

HIDDEN CRIMES, SECRET PAIN

Proposed Regional Strategy for Addressing Sexual Violence in Northern Ireland

**WHSSB Area Public Consultation, 10.30am on Monday 2 April,
Everglades Hotel, Londonderry**

COMMENTS:

Sharing of information between statutory organisations such as Police and Hospitals is vital but these organisations or their staff are sometimes apprehensive at doing so.

At present the rights of the perpetrator seems to be placed ahead of those of the child. This is notable with data protection and human rights legislation.

Article 46 is open to interpretation.

It is important that a SARC model is also based in the Northwest.

The West of the country provides excellent services, facilities and skills. These need to be used, and borne in mind when considering the consultation, strategy and action plan.

There is the need and potential to share existing programmes and resources such as Women's Aid work on the domestic violence one-stop shop. Money may be wasted by duplicating work. 70% of NIWAF's clients have been sexually abused in a domestic situation highlighting the crossover.

The strategy must ultimately address the needs of the victims.

The Bamford Review paid little or no attention to the needs of sexual and/or domestic violence.

Mental health nurses working with victims of sexual violence cannot cope with the workload and are referring patients to Nexus.

The law does not do enough to support survivors.

Public confidence in the Criminal Justice System at an all time low. Nexus have 135 clients registered in a counselling program, only two of whom are prosecuting.

It is the case that victims are not fully briefed on the potential outcomes of not reporting / prosecuting.

The general care of victims and their families when going to trial is poor. Medical staff and teachers also do not provide an appropriately tailored service. Family

counselling would help all affected allowing a degree of normality to return to families at an earlier stage.

Poor handling by professionals in contact with victims adds to the abuse already felt.

Training for all professionals and points of contact essential to put victims at their ease throughout the process. US model of advice centres where health professionals and others can contact for advice when approached by victims of sexual violence.

How will victims with poor literacy skills access the information on what services are available. Not everyone has access to the internet.

Northern Ireland people need to learn how to talk about sex and what appropriate behaviour is. A US model in schools means that children are learning about relationship issues etc. from age 4.

Police powers, monitoring arrangements and others issues such as the exchange of information between British Isles (inc. ROI) police forces need strengthening, particular in NW / Donegal.

Women's Aid, Garda Síochána, PSNI looking at cross-border protocols with regard to domestic violence.

DPP not knowledgeable or skilled enough in the fundamentals, such as how to impose a SOPO (sexual offences prevention order).

Legislation needs updated. Disparity between NI and the mainland e.g.: sentencing, inconsistent tariffs for breach of SOPO's (3 months to 3 ½ years).

Under MASRAM, police have no legal right to enter premises of those being monitored without a warrant. Law is weighted towards perpetrator.

Tagging needs to be seriously considered for sex offenders.

Resources. Huge expectation on voluntary services without appropriate funding and levels of support offered to statutory providers / staff.

There is the potential for Routine Enquiry in A&E similar to that on domestic violence, "Do you suffer sexual violence?"

WHSSB Area Public Consultation, 10.30am on Tuesday 3 April, Manor House Hotel, Irvinestown

COMMENTS:

Strategy welcomed though contains no mention of funding or cost streams. Where will money be aimed? SARCs should not be the priority as Women's Aid already offer the one-stop shop for Domestic Violence.

The Scottish Executive has identified a correlation between domestic violence and sexual violence; and between domestic violence child abuse.

Gender equality important but the focus must primarily be on women and female child victims.

Problem with the definition of rape. ['Any behaviour perceived to be of a sexual nature which is unwanted or takes place without consent.'] To whom does the 'perception' refer? Is it the victim, professionals seeing the victim or others? Criminal Justice may be able to help in strengthening the definition.

The proposed strategy does not state clearly or strongly enough that the perpetrator is responsible in all instances. The victim is never to blame. This does not come across when reading the document.

Strong need to take perpetrators to task and ensure victims/survivors are not felt to be responsible in any way for the assault.

Vulnerable people are only vulnerable because they are being targeted for sexual violence or through grooming.

How will MASRAM dovetail with MARAC. Will this be a duplication of services? MASRAM arrangements should be on a statutory footing.

SARC is welcomed but research needs to be conducted to show that it will meet the needs of victims prior to implementation.

CJS / PPS need to be more robust in decision-making process to prosecute. Judiciary role needs to be brought up-to-date. CJS need to realise that in some cases, it will boil down to one person's word against the other and that this should not prevent court cases.

Judges etc. need to bear in mind that the sentences they hand down will have an impact on others considering coming forward.

Victims need to get their day in court and the perpetrators need to be cross-examined at least. At present, unless evidence is severely stacked in favour of victim, the case does not get to court. This must change to allow the case to be heard irrespective of the outcome.

Investigating officers find the whole process frustrating and toothless. Much money, time and effort goes into these cases only for them to fall flat.

Special measures – such as video links – need to be encouraged

Alcohol plays a significant part in sexual violence and defence barristers play on this to win cases.

Juries scared to make ANY decision in case they get it wrong. Media thrive on negative images such as guilty verdicts being over-turned at a later stage. This can discourage other people going to court.

Where sexual violence is perpetrated by someone in a position of trust, a double 'assault' to the victim may result. For example, a teacher may be retired early or asked to leave on a package rather than bring shame to the school. This is insulting to the victim.

The need to define links between sexual violence strategy and others affecting it. For example, domestic violence and drug & alcohol strategies. Identify who has the lead responsibility and take forward to ensure dovetailing, not over-lapping.

The Omagh Centre for Transformation and Trauma. This is a troubles based drop-in centre. Why is it not used for domestic violence and sexual violence?