

ACTIVE*CONSENT



**FIRST POINT
OF CONTACT:
DISCLOSURE
MANAGEMENT
SKILLS TRAINING**

RESEARCH EVALUATION STUDY

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ACTIVE*CONSENT



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An Ghníomhaireacht um Fhoréigean Baile
Gnéasach agus Inscnebhunaithe
The Domestic, Sexual and
Gender-Based Violence Agency

FOREWORD

The Galway Rape Crisis Centre (GRCC) stands as a pillar of support for survivors of sexual violence and abuse, offering professional counselling services of the highest quality.

Since its inception in 1984, GRCC has grown significantly, driven by a mission to address the critical need for services for survivors of sexual abuse. Over time our commitment has expanded to also encompass support for male survivors.

Our committed team at GRCC presently consists of 31 staff members and a network of passionate volunteers. Underpinning our operations is a strong emphasis on transparency and accountability. At GRCC, we are not only dedicated to providing essential support services but also to driving change through education and advocacy, striving for a future free from sexual violence and abuse.

The GRCC Education Department is dedicated to shaping a more inclusive future by providing training and education programmes that encompasses schools, workplaces and community projects. Since the department's official formation in 2020 our primary goal is to eradicate pervasive societal tolerance of sexual violence. We do this through advocacy, awareness campaigns and comprehensive education initiatives.

The experiential element of the First Point of Contact (FPOC) training is unique. The survivor's experience is always held at the core of the training. It enables the FPOC participants to expand their knowledge and awareness of sexual violence. This training also broadens their emotional capacity to receive and hold a disclosure of sexual violence, and



signpost on to supports. We believe the power of FPOC, and the integral role of GRCC specialist involvement, contributes to the cultural shift in the eradication of sexual violence and harassment.

First Point of Contact was developed by Galway Rape Crisis Centre in collaboration with the Active* Consent. We are very proud of its ongoing success and our successful partnership with the Active* Consent team. While we have trained people from all around the country on FPOC through our partnership in continuous professional development and engagement with Further Education & Training sector, the engagement of the University of Galway has allowed us to establish a case for sustained institutional integration.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cathy Connolly". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cathy Connolly
Director, Galway Rape Crisis Centre
November 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

First Point of Contact (FPOC) disclosure management skills training

FPOC is a 12-hour psychotherapist-led training programme that prepares participants to receive disclosures of sexual violence and harassment (SVH) and to signpost to relevant supports and services. The training has been devised and delivered through a collaboration between the Galway Rape Crisis Centre (GRCC) and the Active* Consent programme. This research study used a mixed methods research design to evaluate the FPOC training and make recommendations about its sustainability into the future.

As well as having specialist psychotherapists from GRCC lead the training, support has been provided by therapists based at the University of Galway Student Counselling Service. Implementation of FPOC has had a particular focus on the University of Galway, where 157 participants were trained up to June 2024. Additional participants have joined our Level 9 10-ECTS accredited continuous professional development module that has run since 2021, and through a consent promotion initiative delivered to the Further Education & Training sector that has been supported by the Department of Justice and now Cuan.

Purpose of this evaluation research study

- To study the experience and satisfaction of staff and students who have completed the FPOC training.
- To make recommendations for the future development of the FPOC training with regard to efficacy, inclusion, and sustainability in particular.

Summary of research in the area of disclosure skills training

Research to date suggests that there is scope to enhance the provision of standardised disclosure management skills training in education settings and other organisations. While disclosure training recommendations have been suggested, guidance on training content requires further clarification and development. Research indicates the importance of having culturally specific disclosure skills training content. A comprehensive implementation model for sustainable disclosure skills training is lacking in the research carried out to date.

Data collection and research methods:

A mixed methods research design was used to evaluate FPOC training:

- 154 participants completed an online survey that evaluated the FPOC training programme. The survey provided quantitative and qualitative data that were analysed and reported on.
- Focus group interviews, individual stakeholder interviews, and a follow up survey of FPOC participants were conducted and analysed using thematic and content analysis.

Findings

The participants described the FPOC training as providing the skills required for them to feel prepared and confident in receiving a disclosure of sexual violence or harassment. Participants agreed that there were benefits to taking part in FPOC training, including those who had earlier experience of disclosure training or relevant job roles, along with those who did not have prior training experience.

Positive feedback was given on the FPOC training process, as reflected in online survey responses on the planning of sessions, FPOC trainer skills, and the positive environment established between trainers and participants. The content of the training sessions was also evaluated positively, with particular reference made to the learning associated with role play exercises and critical reflection on sexual violence myths.

The participants provided suggestions to enhance FPOC training further, such as extending trainer guidance and feedback and content related to diversity and culture change. Overall, participants described having achieved significant learning that they valued. Nearly all would recommend undertaking FPOC training to their colleagues.

Recommendations for future disclosure training standards and sustainability:

A sustainability model was developed to guide future development of the FPOC training. The key recommendations of the evaluation research are drawn from this model:

1. Maintain the high standard of training in the FPOC delivery model

Training should continue to be provided by specialist facilitators. The time requirement of the training should be maintained to make it feasible to include experiential learning and critical reflection. Implementation of the standardised training programme should be monitored to ensure that there is fidelity to the approved content and mode of delivery. Feedback from participants and ongoing engagement with experts and research should be prioritised to ensure that FPOC training is continually enhanced.

2. Enhance existing training

Areas for further improvement in training content and delivery were noted. These included greater coverage of diversity and intersectionality, culture change, disclosures of SVH perpetration, and additional information on policy and procedures related to SVH.

3. Sustaining the FPOC role

The training experience itself should be complemented by access to resources and support afterwards. This could include provision of standard reference material that participants can rely on to ground their response in the practice they have been trained to deliver. Refresher training should be provided regularly to people who have completed the training, ensuring that their key FPOC skills and knowledge are maintained. Additional training opportunities should be made available to extend the participant's skill set. Peer support and networking were continually emphasised by training participants as a required follow up to sustain the role, while group supervision and access to specialised support were equally seen as a priority for sustainability.

4. Visible and accessible

Recruitment to FPOC training should be targeted to ensure that it achieves coverage across an institution. Those people who have completed the training and wish to be identified in the role should have their contact information made available through a method approved and monitored by the institution. The FPOC role should be promoted as a support that assists individuals through signposting and in providing a space for listening.

5. Grounded in the organisation

For sustainability, the FPOC role in an institution should be set out clearly and the boundaries to the role ought to be delineated. The role should be recognised in institutional policy and procedures, with recognition of the contribution made featuring in workload allocation models. It is important to monitor levels of informal disclosures made to people trained in FPOC, in an appropriate way that ensures it continues to be the person's choice to make a report or not. Institutional concerns about meeting the needs of an increasing number of people who might make an official report should be addressed by reviewing access to specialised supports.



BACKGROUND

‘Disclosure of sexual violence or harassment (SVH)’ refers to an individual informing someone else, formally or informally, about their experience (Sabina & Ho, 2014). The capacity for members of an organisational community to have a safe, well supported outlet for telling someone what has happened to them is a basic requirement arising from the duty of care obligations of employers and education providers. Yet a well worked out infrastructure of this kind is typically not present in educational settings, posing a fundamental issue for any organisation that is striving to achieve the culture change now recognised to be a priority in Irish national policy (Department of Justice, 2024; Department for Further, Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science, 2019).

Disclosure management skills training refers to actions intended to prepare participants to learn how to respond to disclosures of SVH. Traditionally, disclosure training has taken on a range of formats, including self-directed online training and in-person training of variable duration (Alldred & Phipps, 2018, Jones et al., 2021). This report describes an evaluation carried out on the ‘First Point of Contact’ (FPOC) disclosure management skills training programme, a collaboration between Active* Consent, Galway Rape Crisis Centre, and partners including the University of Galway. Since 2021, approximately 300 individuals have completed the 12-hour training, including Higher Education (HE) students and staff members, Further Education & Training (FET) sector staff, along with professionals from other education settings, statutory organisations, NGOs, and community groups.

The evaluation is largely based on feedback provided by participants who took part in FPOC training and stakeholders during 2023 and 2024. The evaluation assesses whether the training content and delivery format was acceptable and impactful for participants. It goes on to consider how to ensure that high quality, standardised training is rolled out as the norm for organisations, with the aim of meeting the basic requirement that organisations are prepared when any of their members wish to disclose sexual violence or harassment.

The relevance of disclosure training is underscored by recent research in the Irish Higher Education (HE) sector on SVH. For example, 44% of Irish students surveyed reported that they had been subjected to sexual violence since joining college, and a majority indicated that they had experienced sexual harassment (Burke et al., 2020). Thus, it is important for the HE sector to have structures in place that will support students who choose to disclose what has happened to them, whether or not they intend to engage with the formal complaints and investigation processes in their institution. The assertion that SVH is experienced relatively commonly in the HE sector is reflected in research with undergraduates and postgraduates in the UK, Europe, and the US (The Student Room & Revolt Sexual Assault, 2018, Bull & Page, 2021, Schredle et al., 2023). Further Irish evidence on this issue was provided by the 2021 Higher Education Authority (HEA) national survey of students (MacNeela et al., 2022a).

An emerging body of work has extended this exploration to the experiences of Higher Education staff. For example, the 2021 HEA national survey found that 59% of staff members who chose to respond to the survey invitation had experienced

sexist hostility (MacNeela et al., 2022b). Approximately half of the staff were treated differently on the basis of their gender, with a similar percentage describing having been condescended to because of gender. One-quarter of the staff respondents had been subjected to sexualised comments related to gender. One in eight described sexualised comments related to their sexual orientation. A similar proportion of staff had been touched in a way that made them feel uncomfortable, while one in twenty had experienced unwelcome attempts at stroking or kissing. However, in common with students, few staff members indicated that they had made a formal report to their institution. Research with HE staff internationally has raised concerns about their exposure to SVH (Bondestaam & Lundqvist, 2020). More recently, the COSHARE all-island study of staff experiences in Ireland has provided additional evidence on this issue (Lagdon et al., 2024).

Thus, the pressing need for a disclosure skills management training infrastructure within Higher Education institutions has been clearly demonstrated. It is further contextualised by the trend in research surveys for many students and staff to make disclosures to peers rather than through formal channels (Burke et al., 2020; MacNeela et al., 2022a / b; Lagdon et al., 2024). Indeed, up to one-third of students and staff in such surveys have indicated that they had not disclosed what had happened to them outside of the survey itself. Moreover, the description of high SVH rates in findings of the ground-breaking Central Statistics Office study of a representative sample of adults in Ireland (CSO, 2022) suggests that the need for greater disclosure preparedness extends throughout Irish society.

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DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The potential for the training programme to be sustainable into the future was supported by several aspects of the research findings. Firstly, the training demonstrated efficacy in enabling participants to meet the learning outcomes it was designed to achieve. Secondly, although relatively time consuming to complete, the participants typically described the commitment required and the demands of the training as manageable. Further to this, individuals who took part tended to state that they would like to continue in the role and have contact information made available.

Overall, the research evaluation study identified that the FPOC programme was successful in areas including:

- Achieving sustained partnership of Galway Rape Crisis Centre, the University of Galway, Active* Consent, and partner networks such as the Further Education & Training sector.
- Attracting sustained interest of participants across a range of backgrounds.
- The delivery model was acceptable to participants, and was flexible to being delivered online and in-person, as a standalone training for groups of mixed backgrounds, as an embedded component of a university-accredited module, and as an offering for participants from a particular background such as FET.
- Allowing participants to learn through experiential learning as well as through discussion, theory and policy.

- The training was valued as a source of knowledge and skills by participants with minimal relevant experience as well as those who had pre-existing experience.
- The delivery was trustworthy and safe, and enabled participants to feel confident in their abilities and preparedness.
- FPOC training was described as providing transferable skills relevant to other areas such as supporting someone who makes a disclosure about their mental health, and in participants' personal lives.
- The training has the capacity to host a unique forum of people across different backgrounds in an institution, from teachers and academics, to students, and professional support staff working in different areas.

Alongside these distinctive strengths and opportunities, the research also identified a broader set of factors to consider when developing a sustainable model for disclosure skills training. For example, the capacity of organisations to manage large increase in rates of formal reporting was questioned by some stakeholders. Moreover, constraints were noted on the availability of specialised staff who can support staff and students affected by SVH. In addition to this, questions were raised about the preparedness of organisational units and departments to respond to informal enquiries. Stakeholders and FPOC participants also flagged an issue with people who are trained in FPOC finding the time to make an ongoing commitment to such a role given their already busy and pressurised jobs.

Sustainability of the FPOC training model

Table 13 integrates the key research findings on continued development of the FPOC training and its sustainability, which provides a basis for the evaluation report recommendations.

There was a clear rationale for maintaining the high standard of training that participants evaluated so positively. Thus, there should be continuing commitment to delivery by specialised FPOC trainers who have psychotherapy qualifications, and to providing a standardised programme of training over the 12-hour duration comprising multiple training sessions. While many participants remarked on the challenge of experiential learning, the use of critical reflection and role play were fundamental to the learning process.

Table 1. Key areas for addressing FPOC sustainability, future potential and risks.

High standard of training	Enhancing existing training	Sustaining the role	Visible and accessible	Grounded in the organisation
Delivered by specialist facilitators	Diversity and intersectionality	Reference material and tips	Targeted, continuing FPOC recruitment	Clarity and boundaries of the FPOC role
Opportunity for critical reflection and experiential learning	Culture change	Refresher training on key skills	FPOC contact information available	Recognition in policy and procedures
Fidelity to standardised delivery and content	Information on policy and procedures	Updates and additional training	Visibility and promotion of the FPOC role	Acknowledged in workload allocation
Commitment to time requirements		Peer support and networking		Monitoring uptake levels by victim-survivors
Ongoing review and research		Group supervision and access to support		Capacity to meet increased reporting

Sustainability of the FPOC training model (continued)

Sustainability would be enhanced by addressing areas to further improve the FPOC training. Participants said the training would be strengthened by increased the coverage of diversity and intersectionality, culture change, and ensuring that clear reference information is presented on the key FPOC skills and on institutional procedures. Once the training was complete, participants would typically like to remain linked into a network of supportive peers. There was a consistent request for refresher training on FPOC skills, the opportunity to extend skills further, and access to regular group supervision.

Following all of these steps, institutional sustainability would involve establishing clear expectations for the FPOC role, aligned to policies and procedures, made visible via a dissemination campaign, and through community access to FPOC contact details. Targeted recruitment would be needed to ensure that there was good coverage across the institution and to relevant groups. There was reference made by participants to having training be required for all staff, however this may incorporate less intensive awareness raising for supporters and stakeholders alongside the FPOC training itself. Mandatory education for all staff would provide a supportive platform for those staff who engage in FPOC training (Aldred & Phipps, 2017). Overall, the participants questioned the ability of their institutions to meet

all of these requirements currently. For instance, there was concern over whether institutions could respond to a pattern of increased formal reporting, and whether already busy staff members could incorporate FPOC roles in their workload.

The support of senior management, department heads and colleagues would be needed to make the FPOC role a lasting, sustainable niche with a Higher Education institution – or in any other education or work setting. Nevertheless, the value of the FPOC training was acknowledged by the individuals who took part in the evaluation research. This value extended not only to participants but to building capacity in institutions.

The training model that has been described in this report should be protected in terms of fidelity and further enhanced following participant and stakeholder suggestions. Participants have been receiving informal disclosures, and organisations must choose whether to meet the challenge of systematic implementation. This applies to the spectrum of organisations and education settings, from large Higher Education institutions, to smaller Further Education & Training colleges, and into other settings such as post-primary schools. Nevertheless, as it stands, participants and stakeholders who took part in the research evaluation felt that FPOC training engagement represented a valuable enhancement for individuals and organisations.



Participant satisfaction with FPOC training

FPOC training process

The participants agreed that the FPOC trainers were well prepared and professional, had planned the training sessions well, and made the learning outcomes of each session clear. Participants also felt that the materials, learning resources, and learning activities that were used throughout the training were effective and that the time commitment involved for taking part in the full 12-hour training was manageable.

The role play component of the training provided participants with the opportunity to take part in a mock disclosure situation, an exercise that the participants greatly valued. This exercise allowed participants to use the skills that they had learned – to practice empathic responses to disclosures, to become aware of rape myths and victim blaming and their own unconscious assumptions and bias. These have been noted to be predictors of how an individual might react to a disclosure and which do not feature in all disclosure training programmes (Sears-Greer et al., 2022). Though many participants found the role plays difficult, they also spoke about the advantages, citing the insights they achieved into SVH experiences and the ability to practice their skills.

Participants said that a positive and supportive environment had been created during the training sessions.

They felt well supported by the trainers and fellow FPOC training participants. This is an important finding because half of the participants indicated that the training brought up difficult issues for them, and they were asked to engage in role play and critical reflection on their personal assumptions about consent and SVH. This leads to a state of vulnerability, and yet participants typically agreed that were safe and supported during training. This underscores the importance of having appropriately qualified trainers, given the emphasis placed on vicarious trauma and the importance of self-care (AbiNader et al., 2023; Crivatu et al., 2023).

When asked if they would recommend FPOC training to their colleagues, the vast majority of participants agreed that they would. Further analysis showed that participants who had previous experience with receiving disclosures or had attended other disclosure training or seminars were as likely to recommend FPOC training as participants who had no formal disclosure experience. There appeared to be benefits to FPOC training regardless of whether participants had previously attended other disclosure training seminars or had experience receiving disclosures as part of their professional role. Overall, participants typically agreed that after completing FPOC training, they felt prepared to receive a disclosure of SVH.

Participant satisfaction with FPOC training (continued)

FPOC training content

Most participants agreed that taking part in FPOC training provided them with the skills that they required to receive a disclosure of SVH. This was an important outcome of the training because a person's reaction to receiving a disclosure can impact the individual who makes the disclosure (Ahrens, 2006; Orchowski et al., 2013). Participants identified skills that they had acquired during the training, including empathetic responding, active listening, and non-judgemental support. Indeed, these skills were relevant for being an effective communicator across a range of situations, and illustrate learning achievements that should be highlighted in future FPOC recruitment.

Most FPOC participants agreed that they felt prepared to receive a disclosure of SVH after completing the training. Those with no prior SVH or disclosure training experience were as likely to feel prepared as people who had some previous training experience or who were in a role where disclosures may be made. Thus, the benefits of FPOC participation extended to participant confidence that they could receive a disclosure. Confidence in this context meant the ability to be present and open to receiving a disclosure, alongside possessing the knowledge and relevant information needed to signpost somebody to additional supports.

Suggestions to improve FPOC training

Participants and stakeholders made suggestions and advice about how FPOC training could be further enhanced. At present, FPOC training is provided both in-person and online, depending on a participant's route into the training. Despite support for both online and in-person training, most participants stated

a preference for future FPOC training to be provided in-person. Participants felt that online training could limit rapport building, both individually and as a group, which could impact on comfort in completing the role play exercises. Participants felt that face-to-face contact was important to underpin the role play exercise and was more ecologically valid as they anticipated that disclosures would be made in-person too.

Although the role plays were widely appreciated and seen as important, participants would like future training to have more input and guidance from the trainers on the role play component. Some participants struggle to get the conversation started. The use of a script or prompts to help support the conversation would be appropriate. Participants also sought additional feedback from the trainers on their role play performance to further enhance their learning.

Several suggestions were made for improving FPOC training, which included:

- Incorporating diversity and intersectionality to a greater degree in the training content, to help participants understand the experience and disclosure preferences of members of diverse groups, and how to best respond to these groups in order to meet their needs.
- More information is required in relation to receiving disclosures from a perpetrator of SVH, what such a disclosure might look like, and how best to handle it.
- More information about institutional, local and national SVH-related policies, including a briefing on the procedures associated with reporting, investigations, and the supports available to someone who makes a disclosure.

Limitations

The findings of this research evaluation are caveated by several practical limitations. The self-selection of focus group participants implies a degree of buy-in and support for the training among those who chose to take part. There was a lack of uptake by stakeholders of the open-ended survey and invitation to interview. The stakeholder perspectives provided the basis for an institutional case study, with a need for further consultation to take place with stakeholders in other organisations and settings.

While the FPOC training participants had varied roles and professions, there is a continuing need to expand the range of participation in the training. For example, greater representation

of university students is desirable, along with recruitment of more diverse participants – for example with respect to gender, ethnicities, job roles, and social backgrounds. It may be challenging to have widespread engagement of students in the training, yet disclosures by students are typically made to their peers (Burke et al., 2020). It may be necessary to consider how the training could be adapted to meet the needs of students while continuing to impart skills and knowledge. The CPD module enabled participants with public sector jobs such as An Garda Síochána, the Irish Defence Forces, post-primary teachers, and student advocates such as Student Union Officers to take part. Yet there is considerable scope to explore the applicability of FPOC training to these groups in more detail.





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