

NOTE OF THE SESSION WITH LIVED EXPERIENCED PEOPLE, FACILITATED BY SCOTLAND FOR DECRIM.

13 NOVEMBER 2025

General views

- There was a general view expressed that there have been several pieces of legislation considered or recently passed such as the recent UK Online Safety Act which, coupled with this Bill, felt to our participants like an attack on sex workers. Strong concerns were expressed that all this legislation was making the job of a sex worker unsafe and affecting their livelihoods.
- This ongoing public debate is also having a very negative effect on the mental and emotional wellbeing of sex workers and adds to a feeling of needing to constantly justify themselves and their work to others. Regardless of the progress of the Bill, some felt the wider debate it is generating has increased the level of hostility against sex workers.
- Many feel the Bill, and the debate around it, is dehumanising to sex workers because it suggests they need to get another job as some deem 'sex work' to be too dangerous to them. This was contrasted against others in society who work in what many may see as inherently dangerous jobs, but they do not face the same calls as sex workers do to 'change'.
- Some also pointed out the Bill is also a risk to the partners/spouses/families of sex workers as they would be investigated/charged with benefiting from the earning of a sex worker etc.
- There was some support for the parts of the bill, but a view that, ultimately, it will not do much to affect the behaviour of the buyers.
- Participants noted that, over the years, the Nordic Model has been repeatedly proposed in the Parliament, but a case for decriminalisation is rarely put forward. The repeated efforts to bring forward this legislation feels like an attack on sex workers.
- Participants felt very strongly that decriminalisation is the best way forward. Their view is the Nordic Model does not work. Their view was that the police don't have much sympathy for those working in the sex industry or understanding of the circumstances of those who work in the industry and this is even before the possible introduction of the Nordic Model.
- Participants felt the Bill will have the effect of shifting the balance of power away from them and to clients, especially men who seek to harm sex workers.

- Their view was the Parliament should reject the Bill and instead work with sex workers towards decriminalisation. There was a strong opinion that policymakers should talk to the people this policy will directly affect.
- Participants considered the proposed policy direction in the Bill is flawed as it was not co-designed with sex workers. Their view was that the Bill will make their job more difficult and that decriminalisation would be a safer option.
- A view was expressed that seeing sex work as just work within a legal regime where no one is criminalised, is a better way of avoiding stigma. Their view was that where someone is criminalised by the sale of sex, then the stigma of being involved will always be there even if it is the buyer who is now being criminalised, as opposed to the sex worker.
- Views were expressed that those who work in the industry are already very dehumanised and viewed poorly by many elements of society. Their view was that the approach taken by the Bill is likely to mean that the police will choose to target sex workers in order to then target their clients, which would make workers less likely to report crimes against them. They said this would make them feel more dehumanised.
- A view was expressed that the greatest fear and challenge in their life was trying to pay to monthly bills. They noted that sex workers still have to pay tax even though the work they do is not seen as work, and that have no employment rights from their form of work.

Loitering/soliciting provisions in the Bill

- Members asked about the provisions in the Bill on loitering and soliciting (the Bill proposes a repeal of the existing offence under section 46 of the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982). A view was expressed that this provision felt like a token gesture, included to smooth the passage of the wider Bill and the introduction of the Nordic Model.
- Participants felt that the Bill takes more of a moralising approach to tackling challenges they face and that sex workers feel dehumanised by the approach taken in this Bill.

Women's safety and violence

- Members asked about the safety of people who work in the sex industry and violence towards them and women and girls more generally.
- Sex workers noted that they do try to carry out ID checks of potential clients and verify they are who they say they are. Some do feel able to feel to turn down prospective clients and say no. Therefore, some views were expressed that they

have not felt unsafe when working because they felt in control of who they choose to meet. Others noted though that sometimes the need to pay bills and have money to live is the more important factor when making a decision about meeting a client.

- All the participants recognised that there is a male violence issue in society but that this Bill would not help and could make it worse. One participant explained that they currently encounter very few men who are violent towards them. But if the Bill is passed and it criminalises the buyer, then a great deal of the non-violent clients may stop coming to sex workers, meaning a larger proportion of those remaining clients who will engage with sex workers will potentially be more dangerous, abusive or violent.
- They also said the Bill would make it more difficult to 'vibe check' someone because men will become more nervous of giving information. A view was expressed that this will be doubly difficult for sex workers who still meet clients on the street as they have less time to make that assessment of the potential risk a client may pose.
- A participant expressed a view that sex workers who have neurodivergent conditions may find it even harder to 'vibe check' potential clients without lawful access to tools such as client's names, email addresses, electronic payments etc.
- A view was expressed that the wider violence in society against women is not the result of the work of sex workers. The wider agenda of violence against women and girls needed tackled as a priority rather than trying to make it harder for sex workers to work in the sex industry.
- One participant said that, ultimately, you cannot be completely safe as a sex worker, but you can take some steps to protect yourself.
- One of the most effective means of staying safe that was highlighted is the communication between sex workers about potentially violent clients. Other things such as communicating about unsafe venues etc can be effective too. But sex workers felt they are having to do the work of the police as the police rarely addresses the concerns sex workers have about their safety.
- Some expressed concerns about losing access to the use of advertising websites or apps, as it will disempower sex workers looking to protect their safety and leave them with fewer ways to assess the risk posed by a potential client.
- Their view was that by being more visible through a decriminalised approach was a much safer environment for those that work in the industry

Support (current and proposed) for those working

- Current provision of health support was seen as patchy, but that is a more general problem. There was also a view that some service providers often stigmatise those in the industry.
- Their view was that the introduction of the Nordic Model will mean they have to hide even more what they do and that will make accessing support more difficult.
- Some said that approaching some support service providers (e.g. a GP or the NHS) could lead to those service providers, or the people that run them, getting into contact with other services (e.g. police or social work) which can lead to further stigmatising and less anonymity about how they earn a living. This can be worse in small or closed communities where sex workers need to access services (e.g. STI testing) but still want to remain anonymous.
- There was a strong view that cracking the support needed to help those that work in the industry would take a lot of resources and it will be a difficult and long process to really help people exit the industry. Some said that even one relapse can often result in removal of support, and the exiting is not a linear process.
- Many expressed the view that poverty is the real root cause of the problems facing sex workers, not potential violence from clients.
- Some also feared that spending public resources on the form of support envisioned by the Bill would just lead to even more public resentment of sex workers and the resources being spent on them, especially in the face of calls for increased spending on issues such as health, education, childcare etc.
- One person expressed the view that the kind of support they really needed was support that would empower them to be the 'pioneers of their own story and how they exit sex work'.
- Many stressed that what would be better is help with rent and housing costs, other anti-poverty measures, benefits advice, childcare provision, help with mental health, help with addiction etc. They said if you really want to help people not become sex workers or to exit, then help them with decent benefits and money to live on and therefore be far less reliant on their earnings.
- It was pointed out that many sex workers are single parents and face all the same struggles and challenges as all other single parents – namely to provide for their family. But sex workers face all the additional challenges the criminal law brings for them. The Bill, they felt, would just make their task as lone parents even harder.

- The decriminalisation approach taken in Belgium was highlighted as having been helpful because this has also come with changes to benefits such as maternity rights and pay which has helped those in the industry with children.
- Training could be made better for social workers, the police and others to help them understand what sex workers do and what they need.
- Concerns were expressed about losing access to certain websites and apps that sex workers currently use that they find helpful in order to keep safe.

Indoor/street work

- Participants noted that it is very hard to get a breakdown of the relative amount of sex work and the split between indoor and street sales.
- The approach taken by the police in the Holbeck area of Leeds was praised, noting that trust has been built up between the local council, community police and sex workers. This includes having a dedicated police liaison officer to engage with sex workers. This is making it more likely that dangerous clients will be reported to the police.

Interactions with the police

- Experiences were highlighted by some participants of police removing condoms and money when they have come to their place of work, which has impacted on their ability to do their job safely.
- Mention was made of police viewing two sex workers hiring a hotel room to use to meet clients and be safe, as brothel keeping under the existing law. This approach makes sex workers more vulnerable by forcing them to work alone.
- Some fear that those that speaking out or promoting sex work will result in police or others involving social work to look into their family circumstances e.g. if they had children.
- A view expressed that the introduction of the Nordic Model will make sex workers more vulnerable to the police who can often view sex workers more poorly and can prey on their vulnerabilities.
- A very strong view expressed was that the introduction of the Nordic Model would see the police targeting buyers and that this would have an impact on the ability of sex workers to work. They said the police are likely to follow you around to target the buyers if the latter are now seen as criminals. They said this will simply remove the ability to work.

- Some expressed concerns how the impact of the Nordic Model would affect sex workers from a migrant background, as they are already facing more hostility when engaging with the police and so are even more at risk.
- One person said that there could be some merit though because it removes the fear of arrest if working on the street. That is, not criminalising the seller could help. They said that if you continue to criminalise the seller, it impairs the ability to risk assess because they person is more worried about the police arresting them.
- A view was expressed that Police Scotland also would benefit from working with sex workers and their representatives and that there are some signs that the service is interested in learning. They said the best way to address the negative and hostile police culture many sex workers experience is for the police to learn from sex workers about what they, as members of the public and a community, need from the police.
- A participant said that the Nordic Model might seem preferable to the police because it will make their job easier as they will simply have to go after the clients. They said there needs to be mandatory training for police to reduce/eliminate practices such as victim blaming and an approach where, even when crimes on sex workers by clients are reported by sex workers, police find a way to blame or charge the sex worker.
- Training has to be delivered or be informed by sex workers and all police officers really need to embrace the ethos behind the training.
- Views expressed that those who have come forward to the police to report crimes are then recorded in systems/databases as sex workers. This means sex workers find it difficult to seek work in certain professions, e.g. like those involving children, or to seek to adopt a child etc.
- Recently, views were expressed that Police Scotland have been visiting homeless shelters and addiction services to speak to women who sell sex and who use these services with a view to advocating for the Nordic Model. A worry was expressed that this will make sex workers less likely to use these services.

Improvements to the Bill as drafted

- Strong views that the Bill should not be passed at all.
- However, a view was expressed that stopping the criminalising of women sharing spaces as brothel-keeping would help.
- Amendments to set up a financial fund, with a fair level of support, could help people exit the industry. There was a strong view that more funding and not necessarily more advice is really what is needed.

- If the Bill passes and there is funding for support, then there needs to be fair and equitable funding for those organisations who take a different view for the policy focus of the Bill (i.e. organisations who support decriminalisation). There is a lot of fear such organisations could lose out on funding as they don't share the same views as others who support the Nordic Model. There are concerns that the atmosphere is already adversarial between different groups and this Bill is not making it better.
- Participants felt the terms of 'prostitute/prostitution' in the criminal law is loaded with negative historical and cultural context and makes their life harder. It was felt this word is dehumanising and not fit for purpose in 21st century Scotland. All criminal law in Scotland should use the term 'sex worker' instead.
- Finally, participants strongly stressed though that they do not support the main aim of the Bill, namely the Nordic Model, and strongly support decriminalisation and they want to see the Parliament consider that instead.