

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

**Improving Responses to Supporting
Women at Risk of Sexual Exploitation**



September 2023





CoLab Women enables and supports women towards building resilience for their futures, with a focus on **what's strong, not what's wrong.**

We take a trauma-informed approach to our work, supporting women to regain their identity and to build self-esteem and confidence.

For general enquiries, please email: colabwomen@colabexeter.org.uk
or call 01392 284270



CoLab is a community of organisations with a shared commitment to improving lives and creating opportunities for our partners and visitors.

For general enquiries, please email: enquiries@colabexeter.org.uk
or call 01392 202055

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INTRODUCTION

CoLab is a multi-agency health and wellbeing hub that enables people and organisations to work together, to create the conditions for people to lead their best lives, and do their best work; and for organisations to achieve their greatest impact and value.

CoLab Women is an integral part of CoLab, supporting women by providing and improving safety, information, and support.

We do this across three priority workstreams, which have been identified by the women that we support as priority areas.

These are:

- Creating Safer Spaces for Women
- Improving Social Justice
- Increasing Wellbeing & Supporting Families

We aim to improve access, create safety and promote empowerment for all women, with a particular focus on those experiencing multiple disadvantages.

Supporting women at risk of sexual

exploitation has been part of our offer since 2018, and this resource brings together local and national best practice, with the aim of supporting professionals in a range of settings to improve their response to this hidden group.

Thank you to the funders of this resource, Exeter, Mid & East Devon Community Safety Partnerships, and to Devon Community Foundation and the Tampon Tax for providing funding for our original 'Out of the Shadows – Issues for Women Involved in the Sex Industry in the Exeter Area' project that scoped the needs of women in the sex industry in 2019. This toolkit was developed,



collated and prepared by Jeanie Lynch. It was designed by Lara Czornyj.

This resource has been developed as part of an ongoing workstream focusing on whole system change, with the goal of improving access to and outcomes in health for women involved in the sex industry and/or experiencing sexual exploitation.

This resource is a strengths-based toolkit, based on existing best practice from other areas as well as Devon. It offers opportunities for improved responses and support, bringing together specialist knowledge and research, but most importantly centring on the voices of those who have been brave enough to share their experiences with us.

This toolkit is relevant to a wide range of professionals working throughout the system that supports women. We hope, through its creation, that it offers opportunities to influence change on multiple levels across systems, from micro-level responses, to wider structures, to overarching strategic frameworks.

In particular, we hope that the toolkit can play a role in breaking down the stigma which is so detrimental to women involved in the sex industry and/or sexual exploitation's ability to access health care and other essential components of staying safe, such as housing and trauma support.

We hope for this to be part of a wider shift throughout all system stakeholders and services to a more trauma-informed, gender-informed, inclusive and equitable practice which will benefit not only women at risk of sexual exploitation, but a variety of marginalized communities. Some recommendations may not be achievable overnight or within the scope of one practitioner or practice; they have still been included to offer a wider vision for improvement that

could allow for system change in the medium to longer term.

Whether you operate at a strategic or operational level, we hope you will find this a useful guide to ensuring that your service is inclusive and accessible to women and effective in

improving outcomes for all. It is based on the experiences of women in Devon who have shared their lived experience, and suggestions for improved support. We have also drawn on best practice and expertise from across the UK.

IN SUMMARY, THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESOURCE IS TO:



Support and inform the work of professionals in a range of settings, helping to develop and build on good practice when considering the impact of sexual exploitation on adult women



Improve system and frontline staff responses to women who are at risk of, or involved in sexual exploitation



Offer support and guidance that improves the safety of women at risk of sexual violence and abuse through sexual exploitation



Identify further sources of support and recovery

WHY THIS RESOURCE?

CoLab, through partnership working, has a rich history of creative approaches to promoting health equity and inclusion, supporting a strong network of statutory, public and third sector bodies working to address these at strategic, operational and practice-based levels.

CoLab Women's offer has involved supporting women at risk of sexual exploitation and violence since 2017, when a number of agencies reported concerns about women they were supporting who were becoming involved in the sex industry.

At a seminar we hosted, they told us that women were anxious about seeking support due to stigma and fear of judgement, and that they, as staff, felt ill-equipped to respond to their needs.

Little was known about the scale and nature of this hidden issue, leading to an initial scoping exercise of 17 local agencies which identified unmet needs amongst their client group.

As a result of creating this evidence base, CoLab secured funding from the Tampon Tax and the 'Out of the Shadows' scoping project was developed to provide women and professionals a chance to tell us what would help. A report with recommendations for future development of support opportunities was published in December 2019.

During the COVID lockdowns, the needs of this cohort of women increased significantly. CoLab supported 37 women who were at risk of sexual exploitation during this period. Some were living in temporary accommodation; all were street attached and levels of sexual assault increased significantly amongst this cohort of women. Some had links to organised crime gangs via county lines, and sexual assault and exploitation were used as retribution and coercion by perpetrators.

Women at risk of sexual exploitation experience stark inequalities in both access and outcomes in health, and we are creating this resource, alongside a work stream, to address these at strategic, operational and practice-based levels.

In order to effectively address health and other social inequalities, further systems change needs to develop to ensure that the root causes of these inequalities are also addressed, centring communities with lived experience in the co-design of all support and services from the start.

Our new Brave Spaces project, which aims to create a new model of sexual violence and domestic abuse support over the next two years, will offer new prototypes and improve pathways to wrap-around support. The learning from this project will also make changes sustainable and effective.

This guide, providing recommendations and examples of best practice, has been designed to promote positive change in systems and responses. It uses a 'health at the margins' approach, with the idea that when systems are built to work for the most marginalised, they will be broadly inclusive for all and will therefore support the inclusion of other marginalised communities. It aims to improve access to support for women facing inequalities which place them at greater risk as a result of sexual exploitation and particularly those who are at risk of homelessness, substance misuse, poverty and poor mental health.

In creating this resource, care has been taken to ensure a non-judgemental and proactive approach to improving support for women. This includes the terminology and language used throughout the resource. What we are talking about is the need to improve responses to women who, through their vulnerabilities, turn to or are forced into exchanging sex for money, goods or other services. Terms used to describe this include prostitution, sex working, survival sex and sexual exploitation. All of these terms carry weight within the framework of agency, violence against women and girls, and victim/survivor.

For the purposes of this resource, we have chosen to use the term 'sexual exploitation' to describe the woman's situation, as those that we have supported have had a range of social and economic disadvantage issues that has made them more vulnerable **to sexual and physical violence, exploitation and stigma.**

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

THE FACTS

"There is no national policy or statutory framework covering the response to Adult Sexual Exploitation because their plight has, in the past, not attracted sufficient attention." [1]

DEFINITIONS

Sex work implies that women are making free choices to engage in activities that involve an exchange of sexual acts for money, goods or gifts (or the equivalent). This may take place either in-person (for example, via escorting services, on-street sex work, sex shows, stripping or lap-dancing) or remotely (for example, via web-cams, phones or the selling of other video/pornographic material via sites such as Only Fans).

Survival sex implies that women are engaging in sexual exchanges to meet a survival need. This can include housing/shelter, food, tobacco, remittances, protection, alcohol and/or substances. It can be more opportunistic – carried out when women need to meet a need.

Selling/swapping sex encompasses both of the above types of exchange without distinguishing women's means of selling/swapping sex.

Sexual exploitation of adults is a form of sexual abuse where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a person into sexual activity.

[1] Doncaster Safeguarding Adult Review Board 2020

Sexual exploitation is distinct from both sex work, survival sex and selling/swapping sex. Whilst there is a potential for violence and coercion to take place in each type defined, it is inherent to sexual exploitation.

Perpetrators exploit or create vulnerabilities in order to subject their victim to sexual abuse, often involving violence. This is for the perpetrator's own advantage, whether that is financial advantage, increased status, exerting power or sexual gratification. This may be in exchange for something the victim needs or wants (e.g. drugs, a place to sleep). In many cases, it can result from grooming over a period of time, where the perpetrator makes the victim dependent on them emotionally, physically and/or financially.

Whereas there is a statutory definition of child sexual exploitation, there is currently no statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation. However, this form of exploitation does not end when a person turns 18 and can indeed be initiated during adulthood.

A key difference rests on the fact that children under 16 by definition cannot consent to sexual activity, whereas most adult women are presumed to have the capacity to consent to sexual activity. However, the impact of grooming and exploitation of perceived or actual vulnerabilities and unmet needs can mean sexual activity that appears consensual or non-violent is anything but.

What this means in practice is that women are not being fully protected by the laws and systems that we have in place, and are often dismissed as "prostitutes" or "making poor choices". Only certain elements of adult sexual exploitation are commonly recognised, such as trafficking and modern-day slavery. Other cases are often missed, particularly where grooming occurs.



WHAT WE KNOW

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION...

...affects people of all genders and ages, and can take place in any community.

...can happen in rural villages and coastal areas, as well as large towns and cities.

...can happen as part of a relationship, in which the person being exploited may view as loving and consensual. They may trust or feel dependent on the person exploiting them.

...can be carried out by individuals and groups, children and adults, and people of all genders. Perpetrators may be strangers (they may try to befriend in order to groom) or they may be known to the victim, such as a partner, family member or friend.

...can happen once or on many occasions, and may be opportunistic or part of organised abuse and exploitation.

...can involve abuse, coercive control, sexual and physical violence, and other forms of harm and exploitation.

...may involve people being given phones – this helps their exploiters keep contact and control, and coordinate their exploitation, especially if this involves being harmed by multiple people.

...may involve those being exploited being forced to participate in the grooming and exploitation of others.

...can happen in gangs as a form of punishment or control, or as a display of status and power.

...in some forms in Devon has become linked to drug dealing (including County Lines activities); gang activities and youth violence; homelessness and street attachment; and involvement in sex work.

VULNERABILITY TO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

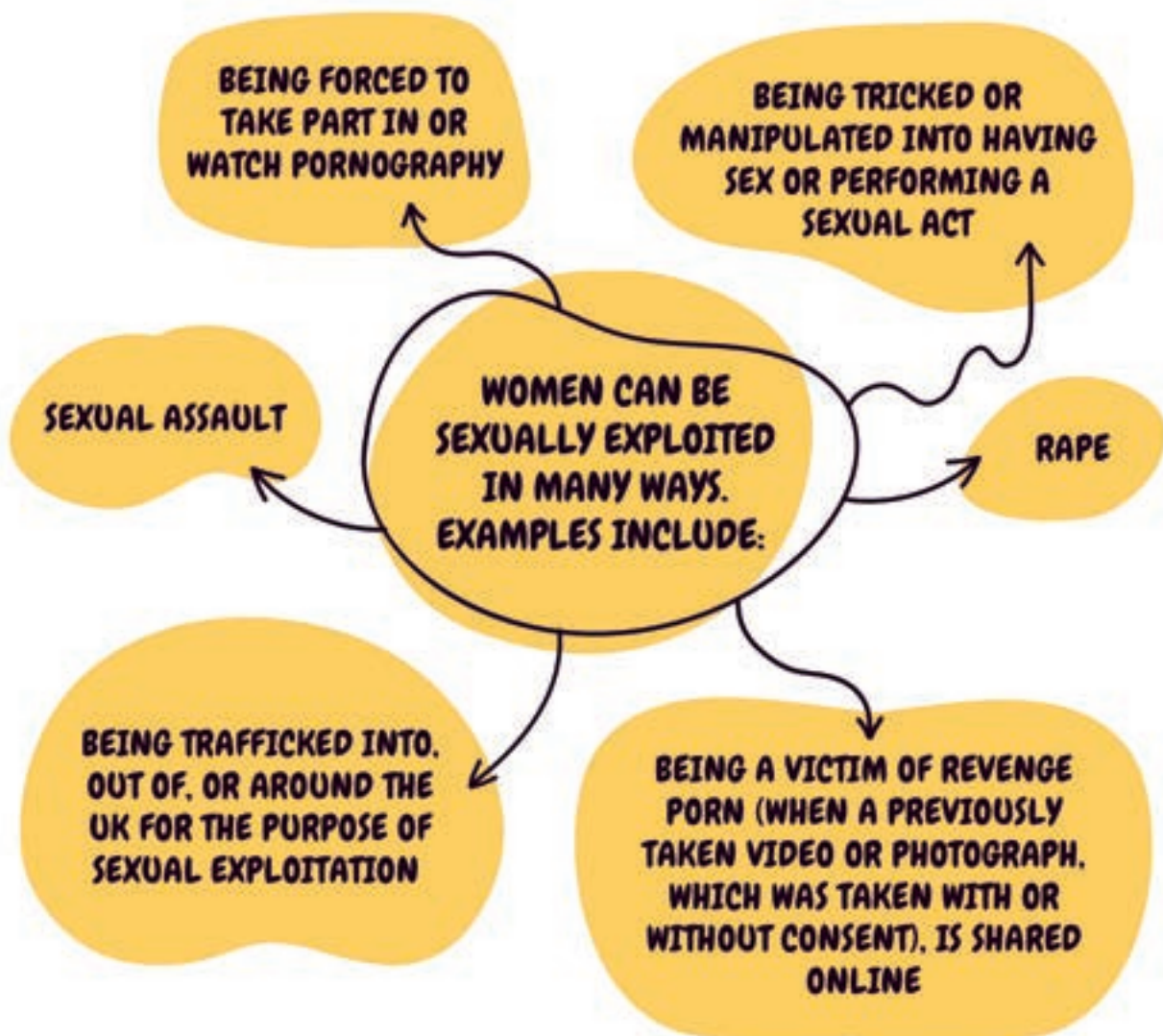
Sexual exploitation is a form of sexual violence or abuse where people in exploitative and reduced circumstances and relationships are manipulated, coerced, or forced into participating in sexual acts in order to receive something such as money, goods (which can include drugs and/or alcohol), affection, or a bed for the night.



Women can be sexually exploited through physical assault or acts not involving physical contact, such as by sharing sexual images through social media and the internet, via sites like OnlyFans.

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE...

"I never thought I'd do this.
When you need to do it,
you just switch off and get
on with it."




ANYBODY CAN BE A VICTIM OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION.

At one end of the scale adult sexual exploitation can be a one-off situation between two adults. At the other end, it may include instances of organised crimes where a number of adults are trafficked and sexually exploited.

Perpetrators of sexual exploitation often have power over those they are exploiting by virtue of their age, gender, sexual identity, learning disability, capacity to consent, physical strength or status.

Many of the women we support are vulnerable to exploitation due to their circumstances. For that reason, we aim to support them towards improved safety and choices.



"She's on her own with the kids, has been struggling a bit for money and was approached by some friends of friends who offered to put her in touch with men who could help her earn some money if she had sex with them."

"They have developed personal relationships with men who want sexual favours for money, drugs, or somewhere to stay. Both see it as a transaction, but there is exploitation that can trigger trauma in the women who think they are holding the power, but are probably not."

ADDITIONAL VULNERABILITY FACTORS:

1. Isolation - lack of strong social networks
2. Breakdown of family relationships
3. Lack of engagement or inconsistent engagement with support networks (e.g. often misses appointments)
4. Friends/peers are victims of sexual exploitation
5. History of local authority care
6. History of abuse (including as a child)
7. Low self-esteem
8. Susceptible to grooming
9. Bereavement or loss
10. Dependency on alleged perpetrator(s)
11. Substance misuse or dependency
12. Needs for care and support
13. Learning disability or difficulty
14. Unstable housing situation
15. Poor mental health

INTERSECTING RISKS AND COMPLEXITIES

People of all sexual and gender identities can be at risk of sexual exploitation. People who do not have a safe space in which to explore their identity may be more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Women at risk of sexual exploitation often experience a disproportionate risk of violence (physical, sexual, structural) and other harm as a direct result of criminalization and stigma. They may exist at the intersection of multiple forms of structural violence and marginalization, such as transmisogyny, racism, and poverty/austerity, all of which are intrinsically linked to social determinants of health.

Anyone of any age can be sexually exploited. This includes people who are aged sixteen and over and can legally consent to sex - however if they are being forced, manipulated, deceived or coerced into taking part in sexual acts, they cannot be seen to have freely given consent.

CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) affects children and young people up to the age of 18 and is usually addressed via local Children's Safeguarding Boards, youth and other settings.

Whilst this resource does not go into CSE in detail, it should also be noted by professionals that young people aged 18+ who are involved in sexual exploitation will not have entered this situation on their 18th birthday and that there is a strong likelihood that there will have been risk factors associated with CSE at a younger age.

There is a need for a more joined-up approach that supports young people beyond the age of 18 up to 25 to ensure that transition support for those that are younger is identified at the earliest opportunity.

See **page 37** for information on Transitional Safeguarding.

LOCATIONS WHERE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION CAN TAKE PLACE

Sexual exploitation is more likely to take place in spaces where the people being exploited can be easily targeted or hidden, and, in some cases, be transported to new locations.

LOCATIONS CAN INCLUDE:

Hotels & B&B's

Hostels & other temporary accommodation

Pubs, bars & clubs

Holiday parks & caravan sites

Brothels & other locations used for sex work

Supported accommodation

Care homes

Settings that support homeless people

Takeaway fast-food outlets & cafes

Transport hubs & taxi ranks

Small retail outlets with long opening hours

Public spaces, including parks, shopping centres and car parks

Settings that support people with complex needs e.g. drug and alcohol services, mental health services

RESIDENTIAL SETTINGS MAY BE TARGETED, INCLUDING:

Individuals homes that can be taken over and controlled – also known as 'cuckooing'

Residential homes and semi-independent accommodation

Care homes, including children's homes



"[We've worked with some women] with a home base in Exeter but working across the South West. Some travel to The Midlands, London and Bristol. There are adverts for travelling brothels that set up annually in an area for around a month, usually via agencies."

ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

The internet and social media is also a key place for sexual exploitation. In some cases, people are being groomed and exploited entirely online. An example of this is through the production of pornographic imagery available through sites such as 'OnlyFans'. There is also increasing evidence of women being encouraged to use sexualised self-images as a means of acquiring accommodation or other services.

"In 2021, a female sex worker (who worked out of friends' accommodation or hotels) was supported by our service. She had an OnlyFans account, and seemed to be running a successful 'business' where she felt in control and had set fees for her sex work. She lost her accommodation and rough slept - she then reported sexual exploitation by a male rough sleeper and relapsed into heavy drug use. Her 'control' was lost and we had concerns that she was being pimped. A safeguarding referral was made. She disengaged from support. She left the county to get away from the male, and we do not know what happened to her."

"She's 19 and has just joined our housing project. She's got an OnlyFans site and has met men in-person. She says she's been doing this since she was 16 and we're worried for her safety but don't really know where to start." [2]

[2] Housing support worker

NATIONAL AND LOCAL PICTURE

THE NATIONAL PICTURE

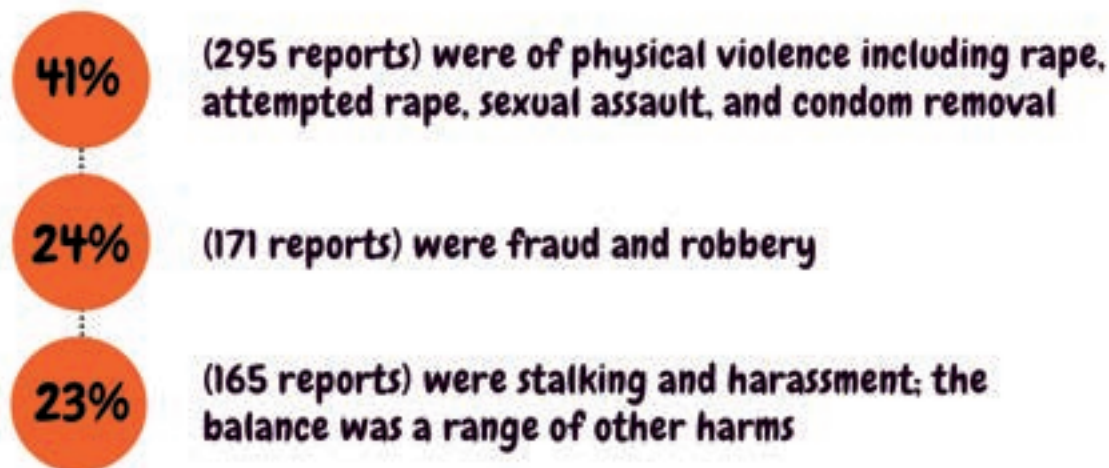
National Ugly Mugs (NUM) is a UK wide charity working with those in the sex industry to improve safety and provide support. In 2016, NUM national research identified:

- **approximately 72,800 sex workers in UK**
- **1,139 victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in 2014 - 248 in April/ June 2015**
- **183 sex workers murdered in the UK since 1990**
- **80% of street sex workers have experienced violence**
- **50% of sex workers regularly fear for their safety**
- **56% report threatening/harassing contact**
- **49% report verbal abuse**
- **3,000+ incidents reported since July 2012/ 50-60 per calendar month**
- **many don't report as they don't think they will be believed, or are scared of being identified with subsequent repercussions from both perpetrators and the community**

In 2020, reporting to NUM declined due to full and tiered COVID lockdown measures. However, NUM received 603 reports containing

723 accounts of harm to sex workers during this period. This reflected the fact that despite the lockdown, many sex workers had no choice but to continue working due to poverty and lack of government support to 'stay home and stay safe'.

Nationally, reports coalesced into three main categories:



LINKS TO MODERN SLAVERY AND TRAFFICKING

An estimated 40.3 million men, women, and children were victims of modern slavery on any given day in 2016.^[1] Of these, **71% were female.**

For every 10 victims detected globally, 5 are adult women and 2 are girls.^[2]

Overall, 50% of detected victims were trafficked for sexual exploitation.^[3]

These statistics reveal an overwhelming picture of the reality of modern slavery and human trafficking. Yet, whilst the crime of human trafficking remains difficult to measure given its hidden nature, we reflect that these numbers could today be much higher.

[1] Global Slavery Index, 2018

[2] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020

[3] UNODC Global Trafficking In Persons, 2020

COUNTY LINES – ORGANISED DRUGS & CRIME GANGS

County Lines is the term given to a form of criminal activity in which drug dealers in major cities establish networks for the supply and sale of drugs to users in towns and rural areas. It involves using other people (typically those who are young or otherwise vulnerable) to carry, store, and sell the drugs.

Cuckooing is the term used when a vulnerable person's home is taken over by perpetrators and used for

these purposes. Cuckooing is most commonly associated with taking over a property for the purposes of drug dealing activity. However, it also includes other forms of activity, such as taking over the property for the purposes of sex work and sexual exploitation.

For women with complex needs, and those who may be vulnerable to exploitation, this is a specific risk in Devon and Cornwall.

The following information has been supplied by Devon & Cornwall Police.

EXETER CUCKOOING PROFILE JAN-AUG 2021

Vulnerability of Cuckoo Victims (Male & Female)

As a city, Exeter received the highest number of reports relating to cuckooing across the Force. County Lines and Dangerous Drugs Networks target vulnerable individuals, often drug users with disability or mental health issues, and are likely to gain control over their home addresses through payment in drugs, cash, or debt bondage. Threats of violence are highly likely if the victim refuses. Single incidents of cuckooing are only slightly more likely to occur in more deprived postcodes. Repeat incidents of cuckooing are significantly more likely to occur in more deprived postcodes. Exploiters are highly likely to cuckoo rented properties. It is highly likely that a significant – though unknown – quantity of cuckooed rental properties are social housing properties.

Female Exploitation Trends

The majority (79%) of potential suspects identified in cuckooing incidents were male. Potential victims of cuckooing were closely split between males and females; 52% of potential victims were female. The cycle of repeat exploitation is difficult for the victim to break, given that exploitation perpetuates some of the risk factors – for instance, substance misuse or insecure housing - to being cuckooed in the first place.

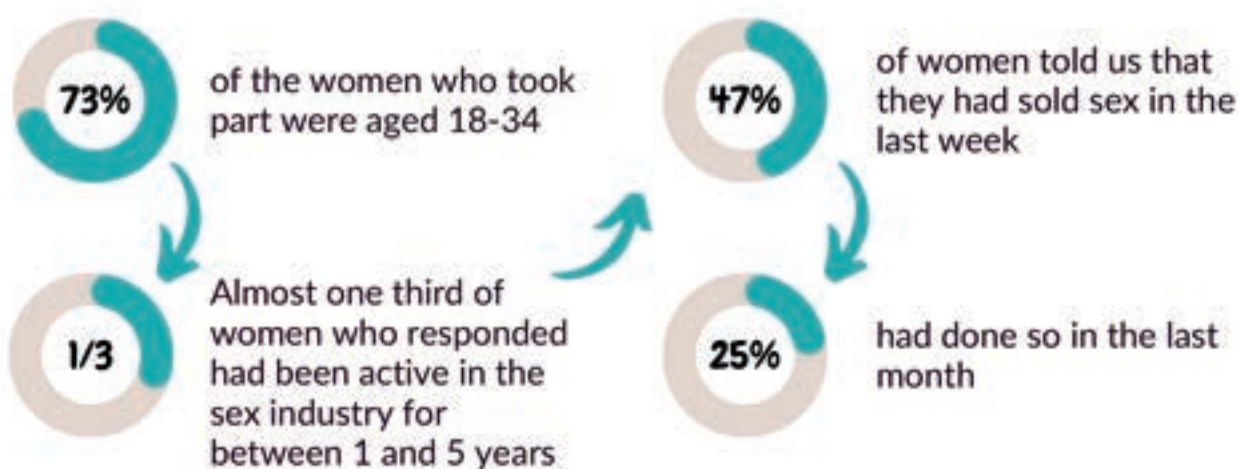
Violence against Female Cuckoo Victims

Exploiters are highly likely to use threats of physical violence and intimidation to gain or maintain access to a cuckooed address but there is limited reporting relating to actual violence towards victims. It is unknown if this is representative of the level of risk of violence. Some exploiters use threats of and actual sexual violence against women to exert control during cuckooing. The frequency with which violence, including sexual violence, is used remains an intelligence gap. For at least a small number of women in Devon & Cornwall, prior experience of either sexual or physical violence has contributed to their vulnerability to cuckooing.

At the end of 2020, the National County Lines Coordination Centre reported an emerging trend of 'gift girls'. This is a term used to describe young girls who are gifted to young males who are used to run a drug line and placed in a trap house by the line owner or middle tier. It is reported that when the young male runners get bored, they contact the line owner who in turn will collect girls from their place of residence (including care homes), give them alcohol and drugs, and transport them to the trap house for the purpose of sexual exploitation. This MO has not been reported in Force in 2021 or 2022. It remains unknown how widespread the 'gift girl' MO is, or if alternative terminology is used by gangs.

THE LOCAL PICTURE – OUT OF THE SHADOWS – IDENTIFYING THE NEEDS OF WOMEN INVOLVED IN THE SEX TRADE IN EXETER

Through the 'Out of the Shadows' scoping project in 2019, the following local picture emerged:



The key themes that emerged were:

- Economic & Parenting Issues
- Locations
- Housing & Homelessness
- Health, Risks & Safety
- Issues for Students
- Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have seen increased pressure on women as a result of the lockdowns, and an increase in austerity for those who were already experiencing disadvantage. This has included a rise in domestic and sexual violence and abuse, reported rape and sexual assault, the cost-of-living crisis, increased fuel poverty, and increased risk of homelessness.

Devon & Cornwall Police figures in 2021 reported that of all County Lines activity across their Force area:



two-thirds of this crime took place across Exeter, Mid and East Devon,



took place in Exeter.

Mid and East Devon have pockets of high deprivation. Exmouth and the East Devon coast are made up of towns that depend heavily on tourism and can experience transient population shifts. There are several holiday caravan parks and hospitality venues offering self-contained accommodation that are often offered as winter lets. Local Safeguarding forums and anecdotal information points to tourist environments, including winter lets and holiday parks, being utilised as 'pop up brothels.' They have been used to house non-British women trafficked from other parts of the South West. All provide opportunities for sexual exploitation.

CoLab Women has worked with over 40 women from East Devon, all of whom have experienced domestic abuse and/or sexual violence. In some instances, this has also included cuckooing and grooming by perpetrators. They have reported feeling **isolated** and too far from any services.

We have worked with fewer women from Mid-Devon, but the demography suggests that there is further unidentified and unmet needs across this area. The women we have worked with from Tiverton and Crediton have cited lack of services and rurality as a barrier to accessing any support.

There is no funded specialist service in Exeter, Mid or East Devon that directly supports women who are victims of sexual exploitation. The creation of this resource aims to partially address this gap by skilling up the workforce to better respond to and offer appropriate support for women.



OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS WOMEN FACE

"We've got women who we know are having to exchange sex for money just to keep the kids fed. They don't see it as exploitation but they're terrified about anyone finding out in case the authorities get involved."



For many women involved in sexual exploitation, the stigma, shame and fear of professional responses to disclosure often creates barriers to support.

Women are anxious about being judged or being seen as to blame for their situation. Most pressingly, for those with children, they are anxious about being seen as 'bad mums' and the accompanying fear of having their children removed.



CRITICAL RISK INDICATORS:

1. Groomed or abused via internet or mobile technology
2. Physical injuries without plausible explanation
3. Controlling partner, e.g. preventing access to services
4. Fear of partner
5. Disclosure of domestic abuse
6. Exchanging sexual activity for accommodation
7. Being trafficked for the purpose of sex
8. Disclosure of sexual assault or exploitation
9. Withdrawing allegations of sexual assault or exploitation
10. Abduction and forced imprisonment
11. Being bought/sold for sex
12. Multiple pregnancies, miscarriages or terminations
13. Recruiting others into sexual exploitation
14. Lack of capacity to understand or disclose

ASKING THE QUESTIONS

Many professionals tell us that they are anxious about routinely asking women questions about sex working for fear of opening a 'can of worms' that they do not have sufficient knowledge of or support to offer a holistic response. As such, they fear creating a tick-box response which can leave women feeling exposed. If a professional has concerns that a woman they are providing support and/or services to are being sexually exploited, there are a range of immediate things that can be done to support her:



If you are concerned that she is at significant risk of harm, you should **contact the police** and make an **Adult Safeguarding Referral** to Social Services.


Creating a trauma-informed, non-judgemental safe space for women to disclose is vital to enabling women to access services and support.

Discreet reception areas are vital in facilitating safety and comfort in communicating sensitive issues and personal information, and for ensuring privacy and confidentiality.

Information sharing protocols are also critical, both with the women and with other agencies. Consent to share information should always be sought. Providing transparency around what information may be shared, with whom and why, alongside clarity about safeguarding boundaries and procedures, and explaining when confidentiality may be broken is essential.

FEAR OF REPORTING VIOLENCE TO THE POLICE

In a recent national report, women in the sex industry spoke out about the issues that stopped them accessing help from the police.

 72% said that they wouldn't try to access help due to 'experiences of fear of criminalisation.'

 69% said that it was due to 'experiences of fear of stigmatisation.'

 92% of an increase in violent crimes against sex workers occurred in 2021.

STATEMENT FROM DEVON & CORNWALL POLICE



There are many reasons why people – and women in particular – may feel reluctant to contact the police, and one of these may be because of ineffective engagement in the past, leading to a lack of trust.

The police recognise that this needs to change. As an organisation the police are changing and evolving to better meet the needs of women and girls affected by crime, exploitation, and abuse. Devon and Cornwall Police recognises and acknowledges there is room for improvement and organisational learning to strengthen our responses.

Building trust and confidence means being honest and transparent, listening to victim-survivors, and understanding the ways to overcome the issues that have sometimes undermined provision of the best service possible to everyone. Devon and Cornwall Police will meet your contact with empathy and in a trauma-informed way.

Investigating perpetrators with a view to prosecution remains one of the main ways the police can support victim-survivors. However, we recognise prosecution is not always a possible or sometimes even a desirable outcome and it's important that we are person-centred rather than process-driven by listening to your situation and needs, and responding appropriately.

As an Operation Soteria expansion force Devon and Cornwall Police has an investigative focus centred on perpetrators, not victims, and coming forward to report to the police should not be hindered by worry that as a victim-survivor you will be 'judged' or investigated yourself - you should feel safe and supported.

Accessing the support of the Criminal Justice system should mean you are treated fairly, non-judgementally and with dignity, and in accordance with the Victim Codes.



CREATING EFFECTIVE RESPONSES

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Many staff tell us that they do not feel comfortable or supported within their agencies to deal with disclosures about sexual exploitation or sex working. This can be due to a number of factors. They may feel out of their depth, fearful or anxious, be seen to condone 'sex for goods,' or simply have no agency response to supporting women in this situation.

Whilst this resource aims to support all sectors of the workforce, there is a need for a wider system understanding of, and commitment to, addressing the needs of this hidden group. This will then enable future strategies and policies to include sexual exploitation when looking at commissioning and creating effective agency pathways to support.

A BLUEPRINT FOR BEST PRACTICE – TAKING A TRAUMA RESILIENCE MODEL APPROACH

Our aim is to develop a system based on values and principles that help to create an environment that facilitates improved support and outcomes. These include the following:

Harm reduction

Focus on minimizing harm for any circumstances or behaviours, without considering morality (whether the behaviour is 'right' or 'wrong').

Non-judgemental

Avoid assumptions or assigning morality, and projecting personal opinions or preferences.

Compassionate

Treat every woman with compassion, regardless of their circumstances or behaviour.

Person-centred

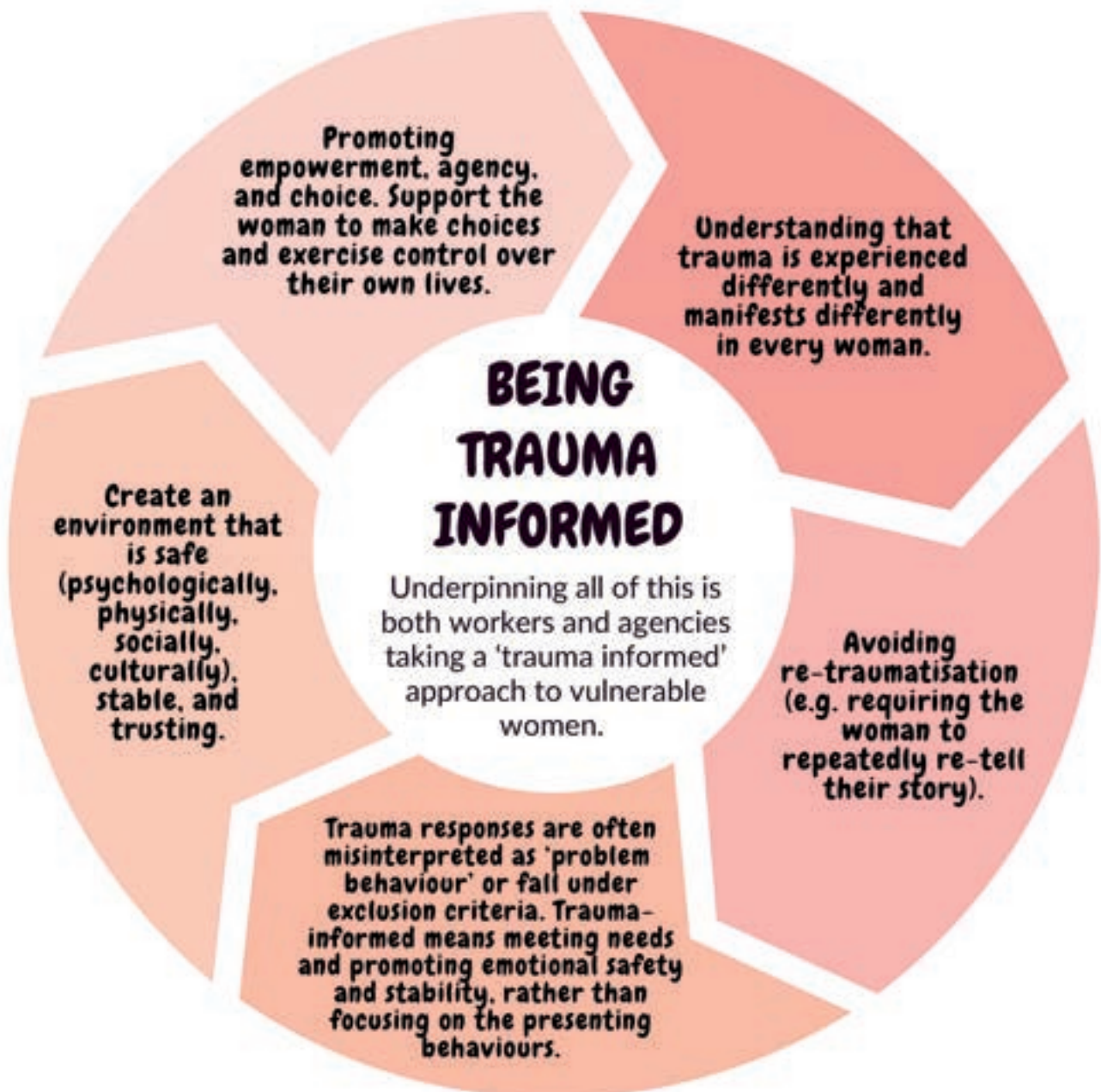
Focus on the person and their individual needs and assets, rather than on criteria and protocol.

Asset-based

Approach to service provision with an emphasis on the strengths and assets of every person, rather than their deficits.

Rights-based

Approach to service provision built around the fundamental rights of every person with fairness, equality, dignity, autonomy, and respect at the core.



THE ROLE OF RELATIONSHIPS – KEY SUPPORT WORKERS AND FRONTLINE STAFF

Creating an environment of safety and trust is essential to support. This is most effective when both the physical and emotional environments are warm, safe and protected.

A trusted key worker can be a very important relationship. A key worker provides a combination of practical and emotional support for addressing holistic needs and a positive relationship can have a significant influence on improving and strengthening positive outcomes.

Where simple signposting is not effective, a key worker can help the woman to navigate complex systems, walking alongside her and advocating on her behalf where needed. Similarly, sufficiently skilled and supported staff can 'hold' the woman without having to signpost. They can offer initial support alongside specific trauma intervention programmes, either in a one-to-one or group setting.

Women tell us that attending appointments with a support worker is really helpful, as they can act as an advocate.

Creating women's spaces is also key to enabling trust and safety in being able to approach issues. Women have described attending women's groups which are not respected by male staff and where their confidentiality has been compromised, leaving them feeling unsafe to talk.

Having a range of resources and clearly displayed information can also help. This can include open statements about the support on offer, the agency commitment to providing safety and advice, other agencies who can help, and also the range of resources on offer.

Easy access to condoms, lubricants, sanitary products, underwear, rape alarms, safety advice and food are also important in creating an atmosphere of non-judgemental support.



"[My support worker] knows my situation, she knows my partner... my family issues... she's there for me... She knows everything... A lot of it [why I've gotten health treatment] has to do with [my support worker]... having someone there for me, telling me how important it was."

"The Venus Clinic (at CoLab) was good. I could see the female doctor or nurse and the project support worker was always friendly and had drinks and cakes. There was a table with a range of things I could just pick up if I needed them, clean knickers, tampons and stuff..."

"...but most importantly, I could chat with her about anything and she never made me feel embarrassed or uneasy. It really felt like she cared that I was ok and safe."



THE ROLE OF SPECIALIST SERVICES

Women express overall positive views on specialist services. However, for those who find it difficult to trust or engage, there can be barriers to support such as referral processes, waiting lists, assessments and thresholds/criteria.

Many women consider the role of specialist services invaluable and continue to access these beyond recovery because the service may have a better understanding of their particular holistic needs. However, while specialist services have a

valuable role, it's also important to consider how they can holistically address and support the intersectionality of their clients. They may look at how they can broaden their remit and skills base to do this, as opposed to remaining in their commissioned area of expertise.

The role of partnership working is key here. Seeking out, working with, and learning from those with expertise can help agencies respond more appropriately and holistically to the needs of this client group.

THE ROLE OF HOLIDAY, HOSPITALITY AND NIGHT TIME ECONOMY SETTINGS

Offering support to staff across a range of public settings is essential as sexual exploitation can often be hidden in plain sight in places such as hotels, holiday parks, car parks, caravan sites and night-time economy settings.

Holiday and hospitality settings, hotels and other types of holiday accommodation, such as caravan parks, can be hotspots for exploiting and trafficking women.

No setting is exempt from this risk so it is important for all venues to take reasonable steps to protect vulnerable adults from this harm.

Women have disclosed being abused in hotels and caravan parks. Some hotels have spotted the signs and informed police about potential exploitation activity. When this happens, vulnerable adults can be rescued, freed from exploitation, and evidence can be gathered to

prosecute the abusers. This prevents victims from being exploited further.

Hotels can be used by County Lines networks and by those grooming and exploiting vulnerable adults.

All hotels and caravan parks should have robust safeguarding policies in place so that their staff adhere to the recommended safeguarding steps to protect both children and vulnerable adults. Failing to do this puts women at risk and premises can become an easy target for criminals to use.

Hotels and caravan parks can also suffer financial and reputational damage or run the risk of the revocation of their licence under a Closure Order. They could also face prosecution via other sexual and criminal exploitation and trafficking orders.

The following indicators are not intended to create judgement, victim-blaming, or shaming of women who may be subject to sexual exploitation. Rather, they are to support, protect, and keep them and others safe.

HOUSEKEEPING – SPOT THE SIGNS

Signs of alcohol, drug or substance misuse – lots of condom wrappers, drug and drug supplies like syringes, pipes, spoons, cookers, antiseptic wipes, prescription or over the counter drugs

Guests who appear secretive about their activities or who try to conceal their activities in their room/caravan

Signs of sexual activity in the room/caravan

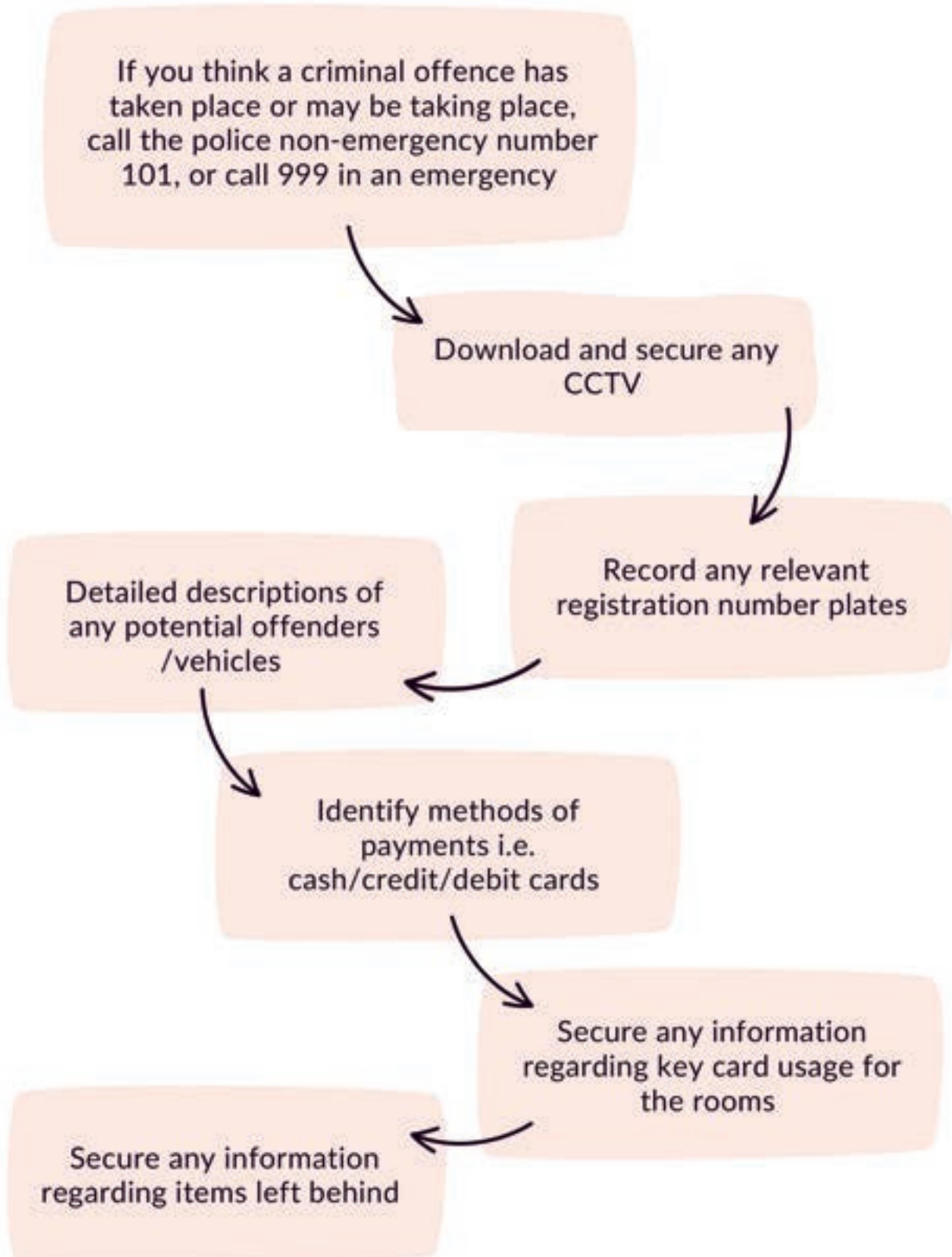
Multiple visitors to a room/caravan

Guests who do not want their rooms/caravans cleaned

Room service – alcohol orders to rooms where you perceive guests to be under age

If any of the above applies speak to your Supervisor or Manager

MANAGERS/SUPERVISORS



RISK MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Encourage staff to make eye contact and engage in conversation to inquire about the reason for guests' visit or stay

Maximise regular patrols (e.g. daily room checks, walking hallways/the building perimeter) and CCTV monitoring

Ensure your venue has a Children and Young People's & Vulnerable Adults risk assessment (should be undertaken in writing and the outcome should inform staff training, briefings and operating policy)

Regularly update all staff training and training records

Require visitors to use the main entrance to the premises

Report suspicious activity to local police and record information in an incident log. Include credit card details, physical descriptions, retain CCTV recordings, vehicle registration numbers, times of arrival/ departure, and findings/nature of concern

Agree a protocol for responding to sexual exploitation with your local police team

Establish a whistle blowing policy with staff

Assign a responsible member of staff to act as a single point of contact/ Safeguarding Coordinator at premises



In Exeter, and increasingly across Devon, there is the creation and implementation of a Safety Charter for Women at Night (SWAN). This is a scheme led by Exeter Community Safety Partnership and Safer Devon, and aims to work across a range of sectors and settings to improve safety for women via the implementation of a set of principles which all agencies will work towards upholding. These principles are:

1. Change the conversation – keeping women safe is everyone’s responsibility. Encourage men in your organisation to think about what they can do to keep women safe
2. Champion - appoint an organisational champion who will drive change
3. Communicate - run positive, public/staff facing communication campaigns, both online and in your space(s)
4. Support your Staff – create clear routes for reporting unacceptable behaviour while at work and lead cultural change
5. Support the Public – create clear routes for reporting unacceptable behaviour while using your service or space at night
6. Training: responding & recording – train staff on how to respond when an issue occurs, including what to say and do and any relevant policies. Train staff on information sharing and appropriate recording of details
7. Designing for Safety - audit your spaces and adapt them to promote a safer environment and to reduce the risk of crime

An online toolkit has been created to offer local supporters practical tips on how to effectively implement this charter. For more information, please see:

www.exeter.ac.uk/students/stay-safe/swan

EXETER SAFE SPACE



Exeter Safe Space is a new initiative that provides free support to people out and about at night time. The approach is non-judgemental, caring, respectful, dignified, warm and welcoming. The aim is to improve safety for those out and about in the night-time. Exeter Safe Space works with police, street pastors and venues to help people.

The space offers a safe, warm and non-judgemental place to go for help. The offer includes light medical treatment and paramedic help, water, phone charging, change of clothing, safety alarms and bottle tops, and a safe place to wait for transport home. It is currently open Wednesday, Friday and Saturday evenings from 11pm to 3.30am during term times.

ASK FOR ANGELA

Organisations, such as Best Bar None, improve safety across pubs and clubs and are well placed to recognise and respond to all types of risk. This includes operating the 'Ask for Angela' scheme where women at risk can use this as code to discreetly ask bar and door staff for help. Staff are properly trained and supported to manage this.



SAFEGUARDING

Safeguarding adults is about protecting people who are at risk of abuse, neglect and/or exploitation and preventing harm. It helps to keep people safe and to put plans in place to help protect those who cannot protect themselves.

Services refer into local authorities when they have a concern that an individual is at risk of, or is experiencing, abuse or neglect. Authorities then assess whether 'adult at risk' criteria have been met to trigger safeguarding procedures.

When referring women into safeguarding due to concerns over sexual exploitation, services can be told that women are not suitable for safeguarding procedures or social care support as they 'have capacity' - which implies that they are consenting to their victimisation.

As outlined above, control, coercion and grooming have severely mitigating impacts on capacity and a victim cannot consent to their abuse. This misrecognition can result in opportunities being missed to safeguard women and support their recovery. It can also leave them at further risk of exploitation and abuse, and limit their recourse to both social and criminal justice.

TRANSITIONARY SAFEGUARDING

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and its impacts do not stop when a victim/survivor turns 18. However, the support that a young person is eligible to receive, and the duty of care towards the individual, can be significantly reduced at this transition point. This is especially compounded if they have not been in care or supported by child protection procedures. This can have significant

impact on a young person's life as, at one moment, they can be looked at as being a victim of exploitation, and the next, as a 'prostitute' who is 'making her own choices'.

The multi-agency approach to their care can also be drastically reduced or stop all together. Perpetrators are aware of this drop off, both in safeguarding and in the law. They therefore target young people for exploitation (whether sexual or otherwise) at this age due to the increased ability to act with impunity.

However, there is a significant move towards 'Transitional Safeguarding', in which children's and adult's safeguarding boards strategically work together to provide benefit to young people in adolescence, not just at the point of adulthood, but throughout the transition into adulthood. It can be potentially for those aged 16-25, but is not necessarily bound by age, in preference of their developmental stage.

The adoption of transitional safeguarding requires buy in from all levels of safeguarding boards - commissioners, strategic leads, managers and practitioners.

This approach, as set out in the practice guidance "Bridging the Gap: Transitional Safeguarding and the Role of Social Work with Adults", determines that children and adult social care should not only work together (as set out by the Care Act), but align processes and institutional culture.

This, for example, includes alignment of institutional attitudes, language, and interpretation of risk and prevention. Transitional safeguarding is therefore both practical and reflexive.

SUPPORTING WOMEN TO EXIT AND RECOVER FROM SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND INVOLVEMENT IN THE SEX INDUSTRY


There is no single route into sexual exploitation or the sex industry, rather there is a complex web of multi-faceted social factors that can lead women to be vulnerable to entering it. As already stated, there is a strong correlation with homelessness, sexual abuse, violence at home, runaways, drug use, time in care, poverty, debt, and poor education. As well as drawing individuals into the sex industry, these social factors can also be significant barriers to exiting.

One weakness in terms of many local responses has been the emphasis on adopting a 'harm reduction' approach, without offering those who wish to, any opportunities to exit.

This may be due to fear of being seen to judge or stigmatise, but to simply ask the question, "Do you want this to stop? We can help you get out of this situation if you want to get out," can sow the seeds of an alternative option, future autonomy and safety.

Various models of support that help women to exit are in existence in the

UK, from both a strategic 'Violence Against Women and Girls' framework approach, to a trauma informed direct support model, such as that offered by STAGE (Support to Overcome Trauma for Adult Survivors of Grooming & Sexual Exploitation).



"I think we need services to help women exit. Not having a job to go to and not having a routine and not having money, and like, that's the biggest pull to go back. It's the practical help that's really important. If a woman really wants to leave, give her something to concentrate on. Something concrete. A route out, in a way."



The STAGE model offers a theory of change that supports women towards recovery and future resilience.

BEING, BECOMING, BELONGING – THE THEORY OF CHANGE THE POWER OF POSITIVE CHANGE



Being, Becoming, Belonging was developed by Changing Lives and adopted by STAGE when working with women experiencing sexual exploitation. It is a three-stage model of change which is utilised as a foundation to help women transform their lives. Changing Lives additionally use this model for every person who accesses their various services.

The theory of change is an underpinning framework used to ensure services are meeting the aspirations and needs of women. It ensures that support is led by the women accessing it, that women are validated, and that she is both in control of the support she receives and also aware of the boundaries in which it is provided – i.e. that power is shared.

The model recognises that women have been (and remain) affected by a wide range of interconnected social, psychological, physical and economic factors. These have not only caused them to experience extreme difficulty and disadvantage in their lives, but continue to prevent them from living healthier, happier and more fulfilled lives. This includes trauma, but also wider determinants such as:



Poverty

Financial, emotional, mental and spiritual poverty is a significant factor in trapping women and preventing change



Poor health

including physical and mental health and addiction, which can sometimes be seen as self-medicating, to manage untreated mental health issues



Diminished social capital

a lack of social relations that have productive benefits, instead having 'survival groups' where people with a common bond band together to cope



Diminished hope, aspiration and self-efficacy

preventing women from believing that things can be different

It also recognises that change is possible. Working with women so that they can recognise their strengths as well as their traps, using the three stages of 'being, becoming and belonging'.

BEING

- Reaching out and engaging with people
- Accepting women where they are at now
- Getting to know women and their aspirations
- Consistent, reliable, honest, empathetic communication and actions
- Creating environments in which women feel safe and comfortable
- Clarity about what the service can and can't do, where, when and how

BECOMING

- Starting the journey of recovery and building emotional resilience
- Acknowledging trauma and helping to understand intense emotions
- Develop the skills to manage distressing emotions and better regulate feelings
- Focus on the internal and external assets required to initiate and sustain long-term recovery
- Strengths-based work to build a sense of self and increase self-efficacy

BELONGING

- Supporting women to continue developing internal and external resources in their own lives and communities
- Support and facilitation for each individual to find their own place within a community which supports their recovery journey
- The exit point is when women have developed social networks within their own chosen communities and find purpose and meaning to their lives, whatever this may be

The theory of change is designed and delivered to support people to flourish in long-term supportive relationships. Services who are influenced by this should also be aware, however, that it sits within the wider context of a woman's life. Support is therefore provided with an understanding and mindfulness of the wider context and end-to-end journey for each individual rather than seen as a process to drive. It should be possible for women to take their support at their own pace, with consistent support throughout.

Being, Becoming, Belonging can be used in any way that is useful to services and the women they support. It can be used to reflect on the service offered and how it meets the three stages (either in itself or via working in partnership with additional services) and as a way of simply communicating what is on offer to women through their engagement.

Another example of exiting support is RASAC in Scotland that has a part-time worker for sexual exploitation who works with women in one area looking to exit. Women often present with multiple barriers to exiting such as addiction, homelessness, poverty, current or previous sexual and/or domestic abuse, current exploitative relationships and offending.

RASAC works in a trauma-informed, survivor-centred way to explore what women want for the future. Support is then tailored to the individual using a variety of therapeutic support, advocacy, safety and stabilisation work.

Given the complexity of women's needs, a multi-agency, holistic approach is required. RASAC has found that without a strategic approach or joint agreements between these relevant services, the full package of support needed is often lacking in fundamental ways. This means exiting then becomes impossible.

However, exiting can be a long and complicated process with individual factors affecting women such as:



BARRIERS TO LEAVING

Thorlby (2015) adapted from Baker et al (2010) sets out the barriers as:

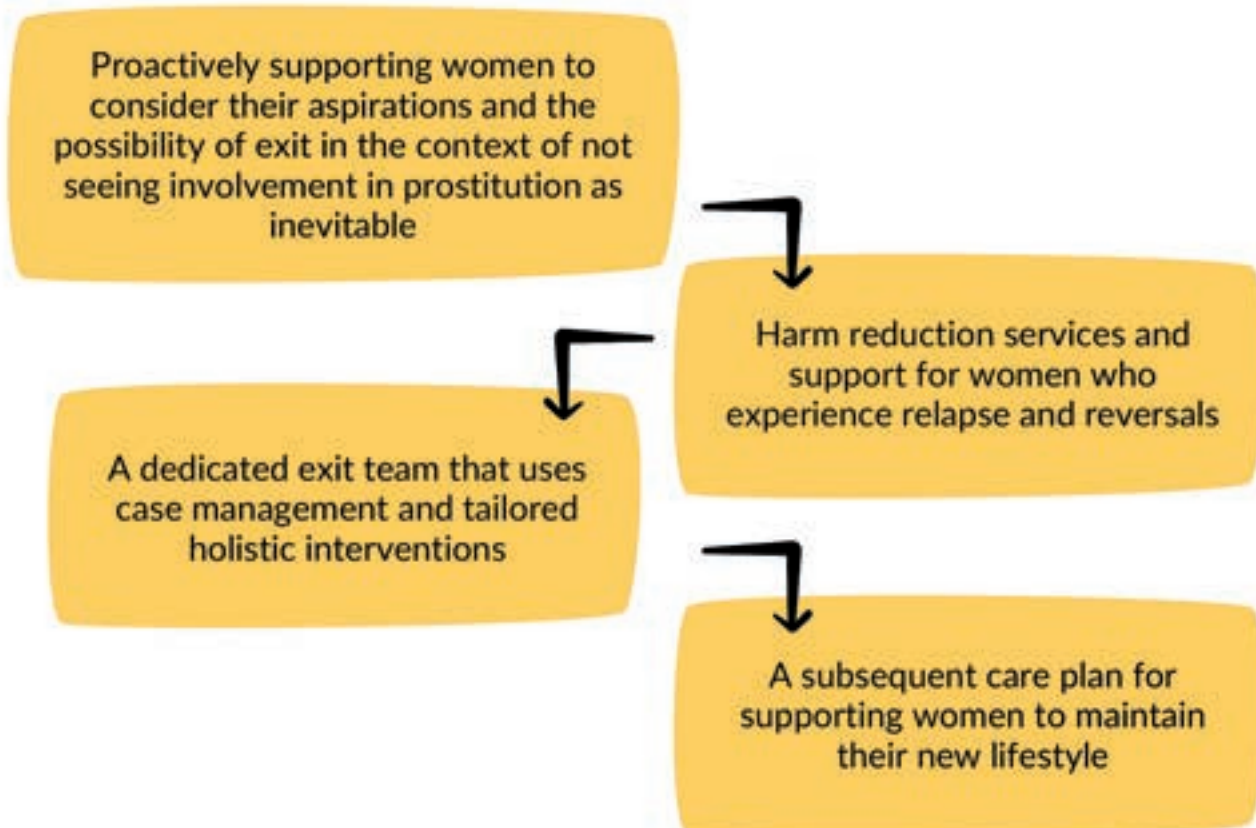
Individual: self-sabotage behaviours and substance abuse, mental health problems, effects of trauma from adverse childhood, psychological trauma or injury from violence, chronic psychological stress, self-esteem, shame, guilt, and physical health problems.

Structural: employment, job skills, limited employment opportunities, basic needs (e.g. housing, homelessness, poverty, economic self-sufficiency), education, criminal record, and inadequate services.

Relational: limited conventional formal and informal support, strained family relations, perpetrators, drug dealers, and social isolation.

Societal: discrimination and stigma.

4 MAIN ELEMENTS TO EXITING SUPPORT (SASE TEAM, SCOTLAND)



WHOLE SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT

To begin to create a whole system approach to Adult Sexual Exploitation, there is a requirement of:

- shared agency Care Plans (identifying risks, clear management plans)
- collaborative working (Multi-disciplinary team approach)
- addressing differential thresholds
- 'One Woman' multi-agency strategy meetings
- involving other supportive agencies with the SARC attendance
- thinking outside of the box regarding referrals (other referrals that may be able to support them if not working)
- sensitive anonymous intelligence (identify linked cases)
- gaining trust (self-referral route)
- reducing (re-)traumatisation of both victims and staff
- safeguarding
- increasing access options for survivors (e.g. third sector commissioning pathway development or extended offer of therapeutic interventions)

Taking this approach would transform the cultural understanding of adult sexual exploitation within an abusive framework for all professionals.

Previous research has identified seven elements for successful responses to women with complex needs. These elements also inform this area of work. They would underpin the creation of a women's hub model (see next section).

7 ELEMENTS FOR SUCCESS^[3]:

TRAUMA INFORMED – DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF THE RANGE AND IMPACT OF:

ACE (incl. physical and/or sexual abuse, experience of care system)

rape, sexual and/or domestic violence as an adult

loss of children (impact often ignored by other agencies)

living on the streets/insecure accommodation

contact with the criminal justice system

HOLISTIC – WORKING WITH THE WHOLE WOMAN:

emotional, physical and social needs

ensuring she is heard and understood

responding to multiple/overlapping issues together

INDIVIDUAL, CONSISTENT, RELIABLE, FLEXIBLE AND NON-JUDGMENTAL:

build respectful trusting relationships which are non-judgmental, consistent and reliable

limit changes in workers

work with strengths and abilities and foster collaboration

limit inconsistent responses

flexible and open-ended

MIXTURE OF SUPPORT AND ACTIVITIES:

not just emotional and therapeutic support

drop-in facility such as a café/lounge area

individual and group activities

opportunities for learning, training and volunteering (including peer support)

wide range of practical and financial support (incl. physical needs, provision of childcare, advocacy with external agencies)

STAFFING:

trained, supported staff

low case numbers

informal and line management, clinical supervision, staff development

appropriate recruitment and training

MULTI-AGENCY WORKING:

respectful, knowledgeable relationships are vital

training

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING:

Joint Commissioning Frameworks


TRAINING:

any movement towards a whole system approach will require specialist training for the workforce across all agencies to provide a greater understanding of complex trauma. This should be cross-agency training to equip staff with the resilience and confidence required to enable them to work with women with complex needs.

CREATING A WOMEN'S HUB MODEL

Many women we support express their preference of having a 'hub' model. This means they would be able to access a wide range of support services in the same place, without having to continually retell their story and face further re-traumatisation.

They would like a welcoming, safe, non-judgemental, trauma-informed and accessible environment. It would incorporate everything from sex worker support services, sexual health, GP, Domestic and Sexual Violence services, mental health, drug services, and workshops/support groups, all in a one-stop shop.



"A women's hub that would cover everything in the same place would be great. We need our own safe space to help us to get the support we need."

"You could get: advice, support, access to whole range of agencies and services, a holistic approach to health and wellbeing needs, energy advice, money advice, housing advice, emergency food supplies, contraception... Know that you can get referred and do application forms in one place"

THE HUB WOULD INCLUDE:



The development of a consultation service



The Establishment of Multi-Disciplinary Teams with Voluntary Sector, National Crime Agency/Police, Social Care and ISVA/IDVA's collocated together



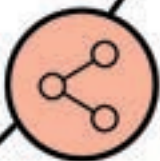
Trauma Resilience Service Hub and referral mechanisms – bespoke, timely and trauma-informed care



Sexual Exploitation & Trauma Training offer to a wide range of staff and stakeholders



Bespoke Trauma Stabilisation – focused relational support and counselling and improved access to mental health



Trusting multi-agency relationships – joining the dots and putting ourselves in the shoes of other organisations and their challenges

AND FINALLY...

If you are supporting women who are at risk of sexual exploitation, CoLab Women can help with:

- advice and signpost for STIs, pregnancy, and HIV
- provide free condoms and lubricants
- referring for accommodation
- escaping domestic abuse
- benefits and debt advice
- making and attending medical appointments
- access to sexual health screening
- a dodgy punter reporting service
- safety advice and information
- personal attack alarms
- referrals into drug and other services
- a friendly chat and a cuppa

Our aim is to help people to keep safe and healthy. Our lovely staff are highly experienced and can support with worries and concerns.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT – LOCAL/DEVON

CoLab Women – a project based at CoLab Exeter, a multi-agency health and wellbeing hub supporting women experiencing multiple disadvantage. As part of this we offer our Brave Spaces that supports women who are rough sleeping, in temporary accommodation or vulnerably housed offering direct support with domestic and sexual violence and abuse, and trauma. We support local agencies to improve gender and trauma informed responses to women. We also offer out of hours outreach support to women. We have supported women facing sexual exploitation since 2018.

www.colabexeter.org.uk/colab-women

Devon Rape Crisis & Sexual Abuse Service - www.devonrapecrisis.org. confidential professional support to survivors of rape, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse in Devon

Devon SARC - www.sarchelp.co.uk Devon & Cornwall SARC are part of the NHS. They provide medical support, examination and counselling after rape or sexual assault for Devon, Cornwall and the Scilly Isles

Devon Sexual Health - www.devonsexualhealth.nhs.uk/sex-relationships/sex-workers sexual health advice and support including testing and treatment and contraception and condoms

Fear-Less - www.fear-less.org.uk support for people experiencing domestic abuse, sexual violence and stalking

Police partnership sharing form - [Partner Agency Information Sharing Form - Devon & Cornwall Police \(devon-cornwall.police.uk\)](#) - Sharing information with Devon and Cornwall police so they are able to build a bigger picture of the local concerns

SOURCES OF SUPPORT – NATIONAL

BASIS Yorkshire - www.basisyorkshire.org.uk information, support and guidance for those involved in the sex industry and provider of a range of toolkits and resources

Beyond the Streets - www.beyondthestreets.org.uk a national charity working to support women to create lives beyond sexual exploitation

Crimestoppers - www.crimestoppers-uk.org 100% anonymous Independent UK charity taking crime information anonymously- Useful link for confidential information sharing via Crimestoppers - this is helpful when people are worried about repercussions about reporting

National Ugly Mugs - www.nationaluglymugs.org NUM is a UK-wide charity working with sex workers to do research, design and deliver safety tools and to provide support services to people in adult industries

National Referral Mechanism - www.modernslavery.gov.uk If we are concerned that a woman is being trafficked or exploited by modern slavery services are required to share this information via the National Referral mechanism

TOEX - www.toexprogramme.co.uk Tackling Organised Exploitation



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