

# **Perspectives on the provision of sexual health services to sex workers**

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## Background

The Centre for Health Promotion Studies working for the Public Health Department has conducted research into the views of sexual health service providers to form the basis for the development of a Sexual Health Strategy. A Sexual Health Strategy Consultative Committee was created and the members identified who the researchers should interview, as the first round of the process of data collection.

## Methods

Interviews took place over a three week period with 18 people identified by the committee as having the best overview of the issues involved in the delivery of sexual health services

The interviews followed a similar pattern and several of the interviewees talked for over an hour. All were very enthusiastic about the process that was happening and the prospect of a Sexual Health Strategy being created.

## Findings

The issues fell into two broad areas:

1. The medical services providers – emphasis on services to reduce STIs and unplanned pregnancies
2. Health promotion – emphasis on positive sexual health promotion i.e. development of skills to negotiate safe sex and increase in information and use of condoms

All mentioned the lack of sexual health education in schools and that there was no sexual health education for people with any kind of disability.

Interviewees were asked their perception of whether and how services were available for and targeted at sex workers. Seven interviewees had no comment to make in relation to sex workers and the remaining eleven, were in general, unclear as to the extent of sex working in Galway and the western area, and were generally unaware of specific services for this population group.

The following quotes illustrate these comments:

"sex workers, I don't know of any specific services or even support groups or anything like that, if there is any, if there is even such a thing"

"services for sex workers, we don't know, very much about the sex working situation, people speculate that there is sex work going on, I would say there must be..."

"Sex workers – I'm unaware of a specific service for those"

"but I don't know too many sex workers in this area."

"they're certainly not as visible here, lets put it that way."

"I think I've only had contact with 2 sex workers in my time here."

"it's a different set up now, its mobile phones, but I can't believe that that's, that's it, I don't know where they're getting screened at the minute ..."

"There must be sex workers but they're very hard to access. Now all we hear about, again people try to get some basic word from the guards, they'll tell you sure look at, around race week Jesus there's thousands of them in the place but outside of that there might be the odd word now and again about some house somewhere that's. Now when the lap dancing club was there, there certainly was the feeling that there was something going on but it was never tied down really."

"I think we have quite a, you know, sex work by its nature in Ireland is very, you know, under the carpet kind of stuff, but here because its, in urban areas, there's a certain level of acceptance that you're going to have it..."

No one knew of any specific services for sex workers, it was felt they availed of mainstream services when they had a problem.

"I've seen I think one sex worker here, at the clinic..."

"I had one definite lady who said, yes she's a sex worker and that was that, she is having multiple partners.."

"services for sex workers, we don't know, very much about the sex working situation, people speculate that there is sex work going on, I would say there must be.."

"Nobody has ever talked to a sex worker put that down as their occupation so ... they don't know and you see because of the illegal nature of the work..."

"But I mean that is an area that I don't have much dealing with and I have only had a few things with African women who tried to work in the area and they didn't stay."

The interviewees felt that if adequate mainstream sexual health services were in place with proper advertising of what services were available and where, then sex workers would avail of services just like the rest of the population, i.e. when they had need of them.

"I would have know people that would have been, and I would know children that would be sex workers, so there needs to be, some programme, more of an Out-Reach service, like you know, some of those people would be homeless, others aren't, some developed services."

"Sex workers, yeah to my knowledge what I have to deal with are just temporary little things that happened, in they go to Galway, you know probably in Galway now. And I know a lot of the girls who work in the lap dancing come to the Galway family planning clinic..."

The interviewees hoped that the strategy would help to facilitate a back drop of more open attitudes towards sexual matters.

"I've seen some of the projects in places like Germany and the Netherlands, where sex workers are very well protected within the system, and I think that what you see there is, you know, a much safer sex working experience for the sex worker, for the buyers of sex, you know, on both sides, people are safer and you know more disease free, if you like."

"Well I mean I mean sex workers might find it difficult and they might have particular issues and very particular issues that might need to be addressed. But the difficulty is that it is very difficult to set up a programme specifically that you know that might stigmatise a group of people as well."

With better sexual health education it was hoped that there would be generally be more positive sexual health promotion happening and that sex workers would be included in that.

.."I mean you might see it legalised then"

### The next steps

The interviews were transcribed and content analysis conducted. The themes identified were categorised into goals, objectives and seven different action areas. These were distributed to 58 individuals who had been originally identified as 'experts' in the area of sexual health, including the original 18 interviewees. All 58 were asked to rank order the possible goals, objectives and actions, in terms of their importance for inclusion in a sexual health strategy for the West. Under the action area 'areas for development', there was a specific action included for sex workers which was 'to provide specific services to meet the needs of sex workers'. Following the ranking process, the average rank and the level of consensus has been calculated, and this has been sent to the original 58 expert participants for further comment. The subsequent (second round) responses are currently under analysis.

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