

## **Probation Officers' Experience of Using Risk Matrix 2000 and Stable & Acute 2007 when Supervising Sex Offenders Living in the Community**

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**Summary:** This paper examines Probation Officers' experiences of the two risk assessment tools, Risk Matrix 2000 (RM2K) and Stable & Acute 2007 (SA07), used by the Probation Service to risk-assess sex offenders living in the community. It first explores the benefits, limitations and concerns of the Risk Matrix assessment. It then focuses on Probation Officers' experience of the Stable interview – how they prepare, the issues during and their views after the assessment interview. The benefits, limitations and concerns of the SA07 are also explored.

**Keywords:** Risk Matrix 2000, Stable & Acute 2007, sex offenders, Probation Officers, risk assessment, supervision, offender management.

### **Introduction**

Risk assessment in Ireland in the 1990s saw a gradual progression from unstructured professional opinion/judgement to actuarial risk assessment tools. Bonta (1996) characterises unstructured professional judgement as giving an opinion on the risk or probability of an event occurring without examining risk factors: in essence it is an unclear route. Actuarial tools or second-generation risk assessment tools are more structured. They are grounded in risk factors that are related to recidivism rates, while they also attempt to eliminate the variance between practitioners' opinions.

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In 2003 the Probation Service introduced the Level of Service Inventory Revised (LSI-R)<sup>1</sup> risk assessment tool. With the introduction of the Sex Offenders Act in 2001, the task of risk-assessing convicted sex offenders on post-release supervision became a statutory responsibility of the Probation Service. LSI-R was not appropriate, as it is designed for generic offenders. A feasibility study on the range of approaches was undertaken, and the Risk Matrix 2000 (RM2K) and Stable & Acute 2007 (SA07) were selected as the most appropriate instruments.

RM2K is a statistically derived risk assessment classification intended for males aged at least 18 years who have been convicted of a sexual offence. It uses factual information about an offender's past history to divide them into categories that differ substantially in their rates of reconviction for sexual or other offences. It is designed to assist in the prediction of sexual and violent recidivism (Thornton *et al.*, 2003).

RM2K incorporates static risk factors. These are defined as relatively fixed aspects of offenders' histories, such as age and the extent of previous offending, which raise the risk of reoffending but cannot be changed for the better through deliberate intervention (Mann *et al.*, 2010). RM2K as a tool has been used by prison, probation and police forces in the UK and Ireland since the late 1990s and late 2000s respectively.

SA07, as a third-generation risk assessment tool, utilises dynamic risk factors defined as psychological or behavioural features of the offender that increase the risk of reoffending and that are potentially changeable. As a result it is intervention-driven, closely integrating assessment with case management. The 'Stable' aspect of the assessment identifies the dynamic/changeable factors that should be addressed over a 12-month period, e.g. impulsivity. 'Acute' risk factors are those that could change quite quickly and relate to the issue of imminence, e.g. victim access. SA07 incorporates an initial 'Stable' interview with the offender where 13 risk factors are discussed. At any subsequent meeting an 'Acute' assessment that focuses on seven risk factors is conducted.

SA07 is used in Ireland, the UK, Canada, Germany and the USA by Probation Officers and Police Officers for sex offenders living in the community, although it has been used in prison settings also. It was implemented in Ireland from 2007 onwards. SA07 assessments also feed

<sup>1</sup> The LSI-R is a risk assessment tool devised by Don Andrews and James Bonta which brings together risk and needs information to determine required levels of intervention. For further information see [www.mhs.com](http://www.mhs.com)

into multi-agency sex offender management discussions in Northern Ireland (PPANI<sup>2</sup>) and Ireland (SORAM<sup>3</sup>).

This paper examines Probation Officers' perspective on RM2K and the 'Stable' aspect of the SA07 assessment.

## **Method**

A total of 24 Probation Service staff were interviewed (16 Probation Officers (POs) and eight Senior Probation Officers (SPOs)) in eight locations nationwide. Fourteen were female and 10 were male. The length of service ranged from seven to 35 years. Interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview guide with specific headings.<sup>4</sup> Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted. This research forms part of a PhD research project which also includes additional probation findings.

## **Risk Matrix 2000**

### *Benefits*

Findings from the evaluation of RM2K suggest that POs have mixed views on it; it was seen by some as a basic tool or a screening device in order to divide the sex offender population into risk categories which would determine resource allocation. Currently if an RM2K score of medium to very high is achieved, the sex offender will subsequently be assessed by SA07. The RM2K risk rating would impact on the level of supervision, frequency of supervision meetings, and whether they would be further assessed with SA07 or be included in the SORAM process.

The introduction of RM2K was seen as validating POs' work as it is based on evidence-based risk assessments, as can be seen in the quotes below. The concept of defensible practice was to the fore, whereby it was

<sup>2</sup> Public Protection Arrangements for Northern Ireland, which are statutory arrangements to facilitate inter-agency cooperation.

<sup>3</sup> SORAM (Sex Offender Risk Assessment and Management) meetings are joint Probation Service/Garda/Health Service Executive meetings for sex offenders who are subject to the Sex Offender Act and under probation supervision.

<sup>4</sup> Risk Assessment Tools, Stable Assessments, Management Plan, Rapport, Supervision, Co-interviewing, Interagency Working, Managing Sex Offenders, Resources, Training, Strengths/Limitations of Tools, Challenges for Sex Offenders, Future Directions.

also viewed as an aid to removing judgement biases, making the risk-assessment process more scientific. This is supported by Kemshall's work (1998), where POs felt that risk assessment instruments with their checklists and weighting systems resolved the value debates they had. With that in mind, there are concerns that as RM2K does not necessitate meeting the sex offender, it could become a 'tick-box' exercise. The assessment itself was seen as straightforward: '*very easy to use, user-friendly*'. It could be conducted relatively quickly once all the information required was at hand.

*P010: It is a part of our defensible practice now so it supports our hunches. It is a useful tool in that regard.*

*P015: It is very basic but I mean it's better than, when I was in the service first nine years ago there was nothing. So you wouldn't have a clue ... So it kind of makes you feel you have a better handle on what the risk is.*

#### *Limitations and concerns*

Some POs reported that there was a lot of unnecessary emphasis on RM2K, and that its importance as a risk assessment tool was exaggerated. POs also found that the results might not correlate with their professional opinion of risk. Therefore the value of the RM2K results was sometimes questioned. While having a defensible practice for probation work was welcomed, when the risk rating was at odds with the PO's perceived risk rating there was some anxiety. This was mainly because RM2K provides a risk of reconviction, not reoffending, and uses static<sup>5</sup> risk factors; hence it does not incorporate all the information about the offender available to the PO.

Two implications of these concerns for practice were observed. Firstly RM2K should not be used in isolation, but rather in conjunction with a dynamic risk assessment tool such as SA07. This reinforces Grubin's (2008) assertion that RM2K should be seen as the first step in the assessment process (which is the case within the Probation Service). RM2K and SA07 have different implications for practice within the

<sup>5</sup> Static RM2K Factors are – Age, Number of Sexual Sentencing Appearances, Number of Criminal Sentencing Appearances, Single Status and whether there was a Stranger Victim, Male Victim and Non-Contact Offence.

Probation Service. RM2K identifies an initial risk rating which dictates the level of supervision and whether an SA07 is conducted. This approach draws on the risk principle with the Risk–Needs–Responsivity Model of Andrews *et al.* (1990) and Andrews and Bonta (2006), where the amount of intervention an offender receives is matched to his/her level of risk to reoffend. The SA07, while identifying a risk rating, also identifies areas of supervision work. Hence RM2K was seen as having little practical value in terms of directing interventions or supervision work:

*PO1: It doesn't really give me any basis to work on. It is about his previous convictions or stuff I can't change anyway whereas I am an agent of change; that is the purpose of Probation Officers.*

The second practice implication is that a professional override can be employed. This is utilised when a sex offender scores low on RM2K but there are concerns due to their needs or responsivity. Hence it may be in the best interest of both the offender and public safety for further assessment to identify risk behaviour and/or areas of work/interventions. The override adds to the PO's defensible practice. This override facility in risk assessments is not uncommon, as the Probation Service allows this practice within the LSI-R assessment (Prendergast, 2012).

*PO10: The officer who had him thought 'nah, this boy is far from low, he needs to be assessed'. So we have the wherewithal that even if they are low we can assess them.*

As strict scoring rules have to be followed in the RM2K instrument, it was viewed as cumbersome at times, especially if it was not completed regularly. An implication for training and practice was that if POs are not conducting RM2K regularly, difficulties or inaccuracies may result when completing assessments.

An evaluation of the SA07 pilot conducted in England and Wales in 2010 (McNaughton Nicholls *et al.*, 2010, p. 20) found that, as with Probation Officers in Ireland, the RM2K was seen as 'a useful starting point for assessing risk and was felt to be quick and an easy tool to use'. However, similarly to the experience of Irish POs, 'it was felt to be limited in that it only incorporated static risk factors and was unresponsive to changing circumstances and dynamic issues'.

## Stable and Acute 2007

### *Benefits of SA07*

SA07, like RM2K, was welcomed as adding to the PO's defensible practice, but it was viewed as a practical risk assessment as it directed supervision work and interventions. This was due to the inclusion of dynamic factors and the fact that it covered all aspects of the offender's life, not just the negative aspects. Progress made could be observed and communicated to the offender, which was viewed as positive. Another benefit was that the structure of the SA07 and the skills built up by the PO were transferable to other offenders not being formally risk-assessed.

*PO9: It doesn't look for exclusively what the old days would have seen as flaws within the offender, traits. It clearly does look at those areas ... but it also takes into account the wider environment: who their supports are and deficits that arise as well, so it is much more comprehensive.*

*PO8: It is very helpful. It is extremely helpful even for working with sex offenders that are low risk. I feel it really guides you to what you need to know and what you need to find out, even to put a report together ... Well when I would have wrote reports initially ... we would gather as much information as we could using our professional judgement writing these reports and there were gaps missed and I think SA07 fills those gaps. It clearly identifies the risk areas. It makes it very clear and I think you can find out so much when you are interviewing a client and you have those headings in your head.*

### *Prior to 'Stable' interview*

When POs were asked how they prepare to conduct the SA07, they highlighted a number of elements: (i) preparing themselves as the interviewer, (ii) preparing the offender, (iii) ensuring that all available information/collaterals are in place.

### Preparing themselves as the interviewer

Apprehension was a key emotion when POs did the Stable assessment for the first time. Therefore, they prepared themselves by reading the SA07 training manual and the practical guide<sup>6</sup> for POs. Some typed out the

<sup>6</sup>This handbook was compiled in 2007 by the Probation Service and Department of Psychology, UCC, to guide and inform POs in their supervision of sex offenders and as a practical and informative aid for staff involved in assessment and intervention with adult sex offenders.

questions from the manual and put it in their own words, making it *more user-friendly*. This would be on hand as a guide if needed. Brief notes were taken which acted as prompts for discussion of subsequent risk factors. As a result the language and flow of the interview was not too scripted, and the turn of phrase was not out of character for the PO. Ultimately the wording was changed to fit the interviewer's style and the client's level of abstraction.

*PO12: I try to prepare myself as best I can by reading through the questions, by familiarising myself with the Stable guidelines. Prepare the guy as best I can, especially for the more intrusive questions, and then just go and get into it.*

*PO2: It is difficult because different people have different levels. So some days you are working and you think you have got it right and you are trying to tune into what his language is. You will say something and he will come back to you and you say 'Oh God, now I really now have confused the guy'. And he is rightly confused and it is my failure to have spotted something. So I have to re-edit quickly and come up with a new way to explain, like every interview sometimes you are on the ball, you're sharp and other times you walk out and say 'that was terrible'. It just didn't come together. But if you are working with a person you have a chance to come back on it and give it another go.*

Any initial embarrassment or discomfort in discussing the sexual regulation risk factors was quickly eroded once a professional role using appropriate language was assumed. Other concerns prior to interviewing centred on not capturing the right information or not picking up on information.

Preparing the client as the interviewee

Building up a relationship with the offender was vital to the success of the SA07 assessment. Fitzgibbon (2007), within the context of OASys<sup>7</sup> assessments, similarly found that far better risk assessments were undertaken when a consistent and sustained relationship had been built

<sup>7</sup> The Offender Assessment System (OASys) is used in England and Wales by the National Offender Management Service to measure the risks and needs of offenders under its supervision.

up with the PO conducting it. Hence it would be rare for a PO to conduct the Stable interview before three or four supervision meetings. An added benefit is that information is gathered which can be incorporated in the assessment.

The Stable assessment would normally take two or three sessions; in some cases it has been conducted over one session, though this is not the norm. This could be the case for a repeat<sup>8</sup> Stable assessment where the offender knows what to expect and has been through the process before, and there is an existing relationship. Rapport and trust were essential in order for the offender to be open and allow for disclosure of information. Essentially the sex offender is prepared and knows what to expect, and hence may engage more. POs also felt they can better '*judge his feelings and emotions*' if a relationship with the offender exists.

#### Information/Collaterals

Information obtained prior to assessment comprised written formal information and verbal informal information. The objective is to gather as much information as possible about the offender from as many sources as possible prior to the assessment. This is used to have a rounded risk-factor discussion and as collateral information to verify or spot discrepancies in the offender's responses. It further acts as a means to challenge the offender, thereby ascertaining the truth and ensuring a more accurate assessment.

Regarding the formal written information, the main items would include the Sex Offender Probation file and any reports (or case notes) written by a previous PO or possibly a report completed prior to sentence. The PO would ask for prison reports, visit reports and any prison psychological reports or educational reports to be released. In addition any treatment programme reports (Lighthouse/Safer Lives/addiction centres/private treatment providers) would be requested if those holding them were willing to provide them to the PO. Regarding young offenders, information provided by schools could also be requested to ascertain problematic schooling, expulsion and extent of misbehaviour. Sometimes if access to this information is proving difficult, a request to the offender's solicitor, with the offender's consent, to provide copies in their possession may be made.

<sup>8</sup> Stable interviews are normally conducted every 12 months.

The Book of Evidence<sup>9</sup> (BoE) is also obtained where possible in order to get a sense of the conflicting accounts of the offence and to monitor how divergent the sex offender's account is from the facts as contained in the BoE. In particular, the statements and medical reports are examined. Firstly the victim's account is deemed a more truthful description of the incident than the offender's, as it may be in the interest of the offender to lie in order to prevent a charge and subsequent potential conviction. Secondly POs look at the offender's statements to see how he shifts his defence, his rationale or motivation, whether he minimises or deflects responsibility, etc., as seen from the quotes.

PO8: [I look for] *the victim statement in the Book of Evidence ... Because my own experience tells me all offenders, not just sex offenders, will minimise the offence or minimise their involvement in the offence or try and excuse it in some way. I think the victim's viewpoint is vital because it gives you something to come back on. How do you think this affected the victim or just to get knowledge on who the victim is.*

PO4: *Generally speaking the victim's statements and medical reports are what you would be looking for really. You can see the damage the person has done and the harm.*

Furthermore, the BoE gives the PO an indication of 'where the offender was at at the time of the offence'. It captures a sense of 'then' (offence time) and 'now' (on supervision). It appears that the BoE is essential when completing an assessment. While POs have found innovative ways of obtaining the BoE, it possibly should be mandatory that it be released to the PO.

Verbal informal information would involve phone contact/discussion by a PO with a member of An Garda Síochána,<sup>10</sup> usually the monitoring Garda or investigating Garda, which POs feel is vital.

<sup>9</sup> The Book of Evidence is a document with all the evidence against the accused, which is put together by the prosecution team once the Gardaí have charged the accused. It contains statements from witnesses as well as the victim, the accused and all Garda statements. It also includes a list of any physical evidence in medical reports, chain of evidence reports, etc. in addition to items such as photographs and weapons used.

<sup>10</sup> Ireland's national police service.

PO3: *I ring the prosecuting guard and ask is there anything else you want to tell me about this person that I don't know about already. It is completely confidential and it won't be going into the report. Is there anything you want to tell me or is the way he describes the offence the way it is? I always do that, it is a matter of pride with me.*

While it is not within the remit of this paper, approximately 25 Garda members trained in RM2K and SA07 were also interviewed. The value of accurate information and the gathering of information from all sources were prized. While at the time the information may not seem hugely important, its true value may come to light when collated with other pieces of information or through discussion with the POs.

Home visits, when possible, are conducted prior to assessment in order to meet the offender's partner/family and to see home lifestyle and living standards. This provides an opportunity to verify information that the offender has given in the sessions prior to the assessment. As a safety measure, POs will notify the local Garda station that they are meeting sex offenders at a specified time and ring back when finished.

PO6: *You pick up far more information, and if you can meet somebody related to them or talk to somebody else you get another view. And it does definitely give you a different feel to the whole situation and when they are describing things you can understand what they are talking about, so it is valuable I think.*

### *Conducting the Stable interview*

#### Discussing risk factors

POs stated that they generally follow the ordered sequence of the risk factors as listed in the Stable form. This order led the client from 'easier to discuss' risk factors to the more difficult sex-oriented discussion. POs used the 'more neutral risk factors', i.e. Significant Social Influences and General Social Rejection, as an avenue to develop and maintain rapport during the assessment in addition to setting the landscape of the interview. It was felt the gradual progression of the assessment eased the offender into discussing more intimate personal aspects of their life or their offending.

PO9: *When you come in [to the meeting] you wouldn't go straight to 'how often would you masturbate a day or do you look at pornography?'. You would start with their early sexual experience, how you learned about sex, when did you first hear, was it in school, was it through peers, can you remember your first contact with girls if there was any contact?*

### Finding truth

Although it is understandable for sex offenders to be reticent about their offending and about personal intimate sexual practices, as would any non-offending person, POs felt that sexual offenders on their caseload would minimise their offending, deflect responsibility, try to distance it to historical cases, or cite mitigating factors that rationalise the offending. All this is common behaviour of sex offenders (Hudson, 2005).

Within this context they have to navigate through truth and lies to arrive at the most accurate risk assessment possible. Hence not everything the sex offender says is believed. While some sex offenders can be overly compliant and *'will do anything to please you where they will give the answers they think you want to hear'*, the truthfulness of responses is paramount.

Older men were mentioned as having more difficulty discussing their sexual interests/preoccupation than younger men. Other challenging assessments for POs were with individuals with psychological issues, disabilities and cultural issues. While some offender responses are easily verifiable, other discrepancies or hunches that the PO may have cannot be verified easily. These are specially related to the offender self-reports, on which the PO will have to make a judgement call.

PO12: *As you go down to the more sexual [risk factors], i.e. masturbation, they are very intimate details and they are all men and I am a young female. I am comfortable enough asking the questions but again for the client answering them and how truthful [they are with me is uncertain].*

PO4: *The sex offender is often a little embarrassed about how often he masturbates or what their use of pornography is or has been or whatever. But I think the more confident you are about that and how you express it [helps] ... You wouldn't be always confident that they are telling you the truth, of course, and there is no verification there unless you might have collaterals that the guards might have found pornography in the house if they searched it, but that is not that often.*

POs said they would challenge rather than confront response inconsistencies and suspected inaccurate self-reports, through the use of collateral information. The PO would give the offender the opportunity to clarify and save face rather than potentially closing down engagement and trust. Furthermore, POs stressed that they set the emotional tone of the interview and this was crucial to the successful completion of an interview. This they felt was a skill or ability that comes with knowledge and experience. Questions posed are framed appropriately, with the PO not shirking the responsibility of asking tough questions.

#### *Post-interview*

After the Stable assessment is conducted, all the risk factors are scored. A concern was '*recording the wrong information in the wrong section*'. As information can impact on a number of risk factors, it was felt that this cross-reference may be a difficulty for newly trained POs, especially for 'sex as coping' and 'sexual preoccupation' risk factors, which may impact on practice. This would be addressed with experience and increased practice, and clarified by the mentoring group process, although POs were mindful that complacency must not creep into their practice once they were accustomed to conducting SA07.

Currently an all-island (Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) research project commissioned by the Public Protection Advisory Group is under way, which is examining all statistical returns for each risk factor of the Stable interview conducted within a specific time frame. This research will add to the international validation studies on Stable and Acute and provide findings in relation to the efficacy of the tool in Ireland.

The value of the mentor group process cannot be overestimated. It involves a narrative written by the PO who completed the assessment, which is co-rated by a second PO. It is then discussed with a mentoring group, where a final score is validated and signed off. This process is to ensure greater standardisation and to remove any potential assessor subjectivity.

POs felt '*the mentor group discussions are useful because the whole area is very complicated and you get a very good appraisal*'. Furthermore they saw it as an indirect learning environment, '*as there are different aspects of the information that you bring forward people will question or make suggestions and it is very helpful for the next interview you do*'. This was felt to be very important, especially in light of the absence of formal training due to resource constraints. Also it directly relates to the individual PO work,

hence its relevance is two-fold as it ensures that the SA07 is accurate and impacts on developing the skills of the PO. The mentoring group was also seen as positive as it *'places checks and balances'* and can identify any *'blind spot to a certain behaviour or something [the PO has] missed'*.

Prior to the mentoring group (and SORAM), POs felt *'very alone with a sense of responsibility on your shoulders'* when supervising sex offenders. Now this is shared, as *'you are covering every angle ... you are discussing everything, everything is out in the open and it is hugely beneficial'*. While a practice implication is that the mentoring group is resource-intensive and time-consuming, the benefits appear to outweigh the limitations.

The SA07 findings feed into the management plan of the offender, which will direct interventions and any areas of concern. Also the Stable interview is discussed at the joint agency SORAM meetings. As members of the Garda Síochána are trained in RM2K and SA07 as well, there is a common language when discussing sex offenders. Furthermore, staff from the two agencies have completed joint training, joint assessments and joint home visits of sex offenders, hence collaborative working is taking place to a high degree.

Training of Gardaí and Probation Officers as SA07 instructors has also taken place, hence this in-house capability will allow for further numbers to be trained in SA07, though now the concern is the need to concentrate attention and training on the interventions. Risk assessment has been addressed and the next stage should now be undertaken. Furthermore, POs felt they were equipped to deal with some areas of work – substance abuse, significant social influences, suicidal thoughts, social isolation – but *'they were not trained to do some of the work around some of the [Stable] areas'*, particularly work centred on the sexual elements, i.e. excessive masturbation and coercive rape fantasies. The feeling was that more support or training should be provided for POs to qualify them to do this type of work. But would this be encroaching on more of a therapeutic role? Some POs with a psychotherapy background were happy to explore these issues with their offenders, though others felt it was beyond their level of experience or role. Role clarity was an important theme in this context. Some questioned whether it was their role to do some of the intervention-driven aspects of the SA07 findings. Furthermore, if they were to conduct this work, there is no Probation Service manual where each risk factor has been deconstructed and linked to possible intervention-focused work or options.

## **Concluding discussion**

The focus of this paper has been to highlight the practice and experience of sex offender risk assessment instruments by Probation Officers. In short, the risk assessment tools have been welcomed, with the practical nature of the SA07 being particularly valued. POs describing themselves as ‘agents of change’ with third-generation risk assessment tools have the ability to measure change in the offender, hence there may be more of a perceived match with the probation role.

This all leads to a defensible practice for the PO. While POs stated that they know that risk cannot be eliminated and they have to work within the limitations of their role, the support of risk assessment tools, mentor groups and SORAM discussions adds to defensible decision-making. As a national framework is in place, there is now more transparency in the risk assessment and supervision of sex offenders than before. International practice suggests that the best and most effective risk-assessment tools will combine static and dynamic elements (Harrison, 2011).

This defensible practice helps lessen the impact of working with sex offenders and the onus of sole responsibility that POs carry. Joint assessments, joint decision making and sharing of information help alleviate the stress that some POs felt about decision-making.

None the less, there are still ongoing challenges for POs. This was mainly observed with resource and training concerns. The mentor group process was seen as providing great validity and support, but was resource-intensive. While extensive work has been completed on risk assessments and training, POs felt that now was the time to focus on intervention work. Some POs found a gap in their knowledge and skills for implementing some intervention-driven work around sexual behaviour and sexual regulation. If their role should stretch that far, more training is needed to complete this work effectively and appropriately.

To conclude, while sex offender risk assessment and management is in its infancy in Ireland, it is ever evolving, as fourth-generation assessment tools have come to the fore here since 2010. This is where risk tools are integrated into a process of risk management, the selection of intervention modes and the assessment of rehabilitation progress (Campbell et al, 2009). On this front RM2K and SA07 are integrated into a procedural and multi-agency structure of management of sex offenders (SORAM). Different agencies are using the same risk assessment tools, in some

instances conducting assessments together and having a common language, which ultimately results in more effective sex-offender management. Collaborative working, where information is shared and the significance of the information is understood, can only mean effective communication, and it is hoped, increased public safety.

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