



**GRADUATE CERTIFICATE in Consolidation
of Social Work Practice
LEVEL 6 - 60 Credits
BMPF6044**

**LEARNER PORTFOLIO
(PORTH AGORED and UNIVERSITY OF WALES
TRINITY SAINT DAVID)**

Learner's name:

Clare Haslam

Email address:

2423019@student.uwtsd.ac.uk

Learner's University Registration Number:

2423019

Cohort: 21 onwards

Task 3

Safeguarding and working in complex situations – Case Study

Guidance;

Please ensure that you meet the National Occupational Standards and assigned Learning Outcomes for this task (see handbook).

Question:

Complete a critically reflective case study based on an assessment that you have undertaken with others, in your own area of work, concerning the safeguarding of either an adult or a child. You must demonstrate how the case relates to or could relate to safeguarding legislation, policies, strategies and procedures (including demonstrating an understanding of the interface between social services provision in Wales with the United Kingdom, the European Union (EU) and outside the EU). You must demonstrate your understanding of the integration of analysis in assessment, collaborative working and professional judgements in increasingly complex situations and the use of social work theories. You must refer to the specific dimensions of working in Wales.

4000 words (+/- 10%: include your actual word count at the end of each section).

This critically reflective case study examined a safeguarding assessment involving Citizen 1, who was known to Adult Social Care due to a Mild Learning Disability and Cerebral Palsy. He lived independently with support from family and neighbours. Following the death of his sister, Citizen 1 allowed his sister's partner (Citizen 2) to move into his home. Over time, concerns emerged from neighbours, police and housing services regarding verbal arguments, threats of violence, potential neglect and coercive control.

Through this assessment, I considered how I applied professional judgement whilst balancing competing rights, risks and responsibilities to evidence transformative learning. The tensions arising within contemporary social work practice, including empowerment versus protection, autonomy versus safeguarding intervention, and individual rights versus statutory duties, were critically examined. This reflection demonstrated transformative learning through engagement with legislation, theory, research and supervision, highlighting how my understanding of safeguarding developed from a predominantly risk-focused process towards a rights-based, strengths-based and critically reflective approach.

Critical reflection on the application of legal frameworks highlighted the complexity of safeguarding adults whose decision-making rights remained intact despite significant vulnerability. The Mental Capacity Act (2005) reinforced the principle that the presence of

disability, risk or support needs did not equate to a lack of capacity. As I became more adept at applying the Act, I challenged an earlier tendency to conflate vulnerability with incapacity and critically examined whether safeguarding concerns had unintentionally encouraged paternalistic decision-making in relation to Citizen 1. Whilst the legislation provided a framework for assessing capacity, it offered limited guidance where an individual possessed capacity yet remained vulnerable to coercion, manipulation or undue influence. Throughout my first year in practice, safeguarding experience, training and supervision strengthened my confidence and professional autonomy when applying this legislation.

Drawing on Banks (2012) ethical framework, informed my thinking around safeguarding decision which involved balancing competing principles. Throughout the enquiry, tension existed between respecting Citizen 1's autonomy and reducing perceived risk. Whilst legal frameworks provided guidance, they did not always provide clear answers regarding the most ethical course of action. This required careful consideration of competing principles including autonomy, generosity, corruption and justice. Reflection highlighted that safeguarding decisions were not solely legal decisions but ethical ones that required balancing competing rights and responsibilities. This strengthened my appreciation that professional judgement involved navigating ethical uncertainty rather than simply applying procedural guidance.

My analysis was further informed by the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. This legislation placed duties upon me to promote well-being, voice, choice and control. Throughout the assessment, I fulfilled my statutory responsibilities whilst supporting Citizen 1's right to make decisions about his own life. This demonstrated growing confidence in applying the principles underpinning the Human Rights Act (1998), particularly Article 8, which protects the right to private and family life, and Article 14, which protects individuals from discrimination. Similarly, the Equality Act (2010) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006), particularly Articles 12 and 19, challenged assumptions that vulnerability alone justified restrictive intervention. Through reflection, I recognised that my knowledge of international human rights frameworks was less developed and identified this as an area for future professional development through supervision and training.

Consistent with the strengths-based principles underpinning the *Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014)*, this enquiry encouraged me to identify and build upon Citizen 1's existing capabilities, relationships and support networks rather than focusing solely upon safeguarding risks. Initially, my analysis centred upon concerns regarding coercive control, neglect and exploitation. However, critical reflection highlighted that Citizen 1 possessed several strengths, including supportive family relationships, positive community connections, neighbour involvement and the ability to communicate his wishes and desired outcomes. Recognising these strengths challenged my assumption that professional intervention was the primary mechanism for reducing risk. Instead, I increasingly understood that positive safeguarding outcomes are often achieved by supporting individuals to utilise their own

assets, relationships and community resources. This learning transformed my understanding of safeguarding from a predominantly protective process towards one that balanced protection with empowerment, resilience and self-determination.

At the outset of the assessment, information received from the police following a domestic incident reported by neighbours highlighted concerns regarding vulnerability and potential domestic abuse arising from verbal aggression displayed by Citizen 2. Colleagues within Adult Social Care also identified previous concerns relating to coercive control and financial exploitation; however, these concerns had never been formally substantiated.

Over my first year in practice, I developed a greater ability to critically analyse information. I became increasingly aware that perceptions of risk could be influenced by professional narratives before sufficient evidence had been gathered. Regular discussions with colleagues, managers and safeguarding professionals shaped the way I applied critical reflection before reaching conclusions. Fook and Gardner's (2007) model of critical reflection (cited in Teater 2014) encouraged me to examine the assumptions underpinning professional knowledge rather than accepting them uncritically. As a result, I adopted a more systematic approach to assessment through direct engagement with Citizen 1, discussions with Citizen 2, and consultation with police, housing, health professionals and social work colleagues.

Preston-Shoot and Bryne (2024) consistently identified premature assumptions, confirmation bias and insufficient professional challenge as factors contributing to safeguarding failures. Initially, information received from partner agencies presented a major narrative regarding risk in this case. Critical reflection encouraged me to question whether this narrative had influenced my thinking before sufficient evidence had been gathered. Consequently, I actively sought contradictory evidence and alternative viewpoints through engagement with Citizen 1, Citizen 2 and partner agencies. This strengthened my understanding in relation to the need for professional curiosity which is extended beyond information gathering. This challenged my own assumptions and cognitive biases. As a result, I became increasingly aware of how professional narratives could unintentionally influence decision-making and limit objective analysis.

A further area of learning concerned the impact of cognitive bias on professional judgement. Kahneman's (2011) work highlights how individuals often rely upon unconscious theories and potential shortcuts when interpreting information. Reflecting on this enquiry, I recognised the potential influence of confirmation bias, whereby information received from partner agencies could have encouraged me to seek evidence that supported existing concerns regarding coercive control whilst overlooking contradictory information. Through supervision, professional discussion and direct engagement with Citizen 1 and Citizen 2, I actively sought alternative explanations and contradictory evidence. This strengthened my understanding that professional curiosity requires practitioners to critically evaluate both the information available and their own thinking processes. Consequently, I became more

aware of the importance of reflective practice in reducing bias and supporting defensible decision-making.

Consistent with Munro's (2011) findings, this experience reinforced the importance of professional judgement, critical thinking and analytical reasoning when responding to complex safeguarding concerns where procedural guidance alone could not provide clear answers. This strengthened my confidence in balancing competing evidence whilst remaining accountable for decisions made within conditions of uncertainty. This led me to think about the work of Howe (2008) who argues that emotionally intelligent social workers are better able to understand emotions build relationships and reflect critically on complex situations.

I learned that this process of triangulation strengthened the reliability of the assessment and reinforced the importance of critically analysing multiple perspectives. More significantly, it transformed my understanding of professional judgement. Rather than viewing professional opinion as inherently more reliable than lived experience, I increasingly recognised that all perspectives, including my own, were shaped by values, experiences and contextual influences. Consequently, I became more confident in questioning information, managing uncertainty and reaching evidence-informed conclusions rather than relying solely upon professional consensus.

Application of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (cited in Payne 2014) further developed my autonomy by encouraging deeper analysis and more holistic decision-making. Initially, I viewed risks as arising largely from interpersonal relationships and care arrangements. However, ecological analysis highlighted the interaction between social isolation, bereavement, disability, health needs, financial pressures and barriers to support, broadening my understanding of Citizen 1's situation.

Through developing a relationship with Citizen 1, my understanding of vulnerability was transformed. Rather than viewing vulnerability as an individual characteristic, I increasingly understood it as something often created through interaction between individuals and their environments. Whilst Bronfenbrenner (1979) supported holistic understanding, it provided limited guidance regarding how practitioners should prioritise competing risks when factors across systems conflicted. Consequently, professional judgement remained essential. This learning encouraged me to move beyond simply identifying risks and towards recognising strengths, resources and environmental factors that could support positive outcomes.

Consequently, professional judgement remained essential. This learning encouraged me to move beyond simply identifying risks and towards recognising strengths, resources and environmental factors that could support positive outcomes. Consistent with Dominelli's (2017) thoughts on empowerment and partnership working. I increasingly recognised the importance of working alongside individuals to identify and build upon their existing capabilities and resources. This enabled me to look beyond safeguarding risks and consider

the wider social and environmental factors affecting well-being. As a result, I developed a greater appreciation that positive safeguarding outcomes are often achieved by supporting individuals to utilise their own assets, relationships and community resources rather than relying solely on professional intervention.

Research into relationship-based practice also transformed my approach to engagement with Citizen 2. Drawing upon Ruch et al (2010) I recognised that effective safeguarding required balancing empathy, authority, collaboration and professional challenge. Throughout the assessment, Citizen 2 demonstrated limited engagement. This prompted me to critically evaluate my own approach and consider what I could do differently.

As I developed a deeper understanding of Citizen 2's circumstances, I increasingly viewed him as vulnerable in his own right. Reflection led me to consider whether grief and increased reliance upon alcohol had influenced his presentation and behaviour. Initially, I focused primarily upon the risks associated with disengagement and the implications for the assessment process. However, as the assessment progressed, I increasingly considered how Citizen 2's experiences, priorities and perceptions of safeguarding differed from my own. This challenged me to recognise how power, communication and differing perspectives influenced participation in safeguarding processes.

Consequently, I adapted my approach by breaking discussions into manageable stages and supporting him to engage more effectively with the process whilst also exploring support for his own needs. This transformed my understanding of engagement and reinforced the importance of seeing individuals as more than the risks they may present.

At times, I became aware that my desire to maintain engagement inadvertently reduced the level of challenge I applied during conversations. This created tension between preserving the relationship and appropriately exploring safeguarding concerns. Reflection increased my understanding that relationship-based practice was not synonymous with agreement. Rather, effective practice required respectful challenge, professional curiosity and ongoing critical analysis. As a result, I developed greater confidence in exploring inconsistencies, questioning assumptions and seeking clarification where information differed across agencies and individuals. This represented a significant area of professional growth throughout my first year of practice.

Multi-agency collaboration remained central throughout the assessment. However, rather than viewing partnership working as a process of achieving agreement, I increasingly recognised the value of professional disagreement. Health professionals prioritised immediate intervention due to concerns regarding deterioration in Citizen 1's health, whereas my assessment placed greater emphasis upon rights, autonomy and contextual understanding. Through supervision, reflection and legislative analysis, I became more confident in exercising independent professional judgement. This represented a significant shift from seeking continual guidance towards recognising my own professional

responsibility to analyse competing evidence and make decisions alongside Citizen 1 and Citizen 2.

Information sharing presented additional complexity. In isolation, information held by individual agencies appeared relatively low level. However, when information was combined, a pattern emerged suggesting cumulative harm and escalating concerns. Through this learning, I developed a greater appreciation that safeguarding required collaborative analysis rather than isolated decision-making. This experience strengthened my understanding of the relationship between effective communication, information sharing and defensible risk assessment. Linking this to the lessons learnt through adult safeguarding reviews this appears significant (Preston-Shoot, 2017).

Throughout my engagement with Citizen 1, multi-agency collaboration was essential in ensuring his safety and reducing the likelihood of future harm. Housing services agreed to explore opportunities for Citizen 1 to relocate closer to family support networks, deepening my understanding of preventative and strengths-based interventions rather than focusing solely on immediate safeguarding concerns. Simultaneously, police utilised their legal powers to remove Citizen 2 from the property in accordance with Citizen 1's stated wishes, reinforcing the importance of balancing protection with autonomy and self-determination.

Critically reflecting upon this process, I recognised that effective multi-agency working extended beyond information sharing. Instead, it involved combining different professional perspectives to create a more robust understanding of risk and develop coordinated plans that promoted safety whilst respecting individual rights. This experience strengthened my appreciation that sustainable safeguarding outcomes are rarely achieved through single-agency intervention and are more likely when individuals are supported through coordinated partnership working.

Reflection upon power and oppression further developed my practice. Thompson's PCS model, as discussed by Teater (2014), provided a valuable framework for understanding how power and oppression operate at personal, cultural and structural levels. This helped me to consider how Citizen 1 I could unintentionally be positioned as recipient of protection rather than holder of rights. Applying a rights-based approach enabled me to challenge this assumption and reinforced the importance of ensuring Citizen 1 remained central to decision-making.

At a cultural level, differing beliefs regarding caregiving, responsibility and support shaped understandings of risk and intervention. At a structural level, I increasingly recognised the influence of resource limitations, service accessibility and organisational priorities upon safeguarding outcomes. Whilst Teater (2014) provided valuable insight, reflection suggested that power could also be negotiated through meaningful collaboration, participation and relationship-based practice. This deepened my appreciation of the need to continually reassess power relationships throughout intervention.

Consistent with the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*, I increasingly considered whether earlier intervention, preventative support and stronger multi-agency collaboration could have improved outcomes and reduced vulnerability. Similarly, the *Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016* reinforced the importance of accountability, partnership working and quality outcomes. Understanding these frameworks transformed my practice by encouraging me to consider safeguarding not only in relation to immediate risks but also through a preventative and long-term perspective.

One of the most significant areas of transformative learning concerned my understanding of vulnerability. Earlier in practice, I had largely viewed vulnerability as an individual characteristic arising from disability, impairment or care and support needs. Through critical reflection, I recognised vulnerability as something that could be created or intensified through social, relational and environmental factors.

Citizen 1's experiences demonstrated that vulnerability could not be understood solely through the lens of disability. His circumstances were equally influenced by bereavement, social isolation, dependence upon others, housing circumstances and access to support. This shift fundamentally changed how I assessed risk and formulated intervention. Rather than focusing predominantly on deficits, vulnerability and protection, I increasingly considered strengths, relationships, community resources and environmental influences affecting well-being and autonomy.

This experience also transformed my understanding of professional judgement. At the beginning of my consolidation year, I often associated confidence with having the correct answer or achieving certainty before making decisions. Through managing ambiguity and conflicting information during this safeguarding enquiry, I recognised that effective professional judgement was not dependent upon certainty. Rather, it involved critically analysing evidence, justifying decisions and remaining open to challenge.

This represented a significant shift in my professional identity. Rather than seeking reassurance that decisions were correct, I increasingly used supervision, legislation, theory and professional discussion to critically test my reasoning. As a result, I became more comfortable working with uncertainty and acknowledging that safeguarding decisions were rarely straightforward. This learning strengthened my confidence, autonomy and accountability as a practitioner.

Teater (2014) references Mezirow's (1992) Transformative Learning Theory which has helped me understand my professional development throughout this assessment. Mezirow (1992) argued that transformative learning occurs when existing assumptions are critically examined and challenged, resulting in new perspectives that influence future behaviour and decision-making. This enquiry challenged many assumptions that had shaped my earlier understanding of safeguarding.

Mezirow's (1992) theory also highlighted the significance of critical self-reflection in professional development. Through reflective supervision and discussions with safeguarding

colleagues, I gradually increased my confidence in questioning assumptions, analysing evidence and considering alternative perspectives. Consequently, transformative learning contributed to a significant shift in my professional identity. I no longer viewed confidence as certainty, but as the ability to critically evaluate information, justify decisions and remain open to challenge. As a result, my practice became increasingly reflective, rights-based and evidence-informed.

Mackenzie and Stojar (2000) help me to develop my awareness of relational autonomy. This challenged my previous assumption that autonomy is exercised solely through individual independence and self-determination. Prior to this enquiry, I often viewed capacity and autonomy as concepts that sat largely within the individual. However, critical reflection led me to recognise that decision-making is frequently shaped by relationships, emotional attachments, social networks and the availability of support. In Citizen 1's circumstances, bereavement, social isolation and his reliance upon Citizen 2 influenced the context in which decisions were made. This prompted me to move beyond a binary view of either having capacity or lacking capacity and instead consider how relationships could both support and constrain autonomous decision-making. As a result, I developed a greater appreciation that safeguarding interventions should not simply assess an individual's ability to make decisions but should also consider whether the social conditions exist to enable genuinely informed and voluntary choice.

This perspective was particularly relevant when working with Citizen 1 due to the impact of disability, bereavement and social isolation. Mackenzie and Stojar's (2000) work on relational autonomy further highlights that decision-making does not occur in isolation but is shaped by social, emotional and environmental influences. This framework was particularly relevant when considering the impact of grief, dependency and social isolation on Citizen 1's circumstances. Following the death of his sister, many of his established support mechanisms changed. Although he retained capacity, his decision-making was influenced by emotional attachment, grief, dependence upon others and the support available to him. This understanding transformed my approach to safeguarding because it highlighted that promoting autonomy involves more than respecting expressed wishes. It also requires me to identify and strengthen supportive relationships, reduce barriers to participation and ensure individuals have access to information and advocacy where required. Consequently, I increasingly viewed safeguarding and empowerment as complementary rather than competing concepts. Supporting Citizen 1 to reconnect with family members, engage with housing services and access wider support networks enhanced the conditions that enabled him to exercise greater choice and control over his future.

Importantly an increased awareness of relational autonomy deepened my understanding of the perspectives of Howe (2008) and Banks (2012), leading to transformative learning

regarding how theories, models and principles interact within social work practice. This helped me recognise that promoting autonomy does not mean encouraging independence in isolation, but rather supporting individuals to exercise choice and control through meaningful relationships, appropriate support and ethical decision-making.

Whilst relational autonomy provided a useful framework for understanding the influence of relationships on decision-making, it also highlighted the complexity of determining when support becomes influence and when influence becomes coercion. This reinforced the importance of professional curiosity and ongoing critical analysis when balancing respect for autonomy with safeguarding responsibilities. Furthermore, relational autonomy highlighted the limitations of assessing decision-making in isolation from an individual's social context. This strengthened my understanding that safeguarding adults with capacity required consideration of both individual decision-making rights and the relational factors that may support, influence or undermine those rights. Critically, it emphasised the challenges practitioners face when distinguishing between supportive influence and coercive control, particularly where emotional dependency and bereavement are present. This reinforced the importance of ongoing assessment, reflective practice and professional curiosity throughout safeguarding interventions.

Oliver's (1990) Social Model of Disability provided a valuable framework for challenging deficit-focused thinking, it offered limited guidance regarding situations where disability, vulnerability and safeguarding concerns intersect. Therefore, professional judgement remained essential in balancing rights, protection and individualised responses to risk.

Applying a trauma-informed perspective such as Ruch et al (2018) further enhanced my understanding of factors influencing Citizen 1's engagement. Through reading and reflection, I developed a greater appreciation of how adverse experiences can influence well-being, decision-making and relationships. The death of Citizen 1's sister represented a significant loss, and I increasingly considered how grief, emotional dependency and potential coercive control may have influenced his perception of risk and willingness to engage with support. Rather than focusing solely upon what was happening in the present, I began to consider what had happened to him and how previous experiences continued to influence current circumstances.

This perspective strengthened my ability to approach the assessment with empathy and professional curiosity whilst avoiding judgemental assumptions. It reinforced the importance of creating an environment where Citizen 1 felt heard, respected and empowered. Consequently, I became more aware of my communication style, pacing and approach to engagement, strengthening the relationship through mutual trust and respect.

Reflecting upon this case, I recognised that concerns regarding coercive control, exploitation and potential harm created a strong sense of responsibility to ensure Citizen 1's safety. This prompted me to consider how emotions such as anxiety and concern could influence

professional judgement and create a desire to resolve risk quickly. Through supervision and reflection, I became increasingly aware of the importance of distinguishing between evidence-based concerns and my own emotional responses.

Howe (2008) relationship-based approach highlighted that emotional awareness strengthens rather than undermines professional practice when acknowledged and reflected upon appropriately. Consequently, I developed a greater understanding of how self-awareness contributed to balanced and proportionate decision-making. Rather than viewing uncertainty as a weakness, I came to recognise it as an inevitable aspect of complex safeguarding practice.

This experience also strengthened my emotional resilience. Earlier in my practice, situations involving significant risk often led me to seek reassurance that decisions were correct. Through managing the complexity of this enquiry, I developed greater confidence in tolerating uncertainty and exercising professional judgement within legal and ethical frameworks. This represented transformative learning because it changed my understanding of professional competence. I no longer viewed effective practice as having all the answers, but as possessing the ability to critically evaluate information, justify decisions and remain reflective when faced with ambiguity.

In conclusion, this safeguarding enquiry substantiated concerns regarding coercive control and financial exploitation, resulting in the implementation of a multi-agency protection plan. However, the most significant outcome was the transformation of my understanding of safeguarding itself. At the outset of my practice, I largely viewed safeguarding as a process of identifying abuse and reducing risk. Through critical engagement with legislation, theory, research, supervision and lived experience, I came to understand safeguarding as a dynamic, rights-based and ethically complex process requiring continual negotiation between protection, autonomy, participation and social justice.

Throughout this enquiry, I developed a deeper appreciation of the limitations of procedural approaches when working with adults who possess capacity but remain vulnerable to coercion, exploitation or undue influence. Critical reflection challenged my assumptions regarding vulnerability, decision-making and professional authority, leading me to recognise that effective safeguarding extends beyond risk management to encompass relationships, strengths, social context and individual rights.

Applying theories including Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1992), relational autonomy and trauma-informed practice enabled me to critically evaluate my decision-making and understand how social, environmental and relational factors influenced Citizen 1's circumstances. Consequently, I moved beyond a predominantly deficit-focused perspective towards a strengths-based, person-centred and anti-oppressive approach. This transformed my understanding of vulnerability from an individual characteristic to a socially and relationally constructed experience requiring holistic assessment and intervention.

The enquiry also strengthened my professional judgement. Through engaging with uncertainty, conflicting information and competing perspectives, I became more confident in critically analysing evidence, challenging assumptions and making defensible decisions. Rather than viewing confidence as having the correct answer, I came to understand it as the ability to justify decisions, remain open to challenge and continuously reflect upon my practice.

Ultimately, this experience demonstrated that effective safeguarding is not achieved solely through the management of risk but through promoting rights, relationships, strengths, choice and control. The transformative learning gained through this enquiry continues to shape my professional identity and reinforces my commitment to critically reflective, evidence-informed and rights-based social work practice as my autonomy continues to grow.

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