

# Hospital ISVA Service

A guide to the **Independent Sexual  
Violence Advisor Service.**

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## Introduction

If you have been given this booklet then it is likely that you have experienced sexual violence or abuse. You may be feeling scared, anxious or overwhelmed. What has happened is not your fault, and you have survived a traumatic experience. It is important to remember that you are not alone and that there is support available.

You may need some time to think about what has happened to you, and what you might want for the future.

This guide explains the services that are available for you to access confidential and independent support. It will talk about the role of an **Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA)** and how they can help.

The second half of the guide will include some helpful tips and information you may need during your recovery, your ISVA can discuss everything with you more thoroughly if you would like.

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## What is an ISVA?

The role of Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) was created by the Home Office to support victims following sexual abuse or violence to ensure that every individual has the support, guidance and information they need during their recovery. An ISVA is independent from the police and other services like social care.

Some of the things your ISVA may help with:

- Emotional support in relation to sexual trauma, eg, coping strategies to deal with nightmares and flashbacks.
- Practical support and safety planning including protective behaviours, helping to begin to feel safe.
- Non-judgmental advice and guidance regarding options such as reporting to police, forensic examinations, anonymous intelligence etc.
- Support throughout the criminal justice process, from report to court (if this is what you choose), ensuring you are kept updated and informed about processes.
- Referring or signposting to other agencies including sexual health, counselling, etc.
- Advocating your wishes and choices to services, work place, family, etc.

The support provided from your ISVA is free and confidential, it will be specific to what you feel you need and would benefit you during your recovery.

## Working with your ISVA

You will need to give your consent to work with an ISVA. Another person, for example, a parent or friend, cannot consent on your behalf.

Once you have consented to working with an ISVA they will make every effort to contact you within two working days. They will attempt to contact you three times before closing your case if a response is not received. Please inform your ISVA in advance if you are unable to attend appointments .

An ISVA is not a counsellor or therapist. They will not provide therapeutic support but can signpost or refer you to counselling services if this is required.

Please call 999 if you are in immediate danger, an ISVA is not an emergency service.

An ISVA will not ask you to disclose the details of your assault, this is to ensure they remain independent and are able to support you at court if required.

### Confidentiality

Conversations and appointments with your ISVA are confidential and information will not be shared without your consent.

However, your ISVA may share information if she believes it is absolutely necessary for your safety. Your ISVA will always try to discuss this with you first.

**You can contact the ISVA on 07977 069922**

## What is a Sexual Assault Referral Centre?

A Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) offers free support including medical, practical and emotional support to anyone who has experienced sexual violence or abuse. You may have the option to attend a SARC **if you have experienced sexual abuse or violence within the last week.**

Whether you are still able to attend will depend on when the incident took place, what kind of assault it was and whether the forensic nurse assesses that it is necessary. You can ask any questions or speak to a nurse 24 hours a day.

The SARC can complete a thorough medical examination and store the results for up to seven years, giving you a chance to report to the police at a later date if you choose. The samples taken may be used as evidence in an investigation. The SARC will also discuss aftercare for you including emergency contraception, sexual health or additional support.

If you are currently unsure about reporting to the police then you can self-refer to the SARC for an examination. You will see a Forensic Nurse Examiner and a Crisis Worker who is there to support you.

If you want to report or have already reported the offence to the police, then the police will discuss this with you and arrange an appointment directly.

For further information, see: <https://www.hertssarc.org/>

Their helpline is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

**Tel: 08081 784448**

## Information and techniques to help you cope

### Trauma and your brain

You are not to blame for what you have experienced. You have survived a traumatic event.

When your brain identifies danger, it starts behaving differently in order to keep you alive. The part of the brain that is responsible for rational decision making switches off, and the part that is more instinctive and is responsible for survival takes full control.

There are several ways that your survival brain may have responded to your trauma. Most people have heard of 'fight' or 'flight', where someone may try to fight their attacker off or run away. There is also 'freeze' and 'flop' where someone may stay still and do nothing, or go completely limp. There is also a 'friend' response where someone might try befriending the offender to try to minimise harm. A common misconception is that if someone doesn't fight their attacker off then it must not have been that bad, or that they wanted it to happen. In fact the most common response to sexual trauma is to freeze or flop where they physically cannot move or talk at all.

Sometimes you may experience 'flashbacks' after trauma. This is where it might feel like you are reliving the experience. You may have some nightmares or find it difficult to sleep. This is normal and won't last forever. If these have lasted for a long time however, your ISVA can refer you to further mental health support, or you can visit your GP.

## Grounding techniques

Grounding techniques can be helpful when you feel out of control – for instance if you are having or have had a flashback or panic attack. Grounding helps you to regain control and put you back in the present, this will hopefully help you to feel safe. Something may be helpful for one person, whilst not help another, your ISVA can provide suggestions and help you to cope.

- Try to focus on your breathing eg. use the 4 4 4 method – inhale through your nose for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds, exhale for four seconds, repeat until you feel centered.
- Can you describe five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear etc.
- Pick up and concentrate on an item in the room, describe it out loud in detail – what it looks like, how it feels, does it have a particular smell and does it make a sound.
- Focus on the sensation of your feet on the floor. Move your legs and remind yourself that you can move.
- Concentrate on reminding yourself that you are safe, it is a flashback and is not real even though it may feel like it is.

## Misconceptions and assumptions about Sexual Violence

There are many misconceptions and assumptions that people including friends and family may hold around sex, relationships and sexual violence, which can impact how people have responded to you or made you feel during your recovery.

Anyone can be a victim of sexual violence or abuse, regardless of their age, ethnicity and gender. This can have long lasting affects on anyone regardless of who the individual is.

## Misconceptions continued

There can be misconceptions about the circumstances of an assault. For example, what the person was wearing, whether they were in a relationship, may indicate it was acceptable. This is not the case, if consent has not been given and the other person knowingly continues anyway, this is a sexual offence regardless of the circumstances.

In order for someone to consent, then they must have:

- 1) freedom - they are not worried about the risk of consequences of making their decision, and
- 2) capacity– they are able to fully understand the decision they are making. Everyone should have the choice and be able to say no.

Sometimes people may assume that if an offence wasn't reported to the police, or it didn't go to court then it must not have happened and that the person may be lying. In reality lots of people may choose never to report or even disclose their abuse in their lifetime. However, this does not mean it didn't happen or that it has not affected them. Who you talk to about what has happened is your decision.

If you would like to discuss any of this section in more detail please talk to your ISVA.

## Criminal Justice Process

It is your decision whether to report the assault to the police. Your ISVA is independent from the police. They will help you to make an informed decision around your options and what may be best for you.

If you do want to make a report, you can telephone 101. They will arrange for an officer to come out and take an initial statement from you called a 'first account'. The officer will be trained to deal with sensitive matters. You can request a female officer if you prefer.

You will be allocated a specialist police officer who will oversee your case. It is likely that they will ask you to attend a video recorded interview where you will talk them through what you have experienced. This is called 'Achieving Best Evidence' (ABE).

The police will look for evidence to prove 'beyond all reasonable doubt' that the offence happened. If they believe they have sufficient evidence they will submit the case to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) which will assess whether: 1) there is sufficient evidence to prosecute and 2) that it is in the public's best interest to prosecute.

If the CPS charge the suspect you may be required to go to court. You will also be entitled to something called 'special measures' such as having a screen around you when giving evidence, or being able to give evidence from another room across a video-link. You will also have the option to have your ISVA to support you.

If you do not want to pursue an investigation but do want to share information, you can report your experience anonymously through crime stoppers. <https://crimestoppers-uk.org/> Tel: 0800 555 111.

The criminal justice process can take a very long time. Your ISVA will support you throughout. Your ISVA can discuss this process in more detail, support with your worries and answer any of your questions.

## Acronyms

Sometimes the language used by police or professionals can be confusing. This is here to help you make sense of it all.

- **ABE** – Achieving Best Evidence. a video recorded interview the police may complete with you if you have reported your abuse.
- **CJS** – Criminal Justice System, this ranges from police to court
- **Complainant** – the victim of the offence, that is pursuing a police investigation
- **CPS** – Crown Prosecution Service. They will decide if a case will be charged and sent to court.
- **Suspect** – refers to the individual that has allegedly committed the offence.
- **Defendant** – once a suspect has been charged they are a defendant.
- **ISVA** – Independent Sexual Violence Advisor
- **NFA** – no further action. A decision that may be made by the Police or CPS when the investigation isn't able to be continued.
- **SARC**- Sexual Assault Referral Centre. Where you can have a forensic examination, and support in the immediate after the incident.
- **SOIT** –Sexual Offences Investigation Team. However, this is not the only team that investigate sexual offences, your officer may be part of a different team.

## Important Contacts

**There are a number of services you can contact if you need support**

**Childline** (under 18's) Information and advice all on all things that impact young people. Chat to a counsellor 1 to 1 online. Message boards to share experiences or get support from other young people. *Call and email 24/7 0800 1111 [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)*

**The MIX** (under 25's) A judgement-free zone to get and give advice within a group. Support chats and discussion boards. Telephone counselling service. One to one chat online with a trained helpline support worker. 'CRISIS text line' 24/7 *Crisis line text number 85258 [www.themix.org.uk](http://www.themix.org.uk) 08088 084994*

**Kooth** (under 25's) and **Qwell** (adults) Message boards where you can share your problem anonymously. Articles experiences and tips online in their 'magazine' section. Free, safe, emotional wellbeing/ mental health online support 1:1 support. [www.kooth.com](http://www.kooth.com)

**Samaritans** (adults) 24/7 helpline. Email support, information and advice on their website. Self help app – info on website. [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org) *Call 116 123*

**Mind** (for all) A guide to support options and different services for survivors of abuse. Counselling, mental health information and support. <https://mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/abuse/>

**NHS Services** (for all mental health) 24/7 single point of access mental health helpline. Nurses provide support and advice for residents of Hertfordshire experiencing a mental health crisis. ([hpft.nhs.uk](http://hpft.nhs.uk)) <https://www.hpft.nhs.uk/information-and-resources/spot-the-signs/urgent-help/> 08006 444101. NHS 111. Option 2 for mental health services. Emergency Services 999

**HollieGuard** (for all): Free safety app. Phone can start recording, tracking location and alert emergency contacts if you feel in danger. It can work as a personal safety alarm – emit alarm and flashlight. The App can be downloaded on any smart phone.

**West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust**

## Hospital ISVA Service

**Watford General Hospital**

Vicarage Road  
Watford  
Herts  
WD18 0HB

**Tel: 07977 069922**

If you need this leaflet in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01923 217 187** or email **[westherts.pals.nhs.uk](mailto:westherts.pals.nhs.uk)**



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