Minutes of the third meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on people with complex needs and dual diagnosis

Committee Room Six, House of Commons, 22nd April 2008
Co-Chairs: Lord Victor Adebowale
Janet Dean MP
Speakers: Sarah Cotton, Outreach Drug Worker (for female sex workers)
Sheffield Adult Treatment Services
Simon King, Head of the Violent Crime Unit in the Home Office
Emma Squire, Prostitution Strategy Lead, Violent Crime Unit, Home Office (fielding questions)

The meeting was opened by Janet Dean MP, who outlined the agenda. She explained that the meeting would discuss the issue of sex workers with complex needs, including substance misuse and mental health problems. 80,000 people are involved in prostitution in the UK1 and 95% of sex workers are problem drug users. They also have a number of complex needs linked to housing and homelessness, sexual health, violence, safety and childcare issues. 68 percent of women involved in street prostitution have been physically assaulted2. This group of people are one of the most marginalized, vulnerable and stigmatised in the UK and many find it hard to access support. Research has found evidence that certain factors increase the vulnerability to becoming involved in prostitution, such as being in care and childhood abuse.

Sarah Cotton, an Outreach Drug Worker (for female sex workers) from Sheffield Adult Treatment Services, Turning Point spoke about her experiences of working in Sheffield. She outlined some of the challenges that she faced as well as what she felt could be done to improve the situation. She emphasised that sex workers are people with complex needs. For example, a sex worker may have a drug problem, mental health needs, and may also be a parent. What is needed are integrated outreach services that support the whole person. Sarah described how her service takes a ‘connected care’ approach to helping women engage with the range of support services they need. Her service provides essential harm reduction and health intervention about issues relating to drug use and sexual health. She also supports women to access structured treatment services where they can address their drug use and signposts women towards generic and specialist services to meet their whole needs. Sarah described the importance of adopting a non discriminatory, non-judgemental, and fully confidential approach, informed by service user involvement.

At this point Janet introduced the formal part of the Annual General Meeting. She proposed the re-election of existing officers to the APPG. These were: Lord Victor Adebowale (Joint-Chair), Janet Dean MP (Joint-Chair), Fiona MacTaggart MP (Vice-Chair), Mike Penning MP (Vice-Chair), Baroness Barker (Vice-Chair), David Burrowes MP (Vice-Chair), Linda Riordan MP (Treasurer), Helen Southworth MP (Secretary).

The results were as follows:

- All in favour of re-electing existing officers.
- Earl Listowel added as a member

---

1 Paying the Price, Home Office, 2004
2 Drug Problems & Street Sex Markets, Home Office March 2004
Chris Mole MP added as a member

Seconded by: Lord Victor Adebowale, Ms Fiona McTaggart MP, Ms Southworth MP, Ms Riordan MP

Simon King, Head of the Violent Crime Unit in the Home Office spoke next. He then talked about the future of the Home Office strategies on Prostitution, outlining the current legal situation and explaining that the Government is currently reviewing whether or not to further tackle demand for prostitution through tougher penalties on kerb crawlers. A six month review of prostitution law was launched in January 2008. The main objective of the review is reducing human trafficking by tackling demand for prostitution. The main proposal being investigated is whether to prosecute men for paying for sex. In New Zealand, prostitution has been decriminalised, while in Sweden, men have been criminalised for paying for sex. Advocates of the Swedish model say that attacks against female sex workers are common and that women should be seen as the victims in this situation. Advocates of the approach taken in New Zealand raise the risks of sex work being driven underground and becoming more of a hidden problem, placing sex workers at even greater risk. The review is expected to report later this year. Simon also mentioned that the Government is currently preparing guidance on commissioning sex worker support services.

Lord Adebowale then took the Chair for the rest of the meeting.

Question and answers

Q) Lord Victor Adebowale:
Is there a country that has proven reduced prostitution levels?

A) Some of the group mentioned Sweden.
Emma Squire explained: Some countries claim success but it is difficult to assess what impact they have had.

Sarah Dennyson-Hunt, Service Manager, SW5 (SW5, formerly Streetwise Youth, is part of the Terence Higgins Trust. They provide advice, information, help, support and a cafe primarily to male and transgender sex workers.) Sarah said that as Sweden didn’t count numbers before the law change, there is no firm evidence.

Ms Fiona McTaggart MP admitted that this was true but that all measures used to indicate a reduction in prostitution suggest that there has been a significant reduction.

Lord Victor Adebowale noted that the Swedish model tackles demand.

Q.) Earl Listowel:
Thanked Sarah Cotton for her speech. He then asked whether, generally, prostitution is a way to earn a lot of money for those who have not received a good education or who have a limiting background? He wondered how viable it would be to discourage kerb crawlers and to create safer brothels and then to work on the self esteem of the workers.
He also asked what intervention measures are taken with the people who pay for sex. Are many of them suffering from addiction themselves?

A) Sarah Cotton explained that from what she sees in the experiences of her clients the reason for entering prostitution is not based on economics. In a large majority of the time it is in order to fund their drug habits/addiction. From
what she has seen it is not a result of low job prospects. Once they have engaged in prostitution all money goes to drugs. It is not seen as an economic choice.

B) Sarah explained that she has not had any first hand experience of intervention to support people who pay for sex, but has been interested by many articles in The Guardian recently discussing the attitudes of men that buy sex and their attitudes against women.

Lord Victor Adebowale pointed out that there is no such thing as a ‘happy hooker’, stating that 95% of sex workers are problem drug users, and many are homeless.

Q) Tasmin Mallion, Services Director, The Passage (The Passage is a Christian organisation which runs London’s largest voluntary sector day centre for homeless and vulnerable people) explained her background of 15 years in the sex worker field. She explained that in all her years of work she found the Lambeth sex worker project the most challenging. In her opinion street sex workers are the most difficult to reach, difficult to engage, difficult to get transformation from and most importantly the most difficult to move on.

She recognised funding as the crucial issue, and that these services demand group commissioning. As they hold extremely complex issues local communities need to be engaged, although there is lots of interest around the subject of sex workers there is very little money.

She suggested that the severely attacked need to be in accommodation, a lot of women need a safe place to be.

Lord Adebowale said that the refuge approach is interesting and asked Simon to discuss the issue of funding further.

A) Simon admitted that the issue of funding is extremely complex, he informed us that the Home Office will be issuing guidelines to local services this year on how to engage communities at a local level.

Q) Sarah Dennyson-Hunt, Service Manager, SW5 told the group that she has been working with male sex workers for 15 years but has now lost all commissioning for male sex workers. All their funding is now for female, young women in street work. She is dismayed about generalisations being used that sex workers are all street sex workers with complex needs. Sarah explained that she sees people in her work who choose sex work, including lawyers, teachers, doctors, and MPs.

Lord Adebowale told the group that he is intrigued by the idea of a person choosing sex work, he pointed out that the fact that they choose doesn’t mean they are in any way free.

Sarah Dennyson-Hunt argued that they are difficult choices but still choices. She emphasised the need to avoid generalisations.

Catherine Stephens, International Union of Sex Workers, (The IUSW campaigns for the human, civil and labour rights of those who work in the sex industry) said that she hears all sorts of generalisations. She said that the focus is always on the most problematic of cases and the most sensationalised, which she sees as ineffective. She said she also feels that the way people talk about the clients is generalised, for
example there are differences between street sex workers and clients and those who are off the streets. She said that it was important to understand that this meeting was focused on street sex workers with complex needs, and not all sex workers.

Q) Chris Mole MP, Ipswich, introduced himself and explained that he was engaged with the local authority before the recent murders of 5 sex workers in the borough. He has spoken before about his experience. In Ipswich they have been tackling demand, by using number plate identification enforcement for example.

He asked if anyone has a view on the extent of displacement between street presence and virtual presence, whether by tackling kerb crawlers there was an incentive to displace sex workers away from the streets to hidden, off street venues so it is a hidden problem and it is less easy to get support. He doesn't think there is enough evidence on this.

He also said that on the drugs side he has found that there was a very clear change from the early 90s in terms of addiction to Class A drugs and meeting the cost of the habit. The trust he is involved in looks at long term educational strategy and refuge, including getting people stable accommodation. He explained that in terms of education they have a local theatre group called Red Rose Chain. Before the murders they made a video about the choices people may face to lead them to have lives like this.

Q) Fiona Mc Taggart MP – Said that the argument that women would be safer in brothels scares her, especially when considering the number of women in human trafficking. She said that we should not automatically consider brothels as an answer. We should also look at parlours and baths as having the same pressures as brothels, there is a pattern of high level of addiction there.

Ms McTaggart pointed out that sex workers are more likely to be murdered, and more likely to experience violent deaths (including drug-related deaths). It is a very violent trade. She said that in her opinion, services are crucial, especially if they are intelligently and sensitively led and relationships are built as Sarah Cotton described. She said that there is a need for a legislative framework. Traditionally the police framework has criminalised vulnerable people. She claimed that there is compelling evidence that the extent of prosecuting people reduces when you focus on demand i.e in Sweden.

Ms McTaggart pointed out that for most participants in this work their lives, their mental health and happiness are at risk; very often they have been mentally and physically abused. In her view we have to effectively reduce demand as, in general, sex work is profoundly harmful, she believes that if you reduce demand you reduce existence.

Q) Catherine Stephens – said that she is not invisible, and neither are other sex workers who are not facing complex needs.

Fiona McTaggart MP: Said she doesn’t think that they are invisible but that she thinks that what she does is illegitimate. She questions how she can make money and not pay tax?

Lord Adebowale– Asked for everyone to be treated equally in the meeting.
Q) Alice Peycke, Safe Exit addressed the group. She explained that they commissioned a report about men buying sex in London

Alice told us that she would be happy to provide the group with more information regarding this. She told the group that a lot of women come from care backgrounds, a lot of them may have mental health issues and be addicted to drugs. In her experience when they stop substance misuse they may not be able to cope with feeling again.

In her opinion there is not enough help from mental health services – she said she felt that this need has to be addressed more strongly. In terms of accommodation for the women and movement into flats she said that a lot of the time they are not stabilised enough so this is not a practical option.

Sarah Cotton said many women spend time in prison, ‘Dying Inside’ is an interesting publication, which stated that there are many deaths in custody related to complex needs. She said we need to divert this and have alternatives to custody. She said we need to reduce all forms of commercial exploitations including lap dance clubs and bars which form part of the picture.

A) Lord Adebowale: suggested that one of the panel would like to answer the question about lap dance clubs?

Emma Squire explained that most are licensed to provide entertainment and liqueur. She informed the group that the Home Office will be providing guidance to local authorities on how they can use the licence documents as a means of regulation.

Q) A representative from the Josephine Butler Society (an organisation that exists to safeguard the safety of sex workers and to campaign against the discrimination faced by sex workers within the law) introduced his organisation and then explained that they are concerned with a group of women who are almost invisible who are concerned about their safety. In his opinion if you tackle demand, a sex worker has to go to more dangerous places. He asked Lord Adebowale if he is going to provide more services as shelter is not enough.

Lord Adebowale– Explained that he is not in charge of commissioning services but explained that Turning Point will try to influence as much as it can.

Q) Allan Taylor PHD Student said that sex work is a complex area, and that there are worrying statistics on violence but asked where this violence comes from? He said wondered if we are preventing harm from the wrong direction because in these cases violence has often started in the home, rather than from a sex worker's clients.

A member of the audience asked Sarah Cotton whether sanctions had a big impact on her service users? She asked if the police have tried to place sanctions on clients or workers.

A) Sarah Cotton explained that she can only comment on Sheffield and that the police there have recently been explicit in targeting punters and kerb crawlers, whereas they may then change tactics and focus on charging sex workers. In her opinion this sends out mixed messages, she feels intervention needs to be more consistent.

Lord Adebowale: Thanked the group for coming. He told the group that what he has learnt from this discussion is that generalisations don't help. He said that as we are
dealing with a group of vulnerable people, it is unlikely to be the case that one solution will solve everything. He warned that if we make one aspect invisible it will pop up somewhere else. He said that clearly appropriate services have not been designed and commissioned. It took five murders to generate the kind of solutions that we might learn from. He finished by saying that services need to be preventative, clear, targeted at the vulnerable and with specific interventions to support people with complex needs.

Earl Listowel: Said he would be grateful if he could have some of the audiences’ contact details for further work with his All Party Parliamentary group on young people in care.

Lord Adebowale: Suggested that perhaps both groups could have a joint meeting at some point in the future.

He thanked the speakers for coming and said that these meetings are an opportunity to learn about the latest government policy and what works in practice on the frontline.