

Issues surrounding vulnerable persons

Why are we writing to you?

We recognise that as a licensed driver your actions may be able to increase the safety of vulnerable people. As such, we wish to raise awareness of issues surrounding vulnerable people; encourage drivers to look out for signs of exploitation; make drivers aware of some of the issues that are happening in Devon; and provide information to help drivers recognise and report a vulnerable person who may be at risk.

As a taxi driver at some point you may have:

- Concerns about young people in your vehicle.
- Concern about an adult paying for a young persons taxi fare.
- Concerns about behaviour or conversations of other taxi or private hire drivers.
- Concerns about the locations or venues you drop passengers at or collect them from.
- Concerns about a person's conversation in your vehicle.
- Concerns about a particular scenario that has presented itself.

As an example:

You arrive to pick up a passenger late at night in a town centre, you see a young girl of what you believe to be 14 or 15 years of age, she is very intoxicated and is with three significantly older men. The group walk towards your vehicle, one of the men asks you to take them to a local hotel. The girl appears upset.

What would you do?

If you feel like something is wrong or see or hear something that makes you feel uneasy, follow your instinct check it out with someone you trust, and report any concerns.

Obviously the above example is solely provided to start you thinking, but there are dozens of other potential situations that may present themselves when working as a taxi or private hire driver. Whilst the information that you have might not be sufficient for action to be taken, it may be a vital piece of the jigsaw and one that will lead to an investigation or prosecution.

What makes a passenger vulnerable and at risk of abuse or exploitation?

There are many factors that may lead to vulnerability such as alcohol and drugs, age, mental or physical health, disability, whether the passenger is alone, or has language problems.

You may have heard of issues surrounding:

- Violent extremism and radicalisation
- Child sexual exploitation
- Modern day slavery

Please do not think that these issues are not relevant in this locality. We have been advised by the Police that examples of all of the above have occurred in North Devon recently. There are common traits, signs and behaviour that may be present and may be witnessed, so the things to look out for are very similar.

Violent extremism and radicalisation have become more prevalent in recent years with the rise of international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State. Violent extremist threats come from a range of individuals,

including domestic terrorism and home grown violent extremists. Currently the threat to the UK and our interests from international terrorism is severe. This means a terrorist attack is highly likely, and the threats we face are more diverse than before, and dispersed over a wider geographical area.

Violent extremism and radicalisation often involve the exploitation of vulnerable people who are considered easy targets.

Modern day slavery is a global issue that still continues in one form or another in every country in the world. Much of the difficulty of spotting modern day slavery is that it is so well hidden in our societies. It may be women forced into prostitution, persons forced to work in agriculture or domestic work, girls forced to marry older men etc.

Child sexual exploitation continues to be another issue that is prevalent in all communities. It is a type of sexual abuse in which children are exploited for money, power or status. Abusers often encourage a close relationship with a child and manipulate them by providing affection, attention, alcohol, drugs, gifts or simply treating them like an adult. It is then that the expectation of sexual favours is pressed upon a child, this could be the abuser or the abusers friends. Exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition e.g. being persuaded to post sexual images on the internet/mobile phone.

How do I spot the signs?

There are no typical profiles of offenders, with this in mind we ask you to be aware of what is happening around you and question suspicious or abnormal behaviour.

As drivers there may be things that you note for example:

- Children being picked up by unknown adults.
- Children with an adult boyfriend, girlfriend or friends.
- Unusual travel times - victims may be dropped off or collected for work on a regular basis very early or very late at night.
- Persons going out late at night and not returning until morning.
- Involvement in criminal activity.
- Changes in behaviour such as becoming very secretive or aggressive.
- Regularly going out and drinking alcohol and or taking drugs.
- Unexplained influx of money or possessions.
- Physical appearance - victims may look malnourished or unkempt, tired or unwell.
- Few or no personal items – victims may wear the same clothing day in and out, or wear unsuitable clothing.
- Poor living conditions – victims may be living in unclean, cramped and/or overcrowded accommodation, they may be living and working from the same address.
- Isolated and controlled – victims may rarely be on their own, seem under control of others, rarely interact or seem unfamiliar with their environment.
- Reluctant to seek help – victims may avoid eye contact, appear scared or hesitant to talk to strangers.
- Restricted freedom – victims may have few opportunities to move freely.

What do I do if I think there is an issue?

This newsletter calls on you to be curious. If you hear or see something that makes you feel uneasy and makes you think that someone might be in danger, don't just look away. Speak to someone you trust and see how they feel about it. If they agree with your concerns report the issue.

- **To report a concern call the Police on 101.**
- **If you believe there is immediate danger to a person then please dial 999.**

Good Safeguarding Practice – Consideration of Vulnerable Persons

- Check at the point of booking if there are any vulnerability issues. This will allow you to prepare for the journey in the right way.
- Ask the persons booking if an escort for the vulnerable person is being provided or required.
- Let head office know (or keep a record) of the time you picked up the vulnerable passenger, the time and place you dropped them off and whether there was any incident or anything significant on the journey.
- If you refuse to take a passenger inform someone that you can't take them so they can deal with the person another way (e.g. hospital staff; family; security staff if a club/pub).
- Record incidents and refusals.
- Be professional – try not to be over-friendly or talk about personal or intimate issues, don't exchange personal contact information such as passenger's telephone numbers or Facebook details. Avoid swearing or aggressive behaviour. Do not touch passengers.
- Make sure you are wearing your ID (requirement of the Council's policy).
- Sit lone passengers in the back of the vehicle unless otherwise agreed.
- Ask or explain to passengers if using a centralised locking system – don't just put it on without explanation.
- Don't assume that you passenger wants help – always ask.
- Never follow a passenger into the house unless previously agreed/properly authorised.
- Ask before making a journey shorter by going off the main roads/using isolated country roads, explain and give the passenger (or person booking) a choice of route.
- Never set off with a passenger without a specific destination address.
- Never double up on a booking without consent, and even then be mindful that whilst passengers may be travelling in a similar direction, they may pose a threat or risk to the other passengers.
- If you think the passenger is afraid, offer to ring head office (where appropriate) to tell them you have a passenger named xxx with you and give the address and approximate time of arrival; this reassures the person that they are safe and someone is monitoring the trip.
- Keep a record either in your vehicle or at head office of any incidents or situations you were not happy with, the record should include a description of what happened and what you did to keep yourself and your passenger safe.
- If you are concerned about a scenario (e.g. dropping off a lone female who is intoxicated in a high risk Location) think about any potential measures you could take, such as suggesting an alternative drop off location. If in doubt report any concerns to the Police on 101.
- If you are concerned about another licensed driver's conduct, speak to someone you trust and see how they feel about it. If they agree with your concerns report the issue to the Police on 101.