Action for Prisoners’ Families

Supporting the Families of Sex Offenders – findings from a symposium

Action for Prisoners' Families has had a particular interest in the families of serious and sex offenders for some years. Specific concerns which families and practitioners have raised with us over this time include:

- Difficulties for children trying to maintain relationships with their imprisoned parents
- MAPPA and its effects on the family
- Convictions for historical offences and the impact on older family members, and
- the dearth in provision of information and support.

To try and address these issues Action for Prisoners' Families held a conference Breaking the taboo: Supporting the families of sex offenders on 13 February 2013. The conference was funded by the Ormiston Children and Families Trust and aimed to get those working with the families of sex offenders to share good practice and think about how they might best support these families in the future. This paper is based on the conference presentations; the presentations themselves are available on the Action for Prisoners’ Families website: www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/Breaking_the_Taboo/

Family members and denial
It is common for the partners and other relatives of sex offenders to deny the offender’s guilt despite their conviction and evidence to the contrary. The non-abusing partners of sex offenders and abusers are in an extremely traumatic situation whereby the only way they may be able to deal with the circumstances in which they find themselves is by denying the offence. Denial becomes a safe place. The reasons behind this denial are many and varied but denial itself, although it is a risk factor for further offending, does show an acceptance by a partner that they know what has happened was wrong. Reasons for a non-abusing partner to deny their partner’s behaviour include:

- the belief that he won’t do it again
- fear of losing their children
- divided loyalties, a mother may love both her partner and her child
- fear of being blamed
- fear of what others may think of her
- fear that statutory services will take over her life
- fear of not being able to cope as a single parent and loss of financial security
- fear of what others will say
- fear of retribution from a violent partner

Whatever the reason for the denial it needs to be recognised by practitioners and worked through. Families should be supported so they can make informed decisions about whether they continue their relationship with the offender.

1Action for Prisoners’ Families uses the term serious and sex offenders to include anyone serving a determinate sentence of four years or more, lifers and anyone convicted of a sexual offence.
The importance of working with non-offending partners

Practitioners need to engage with families, and group work is one way of bringing those in a similar situation together. The non-offending partners of sex offenders can play an important role in preventing further offending and protecting children from abuse. However, non-abusing partners may be hostile and/or antagonistic towards statutory services as well as feeling judged and blamed by them. These feelings may be amplified if they have been subject to a variety of assessments by these same services.

Non-abusing parents should be supported into a new role of ‘protector’ and taught how to place themselves between their child and the offence perpetrator. Partners need to develop enough strength to deal with their situation as well as understanding this type of offending. And if they are less isolated they will be more resilient and better able to protect their children. Various factors should be considered when deciding what protection the non-abusing partner can offer. These include whether they have survived abuse themselves and their relationship history, their co-operation with statutory services, their role in, and feelings about, the child’s disclosure and their role in the disclosing process.

HTV Circles, a charity which aims to reduce the harm caused by sexual abuse, runs a specific programme for non-abusing partners called ‘Breaking the Cycle’. This is designed to assess and enhance the protective capability of non-offending partners to prevent further sexual abuse. Reducing families’ isolation provides the much needed light at the end of the tunnel and allows partners to make informed decisions about how and whether to continue in the couple relationship. In order to contribute to this decision, information about any treatment the offender has should be shared with the partner and/or those who have responsibility for their children.

The sex offender risk assessment process

The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) uses a variety of tools to assess an offender’s risk of re-offending. The same tools are used by the police, prisons and probation, and offenders are put into groups to predict their re-offending. There are two distinct tools. One is static and doesn’t distinguish the individual from the group and does not recognise the potential for change. Static factors include age, conviction history and the nature of the offence. The second is a dynamic tool called SARN (Structured Assessment of Risk and Need) which focuses on the individual and considers 15 factors to assess the presence of various personality characteristics which are linked to re-conviction.

These 15 factors are clustered into four groups or domains.

- sexual interests
- distorted attitudes
- management of relationships and
- management of self

Finally there is an acute tool currently being developed called ARMS (Active Risk Management System) which can assess dynamic factors (these are factors which can change as frequently as daily). This tool is being piloted and will be used by police and probation to assess risk and protective factors which seem to correlate to reconviction. Risk factors include access to victims, hostility and sexual pre-occupation; whilst emerging significant protective factors are intimate relationships, social support and connections with others and a commitment to desist.
Assessing contact between sex offenders and children

The process currently used to determine contact between prisoners and their children is outlined in the HM Prison Service Public Protection Manual. (The definition of children includes biological, adopted and step-children.) It may not always be clear to family members or external agencies why a child could be at risk from contact with the prisoner, as this decision is not always dependent on the nature of the offence the offender has been imprisoned for. Offenders identified as posing a risk to children but who want to have contact with them need to complete an application form. This application process may be particularly difficult for some groups of prisoners, for example those with limited English such as foreign nationals or those with learning difficulties. However, a prison officer and/or a translator should be available to go through the process with any prisoner who needs help or to provide further explanations where necessary.

Once the prisoner has completed his application the parent in the community or other person with parental responsibility for the child will then be contacted and asked whether they support the process. The family are told only that the prisoner has been identified as being a risk to children. They will not be told the nature of the offence. If the family do not support contact there will be none and the prisoner is informed accordingly. There is an appeals procedure open to the prisoner but the prison cannot force the family or person with parental responsibility to write to the prisoner or to come on a visit.

If the family agree to contact the prison will have to request that local children’s services do an assessment of the family. NOMS are not involved in this process but they do ask for a home visit. This is the point in the process where delays may occur as there is a difference between the NOMS’ time scales and those of the local children’s services. For the prisoner waiting to see his children this is an extremely urgent matter, but for children’s services with heavy caseloads, and an offender who currently presents no risk as he is in prison, these assessments are generally not a high priority. In addition the prison will need to contact the police for a child protection report, and will also speak to the offender manager and offender supervisor. Where appropriate, other local agencies may also be part of the assessment process e.g. at HMP Wakefield the NSPCC may check their database for more information about the family.

The final ruling on whether there should be any contact is made by the governor. He or she needs to make an educated and defensible decision based on the information gathered both internally and externally which is available to them at the time. This data could include, for example, reports on the prisoner’s behaviour towards female prison staff or an assessment of the capacity of a parent in the community to protect the children. The decision once made should be reviewed every six months as circumstances and risk levels change. If the offender goes to an open prison information can be sought from other agencies who may become involved at that stage.

Families who have agreed to contact may complain about the weeks or months they have to wait until they are allowed to visit or receive phone calls from the prisoner. These delays are usually due to the time taken to collect the various risk assessments. One of the problems with the current system is that the process is very rigid. It is hoped that future developments will make it more sophisticated and in turn increase flexibility.

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Juvenile sex offenders

There are few interventions for juvenile sex offenders in the community but a new method of treating young people with problem sexual behaviour is being piloted in Cambridgeshire. This intervention is based on multi-systemic therapy and is an intensive community based treatment which has been used to divert children from custody and aims to reduce the risk of re-offending to a minimum. This is done by teaching parents how they can deal with the problem sexual behaviour and by holding the young person responsible for their actions.

Multi-systemic therapy (MST) is based on the premise that a young person’s difficulties have multiple causes and the therapy aims to address the sources of all these influences and therefore promote behaviour change. Children and young people, many of whom have been very socially isolated, are shown how to cope with their environment. This includes learning how to resolve any problems they may face within their family, peers, school or neighbourhood. They must accept responsibility for their actions rather than blaming the victim. The programme is specifically designed for young people, as juvenile sex offenders have been found to have more in common with juvenile offenders than adult sex offenders.

MST is a very intense intervention with up to four sessions a week. These are scheduled around the families’ needs and are delivered in the family home over a period of between 5-7 months. Telephone support is available to the family 24 hours a day and therapists have a caseload of only three families. Therapists consider the whole family to be their client.

Parents have a vital role to play in the therapy and in ensuring their children’s progress is sustained. Parents and carers are shown how to identify warning signs, high risk situations and grooming behaviours. They are taught to understand the drivers and factors that contributed to the problematic sexual behaviour. They are told to inform the therapist, social worker or YOT worker if there is a serious breach of the safety plan and are introduced to a variety of skills so they can continue supporting their child when the therapy finishes. If the young person starts exhibiting inappropriate behaviour in the future, it is hoped that their parents will be able to help them control it. Young people with learning difficulties are able to do the programme if they are assessed as suitable, but no one can start MST before their trial.

If the young offender has siblings a family safety plan can be adapted so these children can remain with the family. The programme can also facilitate children in care being returned to the family. Young people who are suicidal, homicidal or psychotic, who have pervasive developmental delays, who have denied the offence, or are living independently, are not suitable for MST. When the treatment is completed a detailed report is compiled which is then shared with the referring agency and the family. This report includes recommendations for the future and handover plans. The family are also given one therapy session which is kept ‘in the bank’ in case they need it in the months ahead.

Social workers and the children of sex offenders

Social workers offer a service to children whose care, health and development needs have been or may be significantly compromised. They intervene in families where children are experiencing, or are at risk of, serious harm and need protection as well as supporting children who are “looked after”. Many factors can have a negative impact on a child’s welfare. These include parental drug use or learning difficulties, offending behaviour, homelessness, disability or the imprisonment of a parent. But there is no automatic role for children’s services when a child’s parent or relative is convicted of a crime even if it is a sex

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3 A similar programme is also being run at The Brandon Centre in London
offence. However, where the impact of a parent’s behaviour or problems is so severe that a child is unable to live safely within the family, the local authority may seek a court order to remove the children from the home. In extreme cases this may even lead to a child being adopted. These final decisions are always made by courts not local authorities.

If the parent the child is living with does not want any contact between the offender and the child, children’s services have no power to override this decision. When a family member is convicted of a sexual offence, children’s services will only have a role to play if they are already working with the family

- if they are asked by a prison to do a risk assessment,
- if the sex offender is a young person and a parent,
- the sex offender’s child is “looked after” or
- the child is identified as being at risk.

If the local authority decides that a child does need support it is provided by the authority in which they live and not the one where the prison is located. The local authority’s focus is on the child and their service is unaffected by a parent’s absence. Safeguarding risk assessments will only be carried out at a prison’s request and are unlikely to be a top priority as social workers are probably dealing with several more urgent cases. The report sent to the prison is based on the information available and may take time to collate. When considering contact between a child and their imprisoned relative, social workers will be concerned with whether it will be used as an opportunity for grooming or to silence either the child or non-abusing parent.

Every child copes differently with difficult circumstances and part of the risk assessment process is discussing the situation with the child to ascertain their view, dependant on their age and understanding. Children may worry about both their resident and non-resident parents, and may also want to protect them. Children can choose whether they want to see their parent or not and it is not always in their best interests to maintain contact. They may express several different opinions depending on whether they are talking to a social worker or their parent and may not be able to vocalise what they really want. If a child is “looked after” there is statutory guidance on how contact with the family is managed. It is very important that the voice of the child is heard somewhere in this process and they should be given a safe space to be heard. Charities such as the NSPCC might provide services locally which support children in such situations.

Sometimes the non-abusing parent in the community may not want to take responsibility for their decision not to maintain contact with the prisoner. In conversations with the prisoner they may blame social workers and their reports for preventing contact between the prisoner and children. This shifting of blame can provide an excuse for a prisoner’s partner, who is being manipulated or abused by the offender. Families should be given clear information in accessible language about the decisions that are being made about them.

Assessing the Risk, Protecting the Child
The NSPCC runs a project in Carlisle for men who are forming relationships with potential partners and their children. These men must have been convicted of sex offences against children and young people but not be currently subject to any supervision or orders; or have had allegations of sexual abuse made against them and it has been decided that they represent a risk to children. The project works with them, the families they live or want to live with, and any children or young people they are planning to have contact with. Men who are
on bail can also access the project but they must accept the allegations made against them. The men accessing the project are not designated as high risk offenders but might otherwise fall through the system. Ninety-four per cent of the men on the programme are moving into relationships with children.

Children are at the centre of this intervention and the programme aims to keep the adults in the family focused on the child’s needs. In addition to the risk assessment of the man coming into the family, there are six ‘Voice of the Child’ sessions with each child which allow them to describe what it’s like living in their family. The programme ensures that their voices are heard in an age-appropriate way and if they are very young a report is written on their behalf. A lifestyle safety plan is drawn up as part of the intervention so if there is a relapse safety provision is in place.

The project works in partnership with the Sexual Behaviour Unit in Newcastle and is trying to close the gap in the lack of information available for men and their families in these particular circumstances.

**Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) and the impact on families**

The purpose of MAPPA is to help reduce the re-offending behaviour of sexual and violent offenders in order to protect the public, including any previous victims, from serious harm. Police, probation and prisons have a statutory duty to work together to manage the risk posed by dangerous offenders in the community.

Most registered sex offenders are MAPPA Category 1 and will be on the Register for differing lengths of time. Even cautions for certain offences result in sex offender registration, therefore it is possible to have never had a court appearance but still to end up on the Register. If a sex offender receives a custodial sentence of more than 30 months they will be on the register indefinitely but for a caution registration is for two years only. Inclusion on the register means the offender has to notify the relevant authorities of any change of address and also of foreign travel or of any plans to stay somewhere where there are children. Thus these conditions may affect family holidays or weekends away with friends. Police can also make home visits to check the offender is complying with any restrictions placed upon them, to confirm he is living at the address, to gather intelligence or to investigate offences. Other agencies under a duty to co-operate with MAPPA are youth offending teams, Jobcentre Plus, UK Border Agency, local housing authorities and registered social landlords.

The numbers subject to registration are increasing annually but recent changes to the law mean it is now possible for an individual to apply to be removed from the register if they have been on it for 15 years. If media coverage leads to a sex offender’s family home being targeted by local vigilantes and is no longer safe the situation can become very difficult. A single offender can be rehoused relatively easily but it is much more difficult to move a whole family especially if they are owner occupiers. Housing for sex offenders and their families is a very real problem and many families do move to avoid the stigma attached to the offending.

Other effects of MAPPA and sex offender registration include possible disclosure of the offence if a sex offender gets a new partner. A MAPPA representative will go and see them and if the offender doesn’t disclose the police will assess the position and may make a joint visit with children’s services if appropriate. New offenders are reviewed every six weeks and restrictions placed on them might include not visiting leisure centres, parks or playgrounds,

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4 Sex offenders on the register are those who have been convicted or cautioned of a relevant sex offence since 1997.
or using the internet without Net Nanny. If they think it is necessary schools can ban the offender from their premises which could have a huge impact on the whole family.

**Lucy Faithfull Foundation and Stop It Now**
The evidence shows that the majority of child sex offenders assault children known to them, with about 80% of offences taking place in the homes of either the offender or the victim. It is estimated that approximately half of all sex offenders are adult males with between 5-20% adult females and about 30% being adolescents and children. The NSPCC estimates that the perpetrators of child sexual abuse are made up of 40% older siblings, 14% fathers and 19% step fathers of the victims.

Stop it Now is the only UK wide campaign dedicated solely to preventing child sexual abuse. It targets adult and potential abusers to encourage them to recognise the signs of abusive behaviour in those close to them and seek advice about what action to take. It aims to get the family and friends of abusers to recognise the signs of abusive behaviour and to seek advice about what action to take and for the parents of young people exhibiting worrying sexual behaviour to seek help about what to do. The campaign is trying to shift society’s view that sex offenders are monsters and adults are helpless to do anything about sexual abuse. It also seeks to motivate the public to be more positive by showing that behaviours can be changed and interventions can effectively control sexually abusive behaviour.

Experience of working in this field shows that that some abusers want to stop their offending against children and avoid repetition in the future. Others who are contemplating sexually abusing children are able to recognise these thoughts and behaviours and do ask for help before actually committing the offence and some people have intrusive sexual thoughts about children which they do not think they will act upon but do want help of ridding themselves of. Adults are able to recognise inappropriate sexual attitudes and behaviours in those close to them and can be motivated to seek help in order to protect children, these adults can act as a protective force within their families or wider community.

**Sex Offenders in Prison**
The Association of Independent monitoring Boards (AMIMB) are undertaking an investigation into sex offenders in prison. They report that this is the fastest growing group of offenders and make up 14% of the total prison population. They are over represented in the older prisoner population making up 32% of the over 50’s and 57% of the over 60’s. They are held in over 120 prisons, but over 60% are located in just 20 prisons. Sex offender treatment programmes (SOTP) run in about 20 prisons but it appears to be a lottery as to what interventions and services individual prisoners can access.

Some prisons like HMP Whatton only hold sex offenders whilst in others they are held separately in Vulnerable Prisoner Units (VPUs) and have limited access to education, gym, training and resettlement opportunities. Visits may also be run in a different way thus impacting on families, many of which are subject to the additional stigma of not only visiting a prison, but visiting a sex offender in prison. AMIMB has several concerns which will be discussed in full in their report to be published in October 2013.
Concerns to date include:

- the limited vocabulary used to discuss sex offenders, a new terminology is needed for non high risk offenders,
- the apparent lack of a central NOMS strategy,
- problems with the availability and effectiveness of current interventions for this group,
- the intervention for internet offending only being available in the community,
- the numbers of older prisoners held in prisons not designed for them,
- the inequality of resettlement provision such as support and provision of housing and jobs
- the lack of support for families and information available for families.

The conference also saw a presentation on the pilot telephone support group for the families of sex offenders which was run in 2012 by Action for Prisoners’ Families. The evaluation report of this project is available on our website.

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