

RESEARCH BRIEFING

A STUDY OF THE SUPPORT NEEDS OF SEX WORKERS ACROSS NORFOLK



A STUDY OF THE SUPPORT NEEDS OF SEX WORKERS ACROSS NORFOLK

JUNE – DECEMBER 2014

PROJECT TEAM Dr Jane Dodsworth, Dr Penny Sorenson and Dr Birgit Larsson

FUNDER Norfolk Community Health and Care Trust

WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

There is increasing variety in both the types of sex work undertaken and the environments where the work happens, for example in the home with the rise of online sex work. Street workers make up a small proportion of sex workers but remain the focus of services due to their visibility and their impact on communities. Most sex workers are more hidden making them harder to find and support. Such workers include those engaging in more indirect forms of sex work including stripping, lap dancing, and virtual sex on the internet or phone. Those supporting sex workers face challenges as needs and access are likely to be different depending on the sex worker group they are looking to support.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to learn more about the support needs of all types of sex workers in Norfolk. This included looking at:

- Sex workers' views of their needs across varied locations and sex worker groups.
- The services available at present to meet those needs.
- Relevant professionals' thoughts on service need and provision.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

Following a literature review to understand key issues, wider contexts, and patterns of sex work, a 6 month study took place between June and December 2014. Fourteen interviews with female on-street sex workers and escorts were undertaken. Thirty questionnaires were sent to agencies providing support services and 14 were returned. A focus group with 2 professionals was also conducted along with 4 interviews with representatives from the police, sex worker support projects and a sexual assault referral centre. Data from an online forum and a detailed search of a website where sex workers advertise was used to determine numbers of escorts working across Norfolk.

KEY FINDINGS

Sex worker experiences

- The most common reason for starting sex work included the need or desire for money, either because reasonably paid work is hard to find or to fund drug and alcohol habits. Some women were coerced into sex work or sexually exploited.
- Street workers experienced violence, abuse and rape in their work. Escorts said these experiences were rare but some talked of stalking and intimidation.
- Although most sex workers felt better treated by police than in the past, having more supportive experiences, they were still wary about reporting assaults.

Support needs: Sex workers' views

- Housing for street workers and some escorts was a major issue. Periods of homelessness were commonplace. Hostel living was problematic, particularly when trying to get free of drugs while having to live around drug use. Loneliness was widely reported.
- Health, including physical, mental and sexual health problems, was a common issue.

Existing services in Norfolk

- Two agencies specialise in supporting sex workers in Norfolk but mainly work in the city and with female street workers.
- Other agencies that can support sex workers offer services to women in general including support with drug and alcohol problems and violence.

Services: Sex workers' views

- On the whole, sex workers were satisfied with services available to them. Discreet outreach work, drop-in services and telephone support were particularly valued.
- Sex workers spoke of uncertainty about

current services because a lack of understanding around what is on offer.

Services: provider's views

- Professionals working with sex workers recognised that long term, relationship-based support is needed without labelling and stigmatising sex workers.
- Professionals also suggested that 'open services', i.e. not targeted at one particularly service user group such as 'offenders' or 'substance misusers', work best with the multiple and interconnected needs of sex workers.
- Police see themselves as more supportive than in the past, understanding the sex workers' vulnerabilities.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- Professionals who support sex workers need to provide crisis services alongside long-term relationship-based support which increases self-worth and reduces loneliness and isolation.
- Housing support services for sex workers need to assist with emergency accommodation and develop a transfer scheme to long-term housing.
- Police officers need to be clear on the law around sex work and encourage sex workers to report violence and sexual assault. Sex workers' uncertainty about the law means they are not confident about being protected by the police.
- Agencies need to build stronger links between services for children and young people at risk of, or involved in, child sexual exploitation to understand the wider picture and intervene early.

- Services that can support sex workers should expand services to include different kinds of sex work and sex worker.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Strengths

There is a strong emphasis on representing the views of the sex workers and this is backed up by the broader perspectives of professionals directly involved in supporting sex workers.

Limitations

The sample is biased towards white British female sex workers and therefore does not give a picture of what is happening for other workers such as trafficked migrants or men, for example.



FIND OUT MORE

Dr. Jane Dodsworth | jane.dodsworth@uea.ac.uk

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

School of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, Elizabeth Fry Building,
University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ

DIRECTOR Professor Marian Brandon