

Consent and access: Consent from both the individual at risk of harm and their families was perceived as a key variable in the ability of a practitioner to assess and effectively intervene in an individual's life. This was deemed to be particularly problematic for those jurisdictions that did not have specific adult safeguarding legislation in place.

"It is like almost doing it with one arm behind your back in that, yes, you have a policy, but actually, in terms of authority to do the job or legal framework to do the job, it's very, very challenging". (Social work practitioner)

Challenges in 'getting into the home', or 'over the front doorstep' to help support and reach individuals in need, were also highlighted.

Caregiver as potential perpetrator: A range of challenges were identified in conducting safeguarding assessments where carers were identified as the potential perpetrator. There were mixed views among participants, with some arguing that carers should not be 'criminalised'.

"Things should not being (sic) automatically dealt with criminally". (Social work manager)

Lack of reporting by the victim was identified and seen as a likely consequence of fear that their family members or friends could be subject to prosecution. Some participants perceived that a 'blame culture' had been established with cases routinely referred to police, even though this was not always perceived as necessary.

Interagency working: Limitations in effective information sharing across sectors was recognised by participants, comprising systemic barriers such as incompatibility

of different agency firewalls and information technology systems. Moreover, variations in assessment tools across agencies could at times cause a lack of shared understanding amongst those involved in inter-agency working. Wider systemic barriers of timely outcomes for individuals involved in investigation processes were also noted. Accounts of delays within the courts and public prosecution service were viewed as problematic in criminal justice processes.

Research limitations/implications

There are constraints and limitations resulting from this small-scale, time-limited study using one-off online interviews with participants. Findings and analysis have been presented in a practical and pragmatic way to provide professionals with a rich insight and account of safeguarding assessment and tools currently used in the respective countries of those involved in the study. It is worth noting that the findings have been conceptualised into broad themes and findings, which would benefit from further, more in-depth exploration. As detailed in the methodology section, the study sample consisted of 11 stakeholders closely involved in adult safeguarding in their respective agencies and countries. The participant sample is not representative of the range of staff and practitioners who work in this field, thus the small sample size and methods employed in this study meant that its generalisability is limited. However, the 11 participants involved in the study provided useful insights and valuable perspectives on their experiences about what they perceived to be helpful resources and developmental areas for practice in this area, which are detailed in the recommendations section below.

Discussion

On a daily basis, social workers engage with adult safeguarding systems to achieve positive outcomes for adults at risk (Donnelly and O'Brien, 2022). The themes identified in this study provide valuable insights into the assessment frameworks and tools currently utilised in adult safeguarding in four nations. Findings have been reported under four broad themes. Firstly, models of practice currently utilised in adult safeguarding practice in England, Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland were identified. In keeping with other UK based studies, the ways in which statutory sector organisations structure their professional staff to respond to adult safeguarding referrals varied across jurisdictions (Graham *et al.,* 2016; Stevens *et al*., 2017). Adult safeguarding systems have evolved differently across the nations, influenced in part by variations in the legal mandate (Mazars *et al*., 2020; Donnelly *et al.,* 2017; Montgomery *et al.,* 2016). Although participants in this study identified variable structures, there was a consensus that progress has been made in recent years in the ways in which adult safeguarding structures and processes were organised. Person-centred approaches underpinned by empowerment, individualised and tailored methods, proportionality and supporting the will, preference, values, and beliefs of the individual have been identified in the wider literature (Phelan and Rickard-Clarke, 2020), with a similar trajectory in ethos identified by participants in our study.

Secondly, participants identified a range of assessment frameworks and tools used in adult safeguarding practice within and between the selected UK Nations and Ireland. Participants suggested that many of these tools were not accredited or sufficiently evidenced-based (see also McCarthy *et al.,* 2017 in relation to screening

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tools). Participants referred to a range of statutory risk assessment and multidisciplinary tools that helped inform their practice, with some participants identifying different tools for different service user groups. If specific tools were unavailable, participants and their colleagues relied on tools currently in use within the wider social care sector such as those adapted from social work with children and families or even the broader adult care sector. As also recognised in the literature, the study confirmed that experienced practitioners continue to rely on creative participation methods to engage with individuals, families, and carers (Nethercott, 2017), using assessment and relationship skills to weigh up the available information (Preston-Shoot and Wigley, 2002), in conjunction with assessment tools. Assessment tools were seen to shape professional actions at particular points in the safeguarding investigative process (Bows and Penhale, 2018). Likewise, assessment tools and processes were said to be shaped by the policies and procedures of each jurisdiction, which provided a framework within which assessments occurred (Donnelly *et al.*,2017).

Thirdly, a critique of assessment tools employed in practice was offered, with the value of guidance, accountability, and standardised approaches across disciplines identified. A fourth theme identified barriers to this process. Barriers included a lack of consistency in the approach adopted for adult safeguarding assessments, lack of time, challenging workloads and differing professional processes, all of which can inhibit effective interagency working. The current context of pressures on the health and social care sector and the compounding austerity measures must be acknowledged. For example, BASW has identified the difficulty for social workers adopting a rights-based approach to their practice, when poverty is restricting human rights (BASW, 2022). In response BASW is campaigning for a more just society (BASW, 2022a) Notwithstanding issues in their delivery, participants argued that fundamentally there was merit in the use of assessment tools and in developing techniques of intervention for individuals and families in the context of adult safeguarding.

One of the difficulties in assessing the merits in the use of assessment tools is in establishing causality in the midst of differing legal, organisational and professional decision-making processes. Perhaps a more important question is whether those at risk of harm feel safer because of the use of such tools? (Campbell, 2016). The findings of this current study support the human rights-based approach towards assessment of adults in need of care and support and the strengths-based approach towards risk (Greenhill and Whitehead, 2011). It also suggests the need for more interagency and collaborative working in the use of assessment tools that may lead to better use of resources, reduced opportunities for vulnerable individuals to slip through the net and effective investigations leading to more positive outcomes (Fyson and Kitson, 2012). This idea of working together to prevent abuse is a key message our participants advocated for and supports the wider literature in developing a framework of community capacity, early intervention, and prevention within the community (Podnieks, 2006; Koga, 2019; Roberto, 2015)

Whilst this study provides a valuable insight into assessment practices and resources, there continue to be gaps overall in our knowledge of the effectiveness of

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screening, assessment, and evidence of successful interventions for specific populations involved in adult safeguarding and in which settings. Further work in this area would be welcomed. As this study has found, there is variation in the effectiveness of models and assessment frameworks across jurisdictions and limited evidence about the effectiveness of assessment models and tools overall; thus, further research needs to be commissioned and undertaken to explore and address such gaps.

Recommendations

The primary goal of this research was to help inform the future development of an evidence-based adult safeguarding assessment framework for the UK and Ireland. Study participants identified recommendations in relation to this objective, which have been collated below into country level, organisational level and practice level recommendations. The study findings and recommendations also have the potential for wider application, informing our understanding of the utility of assessment frameworks and tools in adult safeguarding practice, and identifying broader systematic issues. To a large extent the structural/systemic and agency level recommendations have been developed from key themes identified by participants in relation to the ways in which safeguarding teams were structured, and the issues which arose due to resource limitations. Practice based recommendations arose directly from themes relating to the critique of assessment tools utilised in practice, together with barriers and enablers. A summary of these recommendations follows:

Systemic/UK and Ireland wide:

- Development of an evidence base of what is effective in relation to assessment in the context of adult safeguarding
- Increase financial investment in the adult social care sector, particularly in relation to adult safeguarding to facilitate timely and comprehensive assessments
- Promote public awareness campaigns, presenting adult safeguarding as 'everybody's business' and seeking to build public confidence in safeguarding assessment and intervention
- Development of an online centralised resource bank of assessment tools/frameworks available within the sector.
- Develop a suite of free to access, regional or national resources, that can be used at the assessment stage and throughout the safeguarding process

Organisational/agency level:

- Identify key champions within agencies to share crucial safeguarding messages relevant to individuals, families and their carers
- Produce webinars/online videos and resources for practitioners from best practice and evidence on assessment practices
- Invest in training and research
- Increase collaboration and partnership with voluntary/third sector and other charitable and non-statutory agencies

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- Develop dedicated and protected space for adult safeguarding - not from core services
- Develop consistent and effective management information systems to facilitate assessment
- Develop and increase relationships with regulators, i.e., to include more conversations about roles and responsibilities within and between agencies. Where appropriate and possible, increase timeliness of responses from services and professionals to support desired outcomes for carer and families

Practice level:

- Create an accredited, evidence-based, measurable tool of assessment for both carers and those at risk of harm
- Development of measurable and effective interventions
- Promote best practice, including use of short and practical tools
- Produce short guidance/aide-memoires for practitioners undertaking assessments

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the creative and innovative work that continues in adult safeguarding in complex and demanding environments, whilst also identifying significant gaps in the available resources to support this work. The study was undertaken to inform decisions around the possible reshaping of 'Building Better Futures', an evidence-based model of social work assessment developed for children and families (Houston *et al*., 2018), as an assessment tool in Adult Safeguarding practice. The need for a model of social work assessment for individuals and their carers within the adult sector was identified, with broader recommendations made around assessment processes. In so doing, our participants highlighted the need for significant investment in people, resources and service provision in order to allow professionals the time and space to develop effective assessment and intervention for individuals, their families and carers, and to continue to promote and develop effective partnership approaches. These continue to be much needed in the field and are the cornerstone of best practice in adult safeguarding.

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Tables

Table I: Basic demographics of participants

Basic demographics of participants (11 in total)		
England	4 participants	
Scotland	2 participants	
Ireland	2 participants	
Northern Ireland	3 participants	

Table II: Participant information on tools currently used in adult safeguarding practice across the UK and Ireland

Tools currently used in adult safeguarding practice across the UK and Ireland	
Standardised tools (unique to each nation's legislation, policies and procedures)	***Preliminary Screening Proforma*** - i.e. determines whether a referral closes or progresses to next stage). ***Adult Safeguarding/Protection plans*** – the actions to support and manage risk of abuse or neglect for an adult with care and support needs. ***Adult Safeguarding Risk Assessments & Risk Tools*** – supports practitioners with decision making and identification of risk.
Supplementary tools	***DASH risk (DASH RIC)*** –domestic abuse risk assessment a common checklist for identifying, assessing and managing risk. ***DARA*** – domestic abuse risk assessment. ***Self-Neglect Clutter Rating Tool*** – toolkit to work with people who hoard and self-neglect. ***Mental capacity assessment form*** – used in nations to support compliance with Mental Capacity legislation. ***Adult Financial Exploitation measurement*** – indicators of financial abuse. ***Threshold, matrix and decision-making tools*** – designed to support defensible decision making. ***Self-Harm/Suicide Prevention Assessment Tools*** – safety planning to help support individuals and families with mental health needs.

	Power and Control wheel – used within interpersonal violence to understand tactics abusers use to gain control over their victims. ***Circles of safety*** – systemic approach to creating safe environments for children, adults and families. ***Chronology*** – capturing and recording significant events in a person's life to date.
Communication tools	***The Three Conversations*** –innovative approach to needs assessment focusing on the person's strengths and community assets. ***Communication Boards*** -devices that display photos/symbols to help individuals with limited language skills. ***Makaton/Sign Language*** –use of signs, speech, and symbols to enable people to communicate. ***Easy Reads*** –text that is accessible, easy to understand formats. ***Genograms –*** pictorial display of a person's family/medical history **Scaling Questions** – assessment of the impact of a situation on an individual.
Governance	***Large scale investigation tools*** – protocol for managing large scale enquires of abuse. ***Duty Logs*** – recording adult safeguarding concerns or incidents at a local level. ***Management of organisational databases*** – to capture themes and patterns in relation to adult safeguarding practice. ***Audit Tools*** – case file audit tools for quality assurance and/or practice improvement. **Service user questionnaires** – instruments to gather service user feedback on services and/or practitioner actions. ***Complaints, Compliments form*** – to help with service improvement/best practice.