



HOW LEISURE CENTRES ENABLE SEXUAL PREDATORS

Authors: Faye McGinty and Joan Lewis

A Womens Rights Network Investigation
Data from Northern Ireland, 2026



**WOMEN'S
RIGHTS
NETWORK**

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
Mixed-sex changing	5
Sex crimes in leisure centres – England and Wales	6
Freedom of Information investigation – Northern Ireland	8
Data and Results	8
Discussion	9
Appendix A – FOI Questions	12

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the women who contributed their unpaid time and labour towards the compilation of this report.

Published June 2026

Executive Summary

In December 2025, Women's Rights Network (WRN) published a report titled "Leisure Centres: Putting Women and Girls at Risk" containing police data collated from a Freedom of Information (FOI) investigation on sexual crimes in leisure centres in England and Wales¹.

These data showed that in one year (2023) there were 16 rapes, 80 sexual assaults and 65 acts of voyeurism across 257 leisure centres in England and Wales. As there are approximately 860 leisure centres in England and Wales, and as these crimes are under-reported, the totals will be much higher.

Using the same FOI approach, data on sexual crimes in leisure centres and swimming pools across Northern Ireland have been provided by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). The response to our questions from PSNI is that:

Of a combined total of 13 sexual crimes (rape, sexual assault, voyeurism) in leisure centres in Northern Ireland in 2023, seven (54%) occurred in changing areas.

All victims are female, all suspects are male.

Unlike data and information from police forces in England, details of the location of these sexual crimes have been documented by PSNI and from the FOI response, we know that:

Of the seven sexual crimes that occurred in changing areas, six (86%) took place in mixed-sex changing areas.

The figures for Northern Ireland closely align with data from three of the police forces in Wales, where of 16 sexual offences recorded in a changing room in 2023, 14 (**88%**) occurred in a mixed-sex village changing room, and also correlates with *The Sunday Times* report that 120 of 134 complaints (**90%**) of sexual assaults / voyeurism in leisure centres and public swimming pools in 2017-18 occurred in mixed-sex facilities.

In just one reported example in Northern Ireland, a 2020 news report highlighting the police investigation of a voyeurism incident at Omagh Leisure Complex² revealed that there had previously been 12 alleged incidents of sexual misconduct/voyeurism since it opened after re-development in July 2014, five of which involved a child under the age of 16. The re-development of this leisure centre included the installation of 'Family Friendly Village Changing Rooms' and has been the main source of complaints about alleged sexual misconduct out of all the main leisure facilities in Tyrone.

Mixed-sex changing villages are the default design for new swimming pools and refurbished wet-side changing areas. Whenever we ask, no risk assessment has been carried out before installing this type of changing area that represents a physical threat to the safety of women and girls.

The data are clear; there is no doubt that mixed-sex changing villages create an environment where avoidable abuse and material harms occur regularly. This criminal behaviour, and the potential for escalation, **must** be considered during the planning and design of leisure centres.

Sport England, local councils, leisure centre operators and architects must act now to ensure the safety of women and girls in UK leisure centres.

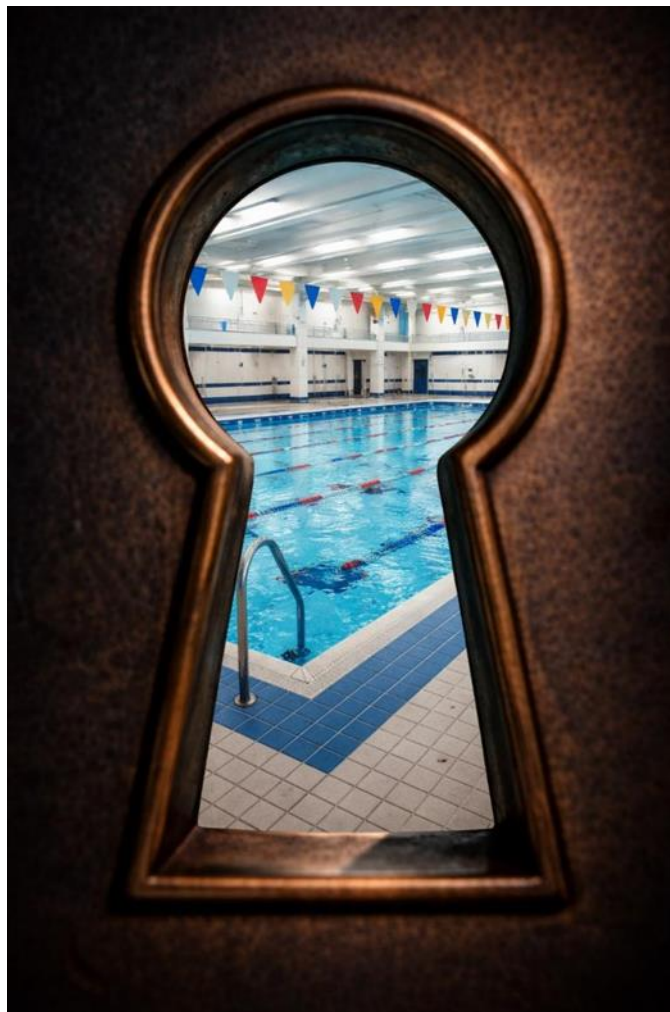
¹ <https://www.womensrights.network/post/how-leisure-centres-enable-sexual-predators>

² <https://wearetyrone.com/news/latest-news/voyeurism-reported-at-leisure-complex/>

Women's Rights Network Demands:

- Sport England immediately withdraws all guidance promoting mixed-sex wet-side facilities as the default option for new and refurbished leisure centres.
- New facilities provide single-sex changing facilities for swimming pool users.
- Councils conduct a risk assessment on safety for women and girls before rubber-stamping plans for changing areas in new or refurbished leisure centres.
- Crime prevention officers are consulted on all design plans, and their expertise is used to help 'design out' crime.
- Existing changing villages must be assessed for the risk of sex crimes and robust mitigation measures be applied together with consideration of cost-effective solutions ensuring a female-only space.

THE SAFEST CHANGING ROOM IS A SINGLE-SEX CHANGING ROOM



Introduction

WRN is founded on the principle that women and girls deserve single sex spaces when they are undressed and vulnerable, whether that is in high street shops, gyms, sports and health clubs or leisure centres.

The campaign scope of the WRN Sport Group includes ensuring that changing rooms are part of the deal when it comes to the protection of single-sex spaces in competitive sport and recreation activities. Policies must reflect the need for safety, privacy and dignity of women and girls in all sectors, and they must be enforced rigorously.

Access to single-sex facilities in leisure centres and swimming pools has been shrinking. In 2024, a WRN investigation revealed that around 30% of local authorities provide *no* single-sex changing or showering facilities for swimming pool users.

Mixed-sex changing

Local authorities and architects heavily rely on Sport England guidelines when planning new swimming pools and waterparks. In their 2013 guidance, Sport England promote village-style changing as the 'preferred option'³ leading to this type of open plan, mixed-sex changing area becoming the blueprint for new and refurbished swimming pools. The more recent 'Accessible and Inclusive Sports Facilities' is a comprehensive document but lacks any analysis of the safety implications of mixed-sex changing rooms.



Example of a village-style changing area that replaced single-sex changing rooms during a leisure centre refurbishment of wet-side facilities⁴.

The Sport England swimming pool design guidance has been adopted by all the UK Sports Councils including Sport NI, Sport Scotland and Sport Wales.

Village-style changing areas, inadequacies in cubicle design and the ubiquity of mobile phones have led to wholesale, widespread voyeurism in leisure centre swimming pools that is out of control. Walls between cubicles in these mixed-sex changing areas have large gaps beneath and above – large enough for covert filming with mobile phones, and so large that there are now several documented

³ <https://www.sportengland.org/guidance-and-support/facilities-and-planning/design-and-cost-guidance/swimming-pools#:~:text=Our%20design%20guide%20was%20updated,been%20updated%20in%20Appendix%202.>

⁴ <https://www.thewestmorlandgazette.co.uk/news/15134690.changing-village-to-be-created-at-kendal-leisure-centre-as-part-of-450000-investment/>

cases of men who have simply bent down and been able to see into the adjoining cubicle^{5,6,7}.

Physical safety is compromised in changing villages that incorporate mixed-sex, multiple occupancy shower areas that are enclosed on three sides thereby hiding those inside from the view of patrolling lifeguards and on-duty staff.

In a 2020 news report highlighting the police investigation of a voyeurism incident at Omagh Leisure Complex⁸, it was revealed that there had previously been 12 alleged incidents of sexual misconduct/voyeurism since it opened after re-development in July 2014, five of which involved a child under the age of 16. The re-development of this leisure centre included the installation of 'Family Friendly Village Changing Rooms' and has been the main source of complaints about alleged sexual misconduct out of all the main leisure facilities in Tyrone.

Common sense dictates that the safest changing room is a single-sex changing room.

Single-sex changing facilities are the gold standard because they eliminate the primary risk to women and girls - the presence of males.

It is hugely alarming that the default option for new swimming pools is mixed-sex village-style changing facilities, ignoring not only the basic principles of safeguarding and privacy, but also ignoring how the majority of people feel about 'gender-neutral' changing areas. In a national survey commissioned by Sex Matters, 84% said they prefer 'changing rooms in gyms and leisure centres' to be single sex⁹.

Sex crimes in leisure centres – England and Wales

As part of the 'Red Flag' campaign which highlights how changing villages 'design-in' harm and abuse, WRN has logged news reports of crimes in leisure centres that have secured convictions, including voyeurism and assaults. Our 'Red Flag Map' of over 130 cases in the UK all feature a male perpetrator and the victims are often teenage girls¹⁰.

To provide data that supports our demand for single-sex provision, WRN has investigated the level of sexual crime in leisure centres, and in December 2025 we published a report on police data from England and Wales: How Leisure Centres Enable Sexual Predators.

The 2025 investigation revealed that there were at least
**16 rapes, 80 sexual assaults, and 65 acts of voyeurism
in 257 leisure centres in 2023 alone.**

This amounts to at least **three serious sex crimes a week**
across the leisure centres included in our investigation.

⁵ <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/news/courts/5386909/mohammed-mirzai-perth-pool-peeping-tom/>

⁶ <https://www.bournemouthcho.co.uk/news/23856338.man-caught-spying-woman-new-forest-leisure-centre-changing-rooms/>

⁷ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3024801/Caught-CCTV-Peeping-Tom-spies-young-women-changed-swimming-pool.html>

⁸ <https://wearetyrone.com/news/latest-news/voyeurism-reported-at-leisure-complex/>

⁹ <https://sex-matters.org/posts/updates/new-poll-shows-most-people-prefer-single-sex-toilets-and-changing-rooms/>

¹⁰ <https://x.com/WomensRightsNet/status/1946103625916317801>

As there are approximately 860 leisure centres in England and Wales, and as these crimes are under-reported, the totals will be much higher.

In many cases, it was not possible to determine the exact location of the crimes within the leisure centres in England due to gaps in police data and inconsistencies in the way data are recorded. The same issue has been described by Lady Angiolini KC in her recent review¹¹. However, data from Wales tells us that of the 16 incidents recorded in a changing room, 14 (**88%**) occurred in a mixed-sex changing village, which closely aligns with the figures reported in the Sunday Times that 120 of 134 complaints (**90%**) of sexual assaults / voyeurism in leisure centres and public swimming pools in 2017-18 occurred in mixed-sex facilities.

In this report, we present police data for sexual crimes in leisure centres in Northern Ireland.



THE SAFEST CHANGING ROOM IS A SINGLE-SEX CHANGING ROOM

¹¹ <https://www.angiolini.independent-inquiry.uk/updates-from-the-angiolini-inquiry/>

Freedom of Information investigation – Northern Ireland

In November 2025, nine questions were sent to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) asking about the number of reports of sexual assault, rape and voyeurism in leisure centres with swimming pools in the period between 1st January and 31st December 2023.

The questions, listed in Appendix A, are substantively the same as those sent to police forces in England and Wales and presented in our 2025 report. A list of 81 leisure centres and swimming pools in Northern Ireland was provided to facilitate the PSNI data analysis.

Data and Results

FOI questions to the PSNI received the following response:

Total number of offences

A total of 13 reported offences comprising combined data for rape, sexual assault and voyeurism.

Data have been provided as an overall total, rather than the number of individual sexual offences, with PSNI citing,

“...a significant risk that this level of breakdown could potentially lead to the identification of individuals involved and thus a breach of Data Protection regulations therefore Section 40(2) of FOI act applies...”

Location of offences

Six offences occurred in mixed-sex, open plan village changing areas.

One offence occurred in a single-sex changing area.

PSNI state that when answering Question 4 on reports of sexual offences in mixed-sex, open plan village style changing areas, they have,

“...interpreted this to mean any changing area which utilises cubical (sic) changing.”

Offenders / Victims

The suspect was male in all reported incidents.

None (zero) of the suspects were reported to be a male member of staff.

All (13) victims were female.

The PSNI provided the following answer to the question of whether biological sex or gender identity of offenders is recorded:

“There is no current definition of gender within the service in relation to data collection and reporting systems. At present gender is recorded according to how a person reports their gender to police.”

Discussion

The response from PSNI to our FoI questions reveals that:

Of a combined total of 13 sexual crimes (rape, sexual assault, voyeurism) in leisure centres in Northern Ireland in 2023, seven (54%) occurred in changing areas.

Of the seven sexual crimes that occurred in changing areas, six (86%) took place in mixed-sex changing areas.

All reported sexual crimes involved male perpetrators and female victims.

Focusing on the **86%** (six out of seven reported offences) of sex crimes that took place against females in mixed-sex, open plan changing villages; these figures closely align with data we received from police forces in Wales, where of 16 sexual offences recorded in a changing room in 2023, 14 (**88%**) occurred in a mixed-sex village changing room, and also correlates with the findings of a report from *The Sunday Times* report that 120 of 134 complaints (**90%**) of sexual assaults / voyeurism in leisure centres and public swimming pools in 2017-18 occurred in mixed-sex facilities.

Perpetrator behaviour

In our 2025 leisure centre report, we mentioned the Ministry of Justice report ‘Escalation in the severity of offending behaviour’¹². It is worth noting, and taking extremely seriously, the threat posed by men who commit voyeurism offences. Every time a voyeur evades detection, reporting or detention, there is the potential for that man’s behaviour to escalate into Serious Sexual Assault (SSA) and sexual homicide.

Escalation in the severity of offending behaviour

Precursor	Offence Group	Sexual Homicide	Nonsexual Homicide	SSA: those with a sexual offence history	SSA: those with no sexual offence history
Kerb crawling and similar offences	Sexual	+++	N/R	+++	X
Sexual assault against adult victims	Sexual	+++	-	N/R	X
Sexual assault against child victims	Sexual	+++	-	++	X
Sexual offence with male child victim	Sexual	+++	---	+	X
Sexual offence with male victim (not restricted to children)	Sexual	+++	N/R	+	X
Voyeurism	Sexual	+++	N/R	++	X

Symbol	Description of strength of association	Notes
+	Moderate positive association	Odds ratio was between 1.0 (inclusive) and 1.5 (exclusive)
++	Strong positive association	Odds ratio was between 1.5 (inclusive) and 2.0 (exclusive)
+++	Very strong positive association	Odds ratio was 2.0 or higher
---	Very strong negative	Odds ratio was 0.5 or lower
--	Strong negative	Odds ratio was between 0.5 (exclusive) and 0.67 (inclusive)
-	Negative	Odds ratio was between 0.67 (exclusive) and 1.0 (exclusive)
X	Not studied	For instance, sexual precursors were not studied for the target offence of ‘serious sexual assault – for those with no sexual history’.
N/R	No relationship	No positive or negative association was found between the precursor and the target offence

Figure 1: Excerpt from Summary Table 2 “Results for association of precursors for escalation by offence group and the four main target offence types: Sexual homicide, nonsexual homicide, serious sexual assault (SSA) for those with and without sexual offence history” from the 2023 MoJ report ‘Escalation in the severity of offending behaviour’¹³

Design Out Harm - Solutions

WRN fully supports the philosophy that families should be able to easily access changing areas with

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/escalation-in-the-severity-of-offending-behaviour>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/escalation-in-the-severity-of-offending-behaviour>

the relevant space and privacy, and there should always be suitable provision for those less able-bodied; however, it is necessary and possible to design wet-side changing areas that are separated by sex, incorporating individual rooms for families, or carers helping someone of the opposite sex.

We've seen an example of a design plan that safely accommodates everyone, shown in Figure 2 below, with separate areas for male and female changing that include cubicles, showers and toilets, and additional accessible / family changing¹⁴. This design prioritises the safety of women and girls and satisfies the requirements of all members of the community; a valid alternative to the standard changing village design.

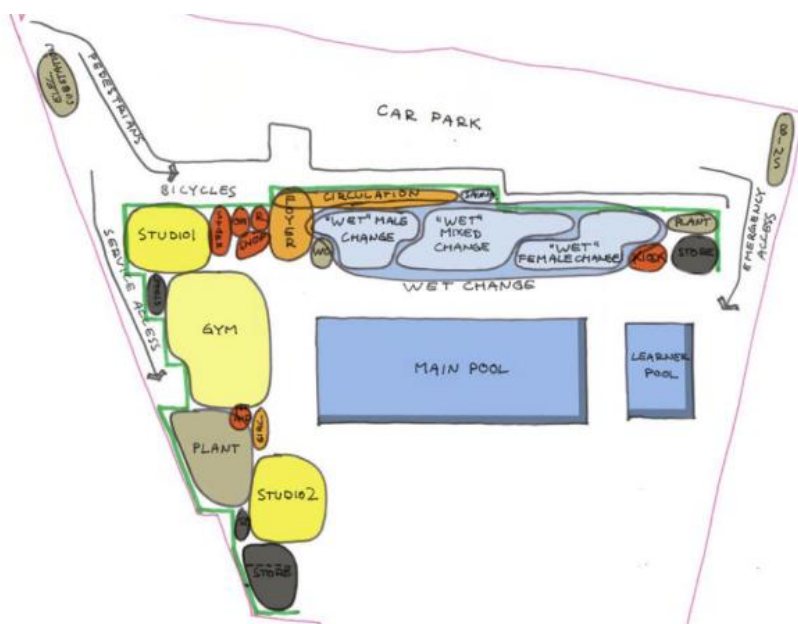


Figure 2: Proposed design plans for an upgrade of the Hampton Pool facility in Hampton Middlesex¹².

It is time to stop the normalisation of violence against women and girls in leisure centres

¹⁴ <https://www.hamptonpooltrust.org.uk/plans-and-reasons.php>

WRN Demands

Our demands remain the same:

- Sport England must immediately withdraw all guidance promoting mixed-sex wet-side facilities as the default option for new and refurbished leisure centres.
- New facilities must provide single-sex changing facilities for swimming pool users.
- Councils must conduct a risk assessment on safety for women and girls before rubber-stamping plans for changing areas in new or refurbished leisure centres.
- Crime prevention officers are consulted on all design plans, and their expertise is used to help 'design out' crime.
- Existing changing villages must be assessed for the risk of sex crimes and robust mitigation measures must be applied together with consideration of cost-effective solutions ensuring a female-only space.

THE SAFEST CHANGING ROOM IS A SINGLE-SEX CHANGING ROOM

Appendix A – FOI Questions

- 1 How many reports have been made to the PSNI of sexual assault which are alleged to have taken place in leisure centres, swimming pools, health clubs and spas?
- 2 How many reports have been made to the PSNI of rape which are alleged to have taken place in leisure centres, swimming pools, health clubs or spas?
- 3 How many reports have been made to the PSNI of voyeurism (all forms of covert surveillance whether using a recording device or in person) which are alleged to have taken place in leisure centres, swimming pools, health clubs or spas?
- 4 How many of the above points 1, 2 & 3 were reported to have taken place in a mixed-sex, open plan village style changing area?
- 5 How many of the above points 1, 2 & 3 were reported to have taken place in a single-sex changing room?
- 6 How many of the above points 1, 2 & 3 were reported to have been committed by a male?
- 7 How many of the above points 1, 2 & 3 were reported to have been committed by a male member of staff?
- 8 How many of the above points 1, 2 & 3 were reported to have involved a female victim?
- 9 Does your force record the sex of offenders as biological sex or as gender identity?

The **Women's Rights Network** (WRN) is a rapidly growing grassroots network of women from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland whose primary focus is to defend the sex-based rights of women.

