

ANONYMOUS VOTER REGISTRATION IN THE UK

# SUPPORTING SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE TO REGISTER TO VOTE



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# Anonymous voter registration in the UK: Supporting survivors of domestic abuse to register to vote

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**This guide is for registered midwives working in the UK, produced by the Royal College of Midwives with support from the Electoral Commission.**

For information about anonymous registration, please contact the Electoral Commission on 0333 103 1928 or visit [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

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## Introduction

This guide is aimed at midwives working with women who are survivors of domestic abuse and tells you how you can support them to access anonymous voter registration. You can make an 'attestation', which is a statement of professional opinion on the need for electoral anonymity for her to remain safe.

Everyone has to provide some personal details to their local Electoral Registration Officer in order to vote in UK elections. Some women who are fleeing domestic abuse may miss out on voting because they are worried that perpetrators will be able to trace them by searching the electoral register for this personal information, such as their address. Other vulnerable women, such as those fleeing domestic servitude or slavery may too feel at risk.

The law allows for some people to vote anonymously so that they can vote *without* their name and address appearing on the electoral register. The people who can support an application to be anonymous has been broadened, to include midwives. It is hoped that this change will allow more people to exercise their right to vote safely.

Research shows that 30% of cases of domestic abuse begin in pregnancy<sup>1</sup> and 2% of maternal deaths from 2013 to 2015 were caused by homicide<sup>2</sup>. Midwives are often the only professional that a woman experiencing abuse talk to, and can offer crucial support and advice.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Health (2017). Responding to domestic abuse: a resource for health professionals. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/597435/DomesticAbuseGuidance.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/597435/DomesticAbuseGuidance.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Knight M, Nair M, Tuffnell D, Shakespeare J, Kenyon S, Kurinczuk JJ (eds.) on behalf of MBRRACE-UK (2017). Saving Lives, Improving Mothers' Care - Lessons learned to inform maternity care from the UK and Ireland Confidential Enquiries into Maternal Deaths and Morbidity 2013-15. Oxford: National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit, University of Oxford. <https://www.npeu.ox.ac.uk/downloads/files/mbrace-uk/reports/MBRRACE-UK%20Maternal%20Report%202017%20-%20Web.pdf>

## 1. Anonymous registration – what it is and how it works

### What is anonymous registration?

Anonymous registration was set up in 2006 to help individuals whose safety would be at risk (or where the safety of other people at the same address as them would be at risk) if their name or address was listed on the electoral register. It was envisaged that this might include witnesses in criminal court or a person who has fled domestic abuse. Anonymous voter registration was not intended to be available to those who simply wanted to keep their name and address private. Consequently, the threshold for anonymous registration was set at quite a high level.

Now the list of people who can help an applicant become an anonymous voter has been broadened to include those people who are more likely to come into contact with victims of domestic abuse such as midwives. This will help more people access anonymous voter registration to keep them safer.

It's not only survivors of domestic violence who could benefit from anonymous voter registration. As a midwife, you may care for other vulnerable adults like victims of modern slavery or trafficking. They too may want to remain anonymous to keep safe, and you can support their applications.

### How registering anonymously works

All voters are required to give basic personal information to their local Electoral Registration Officer so that the ERO can check that they are eligible to register to vote. Below are examples of how a standard registration and an anonymous registration would appear on the electoral roll.

### Examples of electoral register entries

This is how entries usually appear on the electoral register:

**BC412 Vella, John 59 Green Lane**  
**BC413 Vella, Veronica 59 Green Lane**

This is how anonymous entries appear on the electoral register:

**BC602 N**



The 'N' signifies that this entry relates to an anonymously registered voter. If your client is registered anonymously then none of their personal details will appear on the electoral register, and their name will not be included on any registration forms sent to the household.

Some women you care for may not be eligible to vote in UK elections. To see who can vote in UK elections, please visit the [Registering to Vote](#) page on the Electoral Commission website.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Making an application

### How can people make an application to register anonymously?

To register anonymously, your client will need to complete an [anonymous registration application form](#).<sup>4</sup> They will need to explain briefly why their safety (or the safety of someone in the same household as them) would be at risk if their name and address appeared on the electoral register (for example, if they are living in a refuge with a confidential location, or they fear that any disclosure of their address could increase their risk they face from a perpetrator). They also need to provide documentary evidence to support their application, comprising of either:

1. a court order; or
2. an attestation

The application must then be submitted to the Electoral Registration Officer at the local council. They will take a decision as to whether to grant the applicant anonymous registration.

### What supporting evidence needs to be provided with an anonymous registration application?

All applications must include evidence that the applicant's safety or the safety of someone in their household would be put at risk if their name and address appeared on the register. Any of the following can be accepted as evidence:

#### 1) A court order, either

- A current court order, interdict or injunction protecting the applicant (there is more information about which court orders, interdicts and injunctions can be accepted on the anonymous registration application form)
- A current court order, interdict or injunction protecting someone in the applicant's household – together with proof (e.g. photocard driving licence or utility bill) that you live in the same household as them

The list of accepted court orders for anonymous registration is set out in law, and therefore other types of court orders cannot be accepted as evidence.

<sup>3</sup> Registering to Vote and the electoral Register. <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/voter/registering-to-vote-and-the-electoral-register>

<sup>4</sup> Electoral registration forms for registering anonymously. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/voter-registration-forms-paper-versions>

## 2) An attestation from a qualifying officer supporting the application

An attestation is a statement from a professional **who knows the applicant is at risk** and can verify their need for anonymous registration in their professional capacity. It is a statement saying that if the applicant's name and address were on the register, the applicant's or another member of the household's **safety would be at risk**.

Attestations must be in writing and must be signed and dated by the qualifying officer who must specify a period between one and five years for which it has effect.

A qualifying officer can be any of the following:

- A **midwife**, nurse or doctor registered with either the NMC or GMC
- A police officer of or above the rank of Inspector in any police force in the UK
- A refuge manager

Other qualifying officers can be working in Social Services or the National Crime Agency. The list of those who can be qualifying officers is specified in legislation. Contact the Electoral Commission if you would like more information about qualifying officers.

If the applicant has any questions about providing a court order or attestation, they should contact the Electoral Registration Officer for advice.

## How can I make an attestation as a qualifying officer?

As a midwife, you may care for or support women who are escaping domestic abuse, or other kinds of crimes, and fear for their safety. They may approach you to ask for an attestation on their behalf so they can register to vote anonymously. Or you may identify that they would benefit from anonymous registration.

There is a template attestation form attached to the anonymous registration application form and you can base your attestation on this template. Alternatively, you can provide an attestation in your own words, so long as it is in writing, signed and dated by you as the qualifying officer.

The law does not require that the midwife making an attestation must be caring for the women at the time attestation is made. However, the **midwife must be able to truthfully say that the applicant's safety, or the safety of someone in their household, is under threat if their name and address appears on the register**. The electoral register is available for public inspection, often in libraries or other public buildings in the local community.



Healthcare professionals need to be alert to the symptoms or signs of domestic abuse and women should be given the opportunity to disclose domestic abuse in an environment in which they feel secure.

#### **NICE Antenatal care guideline CG62**

In all cases, trust and act on your professional instinct that something is not quite right. It is usually a combination of triggers, an inconsistent story and a pattern of symptoms that may cause you to suspect trafficking.

#### **Department of Health guide to identifying victims of modern slavery**

Raise concerns immediately if you believe a person is vulnerable or at risk and needs extra support and protection... take all reasonable steps to protect people who are vulnerable or at risk from harm, neglect or abuse.

#### **NMC Code**

### **How long after making an anonymous registration application will the registration come into effect?**

Once the application has been processed, and assuming that the application is successful, an individual will be anonymously added to the register when the next update to the register is published. If there are any problems or questions with the application the Electoral Registration Officer will contact the applicant directly.

### **How long does an anonymous registration remain valid?**

Registration lasts for 12 months from the day the anonymous entry is first made on the register. After the 12 month period is up, your client will need to re-register anonymously. The Electoral Registration Officer will contact them in good time to tell them what information they need to provide to enable the registration to continue for a further 12 months. Provided it remains valid, the same evidence or attestation can be used to renew your client's anonymous registration.

### **Does the applicant receive confirmation when they have been added to the register as an anonymous elector?**

Once an applicant has been added to the register, the Electoral Registration Officer will send them a signed 'certificate of anonymous registration' by way of confirmation and this can be used as proof of registration if required (for example, by a credit reference agency).

Attestors will not be informed when the applicant has been added to the register as an anonymous elector. Communication will be between the Electoral Registration Officer and the voter and will be kept confidential.



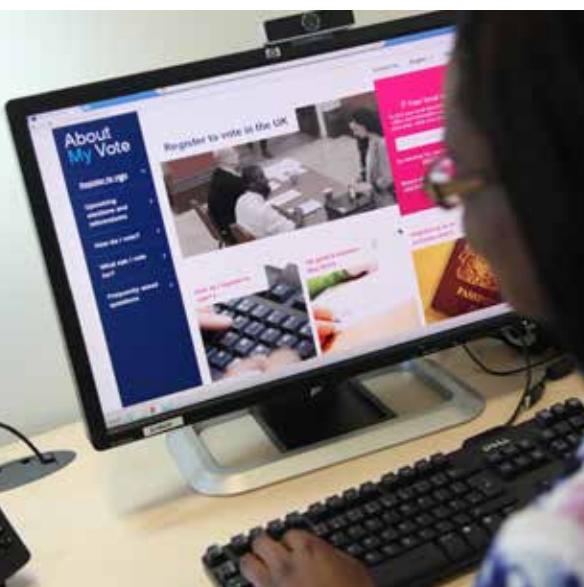
### 3. Keeping your client's personal information safe

#### Access to your client's anonymous registration record

Electoral Registration Officers are very aware of the sensitivity of information from individuals when they receive anonymous registration applications and treat the information accordingly. The ERO will provide help and advice as required to individuals wanting to register anonymously.

As an attestor, you do not need to keep a copy of your clients Anonymous Registration application, or your attestation. But as with other forms that require midwives' input – like Healthy Start forms for example – please record your actions appropriately in the women's care notes.

The ERO will take and keep a copy of the attestation and it will be scanned in and retained in their electoral management system. The ERO and their team are bound by data protection legislation, and also electoral legislation, which requires that electoral data including personal details is only used for specific electoral purposes set out in the regulations. The ERO will not provide your client's details to anyone unless they are legally required to do so.



Access to anonymous registration forms will be tightly restricted, with many authorities keeping hard copy only applications in a locked cabinet and only a small number of senior members of the team able to access these records. You can contact your local Electoral Registration Officer for more information about how they manage sensitive information locally and you can find their contact details at [www.yourvotematters.co.uk](http://www.yourvotematters.co.uk).

#### Obligations in Northern Ireland to report crimes

Routine enquiry on domestic abuse for all pregnant women has been introduced in Northern Ireland. Women should be asked during their pregnancy whether or not they have experienced, or are currently experiencing, domestic abuse.

However, please be aware that in Northern Ireland if a third party such as a health professional knows or believes that a relevant offence (such as domestic abuse) has been committed, the third party will normally have a duty to inform the police of any information that is likely to secure, or to be of material assistance in securing the apprehension, prosecution or conviction of someone for that offence.

At the time of going to print, we have requested official guidance from the Chief Nursing Officer for midwives in Northern Ireland as to how midwives should report information from women about relevant offenses to the police.

We also recognise the conflict between the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) Code requirement to protect confidentiality and the requirement of the law in Northern Ireland to report crime. The NMC have clarified that the law of any country will take precedence over a particular requirement of the Code.

## 4. Voting

### How does an anonymously registered elector cast their vote at an election?

An anonymously registered elector has the same options for voting at an election as other electors. They can vote in person at a polling station or they can apply to vote by post or by proxy.

If they vote in person they will receive a poll card before the election. The poll card will be sent in a covering envelope. An anonymously registered elector must take this poll card to the polling station in order to vote.

If the elector wants to vote by post or by proxy, they should tell the Electoral Registration Officer who will provide them with an application form. They can also download the forms from [www.yourvotematters.co.uk](http://www.yourvotematters.co.uk).



## 5. FAQs

### Are all midwives suitable to make attestations?

Yes. Registered midwives are qualifying officers according to the law. Any appropriate opportunity to support women with anonymous voter registration should be taken. You should keep in mind that many women do not want to repeat their abuse experiences or their fears to different professionals. Women may ask you to be an attestor for them, while others who are at risk may not know they have the option of anonymous voter registration.

The midwife should use their judgement in determining whether or not to support an application through an attestation and should take into account the NMC Code.<sup>5</sup> In whatever context you are caring for a woman as a midwife, whether being her named midwife, booking her into the service, working in safeguarding or caring for her directly, be the attestor the woman needs **if you truthfully believe her safety, or that of someone in her household, is under threat from her name and address appearing in the register**. You can also be proactive and suggest anonymous registration to women who you think may benefit from this policy – those fleeing abuse, slavery, or so-called 'honour' crimes.

### Do I have to provide an attestation?

You are under no obligation to provide an attestation. **If you do not truthfully believe a woman's safety, or a member of her household's safety, is at risk from having their name and address appear in the register, you should not be an attestor to her application for anonymous registration.** The applicant can approach alternative qualifying officers who may be able to do so.

Knowingly providing false information to an Electoral Registration Officer for any purpose connected with the registration of electors is an offence under Section 13D of the Representation of the People Act 1983.

### How can I assess threats to women's safety from being on the register?

Domestic abuse can affect people of all backgrounds and can occur between family members as well as between intimate partners. The term can describe any incident or pattern of incidents

<sup>5</sup> Nursing and Midwifery Council (2015). *The Code: Professional standards of practice and behaviour for nurses and midwives*. <https://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/nmc-publications/nmc-code.pdf>



of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse.<sup>6</sup> There is no specific crime of domestic abuse, but it can be a feature of many offences, such as assault, stalking, sexual offences or harassment. Abuse can involve psychological, sexual, financial or emotional abuse as well as physical violence. It can be perpetrated through use of technology, such as email/text, social media or tracking devices. It also includes offenses such as forced marriage, FGM and other so-called honour based crimes.<sup>7</sup>

Risk of domestic abuse is dynamic - it can differ in severity between incidents and can increase in frequency and seriousness very quickly. Domestic abuse does not end when a relationship ends, and research has consistently demonstrated that women are at significant risk when leaving an abusive partner and after separation.<sup>8</sup> A person may therefore want to keep their new address a secret, but by law the electoral register is available for public inspection, often in libraries or other public buildings in the local community. This is why the option of anonymous voter registration exists for those whose safety is under threat.

Assessing threats must be centred on the applicant's fears for their own safety, as it is they who have the knowledge of the perpetrator(s), and have often managed and mitigated their own risk over a long period of time.<sup>9</sup> Refer to your own country's specialist advice on caring for vulnerable people for information about recognising victims, and the specialist support services that health professionals such as midwives can provide. Remember, the final decision about whether someone can be registered anonymously rests with the Electoral Registration Officer.

### **Are there other vulnerable people who could benefit from anonymous voter registration? Can I support them?**

The primary purpose of ensuring midwives can make attestations is to protect survivors of domestic abuse, as there is a strong link between abuse and pregnancy. However, the law allows for anyone whose safety, or that of their household, is at risk, to apply for anonymous voter registration

<sup>6</sup> Home Office (2016). *Domestic violence and abuse: new definition*. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-violence-and-abuse#domestic-violence-and-abuse-new-definition>

<sup>7</sup> Sentencing Council (2018). *Overarching Principles: Domestic Abuse. Definitive Guideline*. [https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/6.4143\\_SC\\_Domestic\\_Abuse\\_Paper\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/6.4143_SC_Domestic_Abuse_Paper_WEB.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Breenan, D (2016). *The Femicide Census – Profiles of Women Killed by Men*, <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/The-Femicide-Census-2016.pdf>; College of Policing (2016). *Authorised Professional Practice: Domestic Abuse, Victim Safety and Support*. <https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/domestic-abuse/victim-safety-and-support/#if-you-are-living-without-your-abuser-after-separation>

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, A (2016). *Reducing repeat victimization among high-risk victims of domestic violence: the benefits of a coordinated community response in Cardiff, Wales*. *Violence Against Women*. August 12(8):761-88.

with the right supporting evidence. This means midwives who care for victims of modern slavery, trafficking or domestic servitude, for example, can make attestations for their applications too.<sup>10</sup>

## Guidance on responding to domestic abuse and modern slavery

England, Scotland and Wales have specific guidance for health professionals in identifying and responding to domestic abuse, assessing risks and information on how to gather and record information about domestic abuse appropriately. In Northern Ireland, Health and Social Care Trusts have their own guidance and protocols.

Each UK country has its own strategy towards ending modern slavery and trafficking, and guidance and learning packages are available for health professionals to identify and support victims. Make yourself familiar with these resources.

## Is any other individual permitted to attest an anonymous registration application apart from 'qualifying officers'?

Only 'qualifying officers' are permitted to attest anonymous registration applications. **Registered midwives are qualifying officers.**

'Qualifying officers' for anonymous registration applications are set out in law which means that the Electoral Registration Officer has no discretion to be flexible about who may attest an application. The attestation cannot be delegated from a qualifying officer to someone else who isn't on the NMC or GMC register. **This means midwives may not delegate an attestation to a Maternity Support Worker or clerical/administrative staff, for example.** But registered doctors and nurses are qualifying officers within the NHS workforce that can make attestations.

<sup>10</sup> Modern slavery is the recruitment, movement, harbouring or receiving of people through the use of force, coercion, and abuse of vulnerability, deception or other means for the purpose of exploitation. Individuals may be trafficked into, out of or within the UK, and they may be trafficked for a number of reasons including sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude and organ harvesting. Modern slavery has a range of serious mental and physical health consequences at an individual and population level. Keep in mind that some victims of modern slavery may have the right to vote in the UK. See NHS England (2016). Modern Slavery. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/safeguarding/our-work/modern-slavery/> and Public Health England (2017). Modern slavery and public health. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/modern-slavery-and-public-health/modern-slavery-and-public-health>

**I know that the ERO is required to publish two versions of the register – the electoral register and the open register. Can you confirm whether an anonymous register entry appears in both the electoral register and the open register?**

Using information received from the public, registration officers keep two registers: the electoral register and the open register. Only the elector number of an anonymous elector is included in the electoral register. Other electors have their name and address visible in the electoral register. See Section 1 of this guidance for an example of how it looks. **No details of any anonymous elector will appear in the open register whatsoever.**

## About the electoral register (also known as the full register)

The electoral register lists the names and addresses of everyone who is registered to vote in public elections. The register is used for electoral purposes, such as making sure only eligible people can vote. It is also used for other limited purposes specified in law, such as calling people for jury service or checking credit applications. It is available for public inspection, often in libraries or other public buildings in the local community.

## About the open register (also known as the edited register)

The open register is an extract of the electoral register, but is not used for elections. It can be bought by any person, company or organisation. For example, it is used by businesses and charities to confirm name and address details. No information about an anonymously registered elector appears in the open register. Any voter can ask for their details to be removed from the open register and this does not affect their right to vote.

You can find out more information about both registers and how they may be used at [www.gov.uk/register-to-vote](https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote)

## **My client lives in a refuge and the address cannot be made public. Are they still required to give the address of the refuge on their application?**

Yes. The application for anonymous registration requires the applicant to provide details of the address at which they are living. This is so that the ERO can be assured that the applicant is entitled to vote in a particular electoral division. Therefore it is therefore not possible to include a PO Box address instead of a postal address. However, the address will be kept confidentially by the Electoral Registration Officer and will not be published or disclosed.

On the application form the person applying to register can ask for any correspondence from the Electoral Registration Officer – for example, poll cards – to be sent to an address which is different from the address they are living at.

## **If a person is registered anonymously, does it mean that they will have difficulties obtaining credit?**

The electoral register is used by the credit reference agencies as an important part of proving people's identity and deciding on whether to give individuals credit facilities. As an anonymously registered elector's name and address will not appear on the register it may affect their ability to open a bank account or make other financial arrangements.

You should advise those people who are anonymously registered to vote that they can contact the credit reference agencies to add their name to their special anonymous elector database. They can show the credit reference agency a copy of their 'certificate of anonymous registration' (see information on certificates earlier in this guidance).

As this involves handing their details to a third party they should only do this if they are confident about the process the company has to keep their data secure.

## **The Electoral Registration Officer has advised an individual applying for anonymous registration that a particular court order submitted as evidence cannot be accepted. Why is this?**

The types of court order or injunction which are eligible to support an anonymous registration application are set out in law. This means that an Electoral Registration Officer has no discretion to vary from the law on which types of court order or injunction are acceptable.

## **6. Useful links**

Apply for anonymous registration

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/voter-registration-forms-paper-versions](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/voter-registration-forms-paper-versions)

The Electoral Commission

[www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

0333 103 1928

Who can register to vote in the UK

[www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/voter/registering-to-vote-and-the-electoral-register](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/voter/registering-to-vote-and-the-electoral-register)

Search facility for Electoral Registration Officers' contact details

[www.yourvotematters.co.uk](http://www.yourvotematters.co.uk)

Cabinet Office policy statement about making a democracy that works for everyone: survivors of domestic abuse

[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/596185/Anonymous\\_Registration\\_Policy\\_Statement.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/596185/Anonymous_Registration_Policy_Statement.pdf)

24 Hour National Domestic Violence Helpline (run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge)

[www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk)

0808 200 247

Directory of local domestic abuse services in the UK

[www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic-abuse-directory/](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic-abuse-directory/)

National Stalking Helpline

<https://www.suzylamplugh.org/Pages/Category/national-stalking-helpline>

0808 802 0300

Rape Crisis England and Wales (Run by Rape Crisis South London)

[www.rapecrisis.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk)

0808 802 9999

Rape Crisis Ireland and Northern Ireland

[www.rapecrisishelp.ie/](http://www.rapecrisishelp.ie/)

1800 778888

Rape Crisis Scotland

[www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk)

08088 01 03 02

UK Modern Slavery Helpline and Resource Centre

[www.modernslaveryhelpline.org/](http://www.modernslaveryhelpline.org/)

08000 121 700

Nursing and Midwifery Council Code for Nurses and Midwives

[www.nmc.org.uk/standards/code/](http://www.nmc.org.uk/standards/code/)

NICE guidance on antenatal care (CG62)

[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg62](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg62)

NICE guidance on pregnancy and complex social factors (CG110)

[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg110](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg110)

Department of Health guidance for health professionals on responding to domestic abuse

[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/597435/](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/597435/)

[DomesticAbuseGuidance.pdf](#)

Department of Health guidance for health staff identifying and supporting victims of modern slavery

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/identifying-and-supporting-victims-of-human-trafficking-guidance-for-health-staff/identifying-and-supporting-victims-of-modern-slavery-guidance-for-health-staff](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/identifying-and-supporting-victims-of-human-trafficking-guidance-for-health-staff/identifying-and-supporting-victims-of-modern-slavery-guidance-for-health-staff)

Department of Health e-learning module on Modern Slavery

[www.e-lfh.org.uk/programmes/modern-slavery/](http://www.e-lfh.org.uk/programmes/modern-slavery/)

NHS Scotland guidance on what health workers need to know about domestic abuse.

(2018 version forthcoming, 2009 version) [www.gbv.scot.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/GBV\\_Domestic-Abuse-A4-61.pdf](http://www.gbv.scot.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/GBV_Domestic-Abuse-A4-61.pdf)

Welsh Government guidance for frontline professionals on 'ask and act'

<http://gov.wales/docs/livefearfree/171129-ask-and-act-role-frontline-practitioner-en.pdf>

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[www.rcm.org.uk](http://www.rcm.org.uk)