

Gillen Review Implementation Team (GRIT)

Consultation to Inform Guidance on Media Reporting of Sexual Violence in Northern Ireland

**Response from the Commissioner Designate
for Victims of Crime for Northern Ireland**

3 March 2026

1. About you

Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime

2. Do you have any concerns about media reporting of sexual violence in Northern Ireland?

Yes

- The Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime has been made aware of concerns raised by victims and survivors regarding aspects of media reporting that they feel can negatively affect their wellbeing and wider public understanding of sexual violence.
- A primary concern is the **risk of harm from inaccurate or minimising reporting**. The *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031* highlights the importance of communicating about sexual violence in a way that reflects its seriousness and avoids causing further harm. When reporting plays down the nature of the abuse or uses imprecise wording, it can weaken public understanding and discourage victims from coming forward. Women's Aid NI has also drawn attention to recurring issues in coverage, including language that shifts focus onto victims and the use of images that do not reflect the gravity of the subject.
- Victims have raised concerns about victim-blaming language, salacious portage of intimate details, and unwarranted mitigations attributed to perpetrators without evidence base (such as questioning whether mental ill-health was the reason for an attack where there is no evidence to indicate this is the case). These all contribute to further harm to victims and feed into rape myths and unconscious biases held in our society.

3. Do you think that the introduction of guidance for media reporting on sexual violence in Northern Ireland would be beneficial?

Yes

- The Commissioner Designate considers that Northern Ireland specific guidance would complement existing standards and translate them into local practice. It would support the previous commitments to trauma

informed, victim-centred communications and help to avoid coverage that inadvertently causes harm or reduces confidence to report and engage.

- The publication of new guidance would also shine a spotlight on this issue and encourage those responsible for media reportage to reassess their policy and practice when reporting on sexual violence, including reflecting on any reporting norms that are harmful and interrogating unconscious bias in reporting.

4. What do you think should be included in guidance for media reporting on sexual violence? For example, is there anything you would like to see addressed in relation to language use, court reporting, engagement with victim-survivors, or the use of social media in reporting?

- There should be a focus on specific language and framing, with publishers encouraged to use accurate legal terms and avoid euphemisms and victim blaming language. There should also be focus on the need to avoid passive language which implies that sexual assault is something that just 'happened' as opposed to being a choice made by a perpetrator to attack a victim.
- Similarly, the guidance should stress the need to avoid speculation about motivation which may consciously or unconsciously downplay the seriousness of sexual abuse or seek to excuse such attacks. Reaction quotes and comments should be reviewed before publication to ensure that they do not feed into unhelpful narratives about an accused being 'of good standing' and therefore unlikely to have committed the crime. Any reportage should ensure that rape myths or inferences based on a victim or accused's socio-economic status, class, race or ethnicity, gender, sexual identity or disability are avoided.
- When describing how evidence is given in serious sexual offence and domestic abuse cases, reporting should explain the use of special measures and Remote Evidence Centres accurately. These centres are routinely used in Northern Ireland to enable victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence to give their evidence away from the court building, helping to reduce trauma and avoid encounters with defendants.

- The guidance should reaffirm that sensational headlines and stereotyped imagery should be avoided when reporting sexual violence and abuse.
- The guidance may wish to urge outlets to consider restricting or disabling comments on sexual violence stories, and ensuring robust moderation of comments on online reports and social media pages.
- The guidance should mandate that any stories relating to sexual violence and abuse must include clear signposting to appropriate, relevant, locally-based support organisations.
- The guidance should highlight how trauma and PTSD impact on victim behaviour and presentation, and stress that no false inferences should be drawn from such behaviours. This may include explanations of how trauma can manifest as a perceived lack of emotion, how delay in reporting is common and reasonable, and how memory can be affected by trauma with details of an attack only coming back to victim after passage of time. The guidance should also highlight the fight/flight/freeze/friend response and stress that not all reactions to sexual violence attacks look like what people might think they should.
- It is important that the guidance reflects the complexities around sexual violence reportage and right-wing extremism in relation to black and minority ethnic communities. In Northern Ireland and beyond it has become increasingly common that allegations of sexual violence against women and girls have been misappropriated by those seeking to stir up hatred against newcomer communities. The guidance should stress the need for media reportage and comment moderation to take stronger action to ensure stories are not hijacked by those seeking to foment hatred, violence and abuse against minority communities.
- The guidance should include clear guidelines on reportage of sexual violence, abuse and exploitation of children and young people, including in cases where that child may not be aware that they are being groomed. Guidance should stress the need to avoid blaming language or misconstruing grooming as informed consent or applying same rules to children as adults. In particular, the guidance should

stress the need to avoid implication that the responsibility is on a child to not be groomed, or that a child's acquiescence mitigates responsibility of perpetrators.

- The guidance should include specific advice on avoiding gendered rape myths relating to both male and female victims. For female victims, this may include avoiding painting victims as 'good' or 'bad' depending on their previous sexual history. For male victims, this may include guidance on avoiding myths about male victimhood and masculinity or sexuality, and a guide on good reportage in cases where perpetrators are female.
- The guidance should also include a steer on reporting sexual violence against victims who identify as LGBTQ+. In particular, guidance should stress the need to avoid explicit or implicit homophobic and transphobic victim-blaming myths about promiscuity or sexual deviance. The guidance should highlight the need for particular care to be taken not to 'out' a victim who has not been public about their sexuality, and note the additional risks of jigsaw identification given that the LGBTQ+ population is a small subset of an already small NI population.
- The guidance should lay out good practice when engaging with victims for the purpose of a news story. Preservation of anonymity, providing a safe space, offering pre-agreed questions, and not pushing to gain consent to interview should form the basis of these guidelines.

5. Would you have any concerns about the introduction of such guidance?

- The Commissioner Designate is concerned about how consistently any new guidance would be adopted in practice. To address this, she recommends that the Department set out a clear approach for engaging with Northern Ireland media organisations, including seeking visible endorsement from industry bodies and putting appropriate training arrangements in place. Providing this clarity would help build confidence in the guidance and support more consistent application across the sector.

6. Are there challenges associated with media engagement with victim-survivors?

- The Commissioner Designate has been informed by victims and survivors that media coverage can, at times, re-expose them to trauma and create risks of identification. This reinforces the need for strict adherence to anonymity requirements and safeguards on avoiding jigsaw identification.
- There is also a need for reporters to be trauma-informed in how they engage with victims of sexual violence. This should include being open to interviewing them in a safe space, protecting their anonymity if requested, offering sight of questions in advance, and putting safeguarding measures in place should giving an interview about the experience of sexual abuse be triggering.
- Concerns have also been raised about the impact of unmoderated online comment sections, where misinformation and hostile responses can cause further harm. To mitigate this, media organisations should consider restricting or disabling comments on stories relating to sexual violence, consistent with established best practice in Northern Ireland.

7. Is there anything specific to Northern Ireland that you feel needs to be covered in the guidance?

- Where relevant, explain Remote Evidence Centres and their role in reducing retraumatisation and ensuring best evidence. These centres are routinely used in Northern Ireland to enable victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence to give their evidence away from the court building, helping to reduce trauma and avoid encounters with defendants.
- Reporting should also reference the Victim Charter when signposting rights and services. Pointing audiences towards the Charter may help to ensure reporting is not only accurate but also informative for victims who may be considering seeking help or engaging with the justice system.

- It may also be helpful to signpost Northern Ireland specific practical resources, such as Women's Aid NI's Responsible Reporting Matters, which offers clear guidance on language, imagery and survivor engagement tailored to the Northern Ireland context.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add in relation to media guidance for reporting on sexual violence in Northern Ireland?

- The Commissioner Designate recommends that the Department make clear how it intends to track uptake of the guidance over time. A voluntary approach is reasonable, but it should still be supported by an annual review that captures how widely the guidance is being used and what feedback has been provided by media organisations. This would reflect the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy's focus on ongoing learning and improvement, and it would reassure victims and the wider public that the guidance is being taken seriously and is influencing reporting practice in a meaningful way.

General Comments

If you would like to discuss any of these points in further detail, please contact the office via:

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