

APPG Inquiry - Pop up Brothels

Response from Dame Vera Baird QC, PCC for Northumbria

This submission is from Dame Vera Baird QC PCC for Northumbria. I am submitting this response in my capacity as Police and Crime Commissioner for Northumbria. As PCC I successfully bid for funding from the Police Innovation Fund for Northumbria Police to develop in partnership with Changing Lives a multi-agency hub as a centre for the delivery, evaluation and promotion of best practice in providing specialist support to sex workers. The hub utilises collective expertise ensuring that engagement and safeguarding are a priority and that the diverse, complex needs of this vulnerable group. Working in this way also increases opportunities for intelligence collection and engagement which will assist in targeting perpetrators with the aim of reducing re-offending and afford better protection to the wider community. The learning from this work has informed the response. A regional VAWG Strategy developed in partnership with PCCs in Durham and Cleveland includes a priority focusing on trafficking for exploitation and also the need to support those involved to exit prostitution.

Main points made in this submission:

- The value and importance of the establishment of a safeguarding relationship with those who are identified as vulnerable through the exploitation they are exposed to and support for those wishing to exit.
- The need for effective and accurate information systems enabling Police to monitor, track and safeguard if the woman or girl moves either within the force area or between forces.
- The need for Police forces to work together to share best practice so that this exploitative practice can be eliminated.
- A proactive response by Police Forces to reports and intelligence around pop up brothels.
- A need to increase public awareness around pop up brothels and sexual exploitation to increase intelligence gathering opportunities.

Section 1 - The scale and nature of the practice

- 1.1 How do pop-up brothels operate? - Pop-up brothels are commonly set up using internet based sites by Organised Crime Gangs. The gangs seek out holiday lets, Airbnb and weekend let apartments as target premises. Money is then transferred electronically to the property owner so that they are unaware of the purpose of the short term let. Gangs utilise on line web sites such as Viva Street and Adult Work to advertise female sex workers of varying nationalities. Prospective clients can then 'book' to visit the pop-up brothel on line or through a mobile number provided and they are only provided with the exact address, immediately before the allocated appointment time. The internet has enabled the change and reshaping of the off-street sex trade, allowing customers to contact hundreds of workers more easily.
- 1.2 Who is involved in the operation of pop-up brothels? - Intelligence gathered nationally and locally informs that pop-up brothels are advertised and managed on line, predominantly, by Eastern European Organised Crime Gangs. The National Police Chief Council has acknowledged that the issue of short-term brothels at properties rented on line is wide spread. The brothels are populated mainly by migrant Sex workers, many of whom are victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. A study conducted last year by the

Police Foundation found that women in pop up brothels were more likely to be trafficked than women in standard brothels and are expected to work long hours seeing numerous clients during the short life of the Brothel.

- 1.3 On what scale are pop-up brothels operating and has there been an increase? - The scale of 'pop-up' brothels is unknown locally and this impacts on the national picture. Following information received from other force areas it is evident that the operation of brothels is increasing. Reports from Wiltshire force area informs that as many as 30 pop up brothels per week are appearing within Swindon. Other forces which have experienced a sudden rise are Cumbria, North Yorkshire and Cambridgeshire and there is concern amongst police forces nationally that pop-up brothels are now an issue across England and Wales.

Section 2 - Links with organised crime

- 2.1 What links are there between organised crime groups and pop-up brothels? - As a result of the booming demand for prostitutes in the UK, prostitution and people trafficking is now the third most lucrative black market trade after gun running and drug dealing.

The business-like structures required to manage brothels so they are profitable and avoid police attention are strong grounds to presume a link to organised crime. Nearly half of brothels were managed by more than one offender (49 per cent). A third (32 per cent) were run by offenders who also managed other brothels and a similar proportion (29 per cent) had links to other types of organised criminality, predominantly drug supply.'

In Northumbria links between pop-up brothels and organised crime have been difficult to prove as the women and girls do not co-operate with officers and when questioned they inform they are there freely. However links made between organised crime and pop-up brothels have been identified as a result of the quantity and quality of the intelligence received locally.

Section 3 - Associated harms and exploitation

- 3.1 What is the scale and impact of sexual exploitation in pop-up brothels? - The scale and impact of pop-up brothels is surmised but not factually known as this is a new national emerging issue. Women are identified as high risk in relation to any involvement in sex work whether that be from the organised crime groups or from the 'clients' who seek this service.
- 3.2 How do pop-up brothels impact on the wider community? - Reports of premises being used as pop-up brothels are likely to be linked to reports of anti-social behaviour. Northumbria Force area have formulated a strategic response to this and incident logs of premises, that have been identified as pop-up brothels, are frequently checked for any reported ASB issues. Where identification of pop-up brothels have been made but no incidents have been reported they have still conducted a general ASB survey in the street utilising the Neighbourhood Teams. This has received a mixed response, some neighbours are oblivious to the identified premises and other members of the community are aware and engagement receives positive responses including "I have CCTV covering the front if you ever need it and I'll look out for them". Northumbria local neighbourhood team and Diversion Liaison Officers (DLO's) continue to monitor and manage the situation.

Brothels where there is intelligence about Modern Slavery and sexual exploitation are dealt with immediately and robustly. However it is more commonly reported that ASB is

identified as problematic and DLOs make direct contact with those occupying the premises in an attempt to resolve the issues. If the impact of the activity of the identified property continues to be problematic the occupants of the premises are 'persuaded' to move on of their own accord ensuring that our intelligence is updated as to their new location to allow the continuation of monitoring.

Section 4 - Effective responses and prevention strategies

4.1 How can individuals exploited in pop-up brothels be best provided with help and support? -

Using Home Office Innovation Funding applied for by myself as Police and Crime Commissioner, Northumbria Police have established a multi-partnership cohesive hub, The SHADE Project. The SHADE project is committed to the engagement, safeguarding and offer of support, considering all welfare needs, to individuals who are in the sex industry, including those who are sexually exploited, trafficked and groomed. SHADE works with a host of key partners and through this innovative partnership Northumbria are able to offer specialist support services from those including Police Dedicated Liaison Officers, holistic development workers, specialist Independent Sexual Violence Advisors, educational support, access to sexual and mental health and LGBT services. The establishment of The SHADE Project in conjunction with the established DLO Model has resulted in unprecedented engagement of the Sex Worker Community, significant actionable intelligence and safeguarding and exit strategy opportunities and perceived both locally and nationally as a model of good practice.

Pop-up Brothels managed within the force area should be done so as per the NPCC guidance and working closely with border controls and Immigration to ensure, where appropriate the utilisation of Regulation 19 – Right to Reside is used as support for the Sex Worker. A victim centred approach is necessary to engage those at risk, to provide support and to engage to enable effective safeguarding.

Proactive Brothel visits conducted by Police, Diversion Liaison Officers and key partners are key operational practices to proactively manage the safeguarding of those who are identified as vulnerable to exploitation. Photographs, of those at risk of exploitation, should be taken and loaded onto the main Information Systems to enable Police to monitor, track and safeguard if the woman or girl moves either within the force area or between forces. With permission phones should be searched looking at contacts, texts and numbers, notebooks and diaries could be looked at, telephone numbers, bank accounts and e-mail details taken. Check identity markers on the person, such as tattoos and check identity cards and passports. If/when permission is granted to obtain additional information from the 'at risk' individual it is imperative that intelligence systems are updated with the accurate intelligence that has been collated.

The establishment of safeguarding relationship with individuals to encourage take up of exit strategies from sex work and potential disclosure of any criminal exploitation by potential perpetrators should be a primary objective, consideration to standardising practice:-

- Intelligence marker placed on the address so relevant police personnel are alerted to the potential risks around this address,
- Secure Brothel database held so that activity and intelligence can be monitored and risk levels re visited when required and re-assessed,
- Safeguarding information translated into other languages,
- Migrant workers encouraged to sign up to National Ugly Mugs and provided with the necessary information in their own language,

- Migrant workers encouraged to come to Sexual health and drops ins to promote engagement with specialist services.

4.2 *How can organised crime networks profiting from sexual exploitation be stopped?* - Providing comprehensive support to sex workers on a one to one basis encompassing and focused using a consistent targeting approach to those are who exploiting them in order to dealing with criminal offences such as harassment, stalking, blackmail, assault, rape.

Engaging women and girls with DLO's provides specialist support and encourages peer engagement which works to expose the abusive activities of those 'gangs' who exploit women and facilitate the use of pop-up brothels.

Campaigns to increase public awareness around pop up brothels and sexual exploitation including a confidential reporting line would increase intelligence gathering opportunities and assist the Police in their proactive policing response. It is well known within the Sex Work Community both on a local and national level that within Northumbria, there is extensive and well established multi- agency support for those who are involved in sex work . This does not bode well with Criminal Gangs who recognise this as a threat to their criminal and exploitative activity. However the threat is ever emerging and it is imperative that Police forces continue to work together to share best practice so that this exploitative practice can be eliminated.

Nationally Police forces, along with their partners need to work together to ensure that there is a measured and consistent response given to individuals who are at risk of exploitation in pop up brothels. Organised crime gangs appear to favour force areas where there is little or no proactive engagement with the sex work community. They do not want to risk setting up their brothels where they know that geographically that Police force have a good relationships with the sex work community. A united Police response would ensure that individuals were afforded the protection which they so deserve whilst affording the opportunity to collate more actionable intelligence which could then in turn drive forward effective covert enforcement operations, directed at the organised criminal gangs. This issue has been highlighted to the new NPCC lead and working party for Sex work.

The organised crime groups rely on a number of factors in order to effectively run their pop up brothels including

- Use of the internet to advertise – this is unregulated, with no control measures
- The market demand for sex work
- The lack of checks conducted by landlords.

Disrupting patterns of activity and limiting opportunities for exploitation will work to prevent criminal activity that surrounds sex work.

4.3 *What, if any, action should the government take in relation to pop-up brothel?* - Recognising the prevalence of trafficking and understanding that people are being exploited is the first step to tackling the issue of pop-up brothels. A governmental commitment to re-examine the legislation around advertisement of sex work. Currently the law is archaic and covers advertising in phone boxes - Section 46(1) of the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001. There is no legislation in place to cover advertising on the internet which is now the identified

forum for those criminal gangs' exploiting and trafficking women and girls. Many of the sites which offer the opportunity to advertise the pop up brothels are unregulated and do not co-operate with the Police.

Engaging with Landlords & Letting Agents to provide awareness around the national and local issues surrounding pop-up brothels is necessary. Nationally there is a general apathy by landlords and letting agents to thoroughly check who is renting out their properties and consequently it is very easy to set up a pop up brothel without being challenged.

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