

Protecting sex workers

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Practice note: Sex worker harm reduction through engagement and diversion

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Sex work is a dangerous profession. Often, sex workers meet unfamiliar clients and get into vehicles they don't know, which can put them at risk. My PCSO role is dedicated to safeguarding the sex workers in Hull, in order to help reduce that risk. This has been challenging, as sex workers often have a mistrust of the police.

My approach is to be a consistent and regular face in the area, interacting with the sex workers and getting to know them, which has helped me to gain their trust. As a result, I have become an expert resource when a serious offence has occurred within the sex worker community. Crime teams have used my skills and knowledge to support sex workers in engaging with the judicial process. One investigation resulted in the offender receiving an eight-year prison sentence for rape.

Protecting sex workers and reducing risk

My role includes the following elements.

- Keeping up-to-date information on active sex workers, which is shared by outreach workers and by Civic CCTV (which provides me with footage and still images of sex workers and clients).
- Proactive patrolling in the areas used by sex workers, to identify who is working. I engage with many of the on-street sex workers, which helps me to gather intelligence and offer safeguarding advice. I also conduct patrols with partner agencies and neighbourhood policing teams using these methods.
- Maintaining good relationships and chairing a bi-monthly meeting with partner agencies, including probation, domestic abuse partnerships, Civic CCTV, outreach workers, drugs and alcohol rehabilitation, and life skills providers. During these meetings, we share our up-to-date information about active sex workers and identify concerns, making referrals to the relevant agency for support and safeguarding.

- Being the point of contact for enquiries and investigating incidents reported to the police around sex work. I often conduct enquiries following information received and referrals made from partner agencies.
- Supporting the senior leadership team by attending focus groups and supporting other forces to develop their approaches to policing the sex trade and supporting sex workers.
- Delivering presentations to student officers around the sex trade industry and ensuring that they know I am the point of contact. I also deliver presentations to university criminology students, as well as nurses and midwives, particularly on some of the behaviours exhibited by sex workers that are often linked to substance misuse.

Responses to clients

On-street sex work often occurs on residential streets, in plain sight. It can have a detrimental impact on the local community and businesses, and can result in increased anti-social behaviour, such as sex in public, as well as discarded condoms, needles and drugs paraphernalia. Members of the public can be propositioned, and children may witness sexual acts.

To reduce this, I am currently trialling a new problem-solving diversion approach with clients of sex workers as an alternative to prosecution. Those suitable for the programme are given a conditional caution if they admit to the offence, while those who do not admit the offence receive a summons. It involves educating them and offering free health checks to reduce the risk of re-offending and to improve the local areas.

The programme covers:

- information that humanises the sex workers and focuses on their actions as clients, as well as the consequences and impacts that sex work can have on their employment and relationships
- sexual health risks to themselves, partners and unborn children
- free voluntary and confidential screening
- support signposting at the end of the course

In recognition for devising the course, I was recently nominated for innovation at the National PCSO Awards. I am also working with the University of Hull to analyse and measure its success. To date, there is no information to suggest that the individuals who attended the course have re-offended.

- This article was peer reviewed by Detective Sergeant David Thomason, Cheshire Constabulary

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