



Mean Streets

The Government has prompted debate on issues surrounding prostitution and the Association of Chief Police Officers has launched new national guidance to police forces on how they should tackle exploitation and abuse through prostitution. Syreeta Lund reports on why Liverpool City Council want to be the first to introduce a managed zone where prostitutes can work freely, but where they can also access support to leave life on the game.

On July 20, 2003, detectives in Merseyside Police made a grim discovery; the remains of two butchered women stuffed into bin bags in an alleyway in Everton.

The two women were prostitutes.

Sex workers have been plying their trade on the streets of Liverpool for decades, and it may be one of the oldest professions in the world, but the stark reality of its effect on those involved and on communities can be devastating.

Teenagers, sometimes children as young as 12 years old, being locked into drug addiction and receiving regular beatings from punters.

People trafficking, drug dealing and other serious crimes have also been associated with prostitution, alongside the damage done to communities and businesses plighted by the associated crime and kerb-crawlers that use the red-light districts.

This is why Liverpool City Council has looked to a more radical solution and proposed to bring in a 'managed zone'. Prostitutes working in the zone would be reg-

istered and can work in a safer area, away from residential areas, with adequate street lighting and CCTV. They would also have a support network, including instant access to drugs treatment that ultimately helps them leave prostitution.

'We have something like 95 per cent of the sex workers on the street hooked on crack or heroin. The only way they can meet the kind of bills they get for eight bags of heroin and rocks of crack is by earning the £100 to £150 a day they need to fund their habits. Giving them facilities to get off drugs can give them an option out. It's about building self-esteem. Once you hit that kind of rocky road, it is difficult to climb out,' Cllr Flo Clucas, executive member for community safety at the council, tells Police.

The council commissioned an independent consultation, carried out by The Centre for Public Health at Liverpool John Moores University, with more than 1,000 people, including residents' groups, Merseyside Police Authority, local businesses and prostitutes themselves.

The results, published in June, showed the issue of most concern to people was drugs and the drug dealing associated with prostitution.

The report also showed that 83 per cent of people thought that a managed zone is the best way to tackle street prostitution, although 91 per cent backed the council in wanting the area to be away from residential areas.

Professor Mark Bellis, director of the Centre for Public Health, said at the time the report was released: 'The people of Liverpool appear strongly in favour of this new approach to the world's oldest profession.

'Both resident and business communities recognise that a managed zone would reduce disturbances, including drug-related incidents, caused by street prostitution and help end the horrific levels of violence inflicted on prostitutes.'

The report has now been passed to the Home Office, who would be able to decide whether Liverpool could get the go-ahead to pilot the UK's first official managed zone for prostitutes.

More in depth research is currently underway and is due to report back this month on the findings.

The Home Office launched a consultation paper on prostitution, *Paying the Price*, in July last year to gain the views of relevant agencies on the best way to 'pave the way for the development of a coordinated strategy for prostitution' which ended in November.

Last month ACPO launched their guidance, ACPO's Policy, Strategy and Operational Guidelines for dealing with exploitation and abuse through prostitution, advocating a 'holistic' approach with the police working with local government and agencies to tackle the issue.

However, Tim Brain, chief constable of Gloucestershire Constabulary and ACPO lead on prostitution, has raised concerns about the resources needed to police managed zones and of the problems finding a place that residents and businesses will agree to.

Merseyside Police were not in a position to comment on their views on the introduction of a zone, but a spokeswoman said

that they will wait to see what the Home Office response will be to Liverpool City Council's bid.

Trading Places

The traditional area for prostitution was Liverpool's docklands and, more recently, the unlikely area round the Anglican and Metropolitan Cathedral.

A recent clean up operation at the Anglican Cathedral, previously seen as a 'no go' area at night, found 19,000 needles in the grounds.

Ironically, Cllr Clucas says that high-profile police crackdowns during the successful street crime initiative in Liverpool, meant women working in prostitution dispersing into different parts of the city centre.

'Prostitution is like a long balloon, if you squeeze it in one place, it pops up in another,' she says.

'We know we have girls here that are attacked and who move to residential areas where they feel safer. If there is a heavy police presence in an area, the girls are less likely to hang around before getting into someone's car and get any indication they could be getting in with a man who beats the living daylights out of them.'

Mike Creer, a former chief inspector from the Merseyside Police, worked as a local authority liaison officer in community safety before retiring in November 2003.

He now works for Liverpool City Council as criminal justice intervention programme manager.

He agrees that high-visibility policing has simply moved the problem on and that it makes the streets more dangerous for prostitutes.

'The women on the streets also felt safer in residential areas because of the street lighting and being near to where people are,' says Mr Creer.

Prostitutes working in residential areas has had an impact on communities who pushed for the council to find a solution.

Cllr Clucas explains: 'Prostitution takes place 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week and we have had cases of children being accosted by kerb-crawlers on their way to school. We have had sex workers getting in and sleeping in



Credit: Getty Images

the back of people's cars, then demanding money, people are frightened to walk through the areas.

Another fear was the violence being used against the sex workers themselves: 'We had two horrific murders of prostitutes in the city and at that stage the council asked me to come forward and look at a workable solution to tackle the issues around prostitution in the city.'

International Research

The council looked at how countries like Sweden, the Netherlands and Sydney managed prostitution including legalised brothels, something Cllr Clucas said she would not support.

However, in Utrecht, Holland, they have had a managed zone for 18 years, which has seen a dramatic reduction in prostitution and crimes associated with it in the city.

The Dutch model:

- an area for soliciting, a 'working' area and a drop-in shelter are considered essential elements of a managed area
- managed areas are regularly patrolled
- in other respects, the models vary from city to city. For example, in Heeren women are required to be licensed
- drug dealing is officially prohibited in managed areas but is generally tolerated to avoid

women with problematic drug use leaving to work elsewhere where they can buy drugs.

They also examined successful schemes in the UK, although the nature of prostitution and who is involved differs considerably from one city to the next, the Streetreach Project in Doncaster, is widely seen as best practice.

The project aims to get women off the streets and into work and provides support to help break the links between drug addiction and prostitution.

Life on the streets

Paul White, is the operational manager for Armistead, a HIV and wide-ranging sexual health promotion service, also runs the Portside Project which involves outreach work in parlours and saunas in the Dock Road area of Liverpool.

Mr White says that they plan to provide an interim service called Port Street for sex workers on the streets in April this year.

'We actually go out onto the streets where they work. We try to get them to access services, such as sexual health services and drug services,' he says.

They also have a police surgery every fortnight where those involved in the sex trade can speak to an officer about any particular issues, as well as working with Merseyside Police's domestic violence unit.

Dealing directly with the men and women involved in prostitution, Mr White says: 'There are women from different backgrounds involved in the sex trade, middle-class through to those who have been in care, from abusive families who may be on drugs. '80 per cent of the women we talk to wish they did not have to do it, that they do it for drug money. Sometimes it's just about despair. Some women have lost children to care through what they do and want to find a way out; to get their kids back.'

Does he believe a managed zone could help those involved in prostitution to work in a safer environment?

'If an area can be found for a managed zone that communities and the women who work there are happy with, then that would be great, but it is finding a place that people agree to,' he replies, but sounds a note of caution that until this time they still need a service.

Safety zone?

The research undertaken by the council has pointed towards the introduction of a managed zone, which, they believe, will provide safety for the sex workers and keep the impact on the community down to a minimum.

'Within the managed zones will be a uniformed visible presence during opening hours at night, which would be set. Possibly policed by street crime wardens or the police.

The whole idea is that we can help prostitutes in that one area, rather than having them scattered around the city,' says Cllr Clucas.

Those working in the zone would have to be over 18 years old, be registered and have access to medical treatment as well as other facilities to help them move away from prostitution.

Cllr Clucas adds: 'The zone could be closed in the early hours and would have a cleaner at night, so you should not be able to tell it is a zone during the night.'

She argues that the current way of dealing with prostitution means sex workers 'risk being raped and murdered to feed their drug habit'.

