

**Supporting victims/survivors of  
sexual violence and abuse**

# Guidance for professionals working with people with Learning Disabilities

# Introduction and overview

The LimeCulture National ISVA Co-ordinator Initiative has been working in partnership with a range of learning disability and sexual violence organisations to identify the challenges and barriers for victims/survivors of sexual violence and abuse with learning disabilities.

The aim of this guide is to support organisations and professionals working with individuals with learning disabilities to:

- Respond to and support those who may have experienced sexual violence and abuse (recently or non-recently)
- Identify and access sexual violence pathways of support local to the victim/survivor
- Improve access to Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA) services
- Strengthen internal processes and local partnerships with sexual violence services.

This guidance includes an overview of:

- What sexual violence and abuse is
- Experiences of sexual violence and abuse by people with learning disabilities
- Specialist support for victims/survivors of sexual violence and abuse
- Responding to victims/survivors of sexual violence and abuse
- Contact information for the National ISVA Co-ordinator.

This guidance is not intended to be a comprehensive guide on either sexual violence or learning disabilities but aims to strengthen partnerships and pathways between learning disability organisations and local sexual violence services. This guidance should be used in conjunction with an organisation's internal safeguarding procedures and/or other relevant policies.

We would like to thank the many professionals, organisations and ISVAs who have shared their expertise to support the development of this guidance. In particular, we would like to extend a special thanks to the ARC England, the 'Us Too' project, Mencap and the members of the LimeCulture Learning Disability Network for ISVAs.

## Research and further reading

Balderston, S (2017) *VisionSense: Domestic Abuse, Sexual Violence & Learning Disabilities Conference*

Majeed-Ariss, R, Rodriguez, P, White, C (2020) *The disproportionately high prevalence of learning disabilities amongst adults attending Saint Mary's Sexual Assault Referral Centre*

Mencap, Voice, Respond (2001) *Behind closed doors: Preventing sexual abuse against adults with a learning disability*

Office for National Statistics (2021) *Disability and crime*

Turk, B, Brown, H (1993) *The sexual abuse of adults with learning disabilities: results of a two-year incidence survey*

Willot, S, Badger, W, Evans, V (2020) *People with an intellectual disability: under-reporting sexual violence*

# What is sexual violence and abuse?

Sexual violence and abuse is any unwanted behaviour or activity of a sexual nature which occurs without consent. Sexual violence and abuse incorporate many criminal acts such as rape, sexual assault, sexual touching, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, exploitation, and grooming.

Sexual violence and abuse are perpetrated throughout the world, in all countries, cultures and communities regardless of age, race, gender, sexuality, religion or social status. It can occur between family, friends, current or ex partners, acquaintances, strangers or online; however, in most cases, the perpetrator is known to the victim/survivor.

Sexual violence and abuse may have taken place recently or happened some time ago (non-recent). It may be an isolated incident or have occurred more than once over a period of time.

Sexual violence and abuse are predominately perpetrated by men against women and girls. However, it is important to recognise that men and boys experience violence/abuse too.

**Sexual violence and abuse is rarely motivated by sexual gratification, it is about power and control.**

**The impact and trauma of sexual violence and abuse varies – there is no right or wrong way to behave during or following and there are often no physical injuries.**

**False allegations of sexual violence and abuse are rare. It is estimated that most people who experience sexual violence and abuse do not report to the police.**

**It is never the victim/survivor's fault. Blame should always lie with the perpetrator.**

# Experiences of sexual violence and abuse by people with learning disabilities

Research indicates that victims/survivors with moderate to severe learning disabilities are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse, disproportionately likely to be sexually abused, and less likely to disclose sexual violence and abuse where it has taken place.

Multiple challenges can prevent people with learning disabilities who have experienced sexual violence and abuse from accessing support and/or reporting their experiences, with common barriers including:

**No/limited sex education**

**No/limited awareness of support and report options following sexual violence**

**Fear of being 'passed' around services / unsuitable services**

**Fear of disbelief or judgement**

**Lack capacity or knowledge to access support**

**Complex Criminal Justice Process**

**Fear of police / poor police experience**

**Unable to identify and disclose sexual violence**

**No/limited understanding of sexual violence**

# Specialist support for victims/survivors

It is an important principle of an effective sexual violence response that all victims of sexual violence and abuse should be offered the support of a specialist sexual violence support service. As such, specialist support should also be available to people with learning disabilities who have experienced sexual violence and abuse.

Professionals and volunteers working with people with learning disabilities have an important role in assisting victims/survivors to access support from specialist support services where sexual violence and abuse has occurred, either recently or non-recently.

**Professionals can make referrals to specialist sexual violence support services and should do so at the first opportunity alongside any other safeguarding referrals.**

Pathways of support for victims/survivors of sexual violence and abuse are available in all parts of the country to offer immediate and long-term support.

## Independent Sexual Violence Advisers

Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (ISVAs) play an important role in providing specialist tailored support to victims/survivors of sexual violence, irrespective of whether they have reported to the police.

ISVAs provide impartial information to the victim/survivor about all of their options, such as reporting to the police, accessing Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) services, and specialist support such as pre-trial therapy and sexual violence counselling. ISVAs also provide information on other services that victims/survivors may require, for example in relation to health and social care, housing, or benefits.

ISVAs work in partnership with a range of agencies, including specialist learning disability professionals and organisations, to ensure the specific needs of each victim/survivor are responded to.

Many ISVA services now have specially trained ISVAs who are able to support victims/survivors with multiple disadvantages and/or complex needs – including those with learning disabilities.

# Responding to victims/survivors of sexual violence and abuse

The pathway below is intended to support professionals and volunteers to support victims/survivors of sexual violence and abuse with learning disabilities. It is recommended that this pathway should be used in conjunction with internal safeguarding policies and procedures to explore and co-ordinate support.

## RESPOND

Manage disclosures sensitively while following internal procedures:

- > Listen; offer belief and empathy; use non-judgmental language
- > Empower the victim/survivor to take control of their situation and options where possible – what do they want to happen?
- > Do not probe for detailed information; ask basic facts only to inform actions
- > Close down detailed disclosures sensitively, avoiding details of the incident

### REMEMBER:

It is imperative that action be taken at the first contact as this may be the only opportunity to validate the victim/survivor's experiences and facilitate support

## RISK

Establish and respond to risk:

- > When/where did the incident occur?
- > Any immediate risk from the perpetrator or others?
- > Who has been informed? (family, friends, professionals)
- > Initiate internal safeguarding procedures if there is an immediate risk

### REMEMBER:

If the incident is recent, you should contact your local SARC or ISVA service for immediate advice about a forensic medical examination

## REFER

Sexual violence pathways of support are available in all parts of the country and offer immediate and long-term support to all victims/survivors of sexual violence and abuse:

- > Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) provide crucial health and medical intervention such as emergency contraception, sexual health screening and forensic medical examinations
- > Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (ISVAs) are specialist professionals working with people who have experienced rape and/or sexual assault, irrespective of whether they have reported to the police

### REMEMBER:

Your nearest SARC can be located [here](#).

Identify the client's local ISVA service; discuss support and complete a referral if appropriate

## ISVA SUPPORT

ISVAs provide specialist support to all victims/survivors of sexual violence, offering independent information and advice, and providing practical and emotional support. This ensures victims/survivors can identify choices, exercise their rights, and feel in control and empowered. ISVAs will work in multi-agency partnerships, including with specialist learning disability professionals and organisations to ensure the needs of each individual are met holistically. ISVAs can support with:

- > Risk and needs assessments, tailoring individual plans of support
- > Reporting options, Criminal Justice support and exploring civil justice options
- > Accessing a SARC and sexual health advice
- > Housing and welfare advice, support and advocacy
- > Onward specialist referrals such as domestic abuse support or counselling

The National ISVA Co-ordinator service is provided by LimeCulture and can provide support in identifying your nearest ISVA service.

To contact the National ISVA Co-ordinator: [NISVAC@limeculture.co.uk](mailto:NISVAC@limeculture.co.uk) • 0800 246 5260 – 9am – 5pm Monday to Friday

To locate your local SARC: <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/other-services/Rape-and-sexual-assault-referral-centres/LocationSearch/364>