Iriss

PROFESSIONAL CURIOSITY IN PUBLIC PROTECTION

Gathering the knowledge

March 2026

CONTENTS

Introduction

Public Protection in Scotland is about understanding and responding to people who are being harmed, or are at risk of harm. It is a broad term that encompasses many different multi-agency approaches and responses, and includes:

- Child Protection
- Adult Support and Protection
- Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA)
- Alcohol, drugs, and other substance use
- Violence Against Women and Girls
- Suicide Prevention

Professional Curiosity is a topic which has wide resonance across the entirety of Public Protection work. Starting from May 2025, Iriss' Professional Curiosity project has been seeking to develop a deeper understanding of this topic and its implications for the Public Protection workforce in Scotland.

The initial phase of this work has gathered knowledge from a wide range of sources. A rapid literature review was conducted in Summer 2025, reviewing the existing knowledge on the topic in Scotland and beyond. In parallel to this, three hour-long discussion sessions were held in August-September 2025 to gain a snapshot of current practice. The sessions were open to anyone with an interest in the topic. Over these three sessions, 112 people attended, sharing their experiences and offering their perspectives

on supporting a professionally curious approach in Public Protection. Almost half of participants (49.3%) were Local Authority employees, with colleagues from the NHS (24.6%) and HSCPs (15.9%) also well represented, and with small but notable engagement from colleagues within the police and the Care Inspectorate, as well as third sector organisations.

This report brings together both the literature review and findings from the discussion sessions. It is an overview of professional curiosity as it relates to Public Protection work across Scotland.

What is professional curiosity?

> ***"...whilst the concept of professional curiosity has begun to permeate social care practice across sectors, definitions lack clarity and transparency..."***
> (Burton & Revell, 2018)

A single definition for 'professional curiosity' is elusive. Although the term is widely used in Scotland across Public Protection work with both children and adults, the origin of the term is English, and specifically from child protection social work practice. The concept (if not the exact phrase) first gained major traction via Lord Laming's 2003 report into the death of Victoria Climbié. Using the idea of 'respectful uncertainty' – which also implies a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive approach – Laming wrote:

> *While I accept that social workers are not detectives, I do not consider that they should simply serve as the passive recipients of information [...] It does not require social workers constantly to interrogate their clients, but it does involve the critical evaluation of information that they are given.*

The genesis of professional curiosity – in the context of a serious professional failure resulting in a child's death – has also set the scene

for its future use. Burton and Revell (2018) highlight several high-profile Serious Case Reviews where the term professional curiosity appears, usually preceded by the words 'lack of'. It is still frequently used in reports, learning reviews, inspections and research to highlight issues resulting in serious harm or death (Dickens et al., 2023). Participants strongly believed that professional curiosity was a way of working that contributed to the avoidance or reduction of harm in the lives of those they worked with.

However, this deficit-based lens is only one aspect of its use in current Scottish practice. While Scottish practitioners did see the use of professional curiosity as vital in avoiding or reducing harm, it was also routinely used in practice to explore more effective and appropriate support mechanisms for children, families and adults. This could include making best use of all enabling and protective factors available within a community and, most obviously, as a way of getting to the heart of what really matters to the child or adult. Curiosity in this case is seen as an essential component of person – or child-centred working.

The ambiguity of the term has its benefits: it's flexible and can be applied in diverse contexts. Scottish practitioners tended to relate professional curiosity to their own work, using examples from their professional experience. This kind of nimble definition is also clear in the wider literature. For instance, for the police, professional curiosity is linked with investigations to gather evidence (College of Policing, 2021). In health, it can mean uncovering other issues if a patient presents for something else (Milani, 2017).

Yet this ambiguity can also mean that the term is at risk of becoming misunderstood, or a cliché, with its value diminished. If people are unsure of its meaning, they may be less confident in its practice. There was broad support within the professional discussion sessions for an agreed definition that would relate to Scotland's Public Protection landscape.

One current comprehensive (adult-focused) definition in the literature comes from Hertfordshire Safeguarding Adults Board (2020), quoted by Giddens (2025):

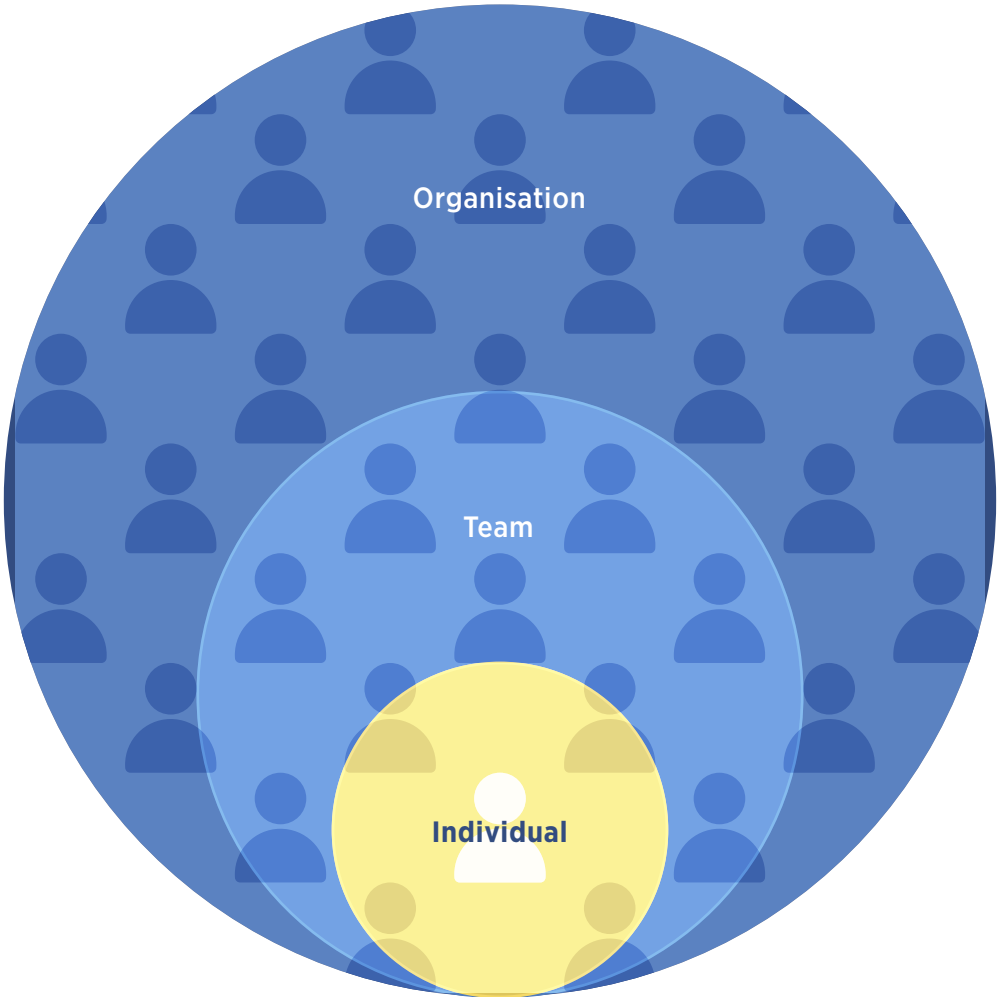
> *…about exploring and understanding what is happening with adults and their wider environment. It is about enquiring deeper and using proactive questioning and challenge. It also relates to understanding [the practitioner's] own responsibility and knowing when to act, rather than making assumptions or taking things at face value. In practice, professional curiosity is aligned to multi-agency working, collating information from different sources and applying different perspectives.*

The discussion sessions yielded an important distinction that is only implicitly mentioned in the literature. There was professional curiosity that is conducted 'out loud' – in conversations, team meetings, and relationship building; and 'internal' professional curiosity, relating more to processing and analysing information.

The three levels of professional curiosity

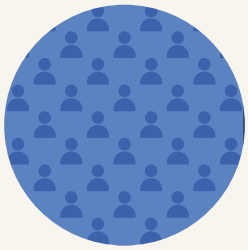
Professional curiosity can be most usefully thought of as an **umbrella** term. It can therefore be helpful to separate it out into three levels. While these levels have a relationship to one another, each does have distinct characteristics and implications for Public Protection work.

They can be visualised like this:



Individual: How individuals who work directly with adults, children, young people and families use professional curiosity. This could be in their conversations, observations, reflections and analytical work; it can also be in discussions with other professionals. The individual level of professional curiosity has the most focus within the research even though, as Revell and Burton (2016) highlight, "failures in safeguarding responsibilities are rarely the fault of one individual practitioner or of an isolated, ill-thought through working practice."

Team: How professional curiosity manifests in a team environment, whether in one-to-one interactions such as supervision, or in wider team discussion.



Organisation: How organisations respond to new learning and knowledge, and how they support individuals and teams to be curious.

Professional curiosity: individual level

Several factors might affect how curious a practitioner feels able to be.

- **Practice skills**. Professional curiosity is not necessarily a standalone skill (although it is sometimes characterised this way in the literature). Skills of questioning, working with complexity, hearing the child/person's voice, creating a safe and non-judgemental atmosphere, picking up on what's not being said and/or non-verbal cues, gathering information from various sources, reacting to changing situations, legal literacy, reflection (including self-reflection), building rapport, analysis and observation have all been cited as positive influences on professional curiosity (Thacker et al., 2020; Mantell and Jennings, 2016; Giddins, 2025; Herlitz et al., 2024; Dunne, 2025; Lohvansuu & Emond, 2020). This was reflected in the discussion sessions; participants would frequently relate professional curiosity to their practice skills, such as analysis and relationship-building.
- **Personality traits**. The research sometimes explores whether there are personality factors that affect practitioners' professional curiosity; practitioners in the discussion sessions too believed being dogged, interested, brave, patient and confident all helped. However, there are issues with an over-emphasis on personality traits. It may suggest that professional curiosity is a 'natural' skill rather than something that can be learned or honed. As a balance, the idea of **state curiosity** may be helpful: the theory that everyone can be curious in particular situations. This

respects the role that personality has to play, while emphasising that it is a learnable skill in Public Protection work (Birenbaum et al., 2024).

- **Emotions and wellbeing of the practitioner.** Strongly brought out in the discussion sessions and the research is the role of emotions and psychological safety for the practitioner. Professional curiosity appears to be higher and more consistent on days when a practitioner is experiencing positive well-being (Lydon-Staley et al., 2019). However, the opposite also seems to be true. Burton and Revell (2018) identified that stressed and overworked practitioners are less likely to practice aspects of professional curiosity such as researching background information and offering respectful challenge. Emotional stress can also have a more psychological impact, as explored by Ferguson (2018): "the demands of face-to-face work were so great at times that workers could not think about or feel that complexity while they were in it, if they were to be able to focus on service users' needs." Not asking questions, in this theory, can be a self-protection mechanism against hearing traumatic information.
- **Space and ability to practice 'internal supervision'**. Internal supervision – as defined by Ferguson (2018) – is when practitioners balance critical and analytical thinking alongside managing personal risk and emotional responses. It encompasses not only reflection on practice itself but space for learning about "the complexities of the self, their emotional lives, and what affects thinking". The need for time and space was frequently cited in the discussion sessions; not only to practice professional curiosity, but to deal with the consequences of what that curiosity might reveal.
- **Particular case dynamics**. "When a child is disliked, perceived as difficult, noncooperative and unable to engage this acts as a barrier to a professional wanting to be curious about them" (Giddins, 2025). Thacker et al. (2019), writing in an adult protection context, found a similar dynamic: "disagreement, disruption and aggression [...] can undermine

confidence and divert meetings away from topics that practitioners want to explore in more depth." In contrast, when a child or adult appears to be engaged and polite this seems to endear practitioners to want to be curious. These dynamics obviously have implications for curiosity employed in challenging practice circumstances.

- **'Disguised compliance'**. This is a **contested term** in the literature and in practice, however it is frequently used (and was mentioned in the discussion sessions). Originating from child protection practice, it was first coined to describe the way parents or caregivers behave in order to appear as if they are co-operating with professionals; using it as a deception technique to stop increased scrutiny (Reder et al, 1993). It has also been used in the context of work with adults, referring to the same behaviour from a family member or carer. 'Disguised compliance' can mean that practitioners think positive action is occurring when it isn't, meaning that they do not ask crucial questions. Ferguson (2014) also highlighted the role of 'unconscious pathological communication' where "the message to workers is do not question, challenge or act", and that practitioners may not identify or challenge these dynamics. All of these experiences can lead to significant practitioner frustration which, in itself, can dampen professional curiosity (Cramphorn & Maynard, 2023).
- **Uncertainty in practice.** Thacker et al. (2019) found that "practitioners are often presented with concerns which are impossible to substantiate. In such situations, there could be a temptation to ignore concerns that cannot be substantiated." These might include contested accounts, vague or retracted disclosures, deception, and inconclusive medical evidence, all commonly found in Public Protection practice. Uncertainty can also lead to feelings of anxiety and tension, further dissuading professional curiosity (Cramphorn & Maynard, 2023).
- **Cultural competence**. This can range from issues of oversight or omission, such as not recording the ethnicity of a child or adult, through to using

family members as interpreters, to making stereotypical assumptions (Brandon et al, 2020; Dickens et al, 2022, Child Safeguarding Practice Review, 2025). These issues can cut across all levels of professional curiosity.

- **Multi-agency working**. This aids in a holistic approach in professional curiosity. It broadens professional curiosity to look outside a practitioner's own area of specialism, helping to share insights and assess the myriad and cumulative impact of risk (Thacker et al., 2019).

In the discussion sessions, individual professional curiosity was usually seen as a positive trait for Public Protection work: something that should be 'the norm'. However, there were two important codas to this.

- Professional curiosity can (and should?) lead to a **blurring of role**. Participants frequently used terms such as 'going above and beyond' what might normally be assumed about professional boundaries of job title. This didn't stray into unprofessional behaviour with individuals and families, but it did highlight that being professionally curious would often involve flexibility. Participants generally supported sharing tasks across different professional groups (rather than rigidly adhering to a set task) in order to support this type of role fluidity.
- Being professionally curious will often **lead to more work**. Professional curiosity can involve the slowing down of processes; cases can stay open longer as curiosity uncovers further needs. Professional curiosity can also involve additional follow-ups and connections with different agencies. Professional curiosity was viewed as the opposite to a 'quick fix' approach, and often led to an additional stretch on practitioners and services already at very high demand.

The general desirability of professional curiosity in Public Protection is reflected in the research, however some authors also note caveats. Dickens et al. (2023) argued that (in the context of child protection) it

could be perceived as “intrusive and prying” by parents, caregivers or young people themselves. Giddins (2025) also highlighted a potential cumulative negative impact of professional curiosity, where people tired of questions from different professionals.

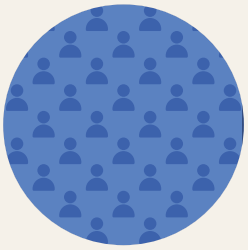
Very recently, a useful distinction has been drawn by Dunne (2025). She writes of ‘overt’ and ‘covert’ professional curiosity in individual work. Overt curiosity – actively seeking views and using direct questioning – was generally seen positively. Covert curiosity, which is behind-the-scenes (gathering information from others, looking for evidence that contradicts what someone has said) was associated with secrecy and could be more challenging for practitioners.

Herlitz et al. (2020), writing in the context of care-experienced young people’s engagement with health services, reminds us that curiosity is a two-way street. Young people were routinely curious about their workers, picking up on verbal and non-verbal cues, judging whether it felt safe for them to open up.

Professional curiosity: team level

Team management, individual supervision and group dynamics are strong themes both in the literature and in the practitioner experience from the discussion sessions. In terms of supervision, this has specifically been identified by Revell and Burton (2016) and Giddins (2025) as a factor in professional curiosity. Although the supervision relationship may be dependent on complex interpersonal and professional factors, high-quality supervision is not only about asking questions to stimulate curiosity; it is also important for modelling professional curiosity as a skill. Supervision offers opportunity to reflect, analyse, manage challenging or difficult conversations and discuss practitioner wellbeing – professional curiosity that's both 'out loud' and internal.

In a general sense, and given the importance of emotion to professional curiosity, the **secure base in teams** – where work colleagues can gain immediate and ongoing support – can help address some of the emotional challenges of Public Protection work (Biggart et al., 2017). Working as part of a team can help reduce professional risks such as burnout, tiredness and pressure (Thacker et al., 2019). This may be more challenging in a post-COVID-19 work environment of greater virtual working and fewer chances for colleagues to interact. This puts greater emphasis on team managers to ensure opportunities for professional curiosity remain live.



Professional curiosity: organisation level

One of the first things organisations can do to support professional curiosity is to accept that support is needed for it – that it's not an automatic process (Thacker et al. 2020). The organisation can offer the individual and team the space for deeper thinking required for professional curiosity.

Practitioners in the discussion sessions spoke of the need for an embedded learning culture. Training is identified in the literature as a positive factor in professional curiosity (Giddins, 2025; Thacker et al., 2020) – although there is little detail as to what exactly should be in that training to encourage professional curiosity, nor how training might skill people up to be curious in practice. What is interesting is that professional curiosity learning and development seems to be enjoyable for practitioners, and they do not expect an immediate, tangible reward from it (Dunne, 2025). This links with the finding in the discussion sessions that a practitioner's values draw them to prizing professional curiosity as part of their identity.

If an organisation, through its policies and culture, values reflection and provides mechanisms for it to regularly happen (while consciously avoiding blame and defensiveness), this can support individuals to be curious in their practice (Giddins, 2025; Thacker et al., 2020). The organisation can also provide the support for team managers and supervisors, who can then provide the modelling and support needed to promote this in their own team (Revell and Burton, 2016). Given the

centrality of practitioner wellbeing to professional curiosity, organisations who work on emotional resilience within their organisation are likely to also support greater professional curiosity (Cramphorn & Maynard, 2023).

The right tools for the job, and effective organisational oversight can actively support and guide their workers in professional curiosity. Baynes (2013) highlights that, by providing practitioners with standardised risk assessment tools, curiosity and analysis is aided – but she stresses that tools do not remove the need for professional judgement. Tools and professional judgement work together, and the organisation shouldn't privilege one over the other.

Wider organisational issues – including restructures, the pressure to close cases early, and staffing shortages – have also been noted as affecting professional curiosity (Giddins, 2025) although the specifics are often hard to discern in the research. However, one that is explored in more depth is frequent changes of worker, which can affect relationship-building with adults, children and families. This can hinder both professional curiosity and observing differences in behaviour or circumstances (Thacker et al., 2019).

Finally, an organisation should be curious about the impact it has. Through regular feedback from those who use its services (Thacker et al., 2020) and an encouragement to people with lived experience to contribute to service change (Research in Practice & Social Care Future, 2023), perspectives are shared and knowledge grows throughout the organisation. The positive effect of this was particularly noted in adult protection (Thacker et al., 2020; Droy and Larson, 2017).

Different professional viewpoints

Professional groups can (and do) interpret professional curiosity differently. This is logical, given that distinct professions have their own outcomes in mind. Participants in the discussion sessions, while defining professional curiosity first and foremost to their own work, would recognise other professionals have their own distinct perspective. As long as the child or adult was kept at the centre of someone's work, different professional curiosity approaches were seen as increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes.

Working in partnership brings different perspectives, and increases understanding between agencies (Thacker et al., 2020). Positively, multi-agency oversight groups in Public Protection can strengthen organisational, team and individual professional curiosity by encouraging partnership discussion at different levels. Joint multi-disciplinary events foster opportunities to debate (and value) professional differences in curiosity (Thacker et al., 2019).

In the research, there was an interesting point about the differences in the practical ability and/or willingness to be curious depending on the type of organisation itself. Giddins (2025) found working within a voluntary service – where contact with someone is not mandated – can sometimes mean practitioners are less confident in practicing professional curiosity, lacking the authority to insist on answers to potentially difficult questions.

Austerity and wider political contexts

This can be thought of an as influence outside of the three levels of professional curiosity. Public Protection work is affected by factors in the wider political context, but individuals, teams and organisations will have little influence over them.

On a very obvious level, shrinking budgets and higher levels of need in children's and adult's services since austerity in the early 2010s have increased both caseloads and worker stress (Thacker et al., 2020; Mantell & Jennings, 2018 and – in a Scotland-specific study – Lohvansuu & Emond, 2020). Burton and Revell (2018) have linked this with a tendency for professional curiosity to be 'stifled' – because there is no space in the working day. There may also be an inability or unwillingness to attend training, because of the demands of the job.

Increasing poverty in society, which has accompanied austerity, might lead to greater feelings of shame in families. This is potentially linked to the 'particular case dynamics' theme in individual professional curiosity, as practitioners become unwilling to exacerbate stigma by suggesting poor caregiving (Lohvansuu & Emond, 2020; Cramphorn & Maynard, 2023).

Mantell and Jennings (2016) also highlight the wider media demonisation of social work in particular as an inhibiting factor for professional curiosity, leaving professionals worried that close questioning can feed into stereotypes of 'interfering busybodies' and the 'nanny state'.

Bias and assumptions

Open-mindedness and addressing bias are frequently mentioned in the literature, and were often cited as integral to professional curiosity in the discussion sessions. Hafford-Letchfield and Carr (2017) argue that in order to be professionally curious, stereotypes must always be "deconstructed". However, there may be a gap between the ideal and reality.

For example, in 2025, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel published the report ***"It's silent": Race, racism and safeguarding children*** which examined the impact of race, ethnicity and culture on multi-agency safeguarding practice in England. The 'silence' the report found in talking about race and ethnicity is an example of how bias, or fear, can manifest in avoidance and incurious practice. Earlier literature also highlights practitioner worries, particularly in child protection work around challenging families of a different race, ethnicity or culture (Laming 2003; Cramphorn & Maynard, 2023). Fear was sometimes mentioned in the discussion sessions as an inhibiting factor to professional curiosity.

There are several different biases and assumptions that could hamper professional curiosity, from **adultification** in child protection work, when children are viewed and treated as older than they are (and which disproportionately affects Black children (NSPCC, 2025)) to confirmation bias, the practice of looking for evidence that supports or confirms pre-held views.

Overall, participants in the discussion sessions only infrequently mentioned the role of bias and assumption in professional curiosity. This is a sensitive topic for many reasons, and an open-forum discussion session may not have felt like a psychologically safe space to consider their implications in professional curiosity work.

Gaps and future directions

Much of the existing research on professional curiosity comes from England, with little formal knowledge on how professional curiosity operates in the distinctive Scottish legal, cultural and professional contexts. This means the discussion sessions in August 2025 have proven to be a rare insight into how Scottish Public Protection workers feel about professional curiosity, and how they use it in their-day-to-day work.

More broadly, there is virtually no standalone research on the feelings of children, young people, and adults in how they feel about professional curiosity; without this, practitioner fear of offending or upsetting those they are trying to keep safer goes unchallenged.

Participants from the discussion sessions were keen to see:

- Case studies, scenario-based exercises, and examples of good practice.
- Training – both in skills needed for professionally curious practice and awareness of its importance. There was support for specific standalone training, or 'mainstreaming' it as a topic into existing training offers.
- Collective reflection sessions.
- Development of tools such as question lists, meeting prompts, conversation guides, both for working with individuals and families and for internal team meetings.
- Work that will enhance the effectiveness of supervision.

Some participants valued a formal framework, to impart gravitas and provide consistent language across sectors; others felt there was potential for difficulty in this, given the different views on professional curiosity in different sectors.

Overall, however, participants acknowledged there wasn't a 'quick fix' to being more professionally curious. Deeper culture change is needed, with collective effort from all involved: this cannot be achieved by a tool or framework alone. Since those who attended the discussion sessions felt professional curiosity in Public Protection was of great importance to improved outcomes, this investment would be more than worth it.

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