

**MINUTES OF MEETING OF THE MULTI-AGENCY GROUP ON COMMERCIAL  
SEXUAL EXPLOITATION  
THURSDAY 25 JUNE 2020**

**Present:**

Trevor Owen (*Co-Chair*), VAW Equalities, Scottish Government  
Katie Brown, Equally Safe, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)  
Paul McDougall, Police Scotland  
Kirsti Hay, Violence Against Women Partnership Network  
Katie Cosgrove, Public Health Scotland  
Dr Alison Scott, NHS Lothian  
Linda Thompson, Women's Support Project  
Emma Ritch, Engender  
Rhona Innes, Tara  
Angela Voulgari, Sacro  
Bronagh Andrew, TARA  
Gordon Smith, Human Trafficking, Scottish Government  
Francois Roos, Child Protection, Scottish Government  
Kim McLaren, VAW Justice, Scottish Government  
Kirstin McPhee, VAW Equalities, Scottish Government  
Leonie Stone, VAW Equalities, Scottish Government  
Niall Wood, VAW Equalities, Scottish Government

**Apologies:**

Saira Kapasi (*Co-Chair*), VAW Justice, Scottish Government  
Anna Donald, Human Trafficking, Scottish Government  
Eilidh Dickson, Engender  
Moiria Mckinnon, Chair of the National Action Group on Child Sexual Exploitation  
Yvonne Wilson, SACRO  
Roseann Cameron, Routes Out  
Sandy Brindley, Rape Crisis Scotland

**1. Welcome and apologies**

Everyone welcomed to the meeting and apologies noted.

**2. Minutes of previous meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed with an update that Bronagh Andrew be moved to Apologies.

ACTION: Secretariat to add this to minutes of 7<sup>th</sup> November 2019.

**3. Covid-19 – Scottish Government response**

A general update was provided by Scottish Government officials on the response to Covid-19 and the reprioritisation of work across portfolios. Women engaged in commercial sexual exploitation have been recognised as a non-shielding, at-risk group. For marginalised groups such as these, it is recognised that support

measures include medical and social care; accommodation and facilities for self-isolation; access to food and cash; advice, information and advocacy; and continuation and expansion of wrap around support for those with multiple and complex needs. Victims of commercial sexual exploitation, including prostitution may be at increased risk of poverty, fuel poverty, and food insecurity. Multiple and complex needs may also include alcohol and/or drug dependency and experience of domestic abuse and/or sexual violence. They may be shouldering the burden of caring responsibilities that reduce their ability to access resources in other ways, and their lack of agency and access to resources may mean that they feel they have no option to continue to sell sex irrespective of public health advice. Financial hardship driven by the economic shock of Covid-19 may push more people into this space. Where people have been trafficked or are being coerced, they may be being forced to continue to sell sex despite public health advice and laws around self-isolation and social distancing.

A weekly conference call with violence against women and girls (VAWG) stakeholders and chaired by the Deputy Director for Criminal Justice Divisions was held until week 11 on a weekly basis, thereafter running fortnightly. This has been implemented to ensure that feedback and the impact on survivors have been consistently considered within policy response. Generally, Ministers and a range of officials have worked collaboratively across Government and beyond with partners to seek to support victims-survivors, to continue to hold perpetrators to account, and to support the system to transition to new ways of working to enable this to happen.

We have been progressing work across government to support survivors and hold perpetrators accountable in line with public health guidelines. Officials are working closely with COSLA to develop guidance for LA s to tackle VAWG in the Covid pandemic. On 18 March, the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government announced funding of £350 million to support communities and wellbeing, and this has been allocated through a number of routes to support immediate priorities, third sector resilience and community wellbeing. On 17 May, it was announced that the Encompass Network had been awarded £61,771 from the immediate priorities strand to provide additional support to women involved in prostitution during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Scottish Government funding streams have been recast to deliver enhanced flexibility and minimised bureaucracy for organisations, and existing funding streams due to open for competitive bidding have been paused.

The Scottish Government has put a £70 million Food Fund in place to provide support for those who would otherwise be unable to access food through the usual routes, and £30m of this funding was initially made available to local authorities for structured public sector responses, working with local resilience partnerships to support households who may experience barriers in accessing food (accompanied by Guidance for local authorities).

Both the Scottish Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline and the Rape Crisis Scotland National Helpline continue to operate, and specialist services continue to be available to support victim-survivors and their children. The Scottish Government has also produced guidance on domestic abuse to accompany

coronavirus legislation and make clear that the restrictions do not prevent anyone experiencing harm from leaving the home and seeking help. the Scottish Government and local authorities can provide support and assistance which is inclusive of people with NRPF (provided the support is not directed through a restricted fund), because this is being done not solely due to destitution, but due to needs arising from the current public health emergency. The new Scottish Government community funds, set up to respond to Covid-19, are not restricted funds. COSLA guidance in this area has also been published.

Public Health Scotland have been disseminating information to the health workforce on domestic abuse and gender-based violence.

Responding to the economic and social impacts of Covid-19 in a way that ensure they do not disproportionately impact on the most marginalised is a priority. On 9 June, Ministers announced that an expert advisory board is to be established to drive progress towards a fairer, more equal Scotland in the wake of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The group will listen to and learn from people with lived experience of poverty and inequality and membership will draw on expertise from equality and disabled people's organisations, housing and homelessness bodies, town centre and regeneration groups, and anti-poverty campaigners.

There is a need to look afresh at the workplan and to consider and prioritise the focus in relation to recovery and renewal. Work to develop this is currently paused due to the organisational requirement to focus on the emergency response to Covid-19 and the maintenance of essential public services. At an appropriate juncture, officials will revisit this and seek further input from the Group and wider stakeholders.

There is a focus on recovery and renewal, broader social and economic impact. It is important that we listen to the voices of people of Scotland to guide this work. Prior work is on pause until this has taken place including and new timeline for the public consultation on challenging demand.

#### **4. COSLA**

COSLA has from the outset of the pandemic, recognised and responded to the heightened vulnerabilities, risks and harms being faced by women and children vulnerable to VAWG and have been working closely in continuing partnership with Scottish Government colleagues throughout, through COSLA's continuing partnership and joint ownership of Equally Safe.

COSLA's Leaders have prioritised local government's COVID response on the mitigation of the heightened risks and vulnerabilities to harm facing and being experienced by women and children living with domestic abuse and for women engaged in sexual exploitation, including prostitution. This has been reflected in the development and refreshment of the COSLA/SG Supplementary Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)/Covid-19 Guidance for Local Authorities and their Strategic Partners, and has been a prominent feature of COSLA's communications with Elected Members across Scotland through its weekly Elected Members Briefings throughout the pandemic to date.

Leaders have instructed that work be undertaken to explore how the harms facing women engaged in Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE), might be better mitigated at a local level - in recognition of the additional vulnerabilities facing women engaged in CSE because of the public health measures being taken to control the spread of the virus. A short term multi agency working group on CSE will be convened and will include learning on how women might be better supported to EXIT the sex industry if they want to do so, and identification of potential costs to local government of any flexible models of support that might be proposed. A steering group will be convened to inform the shape of the group and scope of its thinking and considerations. COSLA's Leaders and the Community Wellbeing Board recognise that the partnership and co-ownership of Equally Safe defined through the Co-chairing of the Joint Strategic Board and other parts of the Equally Safe governance structure, might be better reflected in this area of policy work (CSE including prostitution) including agreements on priorities and multi-agency group action planning. Discussions are ongoing with colleagues in the Scottish Government to explore how we better strengthen our joint working in this area.

## **5. Encompass Network**

The Network highlighted the challenges faced by women in commercial sexual exploitation during Covid from the beginning, including arrest of women under Covid emergency measures, calls for ring-fenced funding, the need to link with housing and addiction. There have been some very good practice on the ground but this has not been consistent across Scotland. The Network worked with Greater Glasgow and Clyde Health Board and Routes Out to pilot targeted messaging for women in CSE and men who are continuing to purchase. This was fed to Public Health Scotland for wider roll out. The £60,000 funding provided by the Scottish Government has been channelled into the destitution fund and mental health services for women, with some in Aberdeen used for staff hours and street-based outreach. Routes Out, Another Way and Click have had success in routing women to services. Across the board there are severe cases of destitution and poverty: in food, fuel, rent, access to technology.

There has been some criticism of Encompass in the mainstream and on social media implying that exiting prostitution is mandatory to access this support or that service users' personal information will be provided to the police.

The Network has seen an increase in online advertising and men asking women online for direct contact. Direct contact is now becoming standard practice again as lockdown restrictions lift. Destitution has also led to more women entering prostitution through job losses and financial constraints.

## **6. TARA**

There has been a decrease in referrals for trafficking over the pandemic. 10 new women were referred since April but this is expected to increase as lockdown eases. Women using the service reported confusion at the beginning of Covid on what it was or public health restrictions as information was not available in languages other than English. TARA have been translating information on these and lockdown easing for them. Many have been struggling with social isolation and inability to access

mainstream services due to the change to remote working. Digital exclusion has impacted them severely as they have no access to smart phones, laptops or money for mobile data. TARA have applied to the Scottish Government Connecting Scotland Fund to address this need. There is an urgent need to proactively identify and refer trafficked women for sexual exploitation who are no longer being identified by the usual routes e.g. Police Scotland, Refugee Council and the Red Cross.

## **7. Click, Sacro**

Sacro seconded the urgent need for support for women in destitution. From 1<sup>st</sup> July 2020 Sacro will be able to provide small-term counselling and will circulate information on this as soon as it becomes available.

## **8. Police Scotland**

National Referral Mechanism (NRM) referrals have indeed decreased but are starting to pick up again. There has been an increase of online advertisements and Police Scotland have been working with online agencies to remove adverts. Work is ongoing with Sacro, Women's Support Project and Police Scotland prostitution champions to promote what information is available and that reporting of gender based violence during Covid is encouraged. One Covid-19 ticket has been issued to an individual in Aberdeen but only after officers met with them, discussed Covid rules on several occasions and then issued the ticket issued as a last response.

## **9. Public Health Scotland**

The invisibility of women in commercial sexual exploitation has been heightened by Covid. Public Health Scotland has been looking at most marginalised communities and how additional inequalities caused by the pandemic have affected them. An equality impact assessment is taking place on contact tracers and awareness of issues facing women around abuse and exploitation, links to human trafficking and the ability of public service staff to identify. We need to ensure that violence against women and girls (VAWG) and sexual exploitation are highlighted in recovery work from the pandemic. Public Health Scotland is developing an internal equality framework during recovery and ensuring GBV is integral in this work.

ACTION: Katie to share this information with the Chief Social Work Advisor.

## **10. NHS Lothian**

The loss of some sexual health venues due to Covid has impacted outreach and a lot of vulnerable women are not being reached. More trafficked women are coming through but do not want to disclose to police or give false information. There needs to be more coordinated learning and approaches to reaching women who do not wish to engage with services and a group response to Umbrella Lane media campaign.

## **11. VAWP Network**

Glasgow VAWP have been linked in with TARA and Routes Out and a weekly scoping exercise has been undertaken for online activity. Members noted the role of the National Violence Against Women Partnerships in tackling commercial sexual exploitation and recommended a joint meeting with the Improvement Service and COSLA to look at this.

## **12. Child Protection**

The National Child Sexual Exploitation Group is approaching the end of its working life. They have been looking to tackle commercial sexual exploitation in a child exploitation context – through criminal exploitation, sexual exploitation and trafficking and are working with Justice policy colleagues to develop this.

Covid has triggered a number of emerging risks for children online. There is an increased role of online services and tech as an enabler to child sexual exploitation, with explosion of guidance for young people and parents but the online harms remain. UK Council for Internet Safety has set up the Early Warning System Group, which includes charities and organisations with helplines and hotlines to monitor the emerging risks and messaging from their calls.

The Child Protection team will respond to the letter from Linda Thompson on the trend of 11-13 year old girls setting up profiles on commercial websites to post sexual content and linking to their social media.

**ACTION:** Francois will circulate a note of child protection activity to the group.

## **13. Engender**

Engender has been gathering evidence of women's experiences and providing this to the Scottish Government. Emma has also been appointed to the Social Recovery Advisory Board. The Board is engaging with policy across government - housing, health, education, social security, etc. - but talking specifically about women in these spaces is not well received. There is a commonality of issues being faced across the world and it is vital to use this learning to shape the response. Emma welcomed a conversation with Linda Thompson to discuss how to coordinate this work and raise awareness of women in commercial sexual exploitation to the Board.

## **14. AOB**

Umbrella Lane has written to Scottish Ministers asking for involvement in this group but are unwilling to sign up to the definition of commercial sexual exploitation as set out in Equally Safe, which is part of the group's terms of reference. Officials have responded.

Members noted that it would be helpful to know the membership of the Social Recovery Advisory Board.

**ACTION:** Trevor to consider ways for this group to feed in to wider social renewal work.

The Scottish Government public consultation on challenging demand consultation is considering a new timeline and will add content on the impact of Covid. Officials will update the group as this develops and will discuss in more detail at a future meeting.

Any additional updates from members to the Secretariat will be emailed out with the minutes.

### **15. Next meeting**

The next meeting of the Group will be arranged by the Secretariat and will focus on recovery from the impact of Covid.

Secretariat, Scottish Government  
1 July 2020