



Belfast Health and  
Social Care Trust

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Via email – [committee.justice@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:committee.justice@niassembly.gov.uk)

**FAO Ms Christine Darrah,**

Clerk of the Committee of Justice  
NI Assembly

Dear Sir/Madam

Belfast Trust would respond as follows to the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill

The overall purposes of this Bill cannot be disputed: - to protect victims of human trafficking and exploitation, provide support for victims and tackle the demand for trafficking.

An evidence based framework is evident and includes recommendations contained in reports from organisation such as GRETA and the Anti-Trafficking Monitoring group who have knowledge and expertise within this area.

The bill has identified models of best practice which appear to have been successful with legislation in that it reduces demand for paid sex and makes it more difficult for and shifts those criminals involved in trafficking to look at other areas to further their illegal activities. The Bill highlights areas who have or are looking at changing the laws mentioned. It identifies Norway and Iceland with specific interest in the Swedish model which makes it illegal/an offence to purchase sexual services

The Motivation and sentiments of this Bill and the debate surrounding the bill has added significant public interest and this therefore has to be positive in raising awareness of the issue that may lead to further vigilance within this area. It also sends out a strong message in relation to perpetrators.

Many of the clauses have positive messages in relation to support, protection sentencing and compensation for the victims. However there is a requirement for an individual tailored approach for victims within NI to avoid a hierarchy of victims.

## **Clause 6 of the Bill:**

BHSCT is currently the only Trust who provides a specific drop-in service for those involved in prostitution. This service has over twelve years experience in providing public health services including sexual health screening, referral to secondary care services, advice and support including harm reduction and personal safety of the service user. We operate a drop-in low threshold model of service provision while adhering to professional codes of practice. The service is a non-judgemental service concerned with the holistic well-being of the service user both male and female and public health protection re the spread of sexually transmitted infections. The service has been proactive in developing multiagency partnership working that will safeguard and enhance services for this client group including looking at exit Strategies with the Department of Justice.

It has been our experience that for the majority of our service users who work at the lower end of the scale prostitution is an exploitive and destructive lifestyle with mortality and ill health rates higher than that of the general population.

Health issues are complex and diverse for this client group and are often exacerbated by addictions that assist in enabling many services users to continue working.

When considering prostitution and human trafficking we need to recognise that there are elements of both that are inextricably linked but also acknowledge that we are looking for two distinct definitions both requiring different ways of support and different required outcomes.

It is felt that the hidden nature of both Human Trafficking and Prostitution requires a concerted effort of joined up working if it is to be addressed effectively within this Bill.

The BHSCT service has identified a decline in the numbers working in street prostitution since the introduction of the sexual offences 2008. Making it illegal to soliciting, curb crawling sell or purchase sex from a car. However anecdotal evidence working with these groups would not indicate a going away but rather a hiding away with many of our service users advertising on social network media and using mobile contacts instead being picked up on the street.

There is an increase in Brothel pop-up working with anecdotal evidence that some of the vulnerable sex workers have now risen to a position of control and are offering those more vulnerable and desperate work within the brothels. This in turn could make the already vulnerable more vulnerable.

It has been our experience that some of our services users may now be in further danger of exploitation, sexual ill health and may even be prevented in attending the service except when circumstances have sometimes reached a crisis.

There is also we believe still a paramilitary involvement within the sex and drug industry in NI and therefore payment may not always be for economic reward but other kinds of rewards.

One of the central tenets of the Bill is to make it a criminal offence to purchase sexual services for any person not just from a prostitute subjected to force as already is the case.

It is also worthy of note that the Swedish model introduced its laws as a gender equality issue not a challenge to human trafficking and not to punish the female prostitute but deter the purchaser they site women as the weaker party.

Experience within NI areas would suggest prostitution is not always male dominance and female subordination and those working at the higher end of the scale look on it as a credible business. It is also worth noting that many of those involved in prostitution at both ends of the scale will have had experienced care backgrounds, many will have suffered sexual and physical abuse when growing up or in domestic violence situations and in turn will have children of their own in the care system. It may be useful to see if this is the case within the Swedish experience.

As expressed earlier the hidden secretive nature of prostitution within NI even when you have known the service user for a long time makes it difficult to gather statistics and carry out research as many stories will hold poetic licence .However this does not take away the need to address the issue and provide services that effectively address the health and social care needs of this group.

We would advocate that the same empathy expressed within this bill in clause 8,9,10 and 11, 13 will apply to those in prostitution.

We welcome clause 12 but suggest it is unacceptable that the clause applies equally to children and adults as a compulsory sentence for children runs contrary to “the best interests of the child” which advocates using custody as a last resort and with the shortest possible sentence

We would welcome:

- Joined up working that acknowledges the changing nature of prostitution and the need to reconfigure services to address this issue.
- Legislation that advocates the best interest of the most vulnerable
- Further training and awareness into recognising signs and symptoms of trafficking and Prostitution including risks and triggers

- Enhanced prevention programmes
- Incentives that will help those wishing to exit prostitution
- Training and education tailored to meet individual needs of the victims
- Health and social care services that address the holistic health of this client group
- Support when relapsing due to life circumstances
- Ensuring that whatever method of tackling these problems is selected will be one that makes the most impact and the best difference.

## CLAUSE 10

Unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Northern Ireland, are the responsibility of Social Services and are therefore afforded assistance and support, which incorporates the 'best interest' principle guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

These children are some of the most vulnerable and traumatised in our society. Many have fled war torn countries, under horrific circumstances and have had no recent contact with family members. Concerns exist when children are brought into the country as refugees to join their parents but have not been escorted by a family member. Proving a family link without correct information such as dates of birth can be difficult, as the risk exists that these children may be trafficked without knowledge. Tighter controls are needed at Port Health to minimise this situation.

Overall this Bill provides a more robust legal framework to the growing problem of trafficking and exploitation in this country. The appointment of a Child Trafficking Guardian is most welcome in safeguarding the child's best interests. By recognising that children have very different and specific needs than that of adults will hopefully ensure they are not "lost" in the process.

I trust these comments are helpful.

Yours faithfully



**Cecil Worthington**  
**Director of Social Work Children's Services**