November 2026

Northamptonshire Safeguarding Adults Board

PRACTITIONER GUIDE – DISGUISED COMPLIANCE

What is Disguised Compliance?

Disguised compliance describes situations where a person may appear to work with professionals, but meaningful or sustained change is not evident. This may arise for a range of reasons, including fear, uncertainty, previous experiences of services, or a wish to reduce professional involvement. The term "disguised compliance" should be used with care, as it may imply deliberate deception and leave people feeling judged or blamed by professionals. Practitioners should respond with respectful curiosity, seeking to understand the person's perspective while considering whether agreed actions are leading to improved outcomes and reduced risk.

This can mean that social workers and other professionals involved may be unaware of what is happening in the adult's life and the risks they face may be unknown to authorities.

Who might exhibit Disguised Compliance?

People drawing on care and support, or their carers, may sometimes provide reassurance or agree to actions because they believe this is what professionals expect to hear. Practitioners should avoid making assumptions about the person's intentions and explore, with sensitivity and professional curiosity, whether there are barriers to carrying out the agreed actions.

Why do people respond in this way?

- Fears around what may happen if staff are allowed to see the reality of the situation, including fear of being judged, feeling shame or perceived stigma
- Previous negative experiences of working with professionals in health and social care
- Feeling that nobody can help them, and that asking for support is pointless
- Feeling that they are coping and don't need support
- A lack of capacity whereby they may agree to demands and want change, but lack the practical skills, resources, or executive functioning to execute the agreed actions
- There may also be evidence of control or coercion and abuse and/or neglect in relationships, leaving one party fearful to share the reality of the situation with professionals

What might Disguised Compliance look like?

You may notice that, either the adult themselves, or their family members or carer(s), are over-eager to please, and agree to interventions without any reflection or questions. This may be an indication that they are saying what they think professionals want to hear.

There may be a history of missed appointments, or unclear reasons for why appointments have not been attended.

The adult, family member or carer(s) may seem overly critical of services or professionals, as a way to divert attention from their own situation.

What are the dangers of Disguised Compliance?

Superficial cooperation from the adult, their family member or carer(s) often prevents or delays professionals understanding the severity of harm and when the focus is engineered away from allegations of harm, agencies may not be able to see the full picture, impacting on an ability to respond appropriately.

Disguised compliance can lead to missed opportunities for support and intervention and may lead professionals to make inaccurate assessments of risk. These key outcomes can ultimately lead to a failure to safeguard the adult at risk.

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How can we mitigate against Disguised Compliance?

The key to mitigating risks is knowing how to recognise the signs and ensuring that you build meaningful and trusting relationships with the adult and their family member or carer(s).

You should also ensure that you:

- Ensure that you are professionally curious
- Use a trauma-informed approach
- Are person-centred in your approach
- Recognise strengths and any positive change to build trust
- Engage in multi-agency working and speak to colleagues from other agencies if you believe there are potential risks for safeguarding

What can I do?

- Be professionally curious when undertaking assessments to gather all the facts
- Use supervision to bring in a 'fresh pair of eyes' to the case
- Keep chronologies to establish any patterns
- Be evidence based
- Triangulation of information is key

Useful Resources

- Controlling and Coercive Behaviour Bitesize Video
- Have you thought about Professional Curiosity – National Safeguarding Adults Board Guidance
- Managing Difficult Conversations Practitioner Guide
- Principles of Engagement One Page Guide
- Professional Curiosity Bitesize Video
- Professional Curiosity Guidance
- Professional Curiosity Practitioner Guide
- Trauma Informed Practice Animation
- Trauma Informed Practice Practitioner Guide
- Trauma Informed Practice Reflective Framework

*NSAB would like to thank West Sussex Safeguarding Adults Board for their permission to adapt their guidance.