

## Open Letter CAUSE FOR CONCERN - THE END OF AN ERA

It was with great concern and disappointment that we learned on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2008 about the drastic reduction (a two-thirds cut) in the level of funding being made available to support services for female sex workers in the city from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009. After due consideration, we decided that the residual funding of £50,000 on offer was insufficient for us to deliver the quality of service required by the women and we took the very difficult decision to withdraw from service provision as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2009, informing NHS Lothian of our decision on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2008. We do however have a number of concerns over the resulting position.

NHS Lothian believes that the epidemiological evidence does not support continued funding from the current stream (Blood Borne Virus prevention monies) at existing levels, as it is felt that female sex workers are no longer at high risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. This work was being described as late as March 2006 as "a priority area for action for NHS Lothian and its partner organisations ... NHS Lothian recognises the need for a service provider which specialises in addressing the needs of female sex workers". We query whether local epidemiological evidence in relation to sex workers and risk of multiple sexual partners has changed so significantly during this short period of time to merit such swingeing funding cuts.

We accept that in recent years, levels of BBV infections have remained low, in part due we believe to the successes of projects like our own, but there is also concern that this trend may not be maintained following such a drastic reduction in the funding levels available.

The World Health Organisation, the UN Joint Programme on AIDS and other international bodies, have praised our work and in view of the comprehensive range of services provided by SCOT-PEP, it is even more disappointing that, in removing the BBV specific funding, no attempt has been made to identify alternative, more appropriate funding streams to allow the continuation of essential services to the women.

When we were informed of the budget cut in November 2008, we requested that an Equalities Impact Assessment be carried out on the likely effect of such a reduction. We were assured that this would be done, but as yet we have heard nothing. SCOT-PEP's commission was to work with female sex workers and all public authorities have a legislative duty, under the Gender Equality Duty introduced on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2007, to assess the impact of its current and proposed policies and practices on gender equality, and to pay due regard to the results of those impact assessments. We suspect that this assessment has not been done, which calls into question whether the proposed new arrangements are equitable.

The Edinburgh Community Safety Partnership (ECSP) commissioned an important project from SCOT-PEP, relating to strategic partnership development between agencies working with female sex workers, awarding us funding through the Scottish Government's 'Addressing Street Prostitution Fund'. But at the same time, the BBV monies were being reviewed, while the Strategic Partnership Development Project goes beyond the life of SCOT-PEP's existing contract with NHS Lothian. It seems particularly incongruous that NHS Lothian, which is a key partner in the ECSP, should then seek to disinvest in both ourselves and services to female sex workers.

Furthermore, the same government funding – managed by ECSP - commissioned outreach to female street sex workers from Streetwork, duplicating the outreach services provided by SCOT-PEP, albeit for a one-year funding period. We are alarmed at the total lack of any strategic approach to commissioning services for female sex workers thus demonstrated, or co-ordinated partnership working across the local health economy.

It is interesting to note that NHS Lothian is keeping the £50k funding themselves, and using the Harm Reduction Team (HRT) to provide services. Quite what this arrangement will produce which will be of benefit to the women is not yet obvious. We are still unclear as to the additional staffing to be recruited and how those staff will be deployed to meet the needs of female sex workers in Edinburgh.

We believe that HRT is doing an assessment with street-based sex workers one night a week during April 2009. We very much doubt that such a skimpy assessment will produce sufficient meaningful data on which to base future services for such a vulnerable group of women, but a major concern is that the services have been withdrawn prior to this assessment being done, not after, which a strategic approach would demand.

We understand that NHS Lothian will be using a single provider for safe sex supplies, and intend reducing the range of supplies offered, which SCOT-PEP has been supplying for years in response to the expressed needs of sex workers in Edinburgh. We have clearly stated our concerns to NHS Lothian about this strategy which poses significant barriers to individual sex workers having their needs met. By failing to provide the harm reduction supplies which the women feel confident using for particular situations and sexual services, the risks that sex workers and their clients face will potentially increase. An inflexibility of approach will not change sexual practices but will instead lead to women hiding their activities. This does not inspire us with confidence that the planned services will be effective or responsive to the diverse needs of the women.

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