

# **HIDDEN HOMELESS 2:**

**AN EXPLORATION OF THE HEALTH, CARE AND WELLBEING  
NEEDS OF PEOPLE INVOLVED IN SEX WORK IN ESSEX**

Sharon Westfield de Cortez  
August 2024

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*'It's not your childhood dream, that's for  
sure.'*

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## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Healthwatch Essex

Healthwatch Essex is an independent charity which gathers and represents views about health and social care services in Essex. Our aim is to influence decision makers so that services are fit for purpose, effective and accessible, ultimately improving service user experience. We also provide an information service to help people access, understand, and navigate the health and social care system. One of the functions of a local Healthwatch under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, is the provision of an advice and information service to the public about accessing health and social care services and choice in relation to aspects of those services. This document was revised in July 2022 and the role of Healthwatch was further strengthened as a voice of the public with a role in ensuring lived experience was heard at the highest level.

The Healthwatch Essex Information and Guidance team are dedicated to capturing the health and social care experiences people in Essex are meeting daily. The team respond to enquiries relating to health and social care and are equipped through training, to offer specific information to the public or other professionals. The team are well placed to listen, reflect on and support people to share complex experiences such as those shared in this report. You can find details of how to contact our team on our website here – <https://healthwatchessex.org.uk/speak-to-our-team/>.

### 1.2 Background

In line with our focus on Hidden Voices, we embarked upon a series of projects looking at 'Hidden Homeless' cohorts in society, who generally experience increased barriers in achieving their health, care and wellbeing outcomes. This is the second report in the 'Hidden Homeless' series, focussing on the lived experience of people involved in sex work.

### 1.3 Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Essex would like to thank all the members of the public and professionals who took part in this project through the survey and interviews. Our thanks are also made to those individuals who took the time to meet with us and share their personal, heartfelt and emotive stories.

### 1.4 Terminology

Bareback – a sexual act without the use of a condom.

BDSM – a variety of often erotic practices or roleplaying involving bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadomasochism, and other related interpersonal dynamics.

Borderline Personality Disorder – a disorder of mood and how a person interacts with others.

Coke – slang term for cocaine.

Freedom programme – a 12-week course for women who want to learn more about the domestic violence and abuse.

Handjobs – an act of male masturbation, especially as performed on a man by someone else.

Headway – a charity supporting brain injury survivors and their families.

Nonce – a person who commits a crime involving sex, especially sex with a child.

OnlyFans – a social media platform where creators can own their content and monetise it.

Pimp – a person who controls prostitutes and arranges clients for them, taking a percentage of their earnings in return.

Red light district – a part of an urban area where a concentration of prostitution and sex-oriented businesses, such as sex shops, strip clubs etc are found. In most cases, red-light districts are particularly associated with female street prostitution.

Rohypnol – a powerful benzodiazepine that can cause amnesia, sedation, and muscle relaxation. It is often used illegally as a date-rape drug or to enhance the effects of other drugs.

Sexual Assault Referral Centre – a specialist medical and forensic service for anyone who has been raped or sexually assaulted.

Sodomised/Sodomy – a sexual act involving anal copulation.

Therapy For You – a range of free talking therapy options available in parts of Essex.

## 1.5 Disclaimer

Please note that this report relates to findings and observations carried out on specific dates and times, representing the views of those who contributed anonymously during the engagement visits. This report summarises themes from the responses collected and puts forward recommendations based on the experiences shared with Healthwatch Essex during this time.

TRIGGER WARNING: this report contains accounts and discussion of sexual acts, self-harm, suicide, violence, drug use, physical and sexual violence and abuse, and child abuse. Please continue to read only if you feel comfortable and able to do so.

## 2.0 Purpose

The aim of this project is to explore the specific health, care and wellbeing needs of people involved in sex work, including the additional barriers that they face in meeting these needs, the support currently available to them and what improvements are needed to achieve the necessary outcomes, which will in turn produce better long-term outcomes for individuals in this cohort group.

## 2.1 Engagement methods



### Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted to collect personal stories. Interviews took place in person during January – May 2024 and all participants gave their consent to have their interviews recorded. Participants were willing for their experiences to be shared within this report, however, to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality of information they provided, names used are pseudonyms to protect identities.

### The Interviews

#### **Rachel\***

Rachel\* moved to Essex seven years ago from Hertfordshire, where she 'had a beautiful house, but the bedroom tax came in, and obviously my children were adults, so they left. The council wanted their bigger properties back, and I was working seven days a week to pay for extra bedroom tax. I had to downsize, so I found a bungalow in mid Essex, which was on the main train line for my different jobs, and that's how I ended up moving out of the area.

When I moved, I basically landed jobs straight away. Some were local and some were in London, so I was really excited about that. Then in the July of 2019, I met someone. It was through Tinder. He came across quite normal, and I'd go visit him once a month, as he lived about an hour away. He told me he was an SAS Officer, and when I first went to meet him, he was very nice, well-mannered and all that. He took me to his flat. I should have known the red flags, as I had to buy food my own food and cook us both dinner in his place. And I did think it was a bit dingy. He said it was because it's a bachelor pad. It was full of all these army pictures, all these trophies, and I thought, God, these are serious. There were photos of him in uniform with guns, so I knew he must be telling me the truth.

I was still travelling all over for my job, and later that year I got caught up in the terrorist attack in London. I was injured, covered in glass and had to have 32 stitches in my head at a London hospital. I had been planning to have my kids with me for Christmas, but I didn't want them seeing me like that. The hospital staff asked me who they should contact, and not wanting to burden my kids, I asked them to call Bradley\*, the man I was seeing. I was struggling to even speak as I had had a lot of my teeth knocked out in the impact, and due to the head injury, I was struggling with my memory and coordination.

I ended up being kept in hospital for a couple of months, but he came straight to the hospital when the staff called him, and he visited me a lot. It felt like he was really there for me. They all loved him in the ward, you know, he was so kind and funny. I can see now that I was at my lowest, my most vulnerable. When the hospital finally said I could go home, I couldn't wait; the issue was that I wasn't allowed to leave hospital without someone to care for me, and I lived alone.

Around the same time, I found out that the council had put an eviction order on my home because I hadn't been living there. We tried sending them evidence of me being in hospital, but it didn't work, and they said that I had made myself intentionally homeless. So, I had nowhere to go. Then Bradley\* said, move in with him. So, what am I going to do? Of course I'm going to move in with him! I still had to go back and forth to the London hospital for appointments, and he would drive me. I was still having seizures quite regularly, so I needed someone, and he was there.

Unfortunately, pretty much as soon as I got to his place, the atmosphere changed. I was on a lot of tablets so he would give me my medication. I had no phone. I had no communication with my family. I basically was at the lowest of the lowest. He even had to bath me and wash my hair. He was in full control of my recovery.

I've lost my home and my career, as I wasn't able to work. Obviously, I had to take loads of painkillers and stuff. I was always in pain with my head. It was really hurting all the time. Most of those days, I have big gaps in my memory, but there were days where I'd wake up and he'd be beating me up. Badly. And he'd be dragging me across the bed, stripping me naked, helping himself to me. And it was



like that for a whole year. And it was absolutely horrendous. I was sore. I was bruised, I'd been burned.

I think now that he was mixing other drugs in with my tablets. All I know is that when I was coming to, I was hurting. I was bruised, I couldn't talk properly. And it was like someone hit me with a bus all over the body. And then I started hearing voices. So, I'm thinking to myself, I've really lost it. I would have visions of men being on top of me, I didn't know if they were real or hallucinations. At the same time, Bradley was giving me a litre of vodka every day, so I was drugged up to the eyeballs and probably alcoholic. He was raping me loads of times. And when I used to go sleep on the sofa, I would wake up to find myself face down naked with cameras rolling on me. I realised that he was having other men coming to the flat and raping me and filming it all.

Now you've got to remember, I worked hard before, so I had good money. I had a bank card which he had been looking after for me. I realised there was six and a half grand taken out of my bank. He'd paid for hotels, new trainers, all sorts. None of it was for me. And now I was broke.

At this point, I think some of the neighbours must have been worried as Social Services turned up. They came into the flat, but it was two men, which made it more difficult for me to speak, and they talked to me in front of Bradley\*, so I was too frightened to say anything. It's really hard for women to give the authorities and people signs they're getting abused, isn't it? Plus, I was going through some really bad stuff. Bradley\* would strangle me and hit me in the head, so much of the time I wasn't fit to hold a conversation. But eventually I did get to go to Headway, and over time I started talking to a lady there, and she helped me plan my escape. It wasn't easy, but I finally managed to get away from Bradley\* a couple of days before Christmas in 2020.

The police brought me to Essex, but I had nowhere to stay. I had family here, but they hadn't seen or heard from me in over twenty years! I ended up sleeping under the benches in the bus shelter, and that's where the local outreach team found me, and offered me support. I was obviously coming off alcohol and the drugs he had been feeding me, so I was shaking and in a real bad way. But the support

here, they helped me with clothing, food, a place to stay. It made such a difference.

I was supported to speak to the police about what Bradley\* had been doing to me. The police went to his flat and he had got rid of any evidence that I was ever there, but they did find cameras in every room. The telly had a camera on it, the bathroom had a camera on it, the bedroom and a camera on it. I felt so relieved, it was like the cameras didn't lie. The police said they thought he had been streaming me on different sites, not just the men having sex with me, but going to the bathroom, everything. He had been exploiting me the whole time. They found me on \*\*\*\*\*. It was really hard to find that out. It was under the title 'Housewife gets \*\*\*\*\* over hard'. They confirmed it was me by my tattoo. They took me to a Sexual Assault Referral Centre, where they found that I had been sodomised, which explained some of the pain I had experienced there. I was found to have traces of Rohypnol in my system too.

I have tried to move on, but it's not been easy. I have my own one bedroomed bungalow now and I see all my adult children and my grandchildren. It's very hard to trust anyone now, though. I did start seeing another guy I met, but then he hit me, so I stopped that. I feel like I'm always on the look out for signs that people can't be trusted. I don't want no man near me now. I'm building my life back up, but I'm so worried that it's just going to be taken away again.

I have a doctor, but they just keep going on that I'm overweight and need weight management. I know I'm overweight but that's not the reason for everything that's wrong with me! I do have a Social Prescriber though, and they are really good. I've done Therapy For You online. I also got myself onto a mental first aid course.

I did the Freedom Programme, which was good, and I enjoy doing arts and crafts, I find that really therapeutic. I done a protest too, women's rights, down the High Street last year. I've got a friend from the Freedom Programme, and she actually got a house around the corner from me. So, we've got this code. If I don't see her tomorrow or the next day, I'm coming round to you and vice versa. Because, you know, she's already met a bloke as well bless her, but he's older and that worries me. We have to look out for each other, don't we?

**Samuel\***

Samuel\* and his husband are a professional couple with their own home. They both maintain an active presence on various social media forums, and recently ventured into the world of OnlyFans. Samuel\* told me,

'My husband and I first decided to dabble with OnlyFans to make some extra cash for a holiday we were planning. We had seen a few people we knew on Twitter take the plunge and seemed to be making a fair amount of cash, so we thought we had nothing to lose.

It helped that we had a certain presence on what is known to the LGBTQ+ community as 'Gay Twitter', between us having over 30,000 followers. However, I still approached OnlyFans with a realist expectation. For anyone with sense it is obvious that only a certain few can genuinely make a living from OnlyFans, and for everyone else, it should just be seen as making extra money for luxuries you may not generally afford.

We ended up being on the site for around four months and uploading around 20 videos. We knew that we were never going to be extremely popular, so set our monthly subscription at a price below the average, at \$6.99 a month. At our highest point, we had over 180 subscriptions and ended up making just over £3,000 in total.

However, for regular people, OnlyFans can have some drawbacks. For the top earners, this is their career, and they can comfortably be able to make enough money to live on and not worry about showing their face and being found out by employers. For others, it is a fine balance between showing enough to gain interest and keeping your private life private. Unfortunately, I have known a few people that have thought they would make a lot more on the site than they actually did. I even know one person who was disciplined at work due to someone discovering pictures they had taken at work. So, for regular people who still need to work to make a living, using OnlyFans can be a dangerous game that needs to be approached carefully.

Another down point is that for most subscribers, they only want to see the 'gym fit' guys, which I always found surprising as these kinds of guys would never have sex

with the subscribers. However, we did find a niche market of people who did enjoy seeing regular guys have sex. Don't get me wrong, me and my husband are not exactly ugly. We have regular body types and regular looks, but we we're not at risk of being scouted for a modelling contract any time soon.

Our interactions on the site were generally positive. Many people were thankful for the opportunity to see regular guys have fun. However, it is important to keep up interactions and remember that these people are paying for a service. I have heard a number of horror stories of creators that don't bother responding to people, or who trick people into subscribing (paying the usual \$9.99 most creators charge), only for their videos to be behind paywalls, needing the subscriber to pay an additional charge (between £4.99 and £9.99) to access each video. However, after coming across some of these creators myself, they soon fell into obscurity.

We decided to stop our venture into OnlyFans after four months as we had made a generous sum to put towards our vacation. Another pressing reason is that we didn't want to disappoint the subscribers. We felt that if people were paying us for a service, then we had to deliver. After four months it began to feel like sex became a chore, and we only seemed to be having sex if we were filming it, and then it started to feel a bit fake. Making sure you've got the right camera angles, making sure you're looking at the camera at the right times, making sure you've got enough footage for a decent video. This was probably the main contributing factor to us stopping using the site. We tried to be as courteous as possible and let the subscribers know that we would be closing the site with a month's notice, so that people could cancel their subscriptions and not be charged when there would be no new content. However, this doesn't appear to be a practice used by some other creators. I have heard of a creator who goes in and out of limbo, still charging subscribers £9.99 a month, but going AWOL for months at a time, and then comes back with a meagre post stating they were busy. For me, you have to have respect for the subscribers, and I truly believe, as regular people, that's how we were able to make as much as we did in a short space of time.

Overall, OnlyFans can be a fun way to take your relationship to another level, while earning a bit of cash on the side. I would say that for regular guys, manage your expectations. Sure, there are anomalies to what I have said, and there are a

number of regular guys who make a killing. However, if you want to be in with a chance of making some extra cash, be respectful to your subscribers and make sure to post new content regularly. However, also remember, that not everyone will be an OnlyFans star, and if your page doesn't take off, it doesn't necessarily say anything about you. The world of sex work, especially in the gay community, can be toxic at times. But there are also a lot of great guys in the industry, and any foray into online sex work should be approached with a pinch of salt. Manage your expectations and have fun.'

Samuel\* also shared his experience as a customer of paid for sexual services.

'Using a sex worker still seems to be taboo in the UK, which is surprising given the amount of people who work in the industry. I have always been quite sex positive with the view that 'as long as everyone consents, what's the harm?'

While I am married, my husband and I have an understanding that if an opportunity arises, we are allowed to have sex with other people, as long as there is openness and honesty surrounding any such encounter. We also have a rule that we should not seek out new sexual partners on a regular basis, and that extra-marital fun should be an extension of our relationship and not take place instead of it.

That being said, it had been over two years since I had had sex with another guy. My husband was going through some personal stuff and wasn't in the mood for sex, so it had been over a year since I had had sex myself. However, I'm not someone who fantasises about sex 24/7. But, after a year, I was beginning to feel like a dog in heat.

I have had many negative experiences using hook-up apps like Grindr, which is full of faceless profiles and angry closeted married 'straight' men. I knew that I needed a sexual fix and pondered with the idea of paying for it. I have had a few people since think this was a crazy idea, as I'm a decent looking guy, who probably could find someone I was attracted to, to satisfy my craving. However, I liked the idea of being able to pick exactly who I wanted to have fun with.

While I wouldn't say I have a definite type, I certainly like guys 5-10 years younger than me, with a slim physique, and these types of guys wouldn't generally have fun

with me. I went online and found the profile of a guy who took my fancy straight away. He was 27, slim and blond. I was nervous about contacting him, as being 10 years older at the time, I knew I wouldn't be his type, but at the same time I knew that I was paying for a service.

The guy was really sweet and made me feel at ease straight away. We arranged to meet up a few weeks later. I picked him up from the station and drove us back to my house. He was chatty and friendly and within minutes we were on the bed. I wasn't sure what to expect as his profile said that he didn't really kiss other guys or suck them off, I guess this was a protective barrier in case you had a client you really couldn't bear to go that near to. So, I was flattered when he jumped me and passionately kissed me before doing anything and everything I wanted (whilst making sure it was ok with him first).

It was over in a flash, and I drove him back to the station and we parted. This is the first and last time I have used an escort, however, I would definitely use one again (perhaps the same guy) if I ever found myself in the same situation again.

The experience was largely positive. I got the sexual fix I wanted without having to bother with small talk or wasting time. The only negative I would say is a personal one, whereby I feel that the type of person I fancy wouldn't have sex with me without me paying them. However, it's important to remember that in a sex worker/client relationship, both have power. You can live out your wildest dreams without any fuss or time wasting and have some of the best sex of your life if you're willing to look past the fact you're paying for it. We all pay for service at a restaurant, so why not pay for excellent service received, even if it is sex.'

**Josie\***

I met Josie\* at a supported housing scheme where she was living, and she shared some of her lived experiences with me.

'My parents were a poor couple and there was domestic violence, so I saw a lot of violence from a young age. I saw my mum being raped as well. I used to look after my brother and sister from when I was little. My dad was always beating us. It's a question as to whether I got sexually abused as a child, but I don't remember, so whether I've blocked that out or not is another question. I don't know. My mum was with my dad for 14 years, then they split up and she got with a partner who was a patient from the mental health unit. I knew there was something funny about this guy and I kept saying, I know there's something off about him. My mum didn't want to hear it though. When I turned 16, he kicked me out of the house.

When I was 19, I heard from my mum, and she was crying. She said that her partner was gay and had been living a double life. He had taken everything she had and left her, so she had nothing, no money, no income. She was my mum, and she was desperate. I wanted to help her, so I thought about it, and back then you had local newspapers, and where the jobs were advertised at the back, there was always women advertising massages. We had to do something because my brother and sister were suffering as well. They needed school uniform, food, the lot. I rang one of the local brothels that was advertising, it took me four days of trying before I could speak to them.

A year and a half before this, I actually got raped by the first person I had ever had sexual contact with. I just laid there crying, I felt violated, and it broke me.

Afterwards, I had a bleach bath, I had sores everywhere. It was the worst day in my life. I had a partner but after that happened, I couldn't even touch him. I couldn't even hold his hand.

But I had to do something to help my family. So, I did speak to the brothel and went there to earn some money. I didn't know what to expect. I just sat and waited for clients for a while. The longer it was, the scarier it was waiting. You just want to get it done and get over with and get out of there. The men, they know you're new, so they control you by telling you that you have to do acts you don't want to, and that

they don't have to wear a condom. It's your body and you're looking at them and you feel disgusted. It's degrading. It's just horrible. And you are laying there crying and knowing they're looking at you and they like it. They have all the power over you. It's not your childhood dream anyway, that's for sure.

This particular brothel wasn't very busy, so it wasn't long before I moved onto another one, because I needed to earn decent money. They were easy to find in the newspapers. At one point I was seeing between ten and twenty clients a day. The boss loved it, she used to make it sound so glamorous, but then she wasn't the one earning the money doing it, she was just taking her cut. She had the gift of the gab, you would say, saying things that would make me feel like I was in control. But when you're alone in that room with a stranger, you don't actually have any control at all. I got a bit stronger as time went on. I would help the younger, less experienced girls working in the brothel. I've seen men have sex with girls who are practically unconscious through drink or drugs, and they just do what they want. They don't care and she probably won't even remember it. They love it when the girls cry too, it makes them hurt them even more because they enjoy it. I've helped the girls have baths afterwards to try and get clean, and they are still crying the whole time. Some just want to try and find a vein to help them get through the next hour. People outside of this world just haven't got a clue. No one sees the underlying pain and the vicious circle that's going on.

You see some important people too. I used to see someone very high up in the hospital. He looked after patients and yet would see me every Tuesday and get me to kick him in the bollocks, so they erupted, and he could come (ejaculate). After a while, I started talking to him and asked him why. It turned out he was sexually abused himself as a child. I started seeing a pattern of that in the men who came to me. I had a vicar come to me regularly and I would have to be his seven-year-old child. Yet you see how these people live in society, no one knows this, so they get all the respect. And then everyone just takes a look at me and judges me. The saddest thing is these people are working with vulnerable people. You're putting your children in the hands of these people and you're listening to these people, but you won't listen to me. And what I've got to say is serious and real. People don't



realise that girls like me, we actually have to deal with rapists, nonces, sex predators. You know what I mean?

I think in a way, it was a form of self-harm for me, doing this kind of work. I had no self esteem or pride left. I did start drinking and using drugs, drink to help me cope and drugs to space me out, but this kind of work is so dangerous. I was using and working, waking up after clients with condoms split, bruised all over and no memory of what had gone on. So, I learned that I needed to stop drinking and I needed to stop taking drugs while I did it. but it was difficult because I also didn't want to remember. I didn't want to be there. I also created characters that I would become when I was working, so many that I didn't know who I really was half the time.

So, I kept working, and my mum, she loved the money. I did it for her, and my brother and sister. Then one day, she dropped me, just like that. Not that she owes me, but I laid on my back for that woman, and she dropped me just like that. And I feel hurt. My pride has all gone, I got to the point where I just felt like a piece of meat. When people know you are a prostitute, they treat you like you're nothing. My brother thinks I'm disgusting and dirty, and my sister put my business all over Facebook, so now everyone knows. But the really sick thing is that I ended up getting lots of private messages for work from people on there! My mum never defends me; I've tried to protect her all my life, and she just throws me under the bus every time.

About twelve months ago I went to see a friend in the hotel. He knew that I had not been working and I was just there as a mate, smoking crack with him. He was having fun and then he threw money at me. He said that I was going to sleep with him, so I replied that I wasn't. I said I'm not here for that. I'm not that person; I thought we was friends. I threw the money back at him and that was it, he strangled me. I nearly died. It was scary. So scary, you know. I've been hurt and scared a lot. I've had to jump out windows many times. I've been mentally and physically hurt. You don't get treated like you have feelings or matter when you're doing this job. I've learned now that it's my body. If I want to say no, you're not telling me that I can't. But it took a long time to learn that. And the mind is a powerful tool; I've learnt a lot. My instincts are spot on. You can put a line of men in

front of me and I'll tell you who is the predator, who is who. I know the characteristics.

I've had so many bruises. I've had cuts and been choked. I've had blows to my head. I've had people want to rob me. I was on a job one Christmas Eve in Tottenham Court Road. And next thing you know, the door burst open, and men are standing there with guns, demanding all of our money. They knew it would be a good day to rob us because Christmas Eve is always busy in brothels. The men make out like they are Christmas shopping but come to see us because they have to stay home with their wives for a few days over Christmas.

I started working at clients' houses too. I would drive myself there, and that was obviously really dangerous too. I've been drugged, I've been spiked. Now I don't take anything from them when I'm at a home. You have to watch them at all times. Watch if there's a weapon or something, how you can get out if you need to. After they've had whatever, they've paid you for, they just want you to get out usually. Like they know what they've done but they don't want you there as a reminder. But it's not about you; it's about them not wanting to see themselves.

I've been arrested myself, a little while ago. The police officer told his colleagues to 'put gloves on because you don't know what she's got'. They didn't need to say it like that in front of me, just because I'm a working girl. It's sad because they treated me like I wasn't a real person with feelings. One of the officers was nice, she actually spoke to me like a human being and got me a coffee. You don't have to treat someone like they're nothing just because of the work they do.

I do still work sometimes now, but only with the clients that I know, ones I've had since I was younger, so I know who they are. I've actually gained friendships from it, which is sad. I had this regular guy; he was married but he shared with me that he didn't want to be a man. He wanted to be a cross dresser, so over the months, he started shaving his legs and dressing as a woman. And he loved coming and seeing me, just to talk. He ended up splitting up with his wife, but she knew deep down, I think, and they're friends to this day. And he always texts and thanks me for changing his life, saying if it wasn't for me, he wouldn't be who he wanted to be because that's such a hard thing to do in this society.

Doing this work has definitely ruined my sex life. I don't appreciate sex. I don't have sex no more. I don't believe that will ever change. I don't have emotions towards people. I haven't been in a relationship with anyone for about eight years. Everyone says I've got a black heart with chains around it. I just look at all men the same now. I have never been able to mostly attach myself to anybody, really. When I had my babies, that's the first and only time I've ever been in love. And the fact they've been taken away has broken me. I never had anything as a child, but I've still made sure my babies have had stuff. I can earn £150 an hour and then spend a couple days with my children and give them the things in life I never had. I just hope they never find out how. I don't have any contact with them at the minute, but hopefully that will change.

I see a psychiatrist now, and they keep saying that I need to stop chasing my mum and dad's love, because I have never had it, and they will never be able to give it to me. All I want is that and all I want is to be loved by somebody, and sometimes the job makes you feel loved for a few minutes by a stranger who doesn't even know you. They say I've got Borderline Personality Disorder, an eating disorder and I have psychotic episodes. I'm 37 and I've been doing the job on and off since I was 19. Obviously, you have to be in the right state of mind to do the job, and with my mental health being so bad, I can't do it. I do it very, very rarely now because of my mental health. I've reclused myself and my anxiety is so bad, I couldn't put an ad in and meet new clients now.

My experiences with mental health support haven't always been great. Just before Christmas I was really struggling, so I got in touch with the local mental health team. I saw this woman and tried to explain how I was feeling, but she just wanted me to go through all my experiences with her. I didn't want to do it, it was making me feel even worse, but she kept saying 'I want to hear everything.' Maybe she did, but it didn't help me. Afterwards she just sent me off feeling worse than when I got there. A week or so later I got a letter basically saying there was nothing she could do for me. And I thought, you've made me relive everything and then just chucked me out the back doors crying and done nothing for me because I'm nobody. They don't listen to me. I'm nobody in this world in society. And that's the saddest thing, because I am somebody. And I have got a voice, and I do want to help people that

have been through my situation. We should be standing shoulder to shoulder, getting people to listen to us.

The best help that I've had has come from the team here at the housing complex and the local homeless centre. They helped me when I got kicked out of my last place and was on the streets. They gave me somewhere to go, and they actually listened to me. I would probably be dead if it wasn't for them.'

**Allie**

Allie shared with me her long history of involvement in sex work, but something which she does not for financial remuneration, but for other reasons.

'I want to share my story because the whole thing around trauma is silent, because there's so much guilt and shame around it. People don't talk about it because they're so ashamed about how they process things or how they cope with day-to-day life. The cycle just continues and continues and continues. I want to be able to say that I do this because my brain has to find a way to cope, and in my case a very severe way to cope. But that was the way it found to cope with how I felt about myself and what was going on and what was coming up for me. And I hope by doing this, that other people might feel actually they could go and talk to someone if they are doing similar.

I experienced abuse from family members as a child, and that has left me with this kind of need for pain and punishment. It's kind of like a tier system in my head, when I get really low about myself. So firstly, I binge eat to cope with my emotions on an almost ongoing basis. And then when things get worse, I self-harm to cope with my emotions and then when I can't cope at all, I let someone else hurt me. And that's when I go online and get involved with someone else hurting me. The need to be hurt at that point is there because I hate myself. I feel the need for someone else to punish me and there's part of me that doesn't want to exist at that point in time. I guess it could be to do with suicidal ideation somehow, so say if someone killed me in the process of that thing going on, I wouldn't care at that point in time because that's how I feel about myself. I just don't want to exist. So, if that person stops me from existing, then great. They've done something that potentially I can't do for myself, so where I can't punish myself enough, they can do it for me.

I think the need for punishment has been there since I was a child. I don't think it has changed since my stepmum basically tortured me throughout my childhood. School never picked up on the fact that I had bruises on me or that I was missing from school. I started self-harming when I was 8, which is when I went back from living with my stepmum to being with my mum, and I've self-harmed ever since.

My mum and my stepdad didn't want me either, and I think all this just made me want to die from a very young age. My mum had made my brother sexually abuse me as a punishment when I was little, and my dad was a long-distance coach-driver who would also sexually abuse me when he was at home. My stepmum knew and would call me his whore. I was six years old, and she was punishing me for having sex with her husband.

There's always this part of me that wants to disappear, to be taken off somewhere and just disappear and for life as we know it not to exist. I've never felt like I belonged anywhere. I did well at work, I loved my career, but I didn't do friends or anything like that. My boss used to say I was a chameleon because I would just adapt and do whatever needed to be done in different situations. I just never really got close to anyone. Until I was about 30, there wasn't really that much access to the internet but then it was suddenly everywhere, and people were using it more for social stuff than they had. There are lots of these BDSM sites, they look like dating sites, but for people that like the alternative lifestyle, it's called. So, you go on there, you put your profile on the same as you would with a dating site, and you get talking to people and arrange meetings. It's that simple. Throughout my thirties, I was meeting men for punishment on average twice a week, all across the country, as I travelled for work. I was staying in hotels, and it was very, very easy for me to engage in that.

I had pretty much got to crisis point with hating myself, though as I said, I was doing really well at work. I was on the road quite a bit, which gave me the ideal opportunity to meet up with someone that I had met on the internet. But then, rather than doing this safer thing of meeting up in a hotel, I'd end up at a stranger's house I'd never met before. I would get completely beaten up, and then the next morning in the work meeting, I wouldn't even be able to put my hands across my chest because I'd be so bruised.

Because of my work, one of the agreements I've always had with these meetings is that nothing happens injury-wise above the neck. And that was one of the agreements I always had, because how it works online is that you put in an agreement of some kind before you meet. It's a leap of faith because the men usually restrain me in some way, so there's been times where my wrists have been

not in a good place, but I get away with that by putting a bracelet on. So, I had this weird thing going on where I was really succeeding at work, but I also had to keep being hurt in order to carry on, if that makes sense?

I've had these proposals a couple of times, where men have said 'I'm going to pick you up in such and such a place, and then you're going to be my slave for the rest of your life. And your life will cease to exist.' There's part of me that thinks that sounds amazing and I have to really rein myself in. A couple of times I've got to the point of actually arranging stuff with people and I haven't wanted to exist anymore and the thought of just being able to stop everything, it's tantalising. I wouldn't have to think anymore. I wouldn't have to feel anymore. All I'd feel is pain because when I'm in pain, I can't feel all the other stuff. So, if someone hurts me enough, I stop feeling all the other stuff; the stuff like how they made me feel, all the stuff they put in my head, all the things that go round like a record in my head about what they said to me and did to me when I was a child.

I also connect with men over a live link, and they tell me things to do to myself whilst they watch. Once guy wanted me to cut my breasts, but unfortunately, I caught an artery. There was lots of blood, so I had to call an ambulance, and before it got there, I was running around trying to hide the evidence of what I had been doing. There were loads of pins, rope and God knows what else that I didn't want the ambulance crew to see. The blood was pumping out of my breast and going everywhere; on the walls, the doors, my carpet still hasn't recovered. The ambulance guys couldn't have been nicer. They wrapped it up in a bath towel and took me to the hospital, where they sent me to Resus. One of the consultants kept walking past and saying 'silly girl, silly girl. You know you're silly doing that, don't you?' That really didn't help me feel any better about myself, it was so patronising. I've had that at least four times now, where I've gone to A&E where I've cut myself or stabbed myself and the attitude has been, 'well, that's really stupid'. I know it's really stupid, but you know, I don't need to keep getting told!

The hospital always does what they need to do clinically and then they'll put me in a side area and say, 'if you leave, we'll call the police.' So, I have to stay until the mental health team see me, which leaves me literally feeling like I'm a prisoner in the hospital. Because if I leave, they're going to call the police to my house, and I

don't want the police coming to my house cause. I don't feel that as a human I've done anything wrong. I've just. They make me feel like I'm a criminal every time I go there, so I don't feel that it's a place that I actually want to go for support, so I don't unless I absolutely have to. However, my haemophilia team are really, really good. I explained to them that I'm doing this, and they said that it doesn't matter how I've got injured, they just need to deal with it, so I should never feel that I shouldn't phone because I've self-harmed. What matters is that I need treatment, so just call and they will help me from a clinical point of view.

I've tried to analyse it myself so many times. I'm not proud of it. I'm ashamed of it. I'm ashamed that as a child, I was hurt, but I had no control over that, and now I'm choosing to be hurt which makes no sense. I know it's a form of self-harm. When I was in the Personality Disorders Unit, I saw the most severe self-harm I've ever seen in my whole entire life in some of the things people have done to their bodies. I'd heard of self-harm, and I'd done self-harm myself, but people had like burned themselves with caustic solutions, and there was this one girl, the whole top of her foot was burnt to the extreme where she was having burns treatment. One of my best friends when I was there, she was anorexic and we used to sit and talk quite a bit and we used to say that we both have exactly the same emotions going on, but she doesn't eat, and I eat.

I was in the Personality Disorders Unit quite a few times, and it's very common with Personality Disorder to self-harm. The problem was, the rule was that if you self-harmed whilst you were in there, you got sent home. Which is crazy really because that's when you need the most help. So, you would be at crisis point, hurting yourself, and they would send you home where you were probably at more risk. And it's what used to happen to you when you were a child; when you in your greatest crisis, all your caregivers abandon you. All of a sudden, I'm in the same situation where people that have said don't worry, I'm here for you. I'll support you. I'll be there for you. You tell us what's going on and we'll support you. And you think, OK, I can trust you. And I can tell you what's going on and you will support me. And you tell them what's going on and they send you home. And it's like, why? Why would I have trusted you? Why did I tell you that?



To be honest, the worst thing that happened to me in the Personality Disorders Unit is that I trusted. When you go in, you're given a named nurse, so you talk to them quite a lot. I wanted to do things properly, so I took the equipment that I used to self-harm at home and gave it to my nurse. I said to him, 'if I'm to be serious about this, I need to surrender all my stuff.' He said, 'that's great, do you want us to hold it, or do you want us to get rid of it?' I said 'I want you to get rid of it. I never want to see it again.' He said 'OK, no worries. I'll sort that out for you.' I felt good about that, like he understood, and it was a fresh start. So, on the last day of being there, I've had my goodbyes from everyone. I was sitting at lunch, which was one of the last things that would happen. I was sitting at lunch with 14 other people, professionals there as well. So, there was about 22 people sitting at this table. Suddenly one of the nurses came in with all this stuff in their hand, not in a bag or anything, and said, 'Allie, did you want to take this stuff home with you?' And I just went into complete meltdown. I just completely, completely went into complete anxiety. I had to leave the room, went and sat in the garden for a good hour and a half. And then had to go home. That was the end of my treatment. I felt that everything I had achieved had been undone in that one action. She had no comprehension of how much she had shamed me in front of all those people.

I don't find my GP helpful with anything to do with my mental health. When I go to see them, they call up the screen and say, 'well, you're under the mental health services. What do you want us to do about it?' It's like they can just pass the buck and not bother. All my doctor will do is give me a lecture about being overweight and then I try to talk to her about the fact that it's emotional, but she just refers me onto whatever weight loss course it is at the moment. I've done all the Essex weight loss courses. I don't know how many times I've done them now. I know that they don't work for me because it's not about managing food and exercise for me, but I can't be bothered with fighting with her. You would think the number of times I've done the course with no impact would flag something up to her.

I do get the need to hurt myself when it doesn't involve other people too. I've stabbed myself a couple of times. I have these impulses, and I'll have them for weeks or months. Once I had this impulse to have the incision that you have at an autopsy. I controlled it for months and months and months. But every day I was

thinking about how much I wanted it and how I could do it and fighting to control those feelings. Then this one particular time I didn't control it, and I got a scalpel and cut myself from belly button to beneath my breastbone. Quite deep, too. Then of course I couldn't get it to close and stop bleeding, so I had to go to the hospital.

Then there was another time that I wanted my breasts to take quite a bit of punishment, I wanted to cut as deep as I could and so I got a craft knife and literally cut from the nipple right up to the top of my breast, and it kind of come open because it was so deep. There's a compulsion that goes with these urges and the compulsion that time was I wanted to see right down inside, I wanted to see everything. So those compulsions are really, really, really hard to deal with, and they're there all the time. One time it was like; I want to put a knife in up to the hilt. And again, that ran for months and months and months, and sometimes the only way I can get rid of it is to do it. Again, I ended up in the hospital. What scares me the most is as I'm doing it, it feels amazing. I want to not like it, but I think it must be a hormone release. I just have a rush of adrenaline and then all the noise and the feelings and the angst just stop. I don't feel the pain until afterwards.

I made one good friend when I was 14, and we have remained friends ever since. Her family welcomed me from the outset, and they've been like my surrogate family. That night with the guy, when I truly thought, I was going to die, it was like I suddenly saw the light of what it would feel like for them if I had died under those circumstances. I didn't want them to have to go through that. So, although there are still plenty of times when I'm not in a good place, they help me to remember that there are people who care about me.

**Kat\***

Kat\* is 20 and was groomed into sex work as a teenager, after becoming addicted to drugs.

'I never got on that well with my mum, we argued a lot, but when I was 15, she got a boyfriend, John\*. He drank a lot and was in the pub all the time, and my mum started doing the same. She was always either with him at the pub, or she would bring him home to sit and drink in front of the telly. He was spending more and more time at the house. I didn't like him, he acted like it was his house and tried telling me what to do. He shouted at me if I went in the living room, because that was his space, and a couple of times when I argued back, he hit me. My mum didn't give a shit about me, all she wanted was him. I just stayed in my room when I wasn't at school. I didn't really have any friends; I got bullied quite a bit at school, I was overweight and that made me a target for the boys and the girls. I suppose I was pretty lonely, looking back at it.

John\* often had some of his pub mates round drinking with him. Mum would wait on them like they were kings or something, it made me sick. I would lay on my bed listening to them watching football on the telly, shouting and swearing. I didn't want to be at home, so I started hanging round with a few of the older kids from our estate. They were all dropouts from school, they hung around the skatepark, and one had a bedsit that we would go to and drink and smoke cannabis. I'd never done it before, but they all did, and I wanted to be one of them. They didn't judge me or shout at me, they were more of a family to me than my mum.

We were all pissed off with the world, life was crap, and nobody cared about us. That's how it was. I hardly ever went home, and nobody came looking for me. I started going out with Joe\* just after I turned 16, he was a couple of years older than me and really funny. We smoked a lot of cannabis together, but he always had money; I found out because he was dealing coke. One night when it was just me and him at the bedsit, he cut a couple of lines and offered me one. I did it and the feeling was amazing, everything was better, we talked all night, did more coke, had sex. I was hooked.

I couldn't get enough of Joe\* or the coke. I wanted more and he gave it to me for a while, but then he said he couldn't keep giving it for free and that his supplier had threatened him. If I wanted it, I would have to pay for it. None of us had jobs but I needed the coke, so Joe\* showed me how to steal from the shops in town. He would wait down the road whilst I went in and nicked mainly alcohol, medicines and sometimes stuff like perfumes from Boots. I would give the stuff to Joe\* and he would supply me with what I needed.

It wasn't long before the security in the shops got to know me, and it made it really difficult to take anything. I was desperate, crying to Joe\* but he kept saying I hadn't earned enough. We were still sleeping together, and he said he loved me, but I was a mess back then; I would've done anything for gear. Joe\* said he would sort it; he went out for a couple of hours and came back with this other bloke. He said if I had sex with the guy, he would pay Joe\* and he could get me some coke. I didn't want to do it, but I needed the coke more. Joe\* went out and left me with this guy. All he said to me was to get on the bed, which I did, and he got on top of me and did it. He never said anything else, he didn't even look at me. I cried the whole way through it. He got up when he had finished and left. Joe\* came back a bit after and hugged me. He said he loved me and gave me the coke. It made me feel better.

It wasn't a one off, of course. It got to the stage where I was having sex with different men most nights. Same old thing, they would pay Joe\* and he would give me coke. It was horrible, and some of the men were really scary. One tied me up and beat me up, one held a knife to my throat whilst he had sex with me, and I had a few that went bareback without me knowing. Joe\* got really angry when that happened, he said he didn't want to catch anything, so I had to be more careful. I don't think I even cared any more.

I was doing this for about a year. I couldn't tell you how many men I had slept with by that point. I had never had regular periods, but I started throwing up, though I ate hardly anything. I was scared to say anything to Joe\* but he knew, and he was so angry. He lost it at me, screaming that I was a stupid bitch and a slag, that the baby wasn't his. He told me to get out and make sure I didn't tell anyone anything about him, or he would kill me. I begged him to let me stay but he literally threw

me out. I didn't have anywhere to go, the only place I had was my mum's, so I ended up there.

I hadn't spoken to my mum for so long, I didn't know she had split up with John\*. She was angry when I turned up but upset too. I was so scared about everything, but she took me back and looked after me. It wasn't easy, I was proper hooked on coke, but she helped me get into a rehab. I hated it there; I cried every day and the come down was awful. The staff were really good though. I got an abortion. I wasn't fit to have a baby, and I didn't even know if I was going to be able to get clean. It's not an experience I would want to go through again, but I think it was the right decision at the time. I feel sad sometimes now when I think I could have been a mum, but it was the right thing to do. I don't think I'll ever have kids; I don't want men anywhere near me. I feel disgusted with myself, and I suffer with depression and anxiety. Mum has been great; I came back to live with her when I left rehab, but I don't know where I go from here. I don't exactly have any prospects, and I'm terrified every time I go out that I might see Joe\*. I've ruined my life really and I'm not even 21 yet.'

**Sophie\***

Sophie\* needed an income after her marriage broke down, and she was left to support her two young children.

'A couple of years ago my marriage broke down, and my husband, Dean\*, left me with our two kids. It had never been great between us; he had lots of affairs and was very controlling. I had to stay home to care for the children, and I never knew much about our finances. He would give me some money each week to buy food, clothes for the children, that sort of thing. It covered the basics but there was never anything left over to treat the kids. He said that I didn't need to know how much he earned, and he dealt with all the bills, so as pathetic as it seems, I had no idea how much things like Council Tax or electricity cost.

He wasn't physically violent, but he didn't need to be. I did as I was told and so did the kids. I didn't have any family or friends around as we had moved to Essex after getting married, for his career. My life revolved around Dean\* and the children. I knew about his affairs, but never challenged him after the first time, when he had told me that if I didn't like it, I could leave but the kids stayed with him. I couldn't risk losing them and if I left, I'd have no home, no job, nothing to provide for them. It was easier to keep quiet.

In early 2022, Dean\* told me that he was leaving me to move in with a woman he had been seeing for a few months. He said that he had never loved me, and it was the real thing with her. I was upset, but once I realised he was going and leaving me and the kids here, I was glad deep down, to be honest.

The mortgage was just in Dean's\* name, and he kept on paying that, but all the other bills I soon found out were in my name. Letters were coming through the door saying that this was owed for one thing, this for another. I didn't know what the hell to do. He had left me a bank card to our joint account, which had £1000 in it, but the direct debits ate all that up in no time, and the bank were telling me I was in the overdraft. I was so naïve; I didn't even know what that meant at that point.

Dean\* was sending £200 a month into the account for the kids, but I was at breaking point, it was nowhere near enough. I couldn't afford to pay the bills, feed

the children, anything. I couldn't sleep for the worry, I was crying all the time and getting snappy with the kids. Only one of them was in school at this point, my son, so I couldn't get a job as I had nobody to look after my daughter.

I don't even know how the conversation came about now, but I had started chatting with one of the other mums in my road; she was on her own after her husband left, and I think she felt sorry for me. I must have been talking about money worries and she asked if I had ever considered Webcam work. I had no idea what that was, but she said that basically I could work from home and earn good money. When I got home, I started searching on the internet to find out more about it. I was amazed to see that there were agencies recruiting girls, and it all looked really professional. People have asked me since if I was scared or felt bad about it, but honestly, I didn't. I needed money to keep our heads above water, I could do it from home and it wasn't like I had to physically touch anyone. It seemed like a godsend to me.

Long story short, I signed on and started working within the week. My neighbour helped me set up the equipment, because I knew nothing about that sort of thing, and she was really encouraging. I think it helped knowing that she was doing it too. I was a bit nervous when I started; I had never been confident in myself, but on cam it was like I could be someone else, and I actually quite enjoyed acting like I was anyone but me, really. I would work a few nights a week, from the time the kids fell asleep to the early hours, then get a few hours sleep before getting up to the kids.

The good thing was that you can get paid weekly, and in the first few weeks I made around £600 a week. I couldn't believe it; I went out and bought the kids new toys and bedding sets for the first time ever with my own money. It felt amazing. I set up my own bank account to have my money paid into, and I would transfer bill money over to the joint account, so that Dean\* didn't know where it was coming from. When he finally asked, I told him I was doing packing from home. I wasn't ashamed of what I was doing, but I knew he would use it against me. My kids weren't affected – I would work when they were asleep, so all they knew was that things were better. I felt like a decent mum, I was providing for my own kids.

There were some weirdos on cam, but most of the men just wanted to talk. One guy told me that his wife was abusing him, and he just wanted me to say nice things about him, to make him feel a bit better. I felt quite sorry for him. Me and my neighbour became good friends, and we would laugh about who we had had on cam over a coffee most mornings. It sounds sad, but I think it was the first time in my life that I felt like I was standing on my own two feet and didn't need my husband to look after me.

Gradually the earnings started to get less, and I was bringing in around £350 a week. You always earn more when you're the new girl, but it was still enough for me to manage on. I carried on with cam work for over a year, then when my daughter started school, I got a job as a lunchtime supervisor. The pay wasn't great, but I started to get to know more people and got worried about them finding out about my cam work. Dean\* also filed for divorce around the same time, and I got paranoid about him finding out and using it against me to get custody of the kids. I stopped working; it was really hard because we had got used to the money, but I knew we could manage. I can't knock the cam work because it kept my head above water when I had no other options, but I had started to realise that it wasn't what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. As the kids were getting older, I didn't want to risk them finding out, either. It worked for me, but I wouldn't want my daughter growing up to do it, and I wouldn't want my son thinking that's what women are for.

I haven't done cam work for over six months now. I'm still working at the school, and I've signed up to do an Open University course this October. The kids are doing good, and the house is on the market now, so when that's sold, we can get our own place. That will be good for us. I had someone ask me out recently, but I definitely don't want a relationship. I got in touch with a local domestic abuse agency and have been going to a group with them once a week. I'm finding it really helpful, and I've made some friends there. I need to be on my own, away from men, for a while, I know that!



### 3.0 Key Findings and Recommendations

There were shared themes and factors which emerged throughout the engagement phase of this project and can be allied with wider research completed with people involved in sex work. These in turn are indicative of areas where improved support and resources could be focussed.

#### Coercion

Our participant Kat\* was unknowingly groomed into having sex with strangers to feed the cocaine habit which her boyfriend/pimp had cultivated. Kat\* initially believed that Joe\* loved her, as is common in most abusive relationships, but it is apparent that his intention was to coerce her into selling sex for his benefit. When she became pregnant, she was of no use to Joe\*, and he rejected her as having no further value to him. Kat\* spoke of how she 'begged him' not to throw her out, showing how powerful the control created by the abuser is over their victim.

Josie\* also spoke of how she felt that she had no choice but to go and work in the brothels in order to support her mother and younger siblings. The coercion here was much more subtle, but the onus and pressure was very much placed on Josie\* to 'save' the family by her mother, who had previously shown no loyalty to her whatsoever. She happily, as Josie put it, 'lived off me laying on my back for her', yet never once supported her, and in due course once again abandoned her daughter, leaving her devastated.

Many children and young people in society do not have the benefits of a secure family setting, for a wide variety of reasons, but it is evident that this lack of stable foundation most often results in challenging long-term effects. The importance of a sense of belonging and positive role models cannot be underestimated, and it is vital that services providing them to children and young people are supported and enabled to grow to achieve a greater reach. Healthy relationships is a topic which in particular should be focussed upon in the national curriculum and other youth services, to educate those starting out in life about consent, respect, control and the dynamics of abuse. Knowledge will facilitate earlier identification of unhealthy relationships which can come about via grooming, domestic abuse and other situations where the vulnerable are open to manipulation and coercion.

## Addiction

Addiction is certainly a significant factor in sex work, with the NHS Health Research Authority (Appendix 4) citing that 'in the UK, most female street-based sex workers use drugs such as heroin and/or crack cocaine. The need to pay for drug use, and often that of a partner, encourages involvement in sex work and drug intoxication impairs the ability to protect themselves from harm.'

Kat's\* need for cocaine overrode any other need, and it was desperation to feed this habit which caused her to have sex with men that she did not know. Had it not been for the addiction, she may have been able to resist the coercion from Joe\*. She stated that she 'never saw any money... I just got the coke, but that's all I needed.'

Josie\* too, despite hating her father's involvement with drugs as a child, began using crack and other substances after starting work in the brothels. She spoke of the dichotomy of needing the drugs because she 'didn't want to remember what she had done with clients' but also wanted to stop using because she knew that they made her more vulnerable through affecting her awareness and responsivity to her environment.

As well as being used by pimps and perpetrators to control sex workers and ensure their compliance, drugs and alcohol create a dependency which many feel helps them to cope with what is happening in their lives, and that which they feel they have no control over. A form of self-harm, addiction becomes a coping mechanism which further alienates the individual from being able to seek help or navigate a way free from their situation.

Addiction support services for all ages are an imperative avenue of support for anyone in this situation, and require ongoing support and investment, along with awareness raising and education about drugs and alcohol, particularly within children and young people.

## Financial Issues

Financial desperation is another common assumption made about sex workers. The notion of women with no other means of income, struggling to put food in their

children's mouths, clearly exists, as illustrated in the case of Sophie\*. Financial hardship and barriers to working appear to be the primary motivator in her venture into sex work, as she stepped up to provide for her children after her husband abandoned the family. Sophie\* alluded to having not followed her own educational and career development after getting married, which resulted in a lack of qualifications and experience which significantly reduced the opportunities open to her.

However, there are evidently also those in stable economic situations who also become involved in sex work. Samuel\* and his husband are both in full time employment and own their own home but made the mutual decision to use OnlyFans as platform to earn extra income, not as a necessity, but for luxury items. There were no mitigating factors like addiction or mental health, and this was clearly an informed decision for both of them. Here there was no imbalance of control or lack of consent, and the transactions were completed with a sense of consultation and management of expectations.

Allie, too, spoke of how she was excelling in her career but felt the compulsion to engage in BDSM activities for non-financial reasons. Her career was arguably the most important thing to her, where she was respected and influential, and she put in place mechanisms to continue succeeding at work whilst simultaneously undergoing extreme physical and sexual abuse through the connections she was making online.

Rachel\* was very focussed on her career, but intervention through the form of an horrendous terrorist attack turned her life upside down. Due to the injuries she sustained, she went from being an independent working woman to becoming completely dependent on, and at the mercy of, a man she knew very little of.

These scenarios are all distinctly different, but for those like Sophie\*, who 'had no idea what to do' when her husband left her, there were no obvious avenues of information and support available to empower herself. The control enforced by her husband meant that she was unaware of services available to her which could have offered support, and perhaps if a professional had picked up on what was happening for her, alternative routes to Webcam work could have been

suggested. However, the isolation which Dean\* had also created meant that there was not an abundance of opportunities for this to happen.

### Trauma

It is clear that, in the majority of participants, trauma had featured significantly in their lives prior to any involvement in sex work.

Allie spoke about her experiences of being physically, sexually and psychologically abused by various close members of her family, from a very young age and throughout her childhood. She was able to draw the comparison between the 'torture' that she was subjected to by her stepmother and the ongoing need to be 'punished' that she has felt throughout her life, and which has resulted in her engaging with men who gain pleasure from harming and humiliating her.

Kat\* shared how she had never got on particularly well with her mother, but that it was the introduction of John\*, an abusive alcoholic, as her mother's new partner that drove her to leave home and become vulnerable to the man that groomed her. The underlying need for love from the mother figure is apparent in Kat's\* decision to return home after she was thrown out by Joe\*. In this instance, the mother had rectified her mistakes and was there for her daughter, but if this had not been the case, the outcome could have potentially been even more damaging for Kat\*.

Josie\* also spoke of her traumatic childhood in a household where there was domestic abuse; she was frequently beaten and believes that she may have been raped. The impact on her was immense, and yet, like Kat\*, she still yearned for that relationship with her mother and was willing to turn to prostitution in order to rescue her financially. It is apparent that there is a strong link between trauma in childhood and sex work, as is supported by The British Journal of Social Work study (Appendix 5) which states that 'what is crucial in identifying who is likely to be the most vulnerable are the accumulation of risk factors in early childhood and the personal and ecological resources available to individuals across the lifespan to manage that pathway.' The study further reinforces the need for a secure and stable foundation for children and young people to thrive in adulthood; 'analysis suggests that there is a need to facilitate the provision of 'secure base'

interventions for women involved in sex work, whatever their age, which have meaning for them.'

Certainly, in the cases of Josie\*, Kat\* and Allie, it appears that opportunities were lost quite early on in educational settings. Flags should have been raised around disengagement, poor attendance, visible injuries and changes in the young persons behaviour and presentation, but this did not happen, and had they been, could have prevented further harmful experiences. Although Josie and Allie's school years were some time ago, for Kat they were very recent, so there are still improvements to be made.

Additionally, it is a point of note that Allie engaged many times over the years with GP's, hospitals, paramedics and other professionals, yet none identified the pattern of injuries that she was presenting with or felt it pertinent to broach the subject or act in any way to safeguard her. Here, it seems probable that a lack of a multi-agency approach contributed to this, with the relevant agencies not sharing information appropriately in order to be fully informed and thus able to evidence any kind of intervention.

### **Mental health**

There is evidently a great deal of shame for many of the women who engaged in this project. Kat\* said how she felt 'disgusted with herself' and how she had 'ruined her life' before reaching the age of 21. Now diagnosed with anxiety and depression, she is one of many who have a recognised mental health condition and have, or are, selling sex. The National Library of Medicine study of sex workers in Vancouver states that 'among 692 sex workers enrolled between January 2010 and February 2013, 338 (48.8%) reported ever being diagnosed with a mental health issue, with the most common diagnoses being depression (35.1%) and anxiety (19.9).'

Josie\* shared her mental health diagnosis of 'Borderline Personality Disorder, an eating disorder and I have psychotic episodes', and is now seeing a psychiatrist. She did however cite some very negative experiences with mental health crisis teams who 'left me feeling worse than when I went in there. Her experiences of mental health workers insisting that she repeat her experiences, which in itself is retraumatising, only to then discharge her with no short or long-term support, is a

failing. The importance of an open disclosure and acting upon it in a timely and appropriate manner is crucial in supporting anyone with mental health issues, and in fostering their continued engagement.

### Agency Responses

There is evidence to suggest that most of our participants have been let down at some point by a professional body, which has further impacted their sense of worth and their faith in the system to support and protect them.

Josie\* talked about a recent incident where she was arrested, and the attending police officer advised colleagues to 'put gloves on' before they touched her, suggesting that she was in some way dirty or contaminated. Instead of feeling safe with the police, despite any actions she may have taken, she instead felt judged and 'like I was disgusting.'

Allie presented many times at the local acute hospital with injuries sustained through BDSM. Whilst she received immediate care, she was repeatedly belittled by a consultant calling her 'a silly girl', despite being an adult woman. This choice of words minimised her experiences, and the trauma that had contributed to them, and created a lack of trust which affected her perception of the service. This was further compounded by the fact that, despite frequent emergency visits, no professional questioned how or why she was being injured in such notable ways.

Allie also spoke of her experience in a mental health inpatient unit, where she felt that 'the biggest mistake I ever made was trusting anyone.' It was clearly a huge act of faith for her to trust the mental health nurse about her self-harming, and to have this trust shattered by their actions on the day of her discharge was significantly damaging to not only her mental wellbeing, but to the likelihood of her ever engaging with the service again.

These are individual but nonetheless important examples of how crucial the response from agencies is to anyone engaging with them, but particularly those with additional challenges to being heard and understood. Choice of words can make the difference between keeping someone working with you or having them disengage entirely. Most agencies promote a non-judgmental approach, but

when this does not translate into everyday working practice, individuals will not have trust in them, and this is a huge barrier to achieving positive outcomes.

## 4.0 Conclusion

The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee reported in 2017 (Appendix 3) that 'the number of sex workers in the UK is estimated to be around 72,800 with about 32,000 working in London. It can be easy to think that prostitution, and other kinds of sex work, exist only in the bigger towns and cities, but this exploration of the experiences of people in Essex showed that, in fact, it is taking place in the most seemingly innocuous of locations.

Of course, the participants who engaged in this project are not representative of every individual involved in sex work, but what is notable is the different routes which led to their involvement. In society, the norm is to view sex workers as being coerced and controlled, which is certainly often the case, but some of our participants showed that sex work was, at least to some degree, an informed choice for them.

In Essex, the main red-light district is in Southend, and I was able to link in with some of the services there, including the city council, who are providing a robust, coordinated package of support for people involved in sex work. With drop ins and outreach underpinned by a strong strategy, there is much to be learned from their person-centred, non-judgmental approach. These combine to provide a visible, accessible offer for those who need it, and has created a sense of community for this cohort of people.

However, elsewhere in the county, sex work appears to be less visible and more fragmented. Those still actively working, like Josie\*, knew a few other sex workers but did not feel that there were any sex-worker specific services which were bringing them together. Services being accessed were mainstream, and there was little actively bringing sex workers together, to create any sense of community. This appeared to at least partly contribute to a sense of isolation and a more 'hit and

miss' approach to whether they were receiving the resources and support that would actually benefit them.

In every individual that was engaged with, however, existed the awareness of the stigma of sex work, and a sense of being judged by society. Even Sophie\*, who did not regret her venture into Webcam work, did not want anyone to find out about it and was scared of the repercussion if her estranged husband became aware. Until sex work is less stigmatised, we will not know the true extent of its reach and be able to shape our services to fully meet the needs of those who have been involved, and those who continue to be.






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