



DVACT-PAI
Assessments & Interventions

Ethical Framework for Registered Expert Domestic Abuse Risk Assessors



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1. Introduction

The *Ethical Framework* outlines the ethical principles, values and good practice standards required for registered risk assessors working in the field of domestic abuse.

The values and principles laid out in this *Ethical Framework* form the main reference points which we, as assessors, are committed to using as the basis for decisions in professional conduct hearings.

It sets out what can be expected of all registrants as assessors providing child-focused assessments. This includes being a supervisor, trainer or educator of assessors. Trainees will fulfil all the commitments to parties within the *Ethical Framework* when completing assessments.

As registered assessors, we have committed ourselves to the principles and values set out in this *Ethical Framework* and recognise that our registration may be at risk if we fail to fulfil our commitments.

Our responsibilities are set out as full or qualified obligations. We are fully and unconditionally committed to fulfilling a specific requirement of *Good practice* where we state 'we will...' or 'we must...'. Where we consider a requirement may need to be varied for good ethical reasons, we state that 'we will usually...'.

We are committing ourselves to being openly accountable and willing to explain how we have implemented any of these obligations to people with a valid interest in our work.

1.1 Using the *Ethical Framework*

Assessors must ensure they understand the *Ethical Framework* before beginning the assessment process; ideally, good practice indicates integrating it into your work rather than falling back on it to help deal with problems after the fact.

The framework provides a structure for everyone working within the field and is sufficiently flexible to be employed within different contexts and by different service users.

Ethical Framework principles also apply to working with trainees and supervisees, to ensure they are treated with respect, provide them with services meeting the required standards, and protect them from exploitation or abuse by anyone with professional power or authority over them.

When working with service users, trainees will fulfil all the commitments to them as outlined in the *Ethical Framework*.

1.2 Key terms

An *assessor* is a registrant who provides expert assessments of parents and families in domestic abuse cases.

Research-informed services are those services which have been developed as a result of analysis of empirical research/theories concerning domestic abuse and risk assessments. Academic disciplines such as neurology, psychology, social sciences, criminology and others may be drawn on in the development of practices.

A *service user* is anyone who is being assessed by an assessor where concerns have been raised that relate to the risk from domestic abuse. All service users are entitled to receive services that satisfy the commitments stated in this *Ethical Framework*.

A *commissioner* is a local authority or legal professional that commissions an assessment from a registered assessor.

Child-focused domestic abuse assessments are delivered to consider the risks towards a *child* or *children* posed by a *service user* through exposure to domestic or sexual abuse.

All parties refers to statements that apply to a *child/children*, *commissioners* and *service users*.

2. Our commitment to children, service users and commissioners

Our primary concern is ensuring Children are effectively safeguarded, for this, Commissioners need to be able to disclose all relevant case information. Service users need to feel able to answer freely when being interviewed, requiring all parties to feel able to trust assessors with sensitive personal information. Being trustworthy is therefore a serious ethical commitment for us as assessors.

We are committed to:

- Putting children first by:
 - a. making children our primary concern while completing an assessment;
 - b. providing commissioners and service users with an appropriate standard of service.

- Working to professional standards by:
 - a. operating within our competence levels;
 - b. ensuring our skills and knowledge are regularly updated;
 - c. improving the quality of what is being offered to commissioners by collaborating with colleagues;
 - d. sustaining the quality of our work by monitoring and maintaining our wellbeing;
 - e. keeping accurate and appropriate records.

- Showing respect by:
 - a. valuing the unique qualities of each child, service user and commissioner;
 - b. protecting and maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of all parties;
 - c. establishing principles on how we will work together with commissioners;
 - d. ensuring the protection of children through working in partnership with commissioners.

- Building an appropriate relationship with commissioners and service users by:

- a. ensuring all parties are aware of what they are entitled to expect from us through clear communication;
 - b. ensuring that commissioners are aware of any benefits, costs and commitments they may expect to receive/incur;
 - c. maintaining boundaries between our work with commissioners and our delivery to service users, and what is outside that scope;
 - d. at all times, avoiding exploiting or abusing service users;
 - e. being attuned to the experience of commissioners in our working together.
- Maintaining integrity by:
 - a. providing total honesty regarding our work;
 - b. providing clear, accurate information about our qualifications, experience and working methods;
 - c. employing ethical working methods which take into account the fulfilment of our legal obligations.
- Demonstrating accountability and candour by:
 - a. open and honest discussions with commissioners over any known risks entailed by the work and the most effective ways to provide the service;
 - b. promptly informing commissioners of any occurrence placing any party at risk of harm and, as far as possible, immediately taking action to address that harm;
 - c. regularly and consistently reviewing our work through supervision;
 - d. monitoring the experience of service users and commissioners in relation to the effects of our work with them.

3. Ethics

Our commitment to children, commissioners and service users are underpinned by our ethics based on values, principles and personal moral qualities.

The challenge of working ethically means that assessors will inevitably encounter situations that require responses to unexpected issues. A good understanding of the ethics that underpin our work is a valuable resource which is helpful in making significant decisions. This Ethical Framework is intended to assist assessors by directing attention to the variety of ethical factors that may need to be taken into consideration and to identify alternative ways of approaching ethics that may prove more useful.

No statement of ethics can eliminate the difficulty of making professional judgements in circumstances that may be constantly changing and full of uncertainties. By accepting this statement of ethics assessors are committing themselves to engaging with the challenge of striving to be ethical, even when doing so involves making difficult decisions.

3.1 Values

Our general ethical commitments can be usefully expressed as values that underpin the purpose and goals of our actions.

Our fundamental values include a commitment to:

- alleviating the suffering and neglect of children;
- enhancing children's wellbeing and safety;
- respecting human rights and dignity;
- appreciating the variety of human experience and culture;
- protecting the safety of all parties;
- ensuring the integrity of assessor relationships with all parties;
- enhancing the quality of professional knowledge and its application;
- striving for the fair and adequate provision of assessments.

3.2 Principles

Values are more precisely defined and action-orientated when expressed as a principle.

Our core principles are driven by key ethical responsibilities. They are:

- Being trustworthy: honouring the trust placed in the assessor.
- Beneficence: a commitment to promoting the child's wellbeing and safety.
- Non-maleficence: a commitment to avoiding harm to the child.
- Justice: the fair treatment of all parties and the provision of adequate services.

Well-founded ethical decisions are those which are strongly supported by one or more of these principles without any contradiction with the others. There may be occasions when assessors need to prioritise some principles over others as they cannot all be reconciled in a particular set of circumstances. The decisions made by assessors can still be considered ethical even if a colleague may have chosen an alternative course of action in those circumstances, as long as an assessor carefully considers all the relevant issues and principles and is appropriately accountable for decisions made.

3.3 Personal Qualities

When values are internalised they become personal qualities that guide our interactions with others and our environment, providing a drive that often operates without a person being fully aware of it. Personal and moral qualities are of crucial importance to assessors as they often impact relationships with parties.

Assessors are strongly encouraged to aspire to the following key personal qualities:

- Candour: being open with all parties regarding that which puts them at risk of harm or any actual harm caused.

- Care: being responsible, competent and attentive in one's work and fully aware of the needs of the case.
- Courage: acting in full awareness of fears, risks and uncertainty.
- Diligence: achieving a positive outcome by conscientiously deploying one's skills and knowledge.
- Empathy: being able to consider another person's perspective to better communicate an understanding of their experience.
- Fairness: principled decisions and actions concerning children in ways that promote safety and wellbeing.
- Humility: the ability to assess accurately and acknowledge one's own strengths and weaknesses.
- Integrity: commitment to being moral in dealings with others, including personal straightforwardness, honesty and coherence.
- Resilience: the capacity to work with the commissioner's concerns without being personally diminished.
- Respect: showing appropriate esteem for all people.
- Sincerity: a personal commitment to consistency between what is professed and what is done.
- Wisdom: possession of sound judgement.

4. Good practice

Assessors must be committed to sustaining and advancing good practice.

This section of the *Ethical Framework* sets out an assessors commitment to serving children, commissioners and service users and their ethical foundation for *Good practice* in more detail.

4.1 Putting children first

The safety and wellbeing of children and service users, and their protection from exploitation or unsafe practice, is a responsibility we share with all other members of our professions.

Assessors must make children the primary focus of their attention and assessment. While doing everything possible to develop and protect all parties trust.

This will involve the following:

- The consideration, by consultation with a supervisor or an independent experienced colleague, of any professional or personal interests that conflict with putting a child's interests first; when appropriate, these will be discussed with the commissioner before assessments are started.
- The management of situations involving protecting children, service users or others from serious harm will be given careful consideration; this may require overriding a service user's explicit wishes or breaching their confidentiality.
- We will support, through our actions, any investigations or actions necessary to prevent serious harm to children, service users or others.

4.2 Working to professional standards

Assessors must be competent to deliver the assessments offered to at least fundamental professional standards or better. This involves fulfilling the ethical

principles and values set out in this *Ethical Framework* regardless of whether working online, face-to-face or using any other methods of communication. The technical and practical knowledge may vary but all assessments will be delivered to at least fundamental professional standards or better.

Skills and knowledge will be kept up to date by:

- Attending regular training;
- Reviewing ongoing research in the field;
- Attending supervision.

Applicable data protection requirements will be complied with by keeping accurate records – see www.ico.org.uk

The confidentiality and privacy of service users will be protected by the active protection of information from unauthorised access or disclosure and by informing service users about the limitations of privacy or confidentiality in advance of the work starting.

We will consult with others with relevant expertise, seeking second opinions, or making referrals, as part of our requirement to satisfy professional standards; we will do so in ways that meet our commitments and obligations for confidentiality and data protection.

Collaboration with colleagues over our work on specific assessments will take place in a form that will enhance those assessments.

Assessments will be improved by working collaboratively with and offering mutual support to colleagues.

We will maintain our own physical and psychological health at a level that enables us to work effectively.

We will be covered by adequate insurance when providing assessments.

4.3 Respect

Assessors must respect the dignity of all parties and take the law concerning equality, diversity and inclusion into careful consideration and strive for a higher standard than the legal minimum.

Service users as people will be respected by providing services that:

- demonstrate equality, value diversity and ensure inclusion;
- avoid unfairly discriminating against any party, or colleagues;
- recognise the importance of self-inquiry, personal feedback and professional development to deal with our own vulnerability to prejudice;
- so far as is reasonably possible, make adjustments to overcome barriers to accessibility, for service users of any ability wishing to engage with a service;
- rather than expecting the client to teach us about their background, recognise when our knowledge of key aspects of their identity or lifestyle is inadequate and take steps to inform ourselves from other sources where appropriate;
- do not make assumptions with service users who appear similar to ourselves or possess familiar characteristics so that we do not overlook or ignore what is distinctive in their lives.

Registrants must consider the need to foster good relationships between those who have a protected characteristic under the Equality Act (2010) and those who do not and should seek to ensure that those have a protected characteristic are positively impacted by an assessment and that any negative impacts are mitigated as much as possible. Protected characteristics are:

- Age (Includes a person's age or perceived age);
- Disability (Defined as a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on someone's ability to do normal daily activities);

- Gender reassignment (individuals who are proposing to undergo, are undergoing, or have undergone a process (or part of a process) for the purpose of reassigning their sex);
- Marriage and civil partnership;
- Pregnancy and maternity;
- Race (Includes colour, nationality, and ethnic or national origin);
- Religion or belief;
- Sex;
- Sexual orientation;

We will challenge views that appear to be unfairly discriminatory from colleagues or others involved in delivering related services and take action to protect all parties.

In cases where our service users may feel under pressure from other people or agencies to attend assessments, we will acknowledge their reservations and take into account how assessments are completed.

The safety of the child or others is our key priority and we recognise this may need to be prioritised over our client's wishes and confidentiality.

When working with children and young people, careful consideration will be given to practice that:

- exhibits sound knowledge of the law in relation to working with children and young people;
- demonstrates knowledge of the current culture and customs that affect parenting/care giving and how children and young people interact with each other and other significant people in their lives.

4.4 Maintaining an appropriate relationship

Assessors must provide clear information about the assessment being provided and maintain appropriate boundaries with all parties.

Details that service users ought to know in order to make an informed decision about the assessment they have been referred to, including how the assessment will be conducted and how information or data about them will be protected, will usually be provided to them in advance.

Careful consideration will be given to how we communicate with service users about the terms on which assessments will be completed. Particular attention will be paid to:

- ensuring we communicate details about the assessment to the client in easily understood ways that are appropriate to their context;
- clear statements concerning limitations in confidentiality and privacy;
- maintaining clear records of what has been agreed.

Appropriate professional and personal boundaries in our relationships with service users will be established and maintained by ensuring that:

- the aims of working as an independent expert are consistent with these boundaries;
- avoiding any dual or multiple relationships;
- ensuring that a distinction between our personal and professional presence on social media, where this could result in dual relationships with service users or commissioners, is maintained;
- periodically reviewing in supervision and discussing with commissioners when appropriate the impact of any dual or multiple relationships. The integrity of the work being undertaken may also be enhanced by discussion with colleagues or managers.

Sexual relationships with or sexual behaviour towards our service users, supervisees or trainees by registrants will not be tolerated.

The financial, emotional, physical, sexual or spiritual exploitation or abuse of our service users in any way by registrants will not be tolerated.

Sexual relationships with or sexual behaviour towards people whom we know to be close to a service user by registrants will not be tolerated, in order to avoid undermining our integrity as independent experts.

The continuation or resumption of any relationships with former service users will be avoided. Conflicts of interest and issues of power may continue after an assessment or our working relationship with a supervisee or trainee has formally ended. Therefore:

- Before entering into personal or business relationships with former service users, caution will be exercised;
- Sexual or intimate relationships with former service users or people close to them will be avoided. In exceptional circumstances, such a relationship may be permissible, taking into account the integrity of expert assessments and after careful consideration in supervision and – whenever possible – following discussion with experienced colleagues, when:
 - a) a distinction between the former and proposed new relationship has been established due to enough time having elapsed or the circumstances of those concerned having sufficiently changed;
 - b) the new relationship has demonstrable integrity and the assessor has shown it to be not exploitative;
- If the relationship becomes detrimental to the former client or damages the standing of the profession, we will undertake to be professionally accountable.

We will appoint someone to communicate with service users and support them in making alternative arrangements in the event of death or an illness of sufficient severity to prevent the assessor communicating directly with service users. The person undertaking this work will usually be a trusted colleague, a specially appointed trustee or a supervisor, and will be bound by the confidentiality agreed between the assessor and client .

4.5 Integrity

Assessors must maintain high standards of honesty and probity in all aspects of their work. This will involve being open and communicative about the assessments being delivered encouraging all parties to raise any concerns about the assessment and avoid any actions that will bring the profession into disrepute.

Our openness and communicativeness with service users, commissioners, colleagues and others will be of a level consistent with the purpose, methods and confidentiality of the assessment.

We will answer promptly all reasonable requests for details of our qualifications, professional experience and working methods, and communicate them accurately and honestly.

The fulfilment of any legal requirements concerning how we carry out our work will be conscientiously considered.

Any criminal charges or disciplinary procedures brought against us will be promptly notified to the registering authority. We will also notify the Register of civil claims, or if we have been declared bankrupt.

Service users and commissioners will be encouraged to raise any concerns about our work as soon as possible; we will give any concerns careful consideration and attempt to resolve them when appropriate. Service users will be informed of any applicable complaints processes open to them including the Professional Conduct Procedures.

4.6 Accountability and candour

The safety of the assessments is the responsibility of the assessors who provide them, and supervisors who oversee others who provide them.

We will be open and honest about anything going wrong and promptly inform our service users and/or commissioners of anything in our work that places service users at risk of harm by:

- preventing or limiting any harm through taking immediate action;
- so far as possible, repairing any harm caused;
- when appropriate, offering an apology;
- notifying a supervisor and/or manager and discussing with them what has occurred;
- avoiding a repetition of what has gone wrong by investigating the incident and taking action.

How we work with service users will be considered carefully in supervision.

How commissioners experience our work, and the effects of the work, will be carefully monitored.

4.7 Working with colleagues and in teams

Assessors professional relationships should be conducted in a spirit of mutual respect that endeavours to build good working relationships and systems of communication that enhance services to service users and commissioners.

Colleagues will be treated fairly and enabled to develop and foster their capability and equality of opportunity.

Colleagues' relationships with service users will not be undermined by making unjustifiable or ill-judged comments.

The management of confidences agreed with service users will be on a professional basis and thus purposeful and respectful, which will be reflected in all communications between colleagues about service users.

4.8 Supervision

Regular and ongoing supervision provides a crucial component in ensuring assessors sustain good practice throughout their working life. It enables assessors to work as effectively, safely and ethically as possible by providing the opportunity to reflect in depth about all aspects of their practice. Supervision also sustains the personal resourcefulness required to undertake the work.

Supervisors require adequate levels of expertise acquired through training and/or experience in order to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to perform the role. The provision of appropriate professional support and their own supervision is also crucial to the work of supervisors.

High levels of competence, professionalism and relationship building, along with the management of personal boundaries, any dual relationships, conflicts of interest and avoiding exploitation, will be modelled by supervisors for the work they supervise.

Confidentiality agreements concerning service users will be respected in all communications made in the context of supervision, which will be consistent with and compatible with any applicable agency policy.

How the undertaking of key responsibilities for service users is allocated between the supervisor, supervisee and any line manager – or others with responsibilities for the assessments provided – will be given careful consideration.

A supervisor may be required to collaborate with training and placement providers in order to ensure that the work with service users of their trainee satisfies professional standards. Agreements and discussions with the trainee regarding arrangements for collaboration will usually take place in advance of their working with service users.

The weight of responsibility for ensuring that the supervisee's work meets professional standards will primarily rest with the supervisee when supervising qualified and/or experienced assessors.

Considerations of how responsibility for assessors is implemented in practice, and how any difficulties or concerns are being addressed, will periodically be discussed by supervisors and supervisees.

Discussions in supervision of the application of this *Ethical Framework* to the work with service users will take place regularly and at a minimum once a year.

The application of the law concerning supervision to their role and responsibilities will be conscientiously considered by supervisors.

Accurate records of key points discussed in supervision will be kept by supervisors.

Supervisees are required to draw attention to any significant difficulties or challenges that they may be facing in their work as part of their responsibility to be open and honest in supervision. Supervisors must provide an environment free from blame or unjustified criticism for their supervisees to discuss any of their practice-related difficulties and, when appropriate, to support their supervisees in taking positive actions to resolve difficulties.

4.9 Training and education

All trainers should have the skills, attitudes and knowledge required to be competent trainers in expert domestic abuse risk assessment.

When using examples of assessments for training purposes, this must be done with the consent of the person or the assessments sufficiently anonymised so that the person concerned cannot be identified by any reasonable means.

High levels of good practice are expected to be modelled by trainers and educators in their work, particularly with regard to expected levels of competence and

professionalism, relationship building, the management of personal boundaries, any dual relationships, conflicts of interest and avoiding exploitation.

Trainers and educators will have processes and policies for addressing any trainee's concerns and will encourage trainees to raise such concerns as soon as possible. Trainees need to be given opportunities by trainers and educators to discuss any of their practice-related difficulties in an environment free from blame or unjustified criticism and, when appropriate, supported in taking positive actions to resolve difficulties.

All trainees will:

- undertake to deliver services satisfying minimum professional standards for working as assessors. Appropriate professional support may be offered to assist in achieving the standard;
- provide assessments that satisfy professional standards by collaborating with their trainers, supervisors and other professional advisers to ensure they are undertaken with reasonable care and skill;
- be open and honest about all issues relevant to their training, supervision and professional practice with trainers, placement providers and supervisors.

4.10 Research

Research is essential to enhancing our professional knowledge and providing an evidence-base for practice in ways that benefit commissioners and service users.

Opportunities for research that is compatible with the assessments we provide will usually be supported and enabled by us.

We will adopt a rigorous approach to the quality and integrity of the research process, the knowledge claims arising from the research and the form in which results are disseminated when undertaking research.

The explicit informed consent of all participants in research is required.

To ensure that the rights and interests of participants have been considered independently of the researcher, all research will be reviewed in advance.

The standards of good practice in any services being delivered will be complied with in all research methods used, and they will not adversely affect commissioners or service users.

4.11 Care of self as an assessor

Assessors should take responsibility for their own wellbeing as essential to sustaining good practice.

We will take responsibility for our wellbeing by:

- protecting our own physical safety through taking precautions;
- ensuring that we are sufficiently resilient and resourceful to undertake our work in ways that satisfy professional standards by monitoring and maintaining our own psychological and physical health;
- identifying and using professional support and services as required;
- maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

4.12 Responding to ethical dilemmas and issues

Professional and ethical issues, problems and dilemmas will arise and assessors should recognise they are an unavoidable part of the assessment process.

Assessors should make the following commitments:

- We will respond to such situations by using our supervision and any other available professional resources to support and how we tackle the issue, giving careful consideration to the best approaches to ethical problem-solving.

- We will be ready to explain why we decided to respond in the way we did and take responsibility for considering how best to act in such situations.