

People convicted of child sex offences and the Approved Premises

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When people convicted of child sex offences are sentenced and ultimately returned to the community, they will often need to have suitable accommodation provided for them due to risk,¹ loss,² or potential future victimisation and vulnerability due to community reactions surrounding their behaviour.³ This article presents findings from an empirical, qualitative study, where seven men convicted of child sex offences living in the community were interviewed. The aim of this paper is to highlight what life was like for the men inside the Approved Premises (AP), and what their experiences of moving from the AP to the community were.

According to HM Inspectorate of Probation, there are two main roles of the 104 APs in England and Wales.⁴ The first is rehabilitation and resettlement, where residents are encouraged or required to undertake Offending Behaviour Programmes (OBPs) or gain assistance with moving on from the AP for example, and the second falling within the public protection remit. In fact, it is estimated that APs provide accommodation for over 2,000 people, most of whom would fall into the high-risk of harm and/or reoffending category.⁵ So, the question of where to house people convicted of child sex offences, people who are often demonised and viewed as being unable to change,^{6,7} remains

an important one within criminal justice. In England and Wales, the use of the AP comes under the authority of Section 13 of the Offender Management Act 2007, with the underlying principles of supervision and rehabilitation being at the fore. This means that under law, the National Probation Service must take all reasonable steps to house mainly high-risk people upon release. However, it is not always as dichotomous as 'high-risk' or not. For example, 14 of the 104 APs do not house people convicted of sex offences due to their proximity to schools and parks. The potential for networking of like-minded people is also viewed as a risk, and communities often react with hostility towards residents, especially if they believe they have committed sex offences.^{8,9} It is an undoubted fact that the use of APs for people convicted of child sex offences is viewed as vital in the risk management toolkit of the Offender Manager (OM) and it can be viewed favourably as a place of safety by the Parole Board post-prison, linking to Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA).¹⁰

This article adds rich data to the limited research on APs which house people convicted of sexual offences against children, by exploring the opinions of those convicted of these offences and the professionals who work with them.

1. Roberts, N., Reeves, C. & Jackson, L. (2024). "I'm getting out to nothing": a temporal analysis of dominant discourses and practices with residents convicted of child sex offences in Probation Approved Premises. *Probation Journal*, 71(2), 159-178.
2. Kras, K. R., Pleggenkuhle, B., & Huebner, B. M. (2016). A new way of doing time on the outside: Sex offenders' pathways in and out of a transitional housing facility. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*, 60(5), 512-534.
3. McAlinden, A.M. (2007). *The Shaming of Sexual Offenders: Risk, Retribution and Reintegration*. Hart.
4. HM Inspectorate of Probation (2024). *Consultation on the inspection of Approved Premises*.
5. See footnote 1: Roberts et al. (2024)
6. Pickett, J.T., Mancini, C. & Mears, D.P. (2014). Vulnerable Victims, Monstrous Offenders, and Unmanageable Risk: Explaining Public Opinion on the Social Control of Sex Crime. *Criminology*, 51(3), 729-759.
7. de Vel-Palumbo, M., Howarth, L., & Brewer, M. B. (2018). 'Once a sex offender always a sex offender'? Essentialism and attitudes towards criminal justice policy. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 25(5), 421-439.
8. Reeves, C. (2013). 'The Others': Sex Offenders' Social Identities in Probation Approved Premises. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 52(4), 383-398.
9. E.g. see Ministry of Justice. (2008). Race Review 2008: Implementing Race Equality in Prisons – Five Years On. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/294157/1000439race_review_part_1.pdf
10. Lammy, D (2017) The Lammy Review: An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lammy-review-final-report>

Methodology

The data included in this article was taken from a larger scale project that examined the reintegration experiences of people convicted for child sex offences. Seven men were identified as having lived in the AP post-prison and it is this stage of their criminal justice journey, especially when they moved on to private rented accommodation, that is of particular interest.

The criterion for inclusion in the project was simple:

1. Men
2. At least 1 current and 1 previous offence related to child sex offending
3. Aged 21 years or over
4. Under the supervision of the National Probation Service in the community

Ethical approval for the project was granted by a university ethics committee and the local National

Probation Service through HMPPS. Prior to the interviews all prospective participants were invited to take part through a participant information sheet. It explained the aims and purpose of the project, and if they did not want to participate this would not be of any detriment to them or their supervision processes. They were also informed about the right to withdraw at any time before, during, or after any proposed interview, up to the point where the data was anonymised.

The participants who agreed to take part were interviewed on a semi-structured basis, lasting between thirty minutes and one hour. The data was then transcribed, anonymised and analysed using thematic analysis. Anonymity was particularly important with this cohort, and a pseudonym was assigned to each participant. Table 1 below highlights the pseudonyms, along with their housing journey pre and post-conviction.

Table 1. *Participants and their Housing Status Before and After Conviction*

Participant	Housing Before conviction	Housing After Conviction
Phil	Rented Accommodation	AP
Andy	Own House	AP
Allan	Own House	AP then Rented Flat
George	Own House	AP then Rented Flat
Adam	Rented Flat	AP then Rented Flat
Sean	Rented Flat	AP then Rented Flat
Nick	Rented Flat/Previously lived in AP during a different sentence	AP then Rented Flat

Findings and discussion

The table below illustrates those themes and provides some context:

The following section will introduce two main themes and one sub-theme that came from the data.

Table 2. *Themes of the findings*

Theme/Sub-theme	Context
The AP – living there, and moving on as a person convicted of child sex offences	This theme takes the perspective of three participants and highlights how they had appreciation for the function of the AP, and how they did not fully feel like a part of the community while they resided in there.
Sub-theme - Violence and Threats in the AP – a Toxic Environment?	This sub-theme follows on from the above and demonstrates how violence, threats, and fear in the AP were very real for the participants. The impact of this resulted in some of the men being more isolated than perhaps they would have hoped for.
Appreciating what is lost and negotiating life outside of the AP	This final theme discusses how the men had often lost a lot in terms of social capital due to their convictions. It highlights their transitions in the community and how they remained isolated through fear of reprisal and fear of losing what they had gained since release from prison.

The AP – living there, and moving on as a person convicted of child sex offences

Andy had lost his own house due to his conviction and prison sentence. This transition from his own house, to prison, to AP was quite significant for him, and even though the AP was a roof over his head he had some reservations:

“I'm in an environment [the hostel] where I'm with other criminals...which is supposed to be a bloody no-no. It's alright. I have a roof over my head and it's a safe environment at the moment. I'm getting fed, it's only costing me £20 per week...I'm fine with that...when I do get a place, I'll be able to furnish it and have some decent stuff rather than having to rely on hand-outs.” (Andy).

Clearly, he was keen to move on, and it was interesting to hear that he wanted to return to a 'normal' life and maintain the minimal family connections that remained:

“I miss my family life, and it can be...I know where I am in the hostel at the moment, I've got people to talk to...but it can still be lonely. That's the thing. Fortunately, I have my sister...one of my sisters and I see her every week and she's the only one I do see. So, she brings a bit of normality back into my life which is a good thing.” (Andy).

He continued, adding further weight to the notion of loneliness, and how he struggled to reintegrate with purpose:

“What I see at the moment while I'm still in the hostel is virtually no reintegration because I'm not mixing with anybody else. If I get my own place, you'll have neighbours and this that and the other. Like I say, I like my garden, if I get a garden I'll be happy as Larry...” (Andy)

Andy was lonely because he struggled to reintegrate with others due to his offending behaviour and the negative reactions from other people in relation to this. He did show appreciation for the use of the AP and had some hope despite the loss of his own home. This appreciation was also noted in the account of Adam, as he described the way in which the AP had supported him post-release:

“Well as you know, I'm a sex offender and I've been out of prison for about seven and a half months now. For the first, just under seven

months, I was in the hostel and that sort of helped me get back on my feet. If it hadn't been for the hostel, I don't know what I'd have done. I'd have probably been back inside...[but] you don't feel part of the community unless you are living in your own place... you feel like you're part of the prison because you're still being watched. You've still got curfews...” (Adam)

It appears that the AP helped Adam to stay out of trouble in those months post-release, but the restrictive regime, mixed with his proclamation of being a 'sex offender' all added to the fact that until he had moved on, he was never going to fully reintegrate into the community. This was a common theme within these first narratives: the impact of the 'child sex offender' label, then the need for the AP to help and support, mixed with the frustration of not feeling part of the community. Moving into the community seemed to be a symbolic step away from being reliant on criminal justice services support.

Phil expressed concern about being able to move out of the AP due to the 'sex offender' label, linking to the labels of 'criminal' and 'sex offender' used by Andy and Adam above:

“[Previously] I've had virtually no problem getting housing...but obviously now I have a criminal record it's just, to me, absolutely distressing. I apply to some [and they say] 'we can't take you because you are a sex offender'...it's just a stigma that...has been blown out of proportion because the majority of people think everyone is like Jimmy Savile or Gary Glitter...obviously there is a lot of stigma that goes with it...[as well as] having a criminal conviction. Applying for housing is virtually impossible because I have been turned down by numerous housing associations. I have had to [try and] find a place privately. There is a lot of stigma that goes with it. OK you have probation [and] other services like the police...but there is no one to help pick up your life. At the moment I am still struggling because it's not like 'OK you've got seven months and it's all finished', you're not...you've got 10 years on licence plus you've got to try and pick up the pieces and move on with your life, with that stigma which doesn't go away, it's there for life...it's pretty hard.” (Phil)

This passage from Phil sums up how hard the transition from AP to the community continued to be for him. When he was asked how he would try to stay

motivated and achieve his goal of moving out of the AP he answered “to be quite honest I don’t know. At the moment, I am just taking it one step at a time.” This meant that for Phil at least, longer term goals may not have been a priority, moving into private housing was.

In addition to his inability to move out of the AP, despite his efforts, he claimed to have had many “arguments” with other residents, especially non-sex offenders, both inside and outside of the building. This is a theme that will be discussed in more detail below and it adds to the evidence presented above that even though living in the AP was useful, it was also difficult, and participants were looking forward to moving out.

Violence and threats in the AP – a toxic environment?

Living in the AP exposed some of the men to violence and threats from other residents, especially from those who did not have convictions for sexual offences. The participants highlighted concerns and anxieties of living in a seemingly unsafe and toxic environment:

“A thing happened at the hostel when I was there. I thought this lad was joking. He had a cricket bat. I was sat on a chair and he walked up, offered it up to my knee and whacked me...people [in the hostel] had been saying things [about his offending] and he’s sort of believed it. So, the following day I said ‘do you realise what you did with that cricket bat?’

He said ‘yes I do’. [George replied] ‘So I tell you now mate, it’s a good job they took it away from you because I was about to get it and do the same to you’.” (George)

Although George was able to confront his assailant, the environment that was supposed to care for him and get him ready to move to his own accommodation, had fallen short of that duty. This was a common theme among the participants, and this is highlighted in the following passage from Adam:

“...the only behaviour I’ve faced is luckily when...four days after I got out. One of the lads found out my name, went on the internet, found out what I’d done, and he came to me and went ‘I know what you’ve done’ and I went ‘oh...good for you’. I went and told the staff at the hostel straight away;

they had a word with him and it sort of eased off. The only time he ever had a go at me was when he was pissed and then he started giving me little digs...so I’d ignore him. He never got violent with me luckily...he threatened it a couple of times, but he never actually got violent. He did it to a couple of lads that he found out about; he hit one of them over the head with his hand and threatened another one. But with me he never actually...” (Adam)

This may seem like a minor incident in comparison to that of George above, but violence and threats to another person are all relative and each incident builds up to create spaces that do not feel safe. In prison, people on remand for, convicted of and/or sentenced for child sex offences are offered ‘vulnerable prisoner’ status under Rule 45 of the Prison Rules 1999. They can be located on Vulnerable Prisoner Units (VPU’s) away from the mainstream location of people convicted of non-sex offences in a safer environment for their own protection.¹¹ However, this level of protection is rarely afforded in the community, which is an issue within this delicate transition. George, below, voiced his concerns:

“It [the label] does not make me feel very good at all. They change it to paedophile, which is what some of the people at [the hostel] were calling me...if somebody does know my past when I [see] them in the street and they start shouting this; it worries me what would happen. I don’t fancy getting beat up.” (George).

It is apparent from what George said that the fear of being identified as a person convicted of child sex offences was an issue that he and some other participants had to negotiate inside and out of the AP. This discreditable identity arguably was only a problem if people had knowledge of their offences, but the fear remained.¹³ For example, Adam alluded to uncertain consequences if his child sex offender status was known to others:

“...basically, the stigma, that’s always on my mind...will people find out what I’ve done? That’s one of the reasons why I don’t want to get too close to anybody...then they don’t know my name...they can’t find out about me and if they do find out about me, I’m not losing anything by not being close to people. If I get

11. McNaughton Nicholls, C. & Webster, S. (2018). *The separated location of prisoners with sexual convictions: Research on the benefits and risks*. Analytical Summary [PDF]. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5bc74704ed915d0ae30b91fe/separated-location-prisoners-with-sexual-convictions-report.pdf>

close to somebody and they find out [what I've done] it's going to be hard for them and hard for me." (Adam).

Here, Adam is discussing how the label of being a person convicted of child sex offences can cause uncertainty for him, and how he will not know what their reaction will be. Indeed, it has already been established above that he was subjected to threats, and he had looked forward to moving out. It can be argued therefore that mixed APs such as the one the participants resided in, may not be the most constructive tool to promote reintegration into the community, and thus reduce risks and recidivism. Those who did move out of the AP were glad to, and this will be explored in the final theme.

Appreciating what is lost and negotiating life outside of the AP

Nick was initially released from prison to the AP. He was happy with this at the time because he "knew people in there" (residents and staff) and because he "had been there before" due to previous convictions and subsequent releases from prison. He had a somewhat positive view of resettling into the AP and then moving on, because of this previous experience: he knew what to expect despite the complications that often come with a risk management and resettlement plan. He was however very motivated to move out of the AP for reasons that are described below:

"Being in there is difficult because it's near a school and parents know what it is, because they have tried to get it closed down. You have people looking at you, but nobody has really said anything." (Nick).

Nick was embarrassed about being in the AP, about the label associated with it and any perceptions that the community had about him:

"I got bidding for the council house and got offered one. I moved in and now I am just trying to decorate it and get it looking good...I just got out and got what I needed to get set up, money wise and stuff like that. [Along with] seeing my Brother and my Dad." (Nick).

Nick did not express any concerns about any violence or threats in the AP, his sole motivation was to get back into the community away from any potential labels that could be given to him.

Transitioning from one space to another was not as straightforward as the account of Nick for some of the participants, and this was due to the nature of their offending. This point was reiterated by the experience of Adam:

"I've put in for three sheltered dwellings and as far as I know the council rang my probation officer and because it had communal areas, he recommended that I wasn't suitable for it. His reason was that when they have these communal centres, people can have their grandkids visiting...if you knew people was going in there that was a risk to me, you'd stay away...why don't they trust you to do that? I think that's what it is, it's a matter of trust and I think they go a bit overboard." (Adam).

It is within reason that a person who has committed offences against children may be treated with caution in the community, and members of that community deserve the right to feel safe and protected. Therefore, suitable risk assessments must be made, and not every accommodation provider is equipped or willing to take potentially high-risk offenders. This was a loss of autonomy for Adam. Prior to being convicted he could live where he wanted to, but that was now all that freedom was gone. This sense of loss was often demonstrated when the participants spoke about what they had at the time of interview in comparison to before they were convicted. This loss is not as abstract as that felt by Adam above, it was more tangible:

"When I got my place...I did not waste any time in getting it ship shape. It's all decorated and painted, flooring done and everything and it looks nice now. I miss my garden. I had a garden at my old house but had to give it up when I went into prison. It was a three-bed house with a big garden." (Allan).

During this project, loss was a major and reoccurring theme, probably unsurprisingly. Due to their offending, many of the men had lost relationships, family, employment, and housing. These are many factors that are believed to help people reintegrate with success and the men appeared to appreciate how stark the loss was.¹⁴ Being in prison brings to the fore some losses that are perhaps quite obvious,¹⁵ on the other hand being in the community as a person on often strict community licence conditions brings a dichotomous sense of freedom and restriction. Having experienced loss seemingly helped the participants

12. Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Penguin.

appreciate their place in the community, especially after moving from the AP. Some therefore adopted a form of behavioural self-management in order to help negotiate life and prevent further loss, which undoubtedly increased their isolation:

“It’s a bungalow. That is what I wanted because it was affecting me going up and down stairs...I keep myself to myself and that will not cause problems, not for me, whether it does for anybody else, I don’t know. I think I will manage, if I keep doing what I’m doing. Keep myself to myself, keep my nose out of other people’s business...” (George).

“A lot of the time I’m keeping myself to myself, I’ve met one of the neighbours and she seems alright, but I don’t have a lot to do with her...I’ve always been one of these that likes my own space. Once I’m in my place on a night, I just like to chill out, watch telly or whatever, listen to music.” (Adam).

Unfortunately, isolation, a lack of meaningful relationships, lack of suitable employment or housing, can be criminogenic factors that increase the risk of offending behaviour, especially child sex offending. What may be an encouraging transition, prison – AP – rented accommodation, may in fact make things worse.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article aimed to disseminate some of the findings from a larger qualitative research project concerning people who had committed child sex offences who were living in the community post-conviction. It specifically focused on the themes of life inside the AP, linking to violence and threats within that environment, and then transitioning between the AP and the community and the loss that the participants felt. It established that these different stages were often quite difficult for the participants to negotiate due to their perceived or actual risk of reoffending, their status as a person convicted of child sex offences, or the emotional/violent reactions that other people had towards them. This caused fear and a heightened sense of threat, further requiring the men to isolate themselves rather than reintegrate, thus increasing the

risks associated with the onset of sexual offending. The AP was a ‘toxic’ environment, where there was a mix of people with and without convictions for child sex offences. It did not seem to be difficult for people to know about another person’s offending, and this further increased the likelihood of violence occurring. Finally, some of the men were able to move out of the AP and into their own places. When they did, they took pride in this, and it was clear that they once again had some form of social capital, and a bond to the community. This made them mindful of what they had previously lost, but rather than being close to their community as they had hoped, some expressed how they did not mix with others and kept themselves to themselves.

Based on this conclusion, the following recommendations are presented:

1. The mix of people with and without convictions for child sex offences within APs across England and Wales is of concern. It is recommended that HMPPS carry out a wider study to examine the prevalence of violence and threats between the two groups. This will help establish what measures may need to be put in place to better protect those in their care.
2. People who have been convicted of child sex offences often move into the AP and then the community with little or no support. It is recommended that dedicated housing advocates who specialise in housing support for this cohort be trialled within APs, with a view to roll out nationally in the future.
3. The framing of expectations for people who have been convicted of child sex offences needs to be addressed from an early stage. This could be through specific and targeted work and education within prisons, or through the sentence planning and Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) measures. For example, Arden University have been working with HMP Rye Hill on projects such as this for the last few years.

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13. See footnote 3: Kras, K. R., Pleggenkuhle, B., & Huebner, B. M. (2016).

14. Sykes, G. (1958). *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*. Princeton University Press.