



Briefing on measures to support women affected by commercial sexual exploitation in the rented sector

We have developed this briefing to support submissions to the Scottish Government's consultation '[A New Deal for Tenants - draft strategy](#).' The strategy aims to ensure that tenants in private and social rented homes have access to adequate housing. The consultation includes a question on the measures required to support women affected by commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) in the rented sector.

Indeed, lack of access to adequate housing is not only a factor that can push women to sell or exchange sex, but it also remains a huge issue whilst they are involved, and it often prevents them from moving on. At the same time, women who sell or exchange sex are not a homogenous group and their housing needs will differ based on their individual circumstances.

Our recommendations here are informed by the experiences of women we have worked with, as well as needs assessments we have conducted, the recent Encompass Snapshot of specialist services for women affected by CSE, and our work with agencies and services.

Below we highlight the key areas of need we have identified based on the above and the changes we want to see so that women involved in selling or exchanging sex can access adequate housing in the rented sector and beyond.

Homeless emergency accommodation

Women who are at risk of becoming or are currently homeless (including women who are 'hidden homeless,' i.e. couch surfing with friends or family) may consider selling sex to obtain money to pay for rent or mortgage, or may exchange sex for a temporary place to live (see '[Sex for Rent](#)' below). Further, women currently selling or exchanging sex will have a range of needs due to their backgrounds and experiences of trauma which mainstream emergency accommodation may not be able to accommodate (such as long-term emotional support focusing on gender-based violence, advocacy to report instances of abuse and to access social benefits, and support to exit the "sex industry"). Barriers to accessing emergency housing support can remove women's opportunities to leave the "sex industry." Thus, emergency accommodation services play a key role not only in breaking the cycle of homelessness for women, but crucially in reducing their risk of being further sexually exploited in a number of ways.

Recommendations:

- Consider appropriateness and suitability of the types of emergency accommodation offered to women.
- Recognise need for multi-agency response and develop strong links between agencies.
- Introduce robust risk assessments which consider the links between homelessness – particularly hidden homelessness – and CSE.
- Include routine enquiry questions about CSE when assessing homeless women.

- Provide staff with regular training on the needs of women who sell or exchange sex and trauma-informed responses.
- Build protocols for women to transition from shelters into supported accommodation.

Supported accommodation for women involved in prostitution

Supported accommodation should be available for women who have experienced specific forms of abuse or violence. Currently, Scotland has services such as refuges for women experiencing domestic abuse or trafficking. However, the range of needs that women who sell or exchange sex often present with and the criteria of existing services can make it harder for women to access some of this supported accommodation and to remain in it. For example, Women's Aid refuges will not accept women with experience of CSE unless they are experiencing domestic abuse and some of them require engagement with emotional support. Given the range of social, financial and health needs that women who sell or exchange sex can present, there is a need for non-judgemental accommodation designed specifically for them which enables women to maintain stable housing, recover from trauma, improve their wellbeing and which supports them to move on from CSE if they wish to do so.

Recommendations:

- Use previous learning and good practice from VAWG and Housing sectors along with Housing First¹ pilots to develop a model of supported accommodation in Scotland designed specifically for women who sell or exchange sex with complex needs.
- Current supported accommodation should be flexible to accommodate the complex needs that women selling or exchanging sex may present.

Social housing and long-term accommodation

Having stable housing is fundamental for a person's wellbeing. Nevertheless, for some women involved in selling or exchanging sex, securing long-term housing through social programmes can feel out of reach. The stigma surrounding involvement in prostitution and other forms of CSE, paired with fear of being "outed" and previous negative experiences with services can make women reluctant to access this option. Additionally, women with complex needs may find it difficult to engage with the bureaucracy and waiting lists that are so common in the social rented sector.

Recommendations:

- Co-develop housing guidance alongside women with lived experience.
- Introduce training for staff on the needs of women who sell or exchange sex.
- Local authorities must invest in holistic housing support for women who sell or exchange sex with complex needs, which includes referrals to services offering support with problematic substance use, VAWG and caring responsibilities.
- In order to achieve the Scottish Government's strategic aims to prevent and eradicate all forms of VAWG including CSE, all women in Scotland must have access to social housing, including migrant women with No Recourse to Public Funds.

Affordability of private rented housing

¹ Housing first is a model designed for homeless people with complex needs. The model moves homeless people into independent housing, giving them access to services so they can adjust to life in their community. Housing First emphasises people's choice and control using a harm-reduction approach. Basis, a service for women in Yorkshire, successfully piloted a Housing First service for women involved in street prostitution.

Rising rental prices, increases in living costs along with high energy prices and ongoing financial pressures due to COVID have made renting housing less accessible. Women in general have been particularly impacted by these increases and are struggling to afford rent. Women who are not currently involved in selling or exchanging sex report that the inability to afford rent can lead them to consider this as an option to secure housing or pay off other debt. On the other hand, women who sell sex often rent two properties, one of which they use to see clients. High rental costs have led women to take out loans and accrue debt, and in some cases, they may have lost one or both of their rental properties.

Recommendations:

- Introduce rent controls that reduce current rent costs and future increases. Affordable housing reduces the likelihood of women entering the “sex industry” to secure accommodation.
- Prioritise women’s access to Universal Credit and government benefits when they are or have been involved in selling or exchanging sex.
- Ensure easily accessible emergency financial support specific for women who sell or exchange sex which does not risk “outing” a woman’s involvement in the “sex industry.”

Precarious rental conditions in the private rented sector

Women selling or exchanging sex can face specific barriers to accessing rentals in the private sector. For instance, difficulty proving their income due to lack of stable employment or fear of disclosing their involvement in selling or exchanging sex. As a result, women can end up in expensive tenancies that require high deposits in advance, or in rentals without a tenancy agreement, which removes protections if issues arise.

Recommendations:

- Introduce alternatives for tenants who cannot prove their income through wage slips or tax self-assessments. Women who sell or exchange sex will often be unable or reluctant to provide proof of income in this way.
- Further regulate private landlords to ensure they do not place unfair or unreasonable requirements (such as high deposits) when a person cannot prove their income or employment status.

‘Sex for rent’

Women in unstable housing situations are often asked for sex in exchange for housing. This can be from opportunistic landlords, men with a spare room as well as clients, pimps, and other people in their lives. Whilst we recognise that ‘sex for rent’ also arises from a lack of affordable housing and social benefits, this transaction inherently leads to a power imbalance that puts the woman at a disadvantage. Women should have access to support and legal recourse when individuals or landlords proposition sex in exchange for rent.

Recommendations:

- Preventing instances of ‘sex for rent’ by securing sufficient affordable and adequate housing for all women, including women with complex needs. This should be accompanied by access to financial support.
- Review existing Scottish legislation to consider introducing a law which makes asking for sexual services in exchange for housing or rent reductions a criminal offense. Any such legislation should cover not only registered landlords but also individuals offering spare rooms in exchange for sex.

Threat of eviction and anti-social behaviour regulations

Women who rent properties in both the social and private rented sectors face a heightened risk of eviction due to several factors. Anti-social behaviour regulations can be misinterpreted, leading to women being reported for selling sex from their rented homes. Additionally, the impact of trauma may not be considered when women are evicted under anti-social behaviour regulations. A final factor is loss of income and increased costs of living, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic, which can mean women are threatened with eviction due to finding themselves in rent arrears.

Recommendations:

- Landlords should be informed about the laws around prostitution to reduce threats of eviction due to selling sex from rented property.
- End avoidable and illegal evictions. Women's needs should be assessed, and their level of vulnerability and risk of exploitation understood before enforcing an eviction that could result in homelessness.
- End evictions into homelessness. Housing associations and councils should provide early intervention and financial support to prevent evictions in both the social and private rented sectors.

Learnings from the pandemic

Housing is central to Scotland's COVID-19 recovery, and it is essential that plans at national and local levels consider the needs of women with past or present involvement in the "sex industry". Learnings from the measures introduced during lockdown should be used to inform how to best support women in the aftermath of the pandemic:

- Expedite social housing applications whilst ensuring adequate housing is offered.
- Stop accommodating women, particularly asylum seekers, in hostels as temporary housing. Temporary housing should always be suitable and linked to support services.
- Build stronger links between local authorities and specialist support services for a smoother transition into housing.
- Introduce protocols that allow women selling or exchanging sex to obtain emergency, temporary and permanent housing.
- Ensure women have access to emergency financial support to enable them to have their basic needs met.

Conclusion

Women who sell or exchange sex have repeatedly pointed out that housing is one of their key concerns. Ensuring adequate access to housing is crucial for women's equality but also for them to achieve the stability needed to flourish and feel safe. Women who have sold or exchanged sex are no exception. The Scottish Government's rented sector strategy must consider the range of circumstances that women selling or exchanging sex can face, and it must recognise that improving the needs of women in the rented sector requires looking also at their wider housing needs.

About the consultation

Title: A New Deal for Tenants - draft strategy

Relevant question: Question no. 10: What measures could be implemented to support people involved in sex work, including women subject to commercial sexual exploitation in the rented sector?

Closing date: 15 April 2022

About this consultation: <https://bit.ly/3LuLE63>

Link to respond: <https://bit.ly/3Nv3nfp>

Further reading

CLiCK Scotland, (Mar-Dec 2020), The experiences and needs of women who sell or exchange sex or sexual images during the coronavirus pandemic in Scotland - clickmagazine.online/uploads/1/3/2/4/132453157/click_needs_assessment.pdf

CLiCK Scotland (2021), CLiCK Cast episode 5: Housing (2021) - clickmagazine.online/click-cast-5-notes.html

Encompass Network (2021), A Snapshot of Services - encompassnetwork.info/uploads/3/4/0/5/3405303/encompass_snapshot_2021.pdf

Encompass Network, (Sep 2020), COVID-19: Moving Out of Lockdown The experiences and needs of women in the sex industry - encompassnetwork.info/uploads/3/4/0/5/3405303/moving_out_of_lockdown.pdf

Encompass Network (2021), Exiting prostitution: what next? - encompassnetwork.info/uploads/3/4/0/5/3405303/exiting_prostitution_what_next.pdf

Everyone Home (2022), Platform for Change 2022 - everyonehome.scot/pdf/eh-collective-platform-2022.pdf.

Scottish Women's Aid (Aug 2019), Domestic abuse: a good practice guide for social - womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Domestic-abuse-guidance-for-social-landlords-FINAL.pdf

Shelter Scotland (2018), Sex for rent in Scotland - Topic briefing - assets.ctfassets.net/6sqqr111sfj/Ms0Qu5JNhsCyojON3KNes/fbef4353d596b9c5b804c8dfd6bd1bc7/FINAL_Sex_for_rent_in_Scotland_Topic_Briefing.pdf

University of Leeds (2018), An evaluation of Basis Yorkshire's Housing First pilot - basisyorkshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Basis-Housing-First-Final-Report-March-2018.pdf

University of York, (2016), Evaluation of the Threshold Housing First Project for Women Offenders - hfe.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Threshold%20Interim%20Evaluation%202016.pdf

The Women's Support Project

Based in Glasgow, we work across Scotland to raise awareness of the root causes, extent, and impact of male violence against women and advocate for improved services for those affected.

Key themes are addressing unmet need and emerging issues, making links between different forms of violence and abuse, and supporting multi-agency and partnership approaches. Our work is informed by an understanding of links and overlaps between different forms of violence, discrimination, and oppression

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