



Muli-Agency Professional Curiosity Briefing

Purpose

This briefing supports practitioners and managers across Dumfries and Galloway to apply professional curiosity in safeguarding work with children, young people, families, vulnerable adults, and adults at risk of harm. Professional curiosity is a core part of effective practice and helps professionals recognise risk, understand lived experience, and respond appropriately to concerns.

Why it matters

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Adults, children and young people, including unborn babies, have the right to be protected from harm and abuse, to be respected and their needs met. Concerns should not be viewed in isolation, as a lack of professional curiosity can lead to missed opportunities to identify vulnerability, intervene early, and prevent significant harm.

What professional curiosity means

Professional curiosity involves:

- looking and listening carefully
- asking direct questions
- checking information received
- reflecting on what is known
- exploring what life is really like for the adult, child, young person or family
- not taking information at face value
- triangulating information from different sources
- using respectful scepticism and challenge

Professional curiosity is about understanding professional responsibility, knowing when to act, and avoiding assumptions. This is not an additional task but part of good safeguarding practice, particularly where there may be disguised compliance, coercive control, or incomplete accounts in families.

Key practice points

Practitioners should:

- think the unthinkable and remain open to difficult possibilities
- look and listen carefully
- keep the child, young person or adult in view
- see the whole picture – ‘think family’
- predict risk without presuming
- look further and enquire deeper
- ask and act
- see beyond the obvious
- check out and reflect
- remain flexible and open-minded
- think wider and look for signs
- explore and understand
- use professional judgement, common sense, intuition, and respectful uncertainty

Barriers to professional curiosity

There are several barriers that can reduce professional curiosity. These barriers can significantly affect analysis and decision-making, so they should be actively recognised and discussed in supervision:

- **Disguised compliance, hostility or non-engagement:** Some families may appear cooperative to avoid scrutiny or reduce professional involvement, or may be openly hostile or refuse to engage, making it difficult for practitioners to ask probing questions or challenge accounts. Practitioners must focus on outcomes and remain person/child-centred, gathering evidence about what is actually happening.
- **The rule of optimism:** Practitioners may be overly optimistic about outcomes for the adult, children and families, even when evidence suggests otherwise. This can lead to minimising or overlooking emerging or escalating risks.
- **Accumulating or escalating risk:** There is a tendency to respond to each incident or risk in isolation, rather than considering the cumulative effect of multiple incidents or historical concerns. Chronologies, supervision, and holistic assessment are essential to avoid missing patterns of harm.
- **Normalisation of concerning circumstances:** Repeated exposure to poor home conditions or risky behaviours can lead practitioners to view these as ‘normal’ and stop questioning them, potentially overlooking significant risks.
- **Professional deference:** Practitioners may defer to the views of higher-status professionals who have less contact with the adult, child or family, even when their own observations suggest greater risk. Practitioners must be confident in their own judgement and escalate concerns when necessary.
- **Confirmation bias:** Practitioners may unconsciously seek evidence that supports their existing views, filtering out information that challenges their assumptions. This can lead to incomplete or inaccurate assessments.
- **Knowing but not knowing:** Practitioners may sense that something is wrong but lack clear evidence. Intuition and gut feelings should be explored in

supervision to articulate concerns and identify what further information is needed.

- **Low confidence in managing tension:** Disagreement, disruption, or aggression from families or others can undermine practitioner confidence and divert attention from important safeguarding issues.
- **Difficulty dealing with uncertainty:** Practitioners may be tempted to discount concerns that cannot be substantiated, rather than tolerating uncertainty and continuing to explore risks.
- **Other barriers:** Poor supervision, high workload, stress, frequent changes of caseworker, closing cases too quickly, fixed thinking, and lack of openness to new knowledge can all create unnecessary barriers to professional curiosity.

Challenging conversations

Professional curiosity is especially important when handling difficult conversations, including raising concerns, challenging accounts, discussing risk, and addressing disagreement with families or professionals. These conversations can be uncomfortable, but they are part of safeguarding practice and need to remain focused on the adult, child or young person's safety and wellbeing.

The role of supervision and management

Managers and supervisors have an important role in creating a culture where professional curiosity is expected and supported. This includes:

- modelling authoritative practice
- encouraging reflection and discussion
- asking “what if?” and “so what?” questions
- testing whether outcomes have improved
- exploring alternative explanations
- supporting staff to think through evidence
- monitoring workload and stress
- encouraging a fresh perspective when needed
- being cautious of ‘start again’ syndrome (over optimism)

Reflective supervision, group discussion, and shared learning all help practitioners question assumptions, develop confidence, and maintain focus on risk. Managers should foster a supportive culture, model curiosity, and provide opportunities for practitioners to learn from each other and to challenge and reflect on their own practice.

Key message

Professional curiosity is a fundamental part of safe, effective safeguarding practice. Practitioners should never feel unable to ask obvious questions, test assumptions, or share concerns. A fresh perspective and thoughtful challenge can strengthen assessment, improve planning, and support better outcomes for adults, children, young people, and families.