

Cross-Party Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation

AGM

Wednesday 18th September 2024 from 18.00-20.00

This was a hybrid meeting.

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Ruth Maguire MSP

Rhoda Grant MSP

John Mason MSP

Tess White MSP

Non-MSP Group Members

online

Laura Jeffries Individual (PA to Rhoda Grant MSP)

Aileen Fleming SOHTIS

Alison Raybould Salvation Army

Bronagh Andrew TARA

Janet Warren Individual

Janice Wilson Soroptimist (Scotland North Region)

Sally Jackson FiLiA

Susan McKellar Scottish Women's Convention

Chris Ringland Evangelical Alliance

Emily Maclean Individual (Scot Gov staff)

Ann Hall Not for Sale

Chris Hall Not for Sale

Susan Smith For Women Scotland

Maren Schroeder Individual (researcher for Ash Regan MSP)

In person

Jacci Stoyle Secretary
Michael Veitch Care for Scotland
Cara Mc Conville Salvation Army

Detective Superintendent Stevie Bertram Speaker

Agenda item 1

Welcome and apologies for absence

Agnes Martony Individual
Steve Rawbone Individual
Beverley Johnston Individual
Teresa Little Individual
Anne Martin Individual
Ali Morris FiLiA
Sophie Reymbaut Individual

Agenda item 2

Election of office bearers; co-conveners and secretary.

Rhoda asked John Mason to take the chair to oversee the election of office bearers. John asked for members to propose a co-convener. Michael Veitch proposed Rhoda Grant and Rhoda proposed Ruth Maguire. These were seconded by Jacci Stoyle and John Mason respectively. This was unanimously agreed by all members present.

John asked the members for a proposal for secretary. Ruth nominated Jacci as secretary, which was seconded by John Mason and agreed by all members present.

Agenda item 3

We were delighted to welcome Detective Superintendent Stevie Bertram from the Specialist Crime Division, based at Gartcosh.

Stevie introduced himself by telling us he was the National Lead for Rape and Serious Crime, Modern Slavery/Human Trafficking and Prostitution. A large part of his role is looking at the policies and procedures that affect this area of policing and making sure they are fit for purpose.

Stevie chose to discuss some on-going cases to illustrate some of the issues around sexual exploitation, rape and human trafficking. At his request, details of on-going cases will not be recorded in the minutes.

Stevie told us about a live investigation into human trafficking, where organised crime groups are exploiting women through prostitution; these types of cases are complex and international. Their mode of operation is through adult services websites and at the last count there were 19 active websites across Scotland, the biggest ones being Vivastreet and Adultwork. These websites change and fluctuate, but they are increasing. Many female

victims come from Romania, recruited from rural areas with the promise of a job, often in factories, which do not exist, and they are forced into prostitution once they arrive.

One case featured a young woman who was intercepted at Glasgow airport by border police. She had been trafficked but was now trying to return home. She was subsequently helped by Victim Navigators working with the charity *Justice and Care*. They support victims of slavery through the criminal justice process, very much like TARA.

Stevie also described situations where police visit a house, which they suspect is a brothel, yet the foreign women there say they are not involved in prostitution and that they are not being exploited, whilst the police remain unconvinced. There is a lot of fear from the women and a lack of trust. The police will then try other means to investigate.

There is good communication and co-operation between the Scottish and Romanian police working together to catch the traffickers. All this takes time, a lot of work and is very expensive. Unfortunately, there are similar on-going cases in other parts of the country.

Another case revealed a victim who had sustained a horrific sexual attack by a male she'd met from an adult services website. That led to a substantial investigation, focusing on the website, mobile phones and financial issues. This concluded with a suspect, who was previously unknown to police, which the police found quite worrying. Further intensive investigations led to finding more victims, who had not previously come forward. The victims were foreign women who had been frightened to come forward for fear of being arrested for prostitution or their immigration status. This had shocked the police as not one of the victims had felt they could report the attack.

Stevie said that he had had the impression that the proliferation of online prostitution had meant that on-street prostitution had lessened. However, Bronagh from TARA had shown him that this wasn't the case, and that numbers of very vulnerable women who were out on the street had increased. He said the police were intensifying their presence and working with partners, such as Routes Out, to tackle this. However, there are resource implications. Stevie also mentioned that he would like to see more use of legislation to arrest males who were out there to buy sexual services.

Finally, in addressing the issue of the adult services websites, it should be recognised that this is a contentious issue for the police. Stevie was recently approached by Vivastreet's Head of Security and Compliance, who is an ex-policeman, to meet up. Whilst Vivastreet are very co-operative with police investigations, and say they are doing nothing illegal, indeed, they claim they are helping to make prostitution safer, nonetheless, they are also providing the means and facilitation to make trafficking and sexually exploiting vulnerable women much easier.

The police managed to secure some funding from the Scottish Government for a piece of software called Traffick Jam, which is a suite of analytical tools to use with adult services websites to find traffickers and recover victims. Stevie refreshed it the day before the meeting at 9.00am; it registered 138 live adverts in Edinburgh and 331 live adverts in Glasgow.

Stevie said that in all their investigations with women in prostitution, not one single woman had been arrested for prostitution. He hoped that this would become better known, so that women might start to come forward and to trust the police more.

Agenda item 4

The meeting opened for questions from the group.

Q. Rhoda asked if there was a difference between the women who were trafficked for the websites and those who were more likely to be Scottish women in desperation on the streets?

A. Stevie said it was a mixture of both. Often it was poverty, and trying to feed a family, that was driving Romanian women to look for work in Scotland.

Q. Jacci referred to Stevie saying he wanted women to trust the police and that none had been arrested for prostitution. However, he'd also said some were frightened of immigration law; had there been any arrests for immigration? Did the Home Office trump home-based law?

A. Stevie said yes, there was one woman who was desperate to work, but the Home Office said no. It caused some friction between the police and the Home Office. How is she then to break the cycle? And yes, the women were right to worry about the immigration laws.

Q. Rhoda thought that it was different if women were trafficked, and Stevie said not all women who were trafficked wanted to go down that route and didn't wish to be referred to the NRM.

Bronagh Andrew (TARA) said that in her experience traffickers will use immigration status against women. There is a degree of protection with the NRM for 45 days, but the Illegal Migration Act undermines some of that work.

John Mason suggested that the new Scottish MPs may be worth approaching on this matter, as they were more likely to have access to the Home Office. It might be worth asking if any of them wanted to join the CPG?

Q. Tess White asked how the traffickers got the women in the country.

A. Stevie they were not smuggled, they came by normal means with a passport thinking they were going to do a normal job.

Rhoda said it was one of the ways women get trapped, as often the women feel they can't go home, not without a respectable story to explain what has happened to them.

Stevie told the group about an occasion when they went to a house with some Romanian police officers who were visiting. The women and men in the house were all Romanian and they were having a conversation about what they should say to the Scottish police. This was all related back after they returned to the station by the Romanian officers. Now the police don't go in without a Romanian speaking officer.

Q. Chris Hall asked about an article from Linda last year, where Stevie was quoted as saying that they actively target those who purchase sex. Can you say a few words about that?

A. Stevie said it was difficult sometimes in online prostitution -there were issues to do with evidence and sometimes they needed the buyer to be a witness. However, in on-street prostitution, they would do so.

Agenda item 5

Feedback from the MSPs present on any parliamentary progress.

Rhoda explained that Ruth would be sending out a letter to the CPG members regarding her meeting with **Siobhian Brown**, the Minister for Victims and Community Safety. Members

had previously requested a meeting to hear the Minister, Siobhian Brown, speaking about the new government strategy, and there had been a suggestion that we might invite Ms Reem Alsalem, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, to speak at one of our meetings. Rhoda suggested we might approach both speakers and decide a date for the next meeting on their availability.

There was also a query from John on the progress of Ash Regan's consultation, and Jacci said that Ash would be giving the group feedback at the next meeting when the consultation deadline was closed.

Rhoda told the group that the CPG had completed Ash's consultation using their Parliamentary Inquiry into SEA websites as evidence, as this had already been formally agreed by the CPG membership. Jacci added that many CPG members, both organisations and individuals, had also completed the consultation.

Agenda item 6

AOB and date of next meeting.

Ali Morris (FiLiA) had emailed a written AOB to tell us that she will be going back to Japan, on behalf of FiLiA, to work with teenage girls in prostitution. She intends to update us at the next meeting.

Date of the next meeting to be confirmed after approaching the speakers for their availability.