



UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC DISCLOSURE OF SEX OFFENDER INFORMATION IN IRELAND: LOCALISM, COMMUNITY AND REINTEGRATION

Co-hosted with PPANI & NOTA (NI)

Introduction

This event is part of an ongoing Knowledge Exchange series co-funded by the ESRC and 10 regional as well as national partners. The Aim of the Knowledge Exchange series is:

- To review the current evidence of best practice from the English and Scottish pilots, the schemes implementation in Wales, as well as the ongoing consultation process in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
- To review issues of access and take-up.
- To review the impact and outcome of public disclosure in the UK, and what this means for the consultation process ongoing in both Northern and the Republic of Ireland.
- To review the impact on sex offenders.

The aim of the Northern Ireland event was to examine the social mechanisms that either reintegrate or exclude sex offenders. In doing so it took a dual stream approach, through keynotes and workshops;

- addressing northern Ireland related issues (issues of localism, with particular reference to the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland and policing, offender management, community activism); and
- addressing the Eire (cross border issues, the development of public disclosure scheme, austerity and a focus on particular Irish issues (i.e., cultural attitudes to sexuality, sexual abuse).

Keynotes

The event had 3 main keynote speakers addressing a range of discussion points around the limited disclosure of sex offender information scheme in Ireland, and relating them to the wider academic literature as well as broader UK issues.

1. *Cultural attitudes to sexual offending and their impact upon offender management in Ireland* (Marie Keenan, University College Dublin)
2. *Community responses to sex offenders in Northern Ireland* (Anne-Marie McAlinden, Queens University Belfast)
3. *Policing and public disclosure in Northern Ireland* (D/S Alistair Wallace, PSNI Public protection Branch)

All of the PowerPoint presentations and the related briefing notes by the authors are available on the [Knowledge Exchange website](http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/hls/research/sexoffenderpublicdisclosure.aspx) (<http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/hls/research/sexoffenderpublicdisclosure.aspx>).

Discussion sessions

A range of participants attended and engaged in the discussion groups/workshop sessions these included participants from PPANI, PBNI, PSNI, NSPCC, NOTA, Queens University Belfast, University of Ulster, Nexus, Women's aid, University College Dublin, Stop it Now! Scotland, Staffordshire and West Midlands Probation, NIACRO, Victim Support NI, Department of Education NI, Department of Justice NI, and 1 in 4. The workshops were an opportunity for a selection of these participants (usually 10-12 participants per workshop, with each workshop happening twice and all participants attending two different workshops) to engage in an in-depth discussion on a range of relevant issues tied to sex offender disclosure and border sex offender management in Ireland (North and South)

Workshop 1 & 5: Access and targeting: the reality of community engagement any sex offender disclosure scheme in Northern Ireland.

These workshops were chaired by Alister Wallace (1 & 5), Anne-Marie McAlinden (1) and Ruth McAlister (5). The discussions focused around who were the community in Northern Ireland, in terms of social, cultural and geographical divisions as well as in terms of who would (if one was utilised) access the public disclosure scheme. Hence, recognising and needing to really consider the localism, and resulting informal information sharing, of Northern Ireland and the impact of who would ultimately have access to information and how they would use it. The participants realised that simply having a sex offender limited disclosure scheme open to the public would not be enough and therefore the monitoring of the scheme would need to be complemented with increased sexual violence education as well as appropriate/realistic media engagement on the topic. Therefore public targeting and access to any sex offender information would need to be invested in a broader social, health and criminal justice message, rather than simply one of information sharing.

Workshop 2 & 6: The impact of disclosure on sex offender rehabilitation and reintegration

These workshops were co-chaired by Kirsty Hudson (2 & 6), Shaad Maruna (2) and Mark Farmer. (6). There was a feeling from these workshops that controlled disclosure of sex offender information could help offender rehabilitation and reintegration in Northern Ireland. Throughout the discussion the importance of 'localism' was emphasised. Interestingly, this was seen to have the potential to both aid and hamper the rehabilitation and reintegration of sex offenders if a disclosure was made. For example, if a disclosure was inappropriately managed, it was felt that localism (in this context) could make resettlement and reintegration difficult, particularly with regard to accommodation issues. If, on the other hand the disclosure was managed appropriately, it was felt that localism could help hold the offender to account and therefore reduce the likelihood of reoffending. Localism and a general sense of connectivity in Northern Ireland were also seen to enhance current practice through community and interagency working. It was however recognised that the disclosure scheme could add value to existing procedures, and thus help to support offender rehabilitation and reintegration. In particular, it was recognised that a disclosure scheme similar to that operating in other parts of the UK would help to disseminate accurate information about sex offender rehabilitation and reintegration to the public. To this end, it was seen to be a useful tool in educating the public of the realities of sexual offending and offenders as well as a means to encourage wider community engagement in the reintegration of sex offenders.

Workshop 3 & 7: Protecting the public (?): The relationship between public disclosure and the management of offenders in the community.

These workshops were co-chaired by Kieran McCartan & Marcella Leonard. The participants discussed the need for greater public education on child protection in general, but particularly in respect to sexual abuse. Therefore there needs to be better education on sexual offending in general rather than better education on specific sex offenders. The participants recognised that this was difficult, especially with hard to reach publics who did not want to engage with the topic or change their mindset; however, it was strongly felt that this should not be a barrier, for even though hard to reach populations should help to shape any campaign they should not be allowed to derail it. The participants also indicated that they felt that some hard to reach publics included professions (i.e., teachers, church, GP's, etc) who needed to be better educated and therefore more able/willing to share relevant information. There was a concern voiced by the participants that disclosure would not help to protect the public but make them more fearful or reassure them that they were safe when actually, for various reasons, this may not be the case. Therefore any scheme would need to dispel myths and promote a realistic understanding of sex offenders and their management.

Workshop 4 & 8: Cross boarder issues in the reality and impact of Sex offender disclosure in Ireland

These workshops were co-chaired by Hazel Kemshall & Marie Keenan. There was a recognition that Multiagency work in the Republic of Ireland, although already in development, needed to expand more and take a more central role in sex offender management. Probation colleagues from PBNi described generally good on the ground cross border cooperation, and cited instances of close working to manage sex offenders effectively. This led to recognition that the border is not necessarily an issue in the sharing of sex offender information and related offender management issues; and that the central issues should be risk management and public protection, not politics.

Conclusions

There are a number of points that came out of today's discussion that can be taken forward and discussed in regard to Scotland responses to the scheme and in relation to the other ESRC events:

1. How do we deal with the negative influence, especially when it's reactionary, of politics in sex offender management?
2. There needs to be greater media working, agreement and sharing; especially in Northern Ireland because of its size and the influence of the media.
3. There needs to be 'new' research, either original studies or revising and updating existing studies, on sex offenders, their management and reintegration across all of Ireland.
4. There needs to be better public engagement around the reality of sexual offending, who sex offenders are, and the work already being done by professionals in this area.
5. There needs to be recognition among professionals and the public that we need to change the discourses around sexual violence, in doing so we will open up the possibility of renewed and realistic conversation.
6. There was a feeling that the English and Welsh disclosure schemes would not be appropriate for Northern Ireland, whereas the Scottish version might be but it would need to be adapted.



Partner Organisations

