

# **FUNCTIONS, NOT APPS: IMPROVING RISK IDENTIFICATION AND SAFEGUARDING OUTCOMES**

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## **A behaviour-led approach to risk identification, patterns and escalation in high-harm cases**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Across policing, safeguarding and wider systems, there has been a growing focus on technology in discussions about stalking, coercive control and domestic abuse. Phones, apps, platforms and devices are frequently placed at the centre of analysis. Technology matters, and digital evidence matters, but the focus can become misplaced.

When responses become tool-led rather than behaviour-led, risk becomes fragmented. Cases are broken into incidents. Patterns are diluted. Escalation is recognised late, if at all. Professionals are left trying to keep up with the next platform rather than being supported to understand behaviour.

Functions, not apps was developed to address that gap. It is not a technical framework and it is not a rejection of tools. It is a shift in emphasis, from where behaviour happens to what the behaviour is trying to do. That distinction is central to better risk identification and better safeguarding outcomes.

### **WHY TOOL-LED SAFEGUARDING FALLS SHORT**

Safeguarding systems rely heavily on tools. Risk checklists, assessment forms, scoring systems and digital platforms are often treated as solutions in their own right. In practice, serious harm rarely occurs because a tool is missing. It occurs when information is fragmented, patterns are missed, professional judgement is diluted and escalation fails.

Tools operate within defined parameters. They depend on categories and thresholds. They can support decision-making, but they cannot replace it. Stalking and coercive control rarely present themselves in neat, linear ways. They develop through persistence, adaptation and cumulative impact.

When tools become the focus, behaviour is recorded as isolated events rather than connected conduct. Digital behaviour is treated as separate from offline behaviour even when both are clearly part of the same pattern. Risk appears low because each incident looks minor in isolation. Escalation then becomes obvious only in hindsight.

This is not a criticism of professionals. It is a structural problem. When systems privilege process over understanding, they quietly undermine the very expertise needed to identify escalation early.

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## **WHY JUDGEMENT, PATTERNS AND ESCALATION MATTER**

Stalking and coercive control are defined by persistence. The behaviour continues despite boundaries, rejection or intervention. Persistence is not a side issue. It is the risk feature.

Escalation is often subtle. It may show itself through changes in method rather than an immediate increase in severity. A blocked account becomes a new account. Direct contact becomes third-party contact. Monitoring becomes physical presence. What appears to be unrelated activity is often a single behavioural trajectory.

Recognising that requires professional judgement. It requires stepping back from individual incidents and asking what the pattern is and where it is going. It requires attention to cumulative impact and to the ways perpetrators adapt. Where systems do not support this thinking, escalation is recognised late.

## **FUNCTIONS, NOT APPS IN PRACTICE**

The approach is deliberately simple. Instead of starting with the platform or device, start with the function of the behaviour.

Across cases, the same core functions appear repeatedly. Behaviour may be intended to enforce unwanted contact, monitor routines or relationships, intimidate or create a sense of omnipresence, punish boundary-setting, or misuse systems and processes as a form of control.

The method may change. The function is more stable and more informative for risk identification.

By focusing on function, behaviour across time, platforms and contexts can be connected. Digital and offline activity are understood as part of the same pattern. Adaptation is recognised as a risk indicator rather than reassurance. Evidence can be structured around course of conduct and impact rather than disconnected events.

It also has a practical advantage. You do not need to retrain people every time a platform changes. You train them to recognise behaviour. That competence lasts.

## **WHAT CHANGES WHEN YOU WORK THIS WAY**

When behaviour is understood in functional terms, patterns are recognised earlier and risk is identified sooner. Investigations improve because evidence is structured around persistence and impact. Safeguarding responses are more proportionate when they're guided by the pattern over time, not a snapshot.

Multi-agency decision making improves because partners are working from a shared behavioural picture rather than fragmented information. Professional judgement is strengthened rather than overridden. Supervision and oversight become more purposeful because the questions shift from whether a form has been completed to whether risk is rising and what action follows. The most

meaningful improvements in outcomes come not from new tools, but from clearer thinking and earlier intervention.

## **HOW TO APPLY THIS WITHOUT MAKING IT COMPLICATED**

Embedding a functions, not apps approach does not require new systems or software. It requires a change in how questions are asked and how information is recorded.

Start by asking what the behaviour is trying to achieve, not which platform is being used. Record how incidents connect, not just that they occurred. Pay attention to persistence and to changes in method. Notice the victim's life and world shrinking. Ensure professional judgement is encouraged, not penalised. Make escalation real by using supervision, information sharing, challenge and decisive intervention when thresholds are met or exceeded.

Tools should support this thinking, not replace it.

## **A SIMPLE WAY TO PICTURE IT**

Outcomes sit at the top. Functions sit in the middle. Tools sit underneath.

Good tools can support good functions. They cannot compensate for weak professional judgement, missed patterns or failed escalation.

## **WHERE THIS APPLIES**

This approach is relevant wherever risk is cumulative and harm escalates through persistence.

It strengthens MARAC discussions by shifting the focus from incident volume to behavioural pattern, persistence and escalation. It supports learning in Domestic Homicide Reviews and related work by clarifying why decisions made sense at the time and where safeguarding functions failed. It improves policing and investigation by strengthening pattern recognition, evidential clarity and escalation alongside legal thresholds. It has clear relevance in sport and organisational safeguarding, where proximity, access and persistence can be normalised until harm is entrenched.

## **THE POINT**

Technology will continue to change faster than guidance and policy cycles. If responses remain tied to platforms, systems will always be behind the behaviour. If responses are anchored to behavioural function and cumulative impact, they remain resilient.

That is the premise behind functions, not apps. It is not a rejection of tools. It is a reminder that understanding must come first if we want better outcomes.

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