

Connect More: How can services, sectors & communities find a shared vision?

National Multiple Disadvantage Summit 2025

Supporting sex workers: Current legislation, proposed changes and what this means for individuals and your partnership.

Speakers:

Jackie Brown – Operations Manager at Basis Yorkshire

Camilla Lerner – Team Manager, Allesia Project, Newham

Lynsey Walton – Chief Executive, National Ugly Mugs

Chair: Tassie Weaver, MEAM Associate and Co-Chair of Board at Basis Yorkshire

Aims of the session:

- To clarify the current laws that govern the buying and selling of sex in England
- To highlight current proposed changes to legislation under the Police and Crime Bill amendments
- To explore what these changes might mean for individuals involved in different kinds of sex work
- To consider how your MEAM or Changing Futures partnerships can be used to improve support for people who sex work

Current legislation

Jackie opened the session by outlining current legislation, which is often based on archaic laws and outdated language which serves to maintain stigma around sex work and even increases risk rather than protects people who sex work. It was explained that the act of selling sex is not illegal, but the “fringe” acts and behaviours that are involved in the work are often criminalised.

The illegal act of loitering or soliciting “for purposes of prostitution” was shared as an example. The result of this is that people (often women) who do on street work are forced to work in more secluded and isolated areas away from police attention. When meeting clients, to avoid being criminalised for soliciting, they often have to make rushed risk assessments and have no time for negotiating with clients.

Another example was the offence of keeping a brothel. If two or more people are working in one premises, both could be criminalised for running a brothel. This means that women are forced to work alone and therefore are more at risk.

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Lynsey powerfully summarised the situation by reflecting that the safety advice that you may give to a young woman going on a night out – stay with your friends, stay in well lit areas – is criminalised when it comes to people who sell work.

Proposed changes: Good intentions don't equal good outcomes

Three key amendments to the Police and Crime Bill have been proposed and are currently being considered. In summary, the proposed changes would:

- criminalise facilitating or supporting sex work by a third party
- Make it an offence to pay for sex, criminalising the buyer
- Repeal the offence of loitering or soliciting for the purpose of prostitution

People who sex work and organisations that support them have deep concerns that the first two amendments will increase risk. The third amendment is supported.

Potential increased risks, based on evidence from countries where these laws already exist, include:

- Riskier work for less clients and less money. When clients are criminalised, they are taking more risk therefore feel they can demand more.
- Reduced trust in police and other services as sex workers have been used as “bait” for catching criminals. Support services may also be criminalised if their work is seen to be “facilitating” sex work.
- Criminalisation of safety and survival strategies. For people trading sex for basic needs such as accommodation, this will now be criminalised with no alternative options given.
- A move towards only supporting people who are exiting, rather than meeting people where they are at, leaving a huge gap for the most marginalised people.

We also discussed the additional risks posed to people who sell sex that are also migrants, particularly as many have no right to work legally, and their only means of survival may see them criminalised.

Discussion

A long discussion with workshop attendees followed, exploring why this approach to sex work exists and how partnerships can work together to explore and tackle it. We agreed that the stigma of sex work is still over-whelming for many people. People experiencing multiple disadvantage may avoid partnership approaches due to fear of “being outed” to an entire partnership of professionals. We also discussed why many of the principles that shape our approach to multiple disadvantage – strengths based working, empowerment, choice, voice, flexibility etc – do not apply when it comes to supporting people who sex work. A harm

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minimisation approach is used by many organisations that support sex workers, but the wider system often find this intolerable and difficult to do in practice.

We suggested that MEAM and Changing Futures partnerships are the ideal forum to explore why this level of stigma still exists. Systems Thinking tools can help you delve below the surface and start to understand what underpins the reluctance and fear to support sex workers in a strengths based and empowering way. Once we understand this, only then will we make progress in meeting people where they are at and being led by them, regardless of their decision to sell sex or not. We ended on a poignant reminder that people who sell sex are also whole individuals with many other characteristics, strengths, hopes, beliefs, relationships, responsibilities and skills, and we would do well to focus on these more.