



Exit closed?

Assessing the policy landscape for services seeking to support women to exit prostitution

Summary report

Full report written by Helen Johnson, summary produced by Commonweal Housing



About

The Report

This report is a summary of a review of the policy landscape around strategies to enable women to exit prostitution. The full report was written by Helen Johnson and commissioned by Commonweal Housing. It builds on the previous work of Helen Easton and Prof Roger Mathews; An Evaluation of the Chrysalis Project: "Providing accommodation and support for women exiting prostitution" (2012). That work made several important recommendations, particularly relating to disclosure and the existence of a culture of "don't ask don't tell" regarding engagement in prostitution among some service providers.

Two years on from that report, Commonweal housing commissioned established researcher Helen Johnson to consider the policy landscape around prostitution and exit strategies, predominantly in London, to assess progress or the lack of since the original report.

What follows is a summary of the key findings, the full report can be found at; www.commonwealhousing.org.uk

The Chrysalis Project

The Chrysalis project is a three stage accommodation and support package for women who have experienced exploitation trauma and abuse through their involvement in street based prostitution. The project is delivered by St Mungo's Broadway and only deals with women with a connection to the London borough of Lambeth. Crucially this staged model of exit includes a phase of mixed independent and supported living, where women move into independent accommodation, but are supported in the running of their daily lives, with a gradual move into total independence.

Commonweal

Commonweal Housing is an action-learning charity that supports the creation and testing of innovative housing based solutions to different manifestations of social injustice. Our aim is to challenge the partners we work with and independent evaluators to really identify whether a model is working and, if so, why it works. We then seek to replicate the project and where necessary lobby for policy change.

In 2009 Commonweal began a project with homeless charity St Mungo's providing move on accommodation as part of a staged model of exit for women who have been involved in prostitution: the Chrysalis project. Commonweal provides housing stock for the third stage of the Chrysalis project.

Contact us

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Executive Summary

Key findings

- The Chrysalis Project is a three stage model of accommodation and support for women seeking to exit prostitution. Commonweal Housing provides housing stock for the third stage.
- As part of the project process Commonweal commissioned an evaluation of the project in 2012 and a follow up report on the policy landscape in 2016. The report found that;
- Prostitution is still not being seen as a priority in VAWG strategies in a majority of London Boroughs.
- A lack of national guidance, differing ideological perspectives and the localism agenda are leading to a postcode lottery of support for women exiting prostitution.
- In London in particular the lack of a pan-London approach to exit and the lack of any mapping of what services are available to women is a significant barrier to support.
- There continue to be issues in mainstream services of a lack of asking and identification of relevant signs of whether a woman is involved in prostitution and whether she would like support to help her exit.
- The commissioning landscape for exit strategies is being undermined by cost pressures and the influence of large, non-specialist organisations undercutting specialist services on cost; this has directly led to the closure of one service in recent months.

- There is clear evidence of a commissioning shift back to a sole focus on emergency support. In addition to having poorer qualitative outcomes for the women involved, this is not cost effective in the long term, with the potential for relapse and for women to cycle through the system and a continual transferal of costs.

There is still a prevailing culture of not asking a woman whether she is involved in prostitution

The image shows the cover of a report titled "Exit Closed? Assessing the policy landscape for services seeking to support women exit prostitution". The cover features the logos of Commonwealth Housing and Chrysalis Project. It includes the text "Full report written by Helen Johnson, summary produced by Commonwealth Housing" and "Summary report". Below the cover, there is a photograph of a red brick wall with a glowing yellow "EXIT" sign. At the bottom, a pink banner contains the text "Download the full report at www.commonwealhousing.org."

A Postcode Lottery

Findings

- For a majority of London Boroughs, Prostitution has not been a priority for inclusion within Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategies. A range of reasons lay behind this including an ideological divide between boroughs taking a “sex workers rights” approach and those who see prostitution as exploitation.
- There is evidence of an increasing polarisation of approach between boroughs and seemingly also amongst those organisations delivering services for women.
- The safer Lambeth partnership in particular is exemplary in seeking to address issues of prostitution. Glasgow also have a very successful pro-active approach via the *Routes Out* scheme which has significantly cut street prostitution.

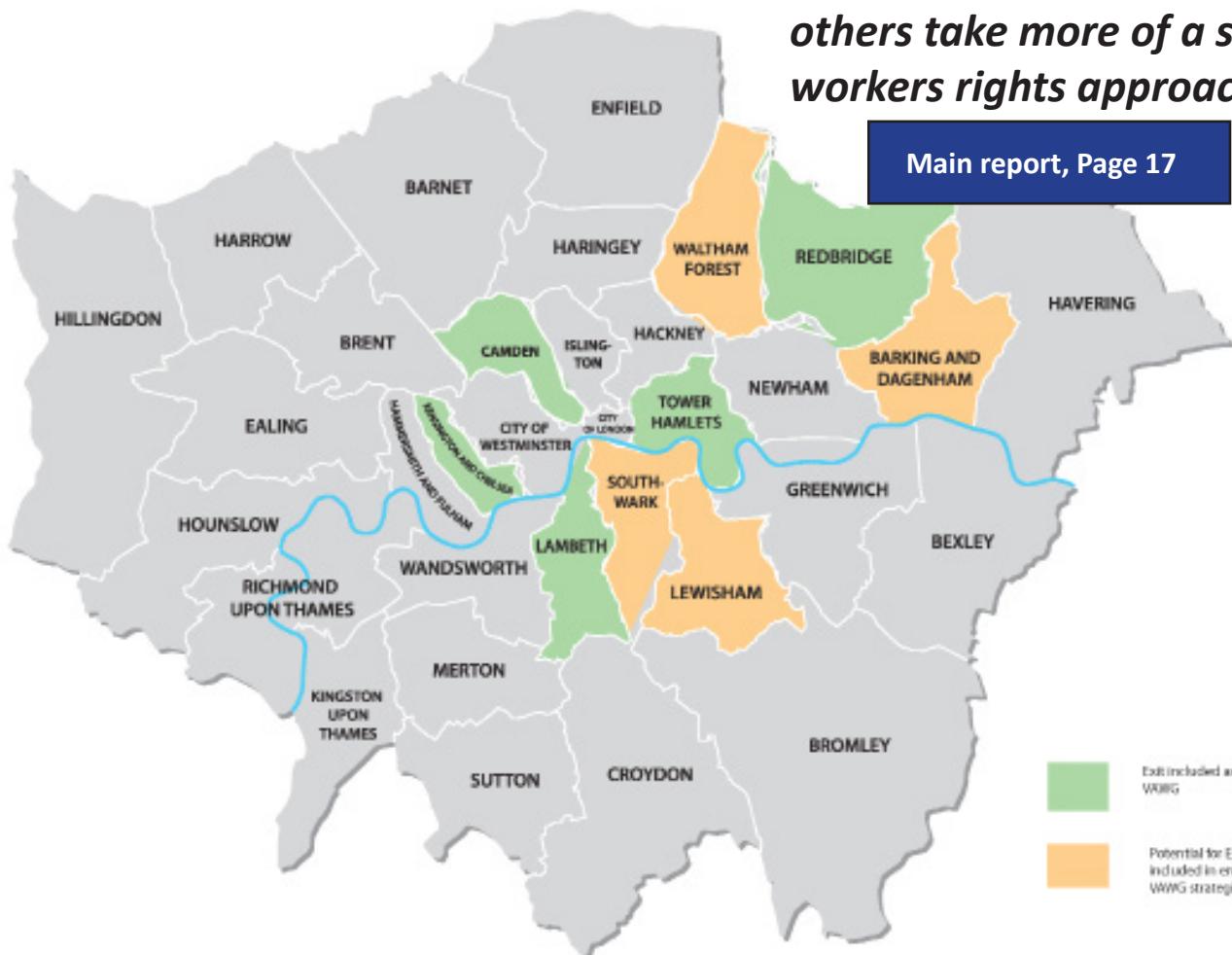
Recommendations

Practitioners and Exit services themselves need to improve their communications with commissioners and policy makers responsible for VAWG strategies.

The best hope for a much needed pan-London strategy on exit is the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime. Through the VAWG strategy MOPAC can develop a pan London response to prostitution and better guidance for policy and practice. This should be a focus for lobbying, particularly after the 2016 Mayoral election.

“ Across London, support for Exit is patchy. With boroughs such as Lambeth and Camden taking a strong and committed approach towards exit while others take more of a sex workers rights approach ”

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Don't ask, Don't tell

Findings

- A large number of both mainstream and specialist services continue to not specifically ask women about involvement in prostitution.
- Despite Social Workers and NHS practitioners being likely to come across women involved in prostitution, only those working in sexual health centers explicitly ask about involvement in prostitution.
- There is still a prevailing culture of not asking a woman whether she is involved in prostitution. Partly due to not wanting to stigmatise the woman, but also partly due to a lack of knowledge about how to work with women involved in prostitution.
- There is a growing problem of young women who are being exploited within relationships. Therefore there may be a need to widen the understanding of sexual exploitation, to incorporate circumstances where women might not identify as being in prostitution, but are nevertheless in exploitative situations.
- Failures in identifying women who are involved in prostitution lead to failures in identifying women who are ready to exit prostitution.

52

*Number of
women the
Chrysalis project
housed 2014-
2015*

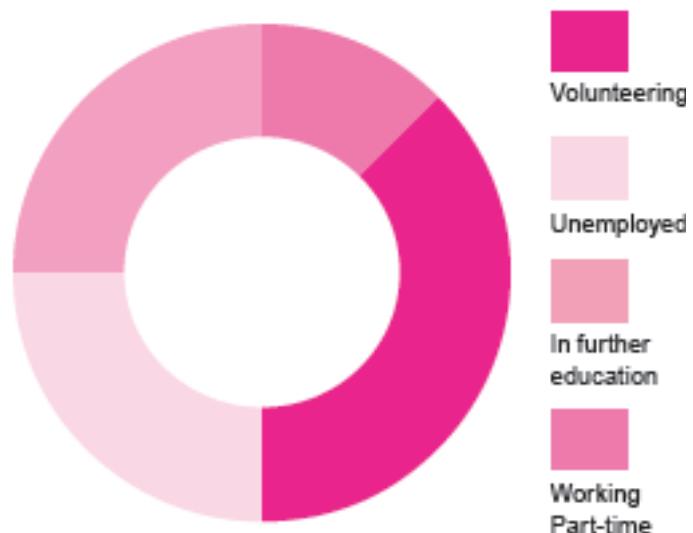
Recommendations

Current definitions of exploitation are too narrow and investigation of adoption of a wider definition to encompass the growing issue of informal prostitution should be examined by practitioners and policy makers.

There is much more work to do to ensure better identification of women involved in prostitution. Specific measures to educate and encourage better identification along with developing stronger support pathways should be examined as a priority in mainstream services, particularly in the National Health Service.

Employment status of women leaving the Chrysalis project

In employment, education or training



Embedding Exit Strategies

Findings

- There is a lack of awareness among mainstream organisations, particularly in the public sector around exiting strategies. Practitioners are not confident in raising the issue with women and may not know the steps to take if a woman did want to exit. However, most practitioners are supportive of exit as an option once alerted to it.
- There is corresponding evidence that some services have not correctly identified the stage a woman is at and her particular support required, largely due to a lack of knowledge about the exiting process.
- As the profile of exit strategies grow among practitioners there is a gap between rhetoric and reality, with some services appearing to offer exit without taking a proactive approach to exit, which can lead to poorer outcomes.
- There is a lack of an overarching strategy for promoting discussion of exit among main stream services, and an unwillingness to present exit as an option.
- A proactive approach is required as many women will not engage with the idea of exit, until they understand there is a realistic prospect of it for them.
- It was generally thought the “voice” of exit services was underdeveloped influencing public policy and practitioners.

Recommendations

Efforts around embedding strategies should center around developing a network for promotion and discussion of exit within mainstream services.

Extending exit strategies to mainstream services not already entrenched on one side of the political divide around prostitution should be a priority. The deep convictions on both sides of the divide mean that it would be counterproductive to target scarce resources at services already opposed to exit.

A lack of knowledge of exit and the various exit services has the potential to restrict access for women, a mapping exercise of the various services offering exit support in London should be entered in to and upon completion promoted with various front-line services.

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There was a strong acknowledgment that women were cycling through the system because they were stumbling once no longer able to access emergency provision or other forms of support and were unable to transition into living independently.

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Housing

Findings

- Current strategies focus primarily on emergency accommodation, with some providers not prioritising accommodation beyond emergency and hostel provision. However a lack of provision around accommodation post-emergency to aid the transition to independent living, can lead to service users returning to prostitution.
- There is recognition amongst practitioners that many women are cycling through the system because they falter when no longer able to access emergency accommodation and find the transition to independent living particularly difficult and in some cases are unable to sustain it.
- The complexity of need involved in some cases mean that no service can guarantee success, however exit strategies, particularly those with three stage accommodation do present greater opportunities for success.
- There is evidence of a financial case for third stage provision if it can reduce cyclical re-entry into service provision.
- While most providers express an interest in providing a service similar to Chrysalis, there is a reluctance to do so prior to spending round decisions by central government and the expected further reductions in commissioning budgets. However, a number of interviewees suggested that some local authorities would ignore the issue of prostitution in the knowledge that those affected would be channeled into neighboring boroughs.

Recommendations

The case for a third stage of accommodation needs to better made, with a stronger evidence base. Projects such as the third stage of the Chrysalis project offer excellent outcomes but these need to be better presented to commissioners.

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Although, it is not so chaotic in this hostel, there are still people using and other girls would frequently knock on my door for money, tobacco etc, and a constant reminder that drugs were easily accessible. I couldn't help but think that if I remained in a using environment, I would in fact return to using. I knew managing a flat while on benefits would be a struggle, however, I knew it was just what I needed to keep heading forward. Since moving into the Commonwealth flat I could not have been happier! It has given me confidence and a feeling of permanence I had not felt in years.

Chrysalis project service user

Changing Funding Priorities

Towards the end the time of writing our report it became clear that the funding for the third stage of the Chrysalis model was being discontinued by the London Borough of Lambeth.

In keeping with our action learning objectives we wanted to investigate whether there was learning for similar projects and organisations, particularly as the discontinuation of the third stage of the Chrysalis Project came at a similar time as closure or threats to other similar projects.

Eaves

Eaves closed on 30th October 2015, having been operational since 1977. Eaves was a large provider of VAWG-related services in London with reach and influence across the UK. The majority of Eaves services have moved in their entirety to The NIA Project in Islington, including the London Exiting Advocacy project and the Alice project. However, the Poppy project, a support, advocacy and accommodation project for trafficked women has not survived. They are currently waiting to see if they will receive funding from an EU source. In addition, Eaves had already been forced to return refuges because they could not deliver the services with the funding.

ELWP

The East London Women's Project (ELWP) is a targeted response by the East London Housing partnership specifically for single homeless women who have multiple needs. The project's original funding ran out in December 2015 and there is uncertainty about the future funding of the project. An evaluation of the project's work to date is expected soon.

Chrysalis

The third stage of the Chrysalis project will be decommissioned by April 2016. A handover of properties is scheduled and Commonweal will seek to engage another specialist partner to prolong the service. However our research into the rationale behind the decision made clear that;

The 3rd stage was decommissioned as part of a wider savings agenda in the borough. Resources are being targeted towards clients requiring 'high support'. As the women accessing stage 3 are close to independence this element of the service is more vulnerable to reductions in budgets available for vulnerable adults.



Changing Funding Priorities

Effects

The Closure of Eaves, uncertainty relating to EWLP and the changes to the Chrysalis project have a strong strategic and systemic impact.

The joined up working that Eaves offered has been lost and there is more and more a move to reducing unit cost with funding going to larger, generic organisations who do not possess the expertise or political focus that Eaves offered. Some interviewees in our research said that the pan-London element of Eaves was its most important feature as it provided a resource smaller services could tap in to.

Another practitioner noted that this also seriously erodes the political and critical focus that the organisation offered, which had a strategic impact for the sector more widely, and which fed into other services such as EWLP and Chrysalis. Further, there has been a loss of resources available to non-specialist services that would look to Eaves for specialist guidance.

Cost vs Value

The commissioning focus on cost rather than value tends to penalise smaller, specialist service provision of the type offered by Eaves and favour larger providers who can employ economies of scale to drive down costs. In the case of Eaves, large generic, non-specialist organisations won tenders, powered by large reserves at the expense of a smaller organisation with significant levels of self referrals (taken to be a sign of the value of the service to the women).

Recommendations

As funding is squeezed providers are prioritising funding only for first stage of emergency support – a risk that EWLP and Chrysalis are both facing. A shift of this kind also creates risks increased pressure on the first stage and could erode confidence in the system in the minds of service users. Instead of observing women move through a process of change, they see their peers stuck in one form of support with nowhere to move. Services become bottlenecked and new service users cannot access the first stage of support, whereas those who are ready to move on have nowhere to go. This often leads to women cycling through the system.

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There is still a prevailing culture of not asking a woman whether she is involved in prostitution.

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Commonweal would like to thank;

Helen Johnson, author of the report. ***Helen Easton and Roger Mathews who produced the important work Evaluation of the Chrysalis Project: Providing accommodation and support for women exiting prostitution (2012). We are also extremely grateful to the London Borough of Lambeth and our project partners St Mungos. We would also like to thank all the practitioners who took time out to contribute to this work.***

Case Study *The value of housing in exit*

Commonweal knows every service user has their own story. These stories emphasise the positive change and qualitative benefits of a proactive approach to exit. Below is the story of a service user who has been through the Chrysalis project;

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I first came into contact with St Mungo's back in January 2011 when I was placed in a large mixed hostel with capacity of over 100 men and women. I had relapsed on alcohol after an 18 month sobriety. Fairly quickly, I was moved to a women's project for my own safety.

Additionally, the size of the hostel meant that there were not the staff available to offer the type of support they deemed necessary for me at the time. I then subsequently went back and forth between two the hostel and the women's project and various detox units, rehabs and dry houses during my periods of being abstinent.

I am not one of those people who can even afford to dabble every now and again. My drinking and using has been so serious that I have suffered double organ failure and was hospitalised for 6 weeks. I have Deep Vein Thrombosis in both legs, I was diagnosed with liver cirrhosis at the age of 26. Drugs and alcohol took everything from me. I went from being a university graduate with a career earning £35k + commission, telephone and travel expenses to unemployed IV drug user living in a hostel with nothing to show from my former life.

In April 2013, following a relapse and returning to London after getting clean with a friend up North, I moved back into a hostel. Although, it was not so chaotic in this hostel, there were still people using and a constant reminder that drugs were easily accessible.

I was determined that I wanted to stay clean. I had a clear idea of where I wanted to go in my career and what I needed to do to get there. The one thing I felt that kept holding me back was the hostel.

I felt if I remained in a using environment, I would in fact return to using. When I was told that there was a Commonweal flat about to become available, I was desperate to get it!

I knew managing a flat while on benefits would be a struggle, however, I knew it was just what I needed to keep heading forward.

Since moving into the flat I could not have been happier! It has given me confidence and a feeling of permanence I had not felt in years. Thorough my using and constantly feeling trapped in a cycle of relapse and wet hostels, my life just seemed transient. I feel I am building a home for my future. I am now looking to go back to university next year to do my PGCE to become a Teacher and have a safe drug free environment to do this from.

Although I like to think that I would have remained abstinent no matter what happened, in reality, had it not been for the opportunity I was given in the Commonweal, I don't know if I would be making the plans I am today.

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