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foundation

Sexual exploitation and sex work in Northumberland and Tyne and Wear

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1. Summary

- 1.1 This study, commissioned by Northern Rock Foundation and carried out by Barefoot Research and Evaluation, has identified that adult sex work and the sexual exploitation of children is common enough to be a concern to statutory and voluntary sector agencies in Northumberland and Tyne and Wear.
- 1.2 Sex is being exchanged in settings and for currencies that do not fit the traditional definition of street prostitution. Evidence of adult sex work includes escort agencies, brothels and the use of B&Bs. Sexual exploitation includes targeting of vulnerable children, for example, those in the looked after and leaving care system, by older men. Crucially, money is often not the main currency. Many adult sex workers and sexually exploited children exchange sexual acts for somewhere to stay or in return for drugs or alcohol. Evidence does suggest, however, that street prostitution, historically not seen in this area, is also on the increase.
- 1.3 There is strong evidence to suggest a clear association between adult sex work and experience of mental ill health. Adult sex workers appear commonly to be the victims of rape and other forms of abuse. Failed asylum seekers, who are left without any access to services, are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation.
- 1.4 Agencies are unfamiliar with definitions of sex work and sexual exploitation other than street prostitution in exchange for money. When first asked, most professionals say they do not know of any clients engaging in paid sex work. But when specific risk factors and behaviours are explained using a broader definition, their knowledge becomes apparent. Even when they do recognise a problem, professionals may fail to respond because they are unwilling to report concerns based on what is seen as hearsay or anecdote, or because they do not know what to do.
- 1.5 The key conclusion is that a cultural shift is necessary to tackle this systemic inertia. The researchers recommend that
 - key statutory strategies and plans should immediately start to address sex work and sexual exploitation using a wider definition and alternative indicators;
 - frontline workers with children and vulnerable adults should be trained on how to recognise and address sex work and sexual exploitation;
 - there should be improved services, e.g. dedicated drug services for women and targeted services for children at risk, and clear referral routes;
 - more effective responses to child sexual exploitation should include challenging children's behaviour, using shared chronologies and hearsay evidence, and pursuing perpetrators;
 - basic support services should be made available to failed asylum seekers through faith groups and the voluntary sector;
 - research should be carried out to track the outcomes of agencies' interventions.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 This research was commissioned by Northern Rock Foundation under its Safety and Justice Programme. Sexual exploitation is a priority in this Programme and the Foundation wished to improve understanding of how these issues manifested themselves in its area of benefit (North East England and Cumbria). The study was conducted by Barefoot Research and Evaluation and gathered information for the period 2006 to 2007.
- 2.2 Initially, the Foundation had been approached by one of the region's Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) to fund a mapping study in its area. The Home Office's 2006 Coordinated Prostitution Strategy states that CDRPs should map the extent of the sex market in their local area, and tailor a suitable response if the results indicate a problem. Following discussion, the Foundation agreed to commission a wider study covering the whole Northumbria Police Authority Area (Northumberland and Tyne and Wear), to get a broader picture of how sex markets operated across district boundaries. Although independent, this research therefore represents the mapping exercise required for the six CDRPs in the study area.
- 2.3 The study was concerned with mapping the extent and characteristics of sex work and sexual exploitation, and agencies' immediate response to cases. The researchers did not seek to track the outcomes in particular cases when they were referred on to, for example, police and social services.

3. Methodology

- 3.1 For the purposes of this study, the following definitions were used.
 - *Adult sex work*: the exchange of any sexual act for currency, be that drugs, money, alcohol, status, goods, accommodation etc.
 - *Sexual exploitation of children*: 13- to 18-year-olds exchanging sex for currency (as above) with an older man. The 2003 Sexual Offences Act stipulates that under-18s are victims not perpetrators i.e. they are treated as being sexually exploited not selling sex.
- 3.2 The methods used in this study represent a particular approach to evidence gathering and there are, as with all approaches, limitations. Interviews were carried out with professionals who were considered likely to have contact with sex workers or sexually exploited children. No interviews took place with sex workers or sexually exploited children themselves. (However, there was concurrent peer-led research, funded by The Scarman Trust, undertaken in Tyne and Wear where adult sex workers were directly interviewed.)
- 3.3 The researchers interviewed approximately 150 professionals face to face and 50 by telephone. They came from a range of statutory and voluntary and community sector agencies, including:

- sexual health services
- child protection nurses
- teenage pregnancy services
- children's services
- looked-after children and leaving-care services
- Social Services
- drug support agencies
- asylum seeker and refugee services
- youth and community services
- housing and accommodation providers
- services for sex workers and sexually exploited children
- services for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people
- services for victims of rape
- central Government representatives
- Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs)
- Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs)
- Northumbria Police.

- 3.4 The researchers gained permission from a series of gatekeepers including senior managers within the Primary Care Trusts, local authorities, CDRPs, LSCBs, voluntary and community sector organisations, Northumbria Probation and Northumbria Police.
- 3.5 Professionals were asked about their knowledge of the extent, characteristics and magnitude of the sex market and sexual exploitation. They were asked how many people they were aware of who were involved in sex work, what type of sex work that was and how they knew about it.
- 3.6 The researchers counted sex workers or those being sexually exploited when either the professional had direct experience of working with that person or it was mentioned by a fellow professional who worked directly with the person. In other words, they were first- or trusted second-hand sources. Figures were triangulated (verified) through interviews with other agencies involved with similar client groups both within and outside the areas. Double counting was minimised through this approach and also through the common theme that most sex workers did not engage with mainstream services, so were unlikely to present at a multitude of agencies.
- 3.7 In addition to the interviews, desk research included reviewing policy and research, and studying local and national press and the Internet.
- 3.8 The researchers collected information about individuals who, if directly asked, would not consider themselves sex workers. This is mainly due to the occasional nature of the sex work or the type of sex work. For example, a woman with problematic drug use who exchanged sex for drugs on a reasonably regular basis due to insufficient money to pay for drugs would not consider herself involved in formal sex work. Similarly, if someone exchanged sex for a bottle of cider, they would not consider themselves a sex worker. The researchers also collected information on children who, if directly asked, would not consider themselves to be sexually exploited. For example, a 14-year-old going out with a 40-year-old would not necessarily see the relationship as exploitative.

- 3.9 In relation to sexually exploited children, information was collected about both those known to be sexually exploited and those at risk. In certain cases, professionals knew that a child was being sexually exploited because they had disclosed that information. In these cases, professionals had referred the cases to appropriate agencies although outcomes for the children were deemed to be unsatisfactory. In other cases, professionals strongly suspected that a child was being sexually exploited as a result of a series of risk factors, but they did not know for a fact.
- 3.10 At no point were researchers given the details of individuals who were being sexually exploited or who were at risk. Anonymised information was gathered from professionals whose responsibility was to support those concerned. All of the documented information had been passed to the appropriate services by the agencies who gave evidence to the researchers.

4. Adult sex work

- 4.1 The research found strong evidence of adult sex work across Northumberland and Tyne and Wear. Evidence included:
- advertisements in newspapers and on the internet, either from individuals or escort agencies;
 - Police intelligence about brothels with both male and female sex workers;
 - data about sex workers accessing contraception, sexual health and drug services;
 - cases of problematic drug users exchanging sex for drugs, including in 'crack houses';
 - cases of soliciting in public environments e.g. streets, parks and car parks;
 - reports from various agencies of destitute asylum seekers exchanging sex for food and accommodation.

Organised adult prostitution

- 4.2 Prostitution is taking place through brothels, individuals attached to escort agencies and those who sell sex from their own houses and who advertise on the internet or in newspapers. Escort agencies are also producing advertising material to recruit sex workers posted through doors.
- 4.3 Interviewees described how brothels can be located wherever there are cheap flats for rent, where they are used for a few months, often until neighbours complain. Interviewees also described emerging and increasing street markets in some areas.

Links to problematic drug use

- 4.4 There is evidence that many problematic drug users regularly exchange sex for drugs, or money for drugs. Some only engage in sex work when other avenues for accessing drugs, or the money to pay for them, are closed off. One interviewee said: *"for drug*

users sex work is a safe bet to get money... shoplifting ceases to be an option when most shopkeepers know their faces or they have been banned from particular shops."

- 4.5 Some interviewees described how male drug users pimp their girlfriends to other men in exchange for drugs or money. Interviewees reported that women sex workers are under-represented in drug treatment services, often because they are discouraged from seeking treatment by their 'boyfriends', or because they are mistreated by other service users: *"[name] had no interest in accessing services... she'd had bad experiences before and feels there's lots of stigma surrounding sex work... she's often shouted at in the street by other drug users and has been spit on and physically assaulted by youths and drugs users who know she is a sex worker."*
- 4.6 There is evidence that sex is exchanged within crack houses for as little as £10.

Sex work and housing

- 4.7 The evidence from the study indicates that in many cases, sex is exchanged for somewhere to stay. Interviewees indicated that this might be because some sex workers' lives are too chaotic for supported accommodation. One said: *"we have a six-bed hostel for women but some women who have been involved in sex work are barred from the direct access hostels which makes them homeless which often forces them into sex work ... it's a circle."* Cases were also reported of sex workers living in B&Bs where their landlords or landladies act as *de facto* pimps.

Mental health issues

- 4.8 Interviewees identified a number of sex workers who had been 'sectioned'. Others reported sex workers who displayed symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Links were reported to drug use i.e. sex workers taking drugs to be able to undertake sex work and to forget they had undertaken sex work. One professional said: *"sex workers are the most damaged clients I've ever met ... their self esteem is in their boots ... they show a recklessness with their own safety."* Mental health issues were also associated by interviewees with the high prevalence of violent assault, sexual violence and rape that is experienced by sex workers.

Travel and the sex market

- 4.9 Interviewees described how adult sex workers travel widely within Northumberland and Tyne and Wear, and outside the area (in some cases as far as Leeds or Birmingham). One professional said: *"when I asked her what it was like on her 'weekend away' she said she'd never left the hotel."* Another said: *"girls from Newcastle go as far as Alnwick and Morpeth – these often know clients from the brothel and a driver will take a girl up, wait then take her back."*

Failed asylum seekers and sex work

- 4.10 Some interviewees described how female asylum seekers who were refused permission to stay in the UK were resorting to exchanging sex for food or accommodation. A particular case was described as follows: *“one girl had to prostitute herself for a bed... she was offered a place to stay and when she was there she had to fight the guy off her and she ran off... but then she had to go back... because she had no where else to go... she’s still there.”*

5. Sexual exploitation of children

- 5.1 The research found strong evidence of the sexual exploitation of children across Northumberland and Tyne and Wear. Evidence included:

- reports of children soliciting;
- data about children accessing various services who were identified as being sexually exploited or at risk of sexual exploitation;
- evidence of children in the looked-after and leaving-care system being groomed by men outside the system;
- cases of a number of girls under 18 being pregnant to the same older man;
- cases of trafficking.

A culture of exploitation

- 5.2 Interviewees described a culture on some housing estates of young women between 13 and 18 commonly associating with older men of anywhere between 30 and 50. These situations were linked by interviewees to cases of teenage pregnancy and domestic violence. One professional said: *“...it’s attraction to wealth and status... going out with the hard cases... a 49-year-old going out with a 14-year-old, showering her with gold and then beating the shit out of her... it’s a form of prostitution...”*

Children in the looked-after and leaving-care system

- 5.3 Interviewees described how young women between the ages of 15 and 18 in the looked-after system can be targeted by older men outside the system. These men may send text messages of a sexual or pornographic nature, buy the young women drugs or alcohol, or offer them somewhere to stay. Interviewees reported that risks of exploitation spread because of the strong networks between individuals in the looked-after and leaving-care systems (i.e. between those within the system, those having left the system and those still remaining), and because of the code of silence among young people in the system. Examples were given of young people who are known to be sexually exploited taking other young females with them, who are not exploited, when they abscond.

Use of B&Bs to house vulnerable people

- 5.4 B&Bs continue to be used by some local authorities to house vulnerable families and individuals because of housing shortages and their duty to accommodate people who are officially homeless. In some areas, the same B&Bs cater for stag nights and temporary contractors.
- 5.5 Researchers were told that the Police had advised certain local authorities not to use a particular B&B because of concerns about the landlord and his associates and the sexual exploitation of children.

Trafficking

- 5.7 Previous research has found evidence, confirmed in interviews for this study, of some cases of children being trafficked from overseas into the area to be sexually exploited.

6. Role of service providers

- 6.1 The research found a general lack of awareness about adult sex work and the sexual exploitation of children among statutory and voluntary agencies, particularly at a strategic level. There were some notable local exceptions, where attempts to address problems included multi-agency planning or information sharing.
- 6.2 On first inquiry, professionals often stated that they had no knowledge of sexual exploitation or sex work among their client group, but when further questioned about clients' behaviour, using the broader definitions described in paragraph 3.1, they were able to describe many cases.
- 6.3 This contrasts, however, with the detailed knowledge found in a few agencies, particularly those which relied on strong, trusting relationships between frontline workers and clients. But such knowledge was often not passed up to strategic levels. In some cases this was because the knowledge was considered anecdotal and therefore insufficiently 'worthy' of reporting, in others it was because the frontline workers did not know whether and how to refer cases on.
- 6.4 Some professionals working with vulnerable children have a good understanding of risk factors associated with sexual exploitation. One interviewee stated: *"You could get a list of the young people [on their books] and put ticks next to the ones who are at risk of being sexually exploited but we do nothing until they're being sexually exploited ... it's no big surprise when a young person falls into the trap."*
- 6.5 Despite the clear definition of children as victims given in the 2003 Sexual Offences Act, interviewees described many situations where sexually exploited children were seen by agencies as 'nightmare cases' and too hard to help. Sometimes this was

because a child protection response had been set up and the child had refused to engage with it; sometimes it was because a child's behaviour was highly sexualised and difficult to challenge; sometimes it was because the child refused to co-operate with attempts to explore alleged exploitation.

7. Examples of good practice

7.1 Throughout the study, the researchers found examples of good practice within statutory and voluntary organisations seeking to tackle problems of adult sex work and childhood sexual exploitation. They included the following.

- SCARPA (Safeguarding Children At Risk Prevention and Action), a collaboration between The Children's Society, Barnardo's and Save the Children. It provides intensive support and early intervention to young people aged 11-18 who are, or who are at risk of, running away, being sexually exploited or trafficked.
- Newcastle GUM clinic, which provides specific help and referrals if someone discloses that they sell sex.
- The GAP Project, run by Tyneside Cyrenians, which supports adult sex workers.
- The Women's Project in Sunderland which provides condoms, needle exchange, crisis intervention, counselling and group work for women drug users.

8. Conclusions

8.1 The key conclusion is that sex work and sexual exploitation of children is common enough to be a concern to statutory and voluntary sector agencies in Northumberland and Tyne and Wear. The study points to a series of themes in the area including the following.

- The strong link between problematic drug use and adult sex work.
- Adult sex work also linking to other forms of vulnerability, including poor housing, mental ill-health and failed asylum-seeker status.
- The differing needs of different types of sex workers, which in turn require different kinds of response.
- The lack of skills and confidence among frontline workers to tackle the problem, partly because of worry that so-called hearsay and anecdote will be disregarded.
- A particular cause for concern regarding older men targeting children in the looked-after and leaving care system.
- Examples of good practice in the voluntary and statutory sectors showing that there are proven ways of working positively with individuals.

8.2 The evidence suggests that there are major gaps and weaknesses in current efforts to address the needs of adult sex workers. It also suggests that current child protection systems are inadequate to deal with the complexity of cases involving the sexual

exploitation of children. However, the examples of good practice demonstrate there are positive ways of working with individuals described as 'nightmare cases'.

9. Recommendations

- 9.1 The needs of sex workers and sexually exploited children should be recognised in the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships' (CDRPs) 2008-2011 Community Safety Strategies and in the Local Safeguarding Children Boards' (LSCBs) annual plans.
- 9.2 Training should be provided to all staff who work with vulnerable children about how to identify those who are sexually exploited, and to those who work with adults who are problematic drug users, homeless or otherwise vulnerable around issues of adult sex work. The training should incorporate awareness raising, referral pathways and tools that can be used when working with people involved in sex work, or those being sexually exploited or at-risk of sexual exploitation.
- 9.3 Referral routes should be identified for both adults and children and protocols put in place to ensure referrals happen. There are services which are appropriate for sex workers or sexually exploited children. Each area needs to identify its own referral routes, which can be used in conjunction with the training.
- 9.4 More effective mechanisms for responding to sexually exploited children should be developed. These could include investing in youth-work-style approaches that seek to engage children and challenge their behaviour; making use of shared chronologies and hearsay to provide shared intelligence; and strengthening efforts to pursue perpetrators through improved evidence gathering.
- 9.5 Links should be made between the CDRPs and the LSCBs in relation to sex work and sexual exploitation. Many issues cross over and relate to both partnerships, not least as children become adults and the perpetrators of the exploitation are adults.
- 9.6 A minimum service of safe housing and food should be provided for failed asylum seekers. This group is continually and permanently at risk due to a total absence of access to resources. It is recognised that statutory services are unable to provide services to this group because of the Government's stance on repatriation. The remaining option is to strengthen the faith and voluntary sector's provision of services to this group.
- 9.7 Drug treatment and support services should be made more women-friendly to meet the needs of women who are currently not using them.
- 9.8 Agencies should consider collectively or individually assessing the effectiveness of their interventions in this field by commissioning research that tracks the outcomes of individual cases.

About Northern Rock Foundation

Northern Rock Foundation is a charity formed in 1997, when Northern Rock converted to a plc. The Foundation receives 5% of the plc's pre-tax profits each year and is one of the UK's largest independent funders of charitable activity. Its current objectives are to tackle disadvantage and to improve quality of life in North East England and Cumbria. It does this through grant-making, policy and research work, training and development activities, special initiatives, loans and other investments.

More information: www.nr-foundation.org.uk

About the authors

Barefoot Research and Evaluation is based in Newcastle upon Tyne. It has particular expertise in work with vulnerable and at-risk groups and on projects and strategies to support them. Barefoot Research and Evaluation has carried out work for Nacro, Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, the Probation Service and local authorities on initiatives to reduce crime and re-offending and improve community safety. Christopher Hartworth has a doctorate in social science and almost 20 years' experience of research and evaluation. He has worked on projects in the UK and in developing countries and has published in internationally peer reviewed journals.

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