

Night Light Project – safeguarding female sex workers and vulnerable young people

A multi-agency approach to safeguard female sex workers and young people who may be at risk of exploitation.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Evaluated locally
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Violence against women and girls Adults at risk Community engagement
Organisation	Avon and Somerset Police Barnardo's
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Region	South West
Partners	Police Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.

Key details

Start date	January 2020
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Children and young people Victims

Aim

In 2020, Avon and Somerset Police conducted a review which revealed the systematic abuse and trafficking of young people in areas associated with street sex work in Bristol. The review also revealed that the insight of street sex workers, who often witness firsthand exploitation of others was missing from existing safeguarding initiatives.

In response the Night Light Project was launched, with the aim to form trusting partnerships with female street sex workers. The Night Light team enables female sex workers to act as informal guardians to identify:

- potential perpetrators
- vulnerable children
- safeguarding opportunities

The overarching aim of the Night Light Project is to inform vulnerability policing strategies, child protection protocols, and city-wide prevention frameworks.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of the Night Light Project are to:

- improve engagement with sex workers, with the intention to build trust and offer support
- increase the number of reports of individuals who may pose a risk in order to develop intelligence and investigate crimes

- improve the identification of children and young people at risk of being sexually exploited and take appropriate safeguarding measures
- disrupt and prevent child sexual exploitation and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG)

Description

The Night Light Project is a collaborative safeguarding initiative led by Avon and Somerset Police and Barnardo's. Strategic leadership is provided by an Avon and Somerset Police's sex work liaison officer and a Barnardo's child sexual exploitation worker. The project is overseen by the force's thematic lead for sex work and Bristol Barnardo's children's service manager. While the oversight roles ensure accountability and alignment with broader safeguarding priorities, day-to-day delivery of the project remains the responsibility of the co-leads.

Implementing the Night Light Project

The Night Light Project conduct weekly outreach shifts, where the team engage with female sex workers. These shifts are informed by intelligence briefings with the intention of building trust, gathering safeguarding information, and responding to disclosures. The team is intentionally small, to ensure continuity when conducting frontline engagements. The team includes:

- two sex work liaison officers from Avon and Somerset Constabulary – who are supported by Response, Neighbourhood and Investigations teams.
- Barnardo's child sexual exploitation worker
- two social workers from Bristol City Council

Each team member brings specialist expertise to the project:

- the officers focus on safeguarding, intelligence gathering, perpetrator disruption, crime reporting, and appropriate information sharing
- partner agency staff complement this with trauma-informed support, including safeguarding interventions, signposting, and referrals to specialist services

The Night Light Project operates two types of shifts:

- Engagement shifts – a police officer and a partner agency practitioner patrol key areas to connect with women, offer support, gather safeguarding information and intervene if children are found at risk. These shifts operate once a week, on varying nights, changing on a weekly basis.
- Operation Boss shifts – these are larger police-led operations supported by the Night Light team which aim to actively disrupting perpetrators.

During the outreach shifts, team offers:

- practical support (food, condoms, clothing, harm-reduction kits)
- emotional support and listening spaces
- guidance on how to report exploitation (including anonymous reporting)
- advice on identifying risks to children
- immediate safeguarding when necessary

All interactions are underpinned by a trauma-informed, non-judgemental approach that respects the autonomy and lived experiences of the female sex workers.

Multi-agency collaboration

The Night Light team also provide support to women who are often experiencing homelessness, hunger, poor physical and mental health, and exploitation. The team offers engagement items and facilitates access to vital services through well-established partnerships. These include:

- homeless outreach teams
- emergency night shelters
- the One25 Project (a Bristol-based charity supporting women engaged in street sex work)
- sexual assault referral Centres (SARC)
- drug and alcohol prescribing services
- specialist NHS teams such as midwifery and other trauma-informed support networks

Funding and resources

The Night Light Project requires minimal financial investment for implementation. The monthly costs are approximately £100, which covers engagement items such as toiletries and clothing. These items are sourced via:

- Avon and Somerset Police's destruction of property register (DPR) which repurposes approved items
- donations coordinated by Barnardo's
- regular charitable contributions made directly to Barnardo's to support outreach needs

The most significant resource commitment is the time used to conduct shifts and administrative duties such as recording incidents.

Evaluation

In 2024, Avon and Somerset Police and Barnardo's published the [Night Light: Impact report](#).

The report focuses on the:

- number of interactions with female sex workers
- number of reports made regarding people who may pose a risk
- number of children and young people identified who may be at risk of exploitation
- number of children safeguarded
- number of criminal justice outcomes as a result of information from the Night Light Project

The report also includes qualitative feedback from on-street sex workers, highlighting the benefits and impact of the project.

Overall impact

During 2023–2024 the Night Light Project:

- interacted with over 50 women
- received over 65 reports of dangerous individuals which were forwarded onto to Avon and Somerset Police
- identified more than 20 young at risk of exploitation
- 100% of the children flagged through the project were not previously reported missing
- 16 young people received safeguarding, including placement in safer environments
- several arrests and active investigations launched as a result of the project's intelligence

The women involved consistently express a sense of safety, trust, and dignity when working with the team, often sharing disclosures they would not give to other services.

In May 2024, the Night Light Project received the National Frontline Social Work Award for Innovation.

In 2024 the Night Light Project National received the Violence Against Women and Girls Award, recognising its innovative and impactful approach to safeguarding.

Learning

- The Night Light Project continues to evolve with plans to expand its reach across Bristol and Somerset.
- It is essential to engage with women and children affected by exploitation. The team aims to increase the frequency of outreach shifts, currently moving from being out every two weeks to every week.
- To date, the team has held discussions with 17 police forces, to share best practice and offer guidance on implementation. Training has also been delivered to multiple local authorities and non-police organisations, with presentations given to the National Rape Working Group and Police Now.
- It is important to secure sustainable funding and resources for long-term delivery. While the project currently operates on minimal financial input, expanding its reach and capacity will require dedicated investment to support staffing and training.
- Team development and training are a priority for the expansion of the Night Light Project. Continuous training ensures that trauma-informed, multi-agency practice continues to underpin all engagement.

In May 2024, Night Light received the National Frontline Social Work Award for Innovation and in October 2024, the project was honoured with a National Violence Against Women and Girls Award, recognising its innovative and impactful approach to safeguarding.

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