

Public Health Rapid Needs Assessment

Sex work in Brighton & Hove

Key findings

Brighton & Hove City Council
Public Health Intelligence Team
for the

Safe in the city
Brighton & Hove Community Safety Partnership



Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the local specialist services and others who participated in the steering group which had oversight of this research.

Our thanks also go to everyone who provided information and/or gave their time to participate in the interviews.

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2016

CONTENTS

- 1 Introduction and background.....4
- 2 Methodology5
- 3 Legislative setting and policies6
- 4 Local context.....7
- 5 A picture of sex work in Brighton & Hove 8
- 6 Characteristics, circumstances and needs of sex workers10
- 7 Key risks for sex workers 12
- 8 Services and access to services..... 15
- 9 Conclusions.....18
- References 19

1 Introduction and background

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the nature and scale of sex work^a in Brighton & Hove and a profile of those involved. It is also intended to help understand the risks faced by sex workers in the city, and the extent to which sex workers might be accessing any information and services they might need. These research aims were agreed by the Brighton & Hove Safe in the City Partnership Board.

It is over ten years since research into female sex workers in Brighton & Hove was carried out and the context of sex work has moved on since then¹. There have been more recent studies of male sex workers the latest of which was undertaken in 2014/15^{2, 3}.

The term 'sex work' tends to be used to describe a range of activities relating to payment for the provision of a sexual service, often involving genital contact. Payment is often in the form of money, but may take other forms, such as drugs, gifts or accommodation.

Compared with a few years ago, the internet, social media and mobile communication technology have had a big impact on how sex work is advertised, accessed and delivered. This has altered the risks faced by sex workers.

Sex workers are a heterogeneous group (eg. across sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc.) and sex work happens across a wide range of circumstances.

Some sex workers identify themselves as such. They plan for and actively seek work. This is sometimes referred to as 'professional' or 'commercial' sex work. The incentive tends to be financial to help meet daily living costs or improve their quality of life.

Other 'opportunistic' sex workers undertake sex work more spontaneously, and may be working to meet immediate needs. Payment may not always be in the form of money, but may be directly in exchange for accommodation or drugs.

Not all people who sex work may be doing so of their own free will⁴. They may be subject to coercion or control. Some, including people who have been trafficked, may be financially or sexually exploited.

This report focuses on sex work undertaken by adults; children and young people under the age of 18 and the services specifically directed at them are not examined in any detail. Life circumstances will have a bearing on whether someone undertakes sex work at any age, but evidence suggests that over half of sex workers first become involved in sex work during childhood⁴. In terms of legislation, the provision of sexual services for payment by under 18s is considered as child sexual exploitation and the response to it is managed by children's services with input from partner organisations.

This is a summary version of a more in depth report. It provides key findings and suggests ways in which improvements may be achieved. .

The Rape and Sexual Violence Operational Group will develop a partnership action plan based on the findings with a view to improving the city's response to help reduce the risks faced by sex workers. Although sex workers themselves were not directly involved in this research, it is intended that the action plan in response to the findings will be informed by the voices of those engaged in and affected by sex work.

^a Different interpretations are sometimes assigned by different people over the terms 'sex work' and 'prostitution' (or 'sex workers' and 'those involved in prostitution'). Generally the term 'sex work' is used in this document. This is not intended to infer any additional meaning, but simply to describe the exchange of sexual services for payment.

2 Methodology

A small steering group comprising members of Brighton & Hove City Council's public health and community safety teams was set up to oversee the work. In addition, an advisory group was set up so that the project could also benefit from a wider range of people with subject expertise from statutory and third sector agencies, academia and others.

Information for this report was gathered in three main ways: a literature review, data from local services and semi-structured interviews with 24 service providers. The research took place between October 2015 and March 2016.

The challenge of obtaining a comprehensive picture

Obtaining a comprehensive picture of sex work presents a significant challenge since it is a diverse and changing picture. Sex workers may be hidden and/or isolated and information on them inaccessible.

There was no capacity to undertake consultation directly with sex workers themselves since this research was conducted as a rapid needs assessment. To mitigate this, attempts were made to engage with a national sex workers group which had an active presence in Brighton & Hove. However, this proved challenging for a number of reasons, including a general barrier with members of this group feeling they did not have a 'safe space' to engage in the process. There was a particular concern about enforcement activity and the potential for criminalisation of sex workers. The local information presented in this report therefore draws mainly on that supplied by local service providers who work (or may work) with sex workers, or is drawn from earlier research projects which directly involved sex workers.

Although we specifically made attempts to collect information on trafficking and modern slavery related to sexual exploitation, findings do not provide a complete picture due its hidden nature.

The information base available for this briefing is therefore limited, and where data are available, the numbers involved may be low so drawing conclusions requires caution. Furthermore, it is important to note that research information on sex workers, whether from national studies or from local sources, will only reflect the population under study and findings cannot be generalised across all sex workers.

There are current debates around whether existing criminal legislation relating to the selling or purchase of sex might be detrimental to the safety of sex workers and whether other approaches such decriminalisation or legalisation or the targeting of purchasers would be more effective. However, this report is not seeking to provide evidence one way or another in support of any changes to legislation or national policy, but is focused on looking at what can be done locally to reduce risks for sex workers.

3 Legislative setting and policies

Key findings

- Selling and buying sexual services is not illegal, although a number of activities associated with the sex industry are against the law⁵. Trafficking and sexual exploitation are illegal.
- Enforcement of the law needs to be managed in a way which both protects vulnerable sex workers and prevents harm caused by criminals who exploit them while supporting a 'strategic enforcement' approach which "*builds consensus between sex workers, outreach and support networks, local communities and the Police.*" (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2015)⁶

Points to consider

1. Review local strategic approaches towards engagement and enforcement activity, including cases where there are suspicions of modern slavery or trafficking, to confirm they align with national guidance and best practice.
2. Determine, in consultation with sex workers, what the local engagement and enforcement priorities should be in respect of outcomes for sex workers. In particular, the response to sex work should focus on public protection while also taking appropriate actions to challenge those who perpetrate violence and abuse.
3. Ensure that there is information available to the public and to sex workers on the legal position regarding the selling and purchase of sex, including the local policing model.
4. Consider how any changes in local policy around sex work will be communicated to and understood by sex workers and the wider public.
5. Provide information more widely on how to recognise signs that sex workers may not be working of their own free will.

4 Local context

Key findings

- The characteristics of Brighton & Hove and the residents and visitors to the city combine to provide an environment where commercial and opportunistic sex work is likely to have a higher than average prevalence.
- Brighton & Hove is the biggest city in the South East outside of London. It has easy transport access to London, and Gatwick airport, and attracts many visitors. There is a thriving night-time economy and a large proportion of visitors come to the city for leisure purposes.
- As a tourist destination there are many city centre hotels and properties available for short term holiday rental.
- The city's resident population is characterised by having fewer children and older residents than many other areas, while having a higher proportion of those aged 20-44⁷, including a large number of students⁸. The city has a significant LGBT population.
- Brighton & Hove has a relatively high proportion of single people under the age of 65⁹ and 36% of households (n=44,300) in the city are single person households¹⁰.
- There is a higher than average proportion of housing in the privately rented sector¹¹.
- The city is poorer than the national average on all separate domains of the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation; on an overall measure Brighton & Hove ranks 102nd most deprived out of 326 local authorities (where 1 is the most deprived)¹².
- The city has a high number of homeless people compared with other areas¹³. Substance misuse is also high and can be implicated in the lives of homeless people.

5 A picture of sex work in Brighton & Hove

IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE that the information in this and the next section has been gathered by speaking to services which come into contact with people who are known, or believed, to be sex working. It does not reflect information on those who work in isolation from services or who do not disclose that they are sex working.

Key findings

- A majority of sex workers' clients are sourced via websites, or, for males, increasingly via mobile apps. There is no 'red light' area in the city.
- There is a reducing number of brothels/parlours, matching national trends¹⁴. Sex work by 'professional' workers mostly takes place in private premises. Sometimes hotels are used or 'holiday lets' are rented for a short period for use by transient sex workers.
- There is believed to be an increasing number of sex workers working independently.
- In addition to private premises or hotels, sex working by males may take place in pubs or clubs or outdoors. There has been a particular escalation of 'chemsex'^b parties over recent years which can also be a source of clients for male sex workers.
- 'Opportunistic' sex workers may be homeless, in a state of financial hardship or may misuse substances. They may find clients on the street and payment may be in the form of money, drugs or in exchange for accommodation.
- Other kinds of work in the sex industry include working in Sex Entertainment Venues (there are three in the city), or in camera or film work, including online work.
- A national survey found that the percentage of men who reported paying for sex has risen slightly over recent years, with over half of these having paid for sex outside the UK^{15,16}. There is no comparable local data.
- Local services providing information for this research reported that sex workers were reluctant to reveal information about their clients and the clients themselves took steps to avoid being identified. However, from available information, it appears that clients were quite diverse in terms of age, ethnicity and the context in which they sought sex work. Purchasers of sex work from females or males were understood to nearly always be men.
- Applying national estimates of the percentage of sex workers proportionately to the local resident population produces an estimate of 350 sex workers in total. However, there are reasons to suggest that actual numbers are somewhat higher in the city (see previous section on 'local context').
- Oasis Sex Worker Outreach Project, the specialist service for female sex workers, provides interventions with about 80-85 women every three months and casework with almost 30 clients per year. 29 men who were clients of Terrence Higgins Trust in 2014/15 were identified as being involved in sex work (although they may not themselves have identified as sex workers).

^b See Section 7 for further information on 'chemsex'.

Sex work in Brighton & Hove: Key findings

- 53 service users who were accessing structured treatment at the substance misuse service over an eleven month period were identified as sex working. There were 36 people identified as sex working using the NHS sexual health service in 2015.
- Local service data are not always collected and recorded in a consistent way making it difficult to know how many sex workers are accessing services. Furthermore, services may be unaware that their service users are sex working, since this may not be disclosed. Disclosure is more likely to happen if trust has been built between the sex worker and the service. It may take time and skill to know how to best elicit this information.

Points to consider

6. Because people can often be reluctant to disclose that they are sex working, services whose clients are likely to include sex workers should consider how to create an environment where sex workers will feel safe to make a disclosure. As well as providing staff training on the needs of sex workers and how best to support them, they may also need to train staff on the best way to help people disclose.
7. It would be useful if agencies could record in a consistent way as part of their service user assessments and on databases whether their service users are known to be sex working. Improved data and monitoring would enable a better understanding of sex working and sex workers locally, and for services to respond in a more targeted way.
8. Further work needs to be considered on responses to those purchasing sex work, including how to manage disclosures and how best to support them. This should include recognition that violence and abuse against sex workers is not acceptable. Services should have a process in place for responding to any concerns they may have in relation to risk and harm posed by purchasers of sex work.

6 Characteristics, circumstances and needs of sex workers

Key findings

National picture

- National estimates are that females make up between 63% and 90% of the total sex worker population^{17,18}. In London a higher proportion of sex workers were estimated to be male (30-40%). Some local services recorded more female sex working service users than males, but it was the other way round for other services.
- The profile of sex workers is highly dependent on which sector of the sex industry is being examined.
- National research suggests that female sex workers on the street had very high health needs, and many had experienced physical, sexual or emotional abuse as a child¹⁹. Those working off-street had healthier lifestyles than those working on-street, but they were still at risk of poorer physical and mental health than the general public.

Local picture

- People involved in sex work locally are diverse in age, gender and the circumstances in which they live. Local service providers reported that they were occasionally encountering trans sex workers.
- The age profile of sex workers known to local services varied widely within and between services.
- Nearly two thirds of Oasis Sex Worker Outreach Project service users were White British, with Eastern Europeans featuring among the other third. This kind of picture was found across other services (for both women and men), with an increase in economic migrants reported in recent years. Male escorts were reported to include those from wider international backgrounds.
- Sex workers may often live in privately rented or social rented housing, but homelessness or insecure housing also featured widely in the current or previous lives of sex workers. Some may be fleeing abusive relationships.
- Some sex workers are peripatetic and visit the city for a few days from time to time.
- Sex workers who saw sex work as a job may be relatively well educated. Some females had a background of working in the health, education or care sector. Sex work was often not their only income source.
- National research suggests that a significant minority of students have been involved in sex work²⁰. They may be doing so in response to debts related to student loans or living costs and find sex work to be a relatively well paid source of income that they can fit around their studies more easily than other lines of work.
- Information on whether there were people sex working in the city who had been trafficked or who were being forced to work was sketchy. A small number of services reported suspicious circumstances, but proven evidence was rare. More resources would be required to be more proactive in locating possible victims.

Points to consider

9. Develop an engagement plan with those services most likely to come into contact with sex workers and/or those communities that are most likely to be affected (eg. students, and any particular nationalities which may feature in national trafficking data and local service data).
10. Raise awareness that trafficking can take place within the UK, as well as internationally, and help services to recognise signs of trafficking.

7 Key risks for sex workers

Key findings

- The following circumstances may increase risk for sex workers:
 - Face to face contact
 - Genital contact
 - Lone sex working
 - Outdoor work
 - Involvement in sex ('chemsex') parties involving men taking substances and having sex often with multiple partners
 - Young age or inexperience
 - New arrivals to Brighton & Hove or the UK
 - Lack of access to, or engagement with, services (see following section)

Physical violence, rape or sexual assault

- In the three year period ending 2014/15 there were 31 reports from Brighton to the National Ugly Mugs service, all relating to violence against women. This included six reports of rape or attempted rape, four sexual assaults and nine violent incidents. More recent reports mostly came from women working independently. This may reflect both the general move away from brothels/parlours to working in private premises, as well as independent working being generally more risky.
- The main risk of violence was believed to be when working in public places, or when alone in clients' or other people's homes. Working independently reduces the availability of support in an emergency.
- Types of violence included clients breaking pre-arranged agreements, eg. around levels of service or wearing a condom. Sex workers may also be subject to domestic violence.
- The use of mobile apps in sex work has escalated recently, particularly to facilitate sex work arrangements between men. This may lead to people working in isolation, without links to support networks or other safety initiatives. Contacts made via the use of apps mean that both sex workers and clients can have complete anonymity and are not traceable.

Sexual health

- In general, people who are sex working in a planned way take precautions to protect their sexual health.
- For people living more chaotic lifestyles or substance dependent lives with insecure housing or homelessness, their sex work may not be planned. They may take fewer precautions and engage in riskier practices.
- Sex ('chemsex') parties for men, facilitated by the use of 'party drugs' and often involving multiple partners, were reported to be drawing in people providing sexual services for payment. 'Chemsex' parties create a high risk environment where HIV and other sexually transmitted infections can spread.
- The availability of post-sex treatment to prevent infection with the HIV virus and the practice of 'sero-sorting' is likely to have affected the propensity to use condoms

within the population of men who have sex with men. This may apply within the context of sex working, especially within the 'chemsex' scene.

Drugs and alcohol misuse

- Substance misuse can be an important factor underpinning someone being involved in sex work.
- The use of substances can make it more difficult to address other needs which may also be linked to sex working, eg. housing; employment options; health issues; and relationships.
- Entrenched users of substances may be particularly vulnerable to being sexually exploited.
- People taking drugs or alcohol and/or who are living in multiple disadvantage may be less likely to vet clients in advance and less likely to have regular health screening checks.
- A state of intoxication may leave a sex worker vulnerable, for example to assault, robbery or other crimes.

Mental health and social isolation

- A recent national systematic review found high rates of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal ideation in sex workers²¹.
- Social stigma and how others might view sex working was reported widely throughout this research to have a negative impact for sex workers. Stigma was thought to link to social isolation, and sex workers not feeling able to speak freely about their lives.
- The increase in independent sex work reduced contact with other sex workers, making social networking, friendship and other support less likely.

Other risks

- Indirect sex work (without physical contact) via the internet may be seen as a safe activity, although may not be totally free of risk in the longer term.
- National research reported a level of harassment experienced by performers in sex entertainment venues, and vulnerability to financial exploitation and poor working conditions²². No evidence was obtained during our research which suggested that this was the case locally, but this was not explored in depth.
- The cash-in-hand nature of sex work, while providing immediate financial rewards, may reduce the likelihood that sex workers will plan for their longer term financial future, pay national insurance contributions, etc.

Points to consider

11. Promote the message that everyone should be free of violence.
12. P International Day to End Violence against Sex Workers (17th December annually).
13. Continue to promote the reporting of any violence or abuse via the 'dodgy punters' scheme.
14. Consider why sex workers from Brighton & Hove may be less inclined to share information about incidents in a non-anonymised form than those from other areas, and whether anything may be done to increase confidence to report.

Sex work in Brighton & Hove: Key findings

15. Continue work with substance misusing sex workers to address their needs, and make use of any opportunities to help reduce risks linked to sex working.
16. Reflecting the strategic framework referred to in Section 3, develop information resources for the public, including those who sell or purchase sex. Make available via a wide range of services.
17. Seek ways in which public attitudes to sex working may be influenced so that the existence of sex working is acknowledged and the social barriers faced by sex workers become less of a concern.
18. Consider whether more information is needed to confirm that those working in Sex Entertainment Venues locally are not unsafe or subject to abuse.
19. Provide support around obtaining alternative means of generating income to anyone who wishes to withdraw from sex working.

8 Services and access to services

Key findings

- In principle, there are services which can help meet the needs of sex workers.

Approaches to service provision

- Some services provide outreach work, but most sex workers in Brighton & Hove work independently, and are dispersed across the city, transient or otherwise 'hidden', making face-to-face access difficult.
- Drop-in and flexible services can work best for some sex workers. Fast track access and the absence of waiting lists are advantageous.
- Online access provides links to local support for women sex workers, but the route to local services for male sex workers is less clear. There are national information sources with generic safety information for sex workers, as well as specific information for male, trans and migrant workers. There are also online chat rooms for information sharing and support.

Referrals, partnership working and engagement

- Most services can receive referrals from other agencies or self-referrals from sex workers themselves, but the rate of engagement is low. Sex workers may not engage with services until a problem has become urgent for them, or they may not engage at all.
- Links between some agencies are more likely than between others and information sharing may not always be explored.
- Sex workers who are most confident, organised or supported are more likely to engage.
- Not all agencies may recognise signs of sex working; a lack of awareness, knowledge and skills may prevent or deter engagement.

Accessible services and appropriate interventions

- Services need to be a safe environment where sex workers feel comfortable and able to report and disclose. Related publicity needs to reflect this.
- Homeless sex workers may be uncomfortable with accessing services which are not specifically designed for homeless people.
- People without English as a first language, those new to sex working, or new to the country may not be aware of what services exist or know how to access them.
- There is a need to take account of those people who are sex working, but who do not necessarily see themselves as sex working.
- Agencies need to understand the risks sex workers may face, know how to respond and be aware of ways in which sex workers can best access further support.

Trust and confidence in services

- Sex workers may fear unintended consequences of reporting incidents or disclosing sex working.
- The use of sexual violence support services by sex workers appears to be low.

Sex work in Brighton & Hove: Key findings

- There often seems to be a fear of, or lack of trust in, the police. This may be related to sex workers' concern about being subject themselves to criminal justice sanctions or they may be concerned about the potential impact it may have on their source of income. Sex workers are often reluctant to report to and work with the police to bring offenders to justice.
- Fear of engagement with the police may particularly apply to sex workers who are offenders, those who may be fraudulently on benefits, with insecure immigration status or victims of trafficking. Perpetrators may therefore feel they can continue to offend or exercise control against sex workers without fear of redress.

Stigma and isolation

- There is a lack of openness around sex working related to societal attitudes. This may prevent disclosure of sex work, limiting access to appropriate services.
- Those working in isolation may lack social networks, support and information. Some may be estranged from family and friends.
- Some sex workers may be living and working under the control of someone else.

Sex workers living with multiple disadvantage

- Sex workers with multiple disadvantage need to manage day-to-day existence around food, drugs, accommodation, etc. If they recognise problems related to sex work at all, they may not prioritise taking steps to resolve issues.
- Until any substance misuse issues are under control, managing other problems related to sex working may be hard to achieve.

Points to consider

Referrals, partnership working and engagement

20. The current framework for information sharing to be reviewed to ensure that it is fit for purpose, including where there may be suspicions of modern slavery or trafficking.
21. Review active referral routes and monitor the success with which referrals are taken up. Take steps to improve uptake of services accordingly.
22. Expectations for services in terms of best practice around addressing the needs of sex workers to be set out, including:
 - Reviewing specialist sex worker service provision to ensure that the commissioning framework is up-to-date
 - Setting out clear expectations around the response to sex work from generic services
23. All relevant agencies to consider asking/capturing information about sex working in client assessments.

Accessible services and appropriate interventions

24. The provision of training for agencies on the risks and needs of sex workers and how best to encourage disclosure and provide support.
25. Publicity, communications and service environments need to be appropriate for all sex workers who might be expected to require their services.
26. Services also need to consider in their communications that not all people who are exchanging sex for payment may consider themselves as sex workers.

27. Consider what might be done to improve access to support for victims of sexual violence.

Trust and confidence in services

28. Publicise that services are provided confidentially.

29. Consider the use of case studies or quotes where sex workers have had positive outcomes from accessing services.

30. Training for police around the needs of sex workers and ongoing work to build sex workers' trust and confidence in the police.

31. Consider what can be done so that sex workers feel free to report crimes against them without feeling they might be at risk of being drawn into the criminal justice system as offenders themselves.

32. Publicity of services which can be accessed without police involvement. Other services may be able to support sex workers who are also offenders without holding them to account for offending.

Stigma and reducing isolation

33. Publicise sources of support for sex workers.

34. Consider whether there is opportunity to build capacity within the sex worker community. This might include peer support, or supporting a local awareness-raising campaign, eg. linked with the International Day to End Violence against Sex Workers each year.

Sex workers living with multiple disadvantage

35. Provide integrated services which are flexible and appropriate to the needs of those with chaotic lifestyles.

9 Conclusions

The characteristics of Brighton & Hove and the residents and visitors to the city combine to provide an environment where commercial and opportunistic sex work is likely to have a higher than average prevalence. How the sex work industry operates locally has been changing in some respects, particularly around more independent working, lone working and working from private premises, mirroring national trends.

There needs to be a recognition that any activity by public services, in particular the police or immigration, can have an impact on trust and confidence which can prevent sex workers accessing and engaging with services.

The commissioning framework for services should be reviewed in light of this report to ensure that they are able to respond to the levels of need identified. With the exception of the specialist projects in the city which are dedicated to supporting sex workers, there is often a lack of knowledge, understanding and focus on the needs and risks associated with sex work. Most generic services respond to sex workers in an ad-hoc way. While work with individual clients may have been appropriate, the city could support a more consistent approach by setting out clear expectations around engagement with sex workers. Wider information-sharing and co-ordination of support and interventions for vulnerable individuals across services would improve the support provided. Training for services may be required.

The approach to sex work, including framing it as an issue relating to Violence against Women and Girls, should be reviewed. This should be included in the planned review of the local Violence against Women and Girls Strategy and seek to address both the wider issues identified in this report, including the risks to those engaged in sex work and the wider context. It should also ensure that sex workers themselves are engaged in the development of the approach.

Awareness-raising in a way which will promote understanding of the existence, needs and risks of sex workers would help create a more open environment and reduce stigma. Sex workers should feel free to disclose and talk about their sex working, and to seek help and advice if they need it.

Agencies contacted as part of this research welcomed this piece of work expressed an interest in understanding more about sex workers and sex working in the city and were open to being able to do more to reach people who are sex working and improve responses.

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Sex work in Brighton & Hove: Key findings

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