Police understanding and application of the concept of vulnerability in responding to the needs of sex workers in Wales.

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Summary:

This research examines the ways in which the concept of vulnerability informs police understanding of, and responses to, the needs of sex workers in Wales. By administering an online survey to all four Welsh forces, this research has identified varied understandings of both sex work and vulnerability, and the ways in which these intersect. The key findings of the research identify issues related to the training received by police employees on the issue of sex work, as well as the complex barriers to engaging with sex workers that the police participants recognise. Whilst these barriers to engagement raise significant challenges in this area, the research identifies practice in Wales which is both innovative and aligned to national policing guidance. The practice discussed within is underpinned by the concept of vulnerability in various ways, including its emphasis on safeguarding and multi-agency working. The report provides a basis for ongoing discussions as to the most effective policing practice in responding to the needs of sex workers in Wales.

1. Introduction

This study examined police understanding and application of the concept of vulnerability in responding to the needs of sex workers in Wales. Recently, policing responses to sex work in England and Wales have been informed by an emphasis on vulnerability, which recognises the potential risk that sex workers face. Therefore, policing approaches have been touted as being underpinned by a concern for welfare rather than the enforcement of sex work-related offences. Indeed, this theme is evident within both the 2019 and recently updated 2023 releases of the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) guidance related to sex work and prostitution.

There are questions, however, as to whether this guidance has informed policing practice across England and Wales to the extent intended, and also whether a safeguarding and welfare focused response from the police is something welcomed by those involved in sex work, or rejected on the grounds that it may lead to an increased scrutiny on a population which have historically been marginalised by the police and other forms of social control.

An online survey was distributed to all four force areas in Wales, through which to explore police understanding and application of the concept of vulnerability in responding to the needs of sex workers in Wales. In order to address this overall aim, the study addressed four research questions:

- How do police understand 'vulnerability' and 'sex work'?
- How do police apply vulnerability-led approaches to supporting sex workers?
- What barriers do police face in supporting sex workers?
- What areas of practice are identified as promising in supporting sex workers?

This report will review the existing literature, to contextualise the study, before outlining the methodology, which included the co-production of research materials with those employed by the police. The key findings will then be presented in relation to the research questions outlined above, before concluding thoughts are provided.

2. Literature review

The Sexual Offences Act 2003 defines sex work as 'a person who on at least one occasion and whether or not compelled to do so, offers or provides sexual services to another person in return for payment or a promise of payment to A or a third person (Potot-Warren 2021). While sex work itself is not a crime many of the interconnected activities relating to it are (Brooks-Gordon 2010; Graham 2017). As such, sex work is regulated through criminal laws that push sex workers into unsafe environments and conditions, with seemingly little options for recourse and potentially rendering them vulnerable to exploitation (Graham 2017).

The policing of sex work can be a double-edged sword; on the one hand enforcing criminal activities that sex workers may find themselves involved in and at the same time supporting and protecting them as victims of crime (Brown, Redmond and Grace 2019). Working collectively indoors is safer for sex workers but this would then fall under the criminal law regulating the running and management of brothels. While working in a brothel is not illegal, keeping or managing one is. The law therefore restricts sex workers working together collectively which moves sex workers into unsafe territories to avoid the risk of prosecution and their assets being seized (Brooks–Gordon 2010). Moreover, under the proceeds of crime Act police can disrupt sex work in brothels and can keep a proportion of the assets seized, giving them an incentive to raid brothels (Brooks–Gordon 2010), causing conflict between policing and safeguarding sex workers. Enforcement led policing does not support the concept of protective policing (Klambauer 2018). There is also a patchwork approach to regulating sex work across the police service (Feis-Bryce 2017).

It is important that sex workers can trust the police (Armstrong 2014). However, with sex workers considered unreliable witnesses (Sanders 2007), with the history of sex work being criminalised (Pyett and Warr 1999, Armstrong 2016), low levels of trust in police among sex workers (Trafford 2020) and a feeling among sex workers of not being taken seriously by the police (Bowen et al 2021), it is challenging for the police service to build trust and confidence with sex workers and to safeguard them.

Guidelines about the policing of sex work have changed in recent years, moving away from criminalisation to safeguarding, following the recommendations of the Home Affairs Select Commission on Prostitution. In 2016 the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) introduced guidelines that reflected the move to tackling perpetrators rather than criminalising sex workers. The most recent NPCC guidelines updated 2023, reinforce this move away from criminalising sex workers to safeguarding them, drawing on the violence against women and girls agenda suggesting that sex workers are vulnerable, especially to male violence, due to the nature of their work.

In Wales, like the NPCC guidance, the violence against women and girls agenda (Violence Against Women and Girls Domestic Abuse Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015)

influences how sex work is governed (Hanks 2023) as there is not a specific policy for governing sex work. The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015) does focus on wellbeing through proactive preventive work. While there are lower levels of arrests and charges for sex work in Wales, in line with wider NPCC guidelines to reduce criminalising sex work, Hanks (2022) argues that this masks other ways in which sex workers are regulated by police contending that it is another way of controlling sex workers. Criminalising sex work can make it less safe for sex workers (Trafford 2020).

Drawing on the Harm Reduction Compass model, a prioritisation tool designed to address sex worker vulnerability holistically, combining public health and community-based approaches in providing a multi partnership approach to helping sex workers (Sanders, Vajzovic, Brooks-Gordon & Mulvihill 2021), NPCC guidelines call for the police service to build mutual trust and confidence, encourage the reporting of crimes, maximise safety and reduce vulnerability. However, what constitutes vulnerability is not defined despite its widespread use (Munro and Scoular 2012), leaving the police service and individual officers deciding what vulnerability is (Keay and Kirby 2018). Focusing on police views of vulnerability rather than sex workers however enables the police to criminalise sex work in a different way (Hanks 2022). Vulnerability has been used as a way to validate state intrusion and power over sex workers (Munro and Scoular (2012) and is used to reframe how sex workers are responded to (Hanks 2022). This move to safeguarding sex workers rather than policing them has resulted in more scrutiny from both policing and other agencies tasked with safeguarding them. Though not ostensibly prosecuting sex work, it is argued to be another way of controlling sex workers (Hanks 2022).

In a sex work context, vulnerability is often used to highlight the violence faced by sex workers (Brown and Sanders 2017) with sex workers made vulnerable by virtue of their working conditions, legal status and access to help (Sanders 2017). Vulnerability also varies between factors including gender, ethnicity, migration status, physical and mental health, drug use, sexual health issues and type of sex work. With indoor/online sex workers less likely to experience certain crimes than outdoor sex workers (Brown, Redmond and Grace 2019). Outdoor sex workers are particularly at risk of violence, compared to indoor sex workers (Church et al 2001), with differences between the nature and extent of violence experienced by them compared to those who work indoors (Sanders and Campbell 2007). Outdoor sex workers are also more likely to be actively policed and have less positive experiences of policing than indoor sex workers with both groups believing they would not be treated respectfully by the police (Klambauer 2018).

While not all sex workers will be vulnerable nor consider themselves vulnerable having made a rational choice to become sex workers and who enjoy their work (Sagar and Jones 2014), more is needed for vulnerable and exploited sex workers to address these vulnerabilities

including legal and social reforms (Brown and Sanders 2017), or having vulnerabilities 'designed out' by building in respect for sex workers through having policies in place that advance employment and human rights (Sanders and Campbell 2007).

In some areas adopting a hate crime approach to sex work has resulted in improved relationships between sex workers and the police, along with improved crime reporting and a shift in attitudes towards sex workers (Campbell and Sanders 2020). Conversely, Holt and Gott (2020) challenge the idea that increased hate crime legislation will reduce violence against sex workers, rather it will put them at increased risk of harm because it will increase their interactions with the police. As noted at the outset more legislation can turn the spotlight on sex workers in a different yet controlling way. Given the focus on addressing vulnerability and conflict and confusion over what constitutes vulnerability and how it should be addressed, it is important to understand how the police understand and apply the concept of vulnerability.

3. Methodology

With its emphasis on police understandings and practice, this study was designed in a way that encouraged wide participation across the four force areas in Wales within the limited timeframe available, whilst also attempting to maintain space for participants to share their own experiences and realities of relevant policing practice.

The primary data collection method utilised was an online survey, aimed at those who work in both frontline and primarily desk-based roles. The survey included both quantitative and qualitative questions, seeking to explore participants' perceptions, understandings and experiences of sex work-related policing.

The quantitative element of the survey collated demographic information such as the type of role held by the participant, their length of service and the force with which they were employed. Beyond this, closed ended questions were asked to glean details of issues such as the training police employees had received related to sex work, their awareness of the College of Policing definition of vulnerability and their perspective on the effectiveness of particular elements of police practice.

In terms of the qualitative element, there were two primary purposes of the questions asked. Some of the questions were utilised as a follow-up to earlier closed ended questions, asking participants to explain why they chose a particular answer or expand upon the information provided. For example, participants were asked if they had any previous contact with sex work support organisations and if they had, they were then asked which organisations and how they felt these organisations had influenced their practice. Other qualitative questions were used to enable participants to present their own understandings of particular issues, such as the activities that they associated with sex work, the vulnerabilities which they associated with it and their understanding of the NPCC's (2019) guidance related to sex work (at the time, the 2023 guidance had not yet been released).

The online survey was developed with input from representatives of two of the four Welsh forces, though all four forces were invited to take part in reviewing and amending this tool. An initial draft was developed by the research team and shared with representatives of South Wales and Gwent Police, who provided written feedback on the draft and were invited to a meeting with the research team where ideas were shared and discussed before the survey was finalised.

A purposive sampling method was utilised, targeting active police officers, detectives or police staff within the four Welsh forces. Established contacts were used to distribute a link to the online survey within their respective force, with a specific request to share as far and as wide as possible, so as to avoid the survey being primarily responded to by those in specific safeguarding roles or teams.

A total of 128 people responded to the survey, though upon review 33 responses were not included for analysis as they had not provided answers to the prompts beyond the initial informed consent screen. This left a total of 95 responses included within the analysis, with 80 respondents employed by South Wales Police, 12 by Gwent Police, 2 by Dyfed Powys Police and 1 by North Wales Police.

4. How do police understand 'vulnerability' and 'sex work'?

This section presents the findings in relation to the first research question, which is concerned with the police understanding of the concept of vulnerability, sex work and the interrelationship between the two in Wales.

4.1 Varied understandings of sex work

Understandings of sex work varied considerably amongst the sample. Of the responses, a majority (55) provided a quite literal definition of sex work, discussing sex for money or other forms of renumeration. There were another 18 responses which used language like 'work' or 'service' whilst defining sex work, which may be read as ideologically legitimising of sex work. In contrast, 18 respondents referred to the issue of exploitation in defining sex work, with participant 23 for example suggesting that:

> 'In our area of work, those involved in sex work are predominately exploited adults who are sex working due to the vulnerabilities they face daily.' (Participant 23)

Morally charged language was also apparent within a small minority of responses. One participant likened sex work to 'using one's body with the offer of sexual services for payment' and another discussed 'money in exchange for inappropriate services'. Whilst these are brief extracts and caution must be taken in drawing conclusions from them, the language used is in stark contrast with the NPCC (2019) recognition that fear of judgement is a key issue that impacts sex workers' trust of the police and that 'the role of policing is not to make moral judgements' (p. 4).

4.1 Training related to sex work

The relevant training undertaken by police employees was of interest here, in order to explore the influences of participant understandings of sex work. Findings of the research suggest that most of those responding to the survey had not undertaken any relevant training (56). For those who had undertaken relevant training, a follow-up question asked how well this had prepared them for responding to and dealing with sex work-related issues or incidents, on a scale from 'not at all well' to 'extremely well'. Those who responded 'slightly well' indicated that they had undertaken some relevant training, though described this as 'minimal', 'very limited' or as having taken place during 'basic initial training'. There were also discussions of the training not being specific to sex work, with one participant in particular raising that they were 'sexual offences trained'.

For those who felt 'moderately prepared', references were made to policy and guidance documents, sexual exploitation, child sexual abuse and modern-day slavery training, as well

as partner input and attendance at conferences/learning events. Similar themes were evident within responses from those who felt 'very prepared', with references made to attending a national sex work conference, held by the NPCC lead for Sex Work and Prostitution. There were also references to inputs from National Ugly Mugs, Horizon and Red Umbrella, with one participant citing the completion of the 'Specialist Sexual Assault Investigation Development Programme' (participant 3). Only one participant selected that they were 'extremely' prepared, having received training internally as well as from Barnado's, The National Crime Agency and Social Services.

4.2   Vulnerability as complex

In order to explore understanding of the concept of vulnerability, participants were asked about their understanding of the College of Policing's (CoP) definition utilised within the THRIVE framework. The definition reads: 'a person is vulnerable if, as a result of their situation or circumstances, they are unable to take care of or protect themselves or others from harm or exploitation'.

The majority of respondents (64) felt that this definition fit 'very' or 'extremely' well with their own understanding, with only 12 participants suggesting that it fit 'moderately', 'slightly' or 'not at all'. Participants were then invited to follow this response with some suggestion as to how they felt the CoP definition may be developed. The most significant theme here was the idea that vulnerability is not a fixed state, with participant 76 suggesting that:

> '… anyone can be vulnerable at any time, people can move to vulnerable in various temporary states of vulnerability due to various factors.' (Participant 76)

A further theme evident here surrounded discussions of particular words used within the definition. Participant 60, for example, critiqued the use of the word 'unable' as it may exclude those who are generally able to care for and protect themselves, but in various circumstances become vulnerable.

Although participants' understanding of vulnerability aligned mainly with the CoP definition, the findings reveal that vulnerability is a complex issue and such complexity may not be recognised within the existing definition used by policing organisations in England and Wales. This may also suggest that it is not a lens which can be applied to heterogenous groups, such as sex workers, indiscriminately, and is discussed further in the section below.

4.3   The interrelationship between vulnerability and sex work

There was a range of responses evident within participants' discussions of the interrelationship between sex work and the concept of vulnerability. Some participants were

keen to stress that involvement in sex work itself does not indicate or stipulate vulnerability. This included participant 79, who suggested that a definition of vulnerability was needed, which better reflects the potential vulnerability of sex workers:

> 'Needs to include a person's circumstances, which brought them to the point of being a sex worker. Not all sex workers are vulnerable.' (Participant 79)

Further responses highlighted how particular circumstances, such as a lack of choice and the setting in which sex work takes places, influence vulnerability rather than involvement in sex work itself. For example, participant 42 suggested that not all sex workers face the same circumstances, and acknowledged the different roles within the industry and the level of risk attached to them:

> 'Sex workers are not always in a position of physical violence as sex working can be online and selling underwear etc.' (Participant 42)

This position suggests that there is a degree of risk attached to some forms of sex work, which was also highlighted by participant 89:

> 'Sex workers who are not exploited, are still operating in high-risk environments and although there is a vulnerability attached, should be able to mitigate these risks as would be expected in other high-risk occupations.' (Participant 89)

Other respondents linked vulnerability more closely and universally with sex work, such as participant 71 who suggested that in order to better reflect the potential vulnerabilities of sex workers:

> '...a normative understanding of the matter as essentially exploitative, rather than "work", would better reflect their vulnerabilities.' (Participant 71)

Where participants considered the types of vulnerabilities that they associated with sex work, substance use (38 participants), exploitation (19), lone working (18), financial issues (18), coercion/control (14), mental health (13) and homelessness (10) were the most frequently raised. To a lesser extent there were also discussions of a lack of protection (4 participants), gender (3), immigration status (3), stigma and discrimination (2) and the regulatory framework (1). Interestingly, much of the sex work-related literature highlights these latter factors as driving an environment of potential vulnerability and risk of harm, though the

context of police interactions with sex workers may explain their emphasis on individual contexts and circumstances.

4.5 Section summary

A key message emerging from the data is that understandings of both sex work and vulnerability vary amongst the policing participants engaged with this study. In terms of understandings of sex work, it is unsurprising that participants were split between various perspectives on sex work, with more neutral-literal perspectives, responses which may be considered sex work positive, understandings emphasising exploitation and traces of a moralistic perspective on the issue. This is contextualised by the limited relevant training identified by the sample, with participants resorting to engaging with a variety of external sources (outside of force prescribed training) in order to develop their responses to the issue.

Understandings of vulnerability were seemingly more uniform, though it is encouraging to see acknowledgement of the complexity of the concept within the sample. Indeed, this continued where sex work and vulnerability were considered together. The potential risk of various forms of sex work were well recognised within the sample, though these were mainly recognised as being potential risks as opposed to a fixed state of vulnerability experienced by all sex workers. Such an understanding of the interrelationship between sex work and vulnerability is perhaps more representative of the heterogeneity evident within the industry, though some of the understandings presented by the sample may be understandable given the context of police involvement in some cases, where vulnerability is perhaps more consistent.

5. Police application of vulnerability in supporting sex workers

This section presents the findings in relation to the second research question, which is concerned with the police application of the concept of vulnerability within their approaches to supporting sex workers.

5.1 Understandings of force policy

A significant proportion of respondents were unsure of their force policy in relation to sex work (24), with others unsure if there was a specific force policy, or more certain that there was not (5). Several themes were evident where participants did present their understanding of force policy, with the idea of safeguarding taking priority over criminalisation being the most commonly raised theme. For example, participant 56 highlighted how vulnerability informs their force response to sex work by saying:

> 'Sex workers are not to be treated as criminals and we must focus on the safety of sex workers. Always consider vulnerabilities and exploitation and build good relations and trust.' (Participant 56)

Similarly, participant 59, amongst others from both South Wales and Gwent, highlighted how a victim-oriented approach is taken to dealing with sex workers:

> 'My knowledge is as victims, and we thoroughly deal with threat risk and harm, and address vulnerabilities through referrals to agencies.' (Participant 59)

As well as emphasising safeguarding and victim-oriented narratives, partnership working that addresses vulnerability was highlighted as being integral to force policy in South Wales Police (SWP) by six participants, including participant 87:

> 'I think SWP are good at identifying the causes of people sex working (although not all people that sex work are vulnerable). They do promote dealing with sex work victims as well as you would any other victim. They work closely with partner agencies via SWOT MARAC (Sex Work Operational Team Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference) and welcome a partnership approach.' (Participant 87)

There are a number of issues evident within these responses, including there being varied awareness and understanding of force policy. Where force policy is understood and described however, approaches are seemingly underpinned by the concept of vulnerability, and responding to the risk of harm potentially faced by sex workers.

5.2   Awareness of national guidance

When asked whether they were aware of national policing guidance related to sex work, the majority of respondents (55) suggested they were not. In terms of understandings of the guidance outlined by the remaining 15 respondents, a number of themes were evident. This included discussions of how the guidance stresses how forces should work:

'To build relationships with partners, police and the sex work industry to share information, build trust and protect those involved.' (Participant 92)

Building trust is essential to the guidance, while engaging with partners is highlighted as 'an important step to building understanding and winning the trust of your local sex working community' (NPCC, 2019: 7). Integral to trust are the interactions held between police and sex workers, with potential criminalisation and judgement proving barriers to engagement. Participant 89 highlights these factors in their understanding of the guidance:

'That the policing starts from a position of exploitation and abuse, engagement is key and police should refrain from moral judgements.' (Participant 89)

Despite several key messages from the NPCC? guidance being reflected within participants' responses, it is concerning that such a large majority of participants claimed to be unaware of the guidance. Whilst this may well relate to the types of role participants are engaged in (i.e those with a specific vulnerability focus being more aware and having a better understanding of the guidance), the guidance does offer specific advice for those engaged in various roles across policing and wider consideration of it should therefore be encouraged.

5.3   Force practice alignment with national guidance

Building on the theme of national guidance, participants were asked to outline the extent to which they felt their force practice aligned with it. Participants were shown an extract of the guidance which emphasises the focus on reducing vulnerability and criminality, maximising safety, increasing trust and confidence, shifting the policing focus onto safeguarding those harmed within the industry and engaging in partnership work. A total of 67 participants responded to this prompt, the majority answering positively (25 'very well', 12 'extremely well'). Open text responses, which expanded on how force practice may be aligned, included themes of being judgement free, adopting supportive approaches, and specific elements of practice and partnership working. The most frequent suggestion was that practice was judgement free and supportive, as opposed to criminalising. Participant 52 of SWP was one of 10 participants to address this theme, suggesting:

'We deal with the criminal element and do not make a moral judgement.' (Participant 52)

Participant 92 (Gwent) linked this theme to specific practice, highlighting how force practice does not seek to criminalise sex workers, and that specific provision is available to them:

'We do not police the sex workers for crimes they commit in relation to soliciting. We have employed an officer who solely works to deal with the crimes reported by sex workers in connection with the sex industry.' (Participant 92)

Participant 95 (Gwent) highlighted how this specific practice may help build and maintain trust with sex work communities within the area:

'We have a specified officer who supports our known sex workers alongside SEASS [Sexual Exploitation Advocacy Support Service] so that she can maintain/develop a relationship so that they will feel more comfortable in reporting criminal offences to Police.' (Participant 95)

Specific practice was also identified in South Wales, relating to a sex work specific multi-agency risk assessment conference (SWOT MARAC). This approach supports information sharing between agencies, and can lead to holistic responses to potential vulnerabilities.

Although specific areas of practice were identified as being aligned with national guidance, potential inconsistencies across forces and between individuals within forces were raised. For example, participant 62 (South Wales) highlighted how practice may be dependent on officer awareness of the guidance and participants 93 and 94 discussed how practice varies in the east and west of the force, for example:

'Two areas of the force operate differently. The exploitation team in the west only works with children so there may be a lack of consistency due to varying knowledge and experience on response'. (Participant 94)

Though raised as being aligned with national guidance, concerns were raised about the inconsistencies in delivery within some police forces, whereby sex workers within the same force area may receive a wholly different level of service depending on the area of the force they are engaged with.

5.4   Identifying and monitoring vulnerability

Identifying and monitoring factors which may influence vulnerability is central to the THRIVE approach adopted by the CoP. Many participants suggested that they were unsure of how potential vulnerability would be identified (28), though 8 highlighted that this would be done through a Public Protection Notice. A further 2 participants noted how information sharing and partnership working would help identify vulnerability, with the rapport some organisations have with sex workers being identified as beneficial to identifying vulnerability. Lastly, officer judgement and identifying vulnerability on a case-by-case basis was discussed by participant 71, though another participant (78) highlighted how this may lead to potential inconsistency and missed opportunities in identifying vulnerability, which may also mean a vulnerability context being over emphasised in some cases.

In terms of monitoring vulnerability, participants raised the use of key word searches on systems such as NICHE and the implementation of the SWOT MARAC in SWP, which is underpinned by an emphasis on partnership working. Such an approach is consistent with NPCC (2019) guidance and in this instance enables information sharing between agencies, which is key to monitoring vulnerability and implementing safeguarding measures.

Whilst the use of PPNs and NICHE to raise and monitor potential vulnerability, as well as specific measures such as SWOT MARACs, may enable more consistent approaches by ensuring knowledge of vulnerability is shared, there is a sense that the actual identification of vulnerability in the first instance may be less consistent and often subject to individual officer judgement. Given the lack of training identified earlier in this report, this is perhaps a concern.

5.5   Monitoring offences and offenders

Similar to the ways in which vulnerability is monitored within forces, specific tools such as NICHE and other ways of flagging incidents to highlight the relevance of the sex work context, including documenting the victim's employment status, were raised as methods of monitoring offences against sex workers. Further to this, participants highlighted how specific teams, such as the exploitation and Public Protection Unit teams, would oversee offences against sex workers. One respondent suggested that a specific individual would perform this role, and 'liaise with other officers and agencies' (Participant 91).

For offenders, some responses were very similar in discussing tools such as NICHE and flagging incidents. There was also significant discussion of how the type of offence may dictate how the offender would be monitored, with a specific response to offences of a sexual nature noted. In this vein, MOSOVO (IN FULL) was raised by several participants, with specialist officers managing any further potential risks posed by offenders who are registered as a sex offender. Where the offence was not of a sexual nature, participants were seemingly less clear on how offenders would be monitored:

'Not Sure - Should a conviction for a sexual offence be apparent, they are flagged as a sexual offender by means of a warning marker which is then highlighted during each Police contact or involvement. Possibly a warning marker flagging offences against sex workers however I have not experienced this.' (Participant 56)

This perhaps suggests both a gap and an inconsistency in how offenders are monitored, with those who have committed offences of a non-sexual nature not being monitored as effectively as those who have. Where there is a sex work-specific team there are seemingly clearer approaches for monitoring those who offend against sex workers in various ways, though this particular provision does not seem to be consistent across Wales.

5.6   Section summary

The data gathered for this study have revealed that in cases where participants were aware of guidance, both at force level and national, messaging was seemingly received and understood with emphasis being on safeguarding, multi-agency working and focusing on those who harm and exploit sex workers. There was however, a feeling from some that there either was no widely available guidance or that they were unaware of it, meaning that there may be issues of inconsistency. This was again outlined in discussions of how vulnerability is identified, meaning that sex workers' experiences of policing may be impacted by which individuals attend the issue or incident. Knowledge of the national guidance also varied, which is concerning considering the guidance is pitched widely.

Where force policy and practice are known and understood, there is some clear alignment with national guidance, with themes of vulnerability-led approaches apparent within the consideration of the experiences of sex workers as opposed to their own sex work-related behaviours, the monitoring of concerns through the various systems available and the prioritisation of multi-agency work to help manage the risk faced by some. A more universal understanding of the above is key to consistency, and the discussions of training held earlier on in this report may serve as evidence that there are considerable gaps in knowledge and understanding between those in more specialist and focused roles and those in more general roles, suggesting a need for input within forces with a broader reach.

6. Police understanding of barriers faced in supporting sex workers

This section presents the findings in relation to the third research question, which is concerned with the police understanding of the barriers faced in supporting sex workers, and also includes some discussion of how these barriers may be addressed, from the perspective of those responding to the survey.

6.1 Police and sex worker relations

A key theme concerning barriers to engagement related to the relationships between sex workers and the police. The overall relationship between the two groups was highlighted as one of mistrust, with 13 participants raising a lack of trust, faith or confidence in the police and the institution of policing, held by sex workers.

Several factors which may explain this mistrust were offered by participants, including discussions of the 'historic relationships' (Participant 42) between sex workers and the police which were described as 'poor' (Participant 85) and where 'police were only there to arrest and not help' (Participant 93). This also included discussions of how previous criminalisation may leave sex workers 'sceptical of police being a help' (Participant 92) and the more general negative perceptions of the police which have been exacerbated by a number of high-profile cases? in recent years, with participant 51 suggesting that the police are 'perceived as amongst other things misogynistic and corrupt'.

Perceptions of the police such as these, and the overall mistrust discussed above, may mean that initial engagement between sex workers and the police do not take place, which in itself may be a barrier to further engagement. A total of six participants highlighted a lack of engagement by sex workers themselves as being a barrier to police engagement with this group. A factor which may explain this is the perception that the police may not believe, may not take seriously or may judge a sex worker seeking their support. A fear of not being believed was cited by four participants, whilst judgement and not being taken seriously was also raised.

6.2 Structural issues

Barriers related to structural issues, such as the partial criminalisation of sex work in England and Wales, and the social stigma attached to the occupation, were also highlighted. Although national policing guidance, and apparent practice of the forces in Wales, stresses the importance of safeguarding sex workers over criminalising them, a fear of criminalisation remains an issue. This was recognised by participants, with several citing the fear of criminalisation as a key barrier to police engagement. This was also discussed in terms of criminalisation for issues outside of the behaviours directly related to sex work, such as the possession of drugs.

The issue of stigma is another factor which has often been raised in discussions of the barriers faced by sex workers in seeking the support of the police and various other agencies. Interestingly within this sample of police employees, there was very little discussion of the stigma experienced by sex workers as being a barrier to engagement. Whilst participants referred to some of the consequences of stigma, such as the fear of judgement outlined above, specific discussions of stigma were scant. Indeed, only one participant referred to the stigmatisation of sex workers by the police, which may well be one of the most significant barriers to positive engagement:

> 'General stigmatisation from others (and Police) towards sex workers resulting in investigation being difficult to manage (such as witness non-cooperation).' (Participant 56)

Paradoxically, there were discussions within the sample of the stigma experienced by the police which meant that sex workers were unlikely to engage:

> 'The stigma that the police are only there to arrest them or their clients. The stigma that everyone hates the police and they won't "snitch" on those perpetrating against them.' (Participant 93)

> 'Stigma of police not wanting to work with sex workers and listening to them.' (Participant 64)

This is interesting in that existing accounts of the barriers faced by organisations working to support sex workers have drawn on the stigmatisation of those involved in the work themselves in order to understand some of the reluctance in engagement, and these quotes subvert this relationship. Whilst the above quotes may have been considered amongst the discussion related to a lack of trust held earlier in this section of the report, the framing of this through the concept of stigma is particularly poignant. Whilst these were amongst the minority of responses, this narrative is perhaps indicative of police participants feeling that there are misconceptions about their work, and they therefore also experience stigma of some description. Such feeling may negatively impact engagement with sex work communities, particularly where both parties within the interaction expect negative treatment from the other.

6.3 Individual issues

Some of the barriers to engagement raised by police participants could be considered as relating to the impact that engagement has on an individual's circumstances. The key issues discussed here were the impact that engagement with the police may have on sex workers' work, a fear of retribution from others and the sometimes 'transient' nature of an individual's lifestyle.

Of these themes, discussions of the impact on work were the most common, with participants raising issues such as the police presence putting off potential clients (Participant 58), or otherwise harming business (Participant 71), and the idea that engagement would 'keep them off the street and may also prevent them from earning through sex working' (Participant 53). This was framed slightly differently by Participants 93 and 95, who suggested that engagement with the police also risked a loss of, or access to, drugs or alcohol on which some may be reliant.

As well as the risk to income and other resources, police participants were also aware of the risk of retribution that sex workers may face in engaging with the police. The potential risk posed by third parties was raised by four participants, with participant 71, for example, suggesting that sex workers may be 'less likely to come forward if associated with dangerous people' or if they do not 'have their own place to live'.

6.4 Resolving barriers

As well as being asked to detail the barriers faced by police in engaging with sex work populations, participants were asked to outline how they felt the police could be better positioned to engage. The key themes evident within these responses related to areas of practice, training and learning, partnership working and increased and/or improved engagement with sex working communities.

In discussing specific areas of practice which could help reduce barriers to engagement, discussions were primarily around how dedicated or specialist officers or teams may have an impact, such as helping to 'build rapport and have positive interactions with sex workers' (Participant 44) and 'provide familiar face/talk to the same officer/s to build trust/confidence' (Participant 77). Notably, participants from Gwent Police highlighted the work done through the Op Quartz team, who were said to liaise with sex workers and 'industry partners' to allow sex working populations and the police to become familiar – indicating that the practice being outlined as potentially reducing barriers to engagement is already in use in this area of Wales.

Improvements to training and staff knowledge in this area were highlighted within 12 accounts related to how the police may be better positioned to engage with sex workers, and in 28 accounts when asked how participants individually may feel better enabled to respond

to the vulnerabilities related to sex work. Discussions within this theme focused on staff knowledge on 'what is available to assist in engagement' (Participant 42) and 'input/e-learning surrounding how to deal with a sex worker and manage an incident involving a sex worker' (Participant 56), which links to earlier discussions on the lack of staff training specific to this issue. Specific to Gwent was a point raised around understanding and knowledge of the dedicated officer, highlighting the importance of broader knowledge and understanding of engaging with and supporting sex workers even where specific practice such as a dedicated team or officer is in place. As well as knowledge and understanding of practice within forces, a greater awareness of the broader support available to sex workers was also raised by three participants, with partnership working more generally a significant theme within the responses.

There was a total of 21 responses across two survey questions which emphasised partnership working. For example, participant 42 stressed that partnership working helps police know '…what is available to assist in engagement' before outlining '…partners as a way in to engage'.

Partners may be able to support engagement, given the trust that they often hold with sex workers. Police need to understand what support is being offered within their area, not only for referring individuals to services, but also for working alongside agencies to help develop trust with local communities. This was highlighted by participant 89:

'Seeking assistance to engage from relevant agencies where appropriate to help with communication and any safeguarding requirements.' (Participant 89)

Linked to the point above, there is a clear recognition of the facilitative role that partner agencies may be able to take in helping support the development of trust between the police and sex workers in a given area. There are of course issues to consider here, including the potential impact of negatively perceived police practice on the trust in these services, and the potential impact of police presence on service delivery, which would need to be negotiated carefully.

Every interaction with those involved in sex work has the potential to impact the likelihood of their continued engagement with the police, and potentially the engagement of other sex workers. Increased engagement was recognised as potentially supporting the rectification of barriers by a number of participants, though perhaps more importantly were the discussions of improved or more preferential (to sex workers) engagement. These included offering a 'clearer and safer way to engage discreetly' (Participant 71), proactive work (Participant 54), more tangible support options (Participant 78) and changes in policing culture 'in relation to the social stigma surrounding sex work and the negative connotations

associated with it' (Participant 56). The data presented here suggest that engagement may be better facilitated not only though increased attempts, but also through more imaginative practice related to the known barriers to engagement and a degree of culture change which means that individual interactions are more likely to be positive.

6.5   Section summary

Participants portrayed a complex image of the barriers that the police face in engaging with sex workers. Broadly, the barriers reported by participants bear significant similarity with those that have already been noted within the literature, which has considered barriers to engagement from the perspective of sex workers themselves, with many relating to the reasons why sex workers themselves may be reluctant to seek or accept engagement.

Whilst this does show police understanding of the issues impacting potential engagement, there is some feeling amongst the narrative presented that it is the barriers faced by sex workers themselves which have been considered in the most detail, at the expense of those specifically experienced by the police themselves. Such an understanding may potentially be interpreted as inward looking, with little consideration of police understanding, competency, policy, practice and culture, which may present barriers to the police themselves.

In discussions of how the police may be better positioned to engage with sex workers, participants' were more likely to consider factors in the vein of the above, with discussions centred on areas of practice, training and learning, partnership working and the scale and quality of engagement. Whilst it cannot be expected that any of the potential solutions offered by participants would create significant and wide-reaching change immediately, there is some promise amongst the suggestions. Further work would be required to explore in detail how these suggestions might assist the police to engage more effectively with sex workers and to consider any associated resourcing or financial implications.

7. Police perceptions of promising practice in supporting sex workers

This section of the report details the key findings of the fourth research question, which sought to understand the areas of practice that policing partners themselves identified as being promising in supporting sex workers.

7.1 Partnership working

Out of the 17 participants who provided an example/s of promising practice, 9 referred to working collaboratively with partner agencies. Drawing together responses to other questions, participants provided a comprehensive list of the various partner agencies that supported the police. Some of these were organisations or charities that supported victims generally, e.g., Crimestoppers and Victim Support, whereas others focused on supporting sex workers and/or people who were especially vulnerable, e.g., Women's Aid, Safer Wales, Ugly Mugs, Streetlife, SWAN project (Swansea), Horizon (Gwent), SEASS (Sexual Exploitation Advocacy Support Service, Gwent), New Pathways, and Thrive (Neath). Throughout the survey, participants demonstrated that working with partner agencies helped the police to build rapport and trust with sex workers, enabling them to work more effectively in supporting them. This includes utilising PPNs to engage other agencies and organisations in helping to manage and support the potential vulnerability of sex workers, as well as working collaboratively to assist the police when dealing with those who have committed offences against sex workers. For example, Participant 87 detailed their engagement with Streetlife, explaining how it had enabled them to build trust with sex workers, allowing them to break down barriers, encouraging sex workers to share information, and had ultimately led to a successful prosecution:

> 'I investigated a rape of a street-based sex worker. It was felt the suspect may have attacked other sex workers. I had the initial complaint and the male was arrested and charged/remanded. I then worked closely with Streetlife and began going on outreach with them to get to know the sex workers and build up trust in the hope they would speak to me if they had any information. I also went to open days and drop ins at Streetlife, so the sex workers could see I was serious about helping them. This broke down barriers and led to a further complainant coming forward and a witness providing a statement. I also managed to get three sex workers to court to give evidence leading to a conviction and long prison sentence.' (Participant 87).

7.2 Specialist practice

Participants from Gwent Police in particular, provided examples of specific police practice which they identified as promising. Responses referred to how the specialist team within this force provided continuity of service to sex workers. This has helped to build and maintain trust

and promote positive relationships between the police and sex work communities in the area. It was suggested that this practice had led to sex workers themselves initiating contact with the specific team, which was highlighted as 'an organisational first' by Participant 89.

Part of the work that this team undertake relates to promoting supportive approaches towards sex workers, as opposed to criminalising approaches. As Participant 93 described, this enables the team to identify, gather intelligence about, and apprehend those who exploit sex workers or those who may pose a threat to sex workers or the wider public:

> 'My team are working with partner agencies to bridge the gap between police and the sex work industry and offer a more supportive role and look to assist them with catching those who are looking to exploit them. Working with the sex workers to build intelligence about clients who are concerning that may pose a threat to not only sex workers but the public as a whole. Trying to work with sex workers to encourage them to report those exploiting them and put an end to them being a victim of those looking to take advantage of their situation. We have a lot to learn and are working towards improving this part of my team all the time.' (Participant 93)

7.3   Adopting positive ways of working with sex workers

The last area of promising practice identified by respondents related to working positively with sex workers, which was raised by two of the 17 participants. Broadly, the police should be engaging with sex workers 'fairly and without judgement' (58). In so doing, the police can foster good relationships with sex workers, and it can assist the prosecution of offenders, as detailed by Participant 46:

> 'Case file presented to CPS on full code for a charge of rape against a female who openly told Officers she had previously worked as an escort. Despite the text messages showing her offering the male suspect sexual services, she was believed from the beginning and the case has been presented to CPS for consideration of charge.' (Participant 46)

7.4   Section summary

Overall, the three areas of promising practice highlighted by participants, namely partnership working, specialist police practice and adopting positive ways of working with sex workers, are all reflected in the NPCC guidance.

There are many benefits to the police engaging with and working alongside partner agencies, such as the support which may be offered in building trust and rapport with sex

working communities, and in recognising and responding to potential vulnerability. Findings suggest that there are formal processes in place to facilitate this collaborative approach, such as PPNs. Further work could explore how easy it is for the police to engage the services of partner agencies and to what extent these organisations have the capacity and resources to assist the police. It could also consider how effective PPNs are for facilitating information sharing between agencies.

In terms of specialised practice, respondents from Gwent Police highlighted how having a dedicated team helps provide a continuity of service for sex workers, which may help build and maintain the trust discussed above. This particular practice also links with the theme of participant recognition of the importance of working positively with sex workers, adopting supportive practice that is free of judgement. Such an approach may enable the police to build more effective relationships with sex workers, and can facilitate their reporting and ongoing engagement, and the eventual prosecution of offenders.

What must be noted here however, is that these practices have been identified as promising by those involved in policing themselves, and it remains to be seen whether these particular approaches would be recognised as promising by sex workers themselves. Further work is required to explore the perspectives of sex workers themselves, in order to support the development of policing responses.

8. Concluding remarks

This research has explored the police understanding and application of the concept of vulnerability in responding to the needs of sex workers in Wales, by distributing a survey across all four Welsh forces. However, it is difficult to make pan-Wales conclusions given the lack of uptake in Dyfed Powys Police and North Wales Police. Nevertheless, the available data do provide a number of insights within the South Wales Police and Gwent Police areas, which demonstrate the influence of the concept of vulnerability on a number of areas of practice related to sex work.

Understandings of sex work and vulnerability:

In terms of participants' understandings of both sex work and vulnerability, and of the intersections between the two, the research found diverse understandings. This may be expected, given the nebulous nature of vulnerability itself and also the ideological disagreement often evident within discussions of sex work. The inconsistencies in understanding may however, also mean inconsistencies in the ways in which sex work is approached by the police. This is true both at the force level, but also at the local or individual level.

Training and awareness of guidance:

The above is contextualised by the discussions within the sample of the training offered to police employees related to this issue. Indeed, the lack of training offered in relation to sex work is a particular concern, especially when it is considered that the majority of participants had highlighted that their work had seen them interact with, or otherwise respond to, sex work related issues. There may be similar concern related to the lack of awareness of the national guidance, though anecdotal evidence suggests that this is not an issue limited to Wales.

Vulnerability-led and potentially promising practice:

What we have seen within this sample however, is a suggestion that features of the national guidance are reflected in practice in Wales, in ways which may be understood as vulnerability-led or underpinned by understandings of sex work centred on vulnerability. Several areas of practice were identified as being promising by participants, though it must be stressed that further exploration of this practice would be necessary to identify its promise, with input from sex workers themselves and partner organisations essential.

Barriers to engagement:

> Barriers to engagement between sex workers and the police remain, and as identified within this research, are complex and likely to require significant efforts to address. Notably, discussions of barriers to engagement within this research were predominantly outward looking, focused on why sex workers may not want to engage with the police. Further attention may be paid to elements of police understanding, competency, policy, practice and culture which may present barriers to engagement in themselves.

Although this research has provided numerous insights into the police work being done to respond to the needs of sex workers in Wales, there is much more to be explored. For example, partner organisations and those working with them may be able to offer insights as to the impact of policing practice on both sex workers and on partnership work. Of course, sex workers themselves should be consulted to explore their experiences of these policing approaches in Wales. It is hoped that this research will provide a catalyst to further research that focuses on the issue of sex work-related policing, and the eventual development of practice which supports more effective responses to the needs of sex workers in Wales.

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