People First (Scotland) is the Disabled People’s Organisation run by and for people with a Learning Disability in Scotland. People First brings together members who meet in collective self-advocacy groups in their local areas across the country.

Although not in a position to submit responses to the specific list of questions due to other commitments before the deadline I have attached information which describes the particular issues for our women members as well as suggestions of helpful communication approaches for women with Learning Disability.

Experiences of women with learning disabilities:

It is not easy for us to have close personal relationships.

A lot of the time we are not being treated like equal adults.

Other people don’t expect us to have or need real sexual relationships, or to get married and have children.

We don’t have enough support and encouragement to have a relationship or have opportunities to go out to places to meet people safely.

Support services focus on physical health to some extent but do not help enough with things like safely making friends and having sexual relationships which are important for emotional health.

Because we do not get the chance to learn what friendships and relationships should be like, we become vulnerable to coercion and harm.

Many women who have been to special schools said they had very little education or information on sexual health.

There is not enough easy read information and education about bodies, sex and relationships.

Unless we have the chance to understand and talk about these things we can find that we are in situations where we do not have power and abuse can happen.

Some women have shared examples of deciding that they want a relationship and then getting involved with someone but keeping it secret. They are afraid they will be told they are not allowed to have a partner.

Some were letting the other person abuse them because they didn’t know that what they were doing was abuse.
A lot of women with learning disabilities have also been abused by people who are supposed to be looking after them. For example: a family member, a carer or support staff.

Most women gave examples of having had a significant lack of control at some point in their lives.

For example: not being given a choice to say No to having sex.

Some women have said that in some cases they tried to tell someone what has happened but they did not feel listened to or believed.

“At school I was sexually abused and bullied. The teachers didn’t believe me when I told them about the bullying so I never said anything about the sexual abuse.”

People First member (42 years of age).

Who you tell depends on who you trust.

Trust is really important.

Women members have said that if they were being harmed or abused they would feel safe to speak to an advocate, a support worker or a nurse.

Some women also said they would tell their family or the Police but others were less trusting.

Most women said they were less likely to speak to a Social Worker or a Doctor.

There is a lot of fear for us that the situation may go out with our control.

Social work or other organisations often overtake and overpower us. We should be involved in all the decisions.

Some of us worry that if we speak up things may blow out of proportion.

Some of us have had bad experiences with Adult Support and Protection and Guardianship.

We are afraid that if we show we are at risk then our right to make decisions about our life will be taken away from us.

What help might a woman with learning disabilities need if she is being harmed? Like all women, we should have access to appropriate support services.

We might need a bit more support than other women but we should have equal opportunity to feel safe.
We need:
- Advice on prevention, protection and safety
- Information on support organisations
- Support to leave an abusive partner
- How to live safely
- How to get the abuser to leave
- Medical treatment
- Relationship advice
- Safe place to go
- Someone to talk to and emotional support

Any information about domestic violence and organisations that can help would need to be available in an accessible format, like easy read.

Professionals should also understand that they need to communicate with us in plain language and take the time to really listen.

A document advising on communication is also attached.

Fiona Wallace
Chairperson
People First (Scotland)
28 April 2017
Annexe

People First (Scotland) is the Disabled Persons’ Organisation led by people with learning disabilities in Scotland.

How can you tell if someone has a learning disability?
Some of the things to look out for are
- Someone being slower understanding or answering questions.
- Having difficulty remembering personal details or events.
- The person giving you information in an unusual or mixed up order.
- Having difficulty reading or writing.

If you think someone might have a learning disability but you are not sure, you could say something like –
- To make sure we can help you in the best way possible, do you have any support needs we should know about?

This could mean a learning disability, autism or a mental health issue.

Top 10 tips for good communication with people with learning disabilities.

1. Listen to us. Listen carefully.
Sometimes people with learning disabilities might not say what has happened in a straight forward way. Or they might use the words you are not used-to to describe something. This does not mean they are talking nonsense. Check with people as they go.

2. Take us seriously.
As you have already heard, one of the reasons people give for not reporting crimes is that they are not taken seriously. Remember a lot of people with learning disabilities have their views ignored at other times in their lives. Please don’t do it too.

3. Please don’t talk in jargon. Use plain English.
Remember that some of the words that you will use all the time at work will still be jargon to us.

4. Check that you have understood what we tell you and that we have understood what you tell us.
We might find it difficult to remember exactly what you tell us. It helps if you can say the important information a few times. Also some people with learning disabilities might say yes when asked if they understand, even if they do not. It is best to ask them to repeat back to you any important things.

5. Don’t just ask the same question over and over.
If the person does not understand the question you are asking them, try to ask it in a different way.
6. **Show us that you have time to hear what we have to say. Be patient.**
People with learning disabilities may take a bit longer to give you the information you need. But rushing them or being impatient is not going to help.

7. **Please don’t patronise us.**
We might do things a bit differently but we are still adults with the same right to live safely as anyone else.

8. **If we are the victim of a crime, please show us that you are on our side.**
As a one-off, some things might not seem serious to you. But please remember that if someone is being harassed from, day to day these things make them feel trapped.

9. **Please don’t raise your voice or shout.**
Shouting louder will not necessarily make you better understood.

10. **Be person-centered. Our ways of communicating are as individual as we are!**
We hope that these tips will be useful to you as a guide. But remember you can ask someone what works best for them.