

What do we mean by ‘vulnerable people’ in Herefordshire?

Protecting vulnerable people is one of the highest priorities for public services in Herefordshire, particularly in the present climate of budget cuts and service redesign.

However, there is confusion as to who exactly is meant by ‘vulnerable’, as many services – even within Herefordshire Council – have a different client group that they consider to be vulnerable or at risk.

Vulnerable; adjective:

Exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally.

Oxford English Dictionary definition

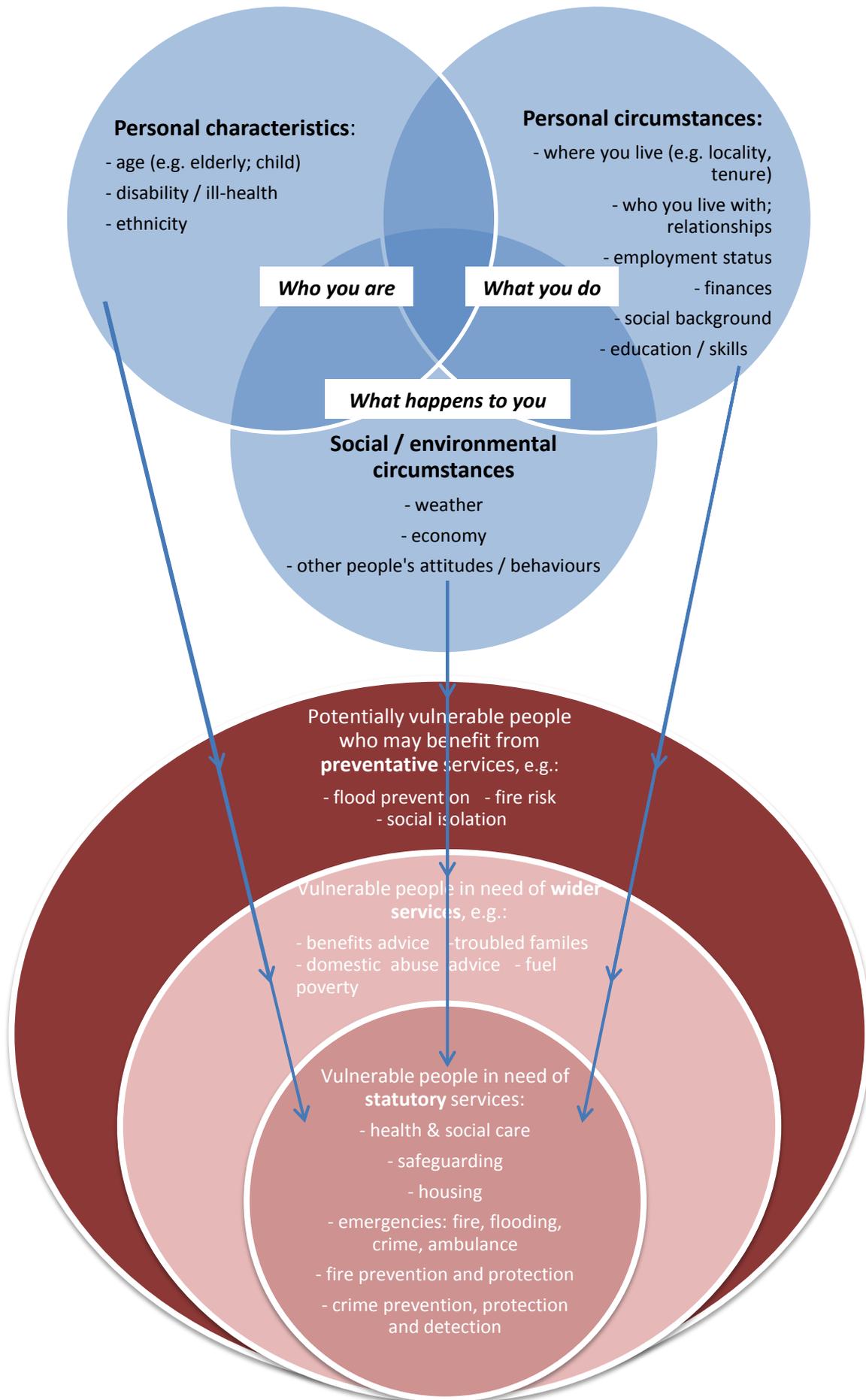
There is never going to be a single definition of ‘vulnerable people’ – everyone is vulnerable to harm at some point in their lives and in certain circumstances, for example when travelling in a car; crossing a road; going in to hospital. However, some people are more vulnerable than others and in more circumstances – people who need help to live their daily lives because of a physical or mental disability, or old age, for example; or children. Sometimes the level of vulnerability will depend on external factors that affect everyone, but place some people at more risk of harm than others – for example particular ethnic groups when there are racial or religious tensions in society, or frail elderly people in extreme weather conditions.

Rather than trying to come up with an all-encompassing definition for all purposes, it’s simpler to think of a ‘hierarchy’ of vulnerability that can be used as a starting point to understand who might be included at each level:

- Those who are already vulnerable under the statutory duties of health, social care, housing, emergencies, etc. – e.g. an elderly person in need of social care to live at home; preventative action with households most at risk of fire.
- Those who are at immediate risk of moving into one of those statutory categories – e.g. a person experiencing domestic abuse who might become homeless or the victim of a crime.
- Those who are at risk of wider types of vulnerability where preventative activity might stop them becoming vulnerable in the statutory sense – e.g. older people currently in good health, but socially isolated; people on low incomes who might be at risk of not being able to pay their household bills.

It’s also helpful to distinguish between the different types of risk factor for being vulnerable in one sense or another and the different types of services that may be available to different types of vulnerable people. The diagram below illustrates this. The risk factors can be divided into personal characteristics and circumstances, and social / environmental circumstances. How ‘vulnerable’ an individual is will depend on how their characteristics and circumstances interact at a given time.

Risk factors for being a “vulnerable person” and what they mean to service provision



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Version 2, August 2013. E-mail: researchteam@herefordshire.gov.uk; tel: 01432 261944