

# SEX WORKERS' ANGER AT HULL STREET CLAMPDOWN

## Prostitute-free zone on notorious Hessle Road

### Former sex workers speak of dangers

A group of former street sex workers has criticised Hull City Council and police for a clampdown on prostitution they claim "vilifies" women and puts their lives in danger.

The women, who have formed a collective called An Untold Story, are concerned the work of outreach services is being undermined by an increased police presence since the introduction of anti social behaviour orders to tackle prostitution. The group was also angered by a request made by Inspector Kirsty Tock, of the Hull central community policing team, for business and members of the public to contact police if they see any evidence of prostitution.

Emma Crick, editor of *An Untold Story* – a book the women have authored about their experiences working on Hull's notorious Hessle Road – said the call for the community to come forward with information, at a time when vital services are being cut, amounted to a "call to arms" against sex workers. In a statement to *Big Issue North* Hull City Council reiterated that members of the community should come forward if they "have concerns over any activity".

### Scapegoating prostitutes

Crick said: "[Sex workers] are a group of people very easy to not just dismiss, but to blame. Our concern is that this encourages a culture of dismissing needs, scapegoating and labelling them."

In 2014 Hull became the first city to use the orders under Section 222 of the Local

Authority Act 1972 to create a prostitution-free zone in the Hessle Road area. Prostitutes and kerb crawlers found to be in breach of the order by loitering, soliciting or having sex, face arrest and a court appearance. A reported 18 orders were made against women in the lead up to the summer, while three orders were issued against kerb crawlers.

Hull City Council said: "Last year the council was granted an extension to its Section 222 injunction until 2019, which prohibits any person from loitering or soliciting for the purpose of prostitution. The council takes this issue very seriously, and will continue to work closely with Humberside Police and the relevant agencies to support the welfare of anyone involved in prostitution to help reduce this type of activity in the community."

Punitive measures are supposed to operate in tandem with support for the vulnerable women, with Hull City Council, support agencies and local charities working together to address the problem. But An Untold Story argued that, together with the publication of photographs of women charged for prostitution, the use of Section 222 represents a "retrogressive vilification" of prostitutes that could put their lives in danger.

A spokesperson from Humberside Police told *Big Issue North*: "When dealing with street workers in Hull, our trained officers show an understanding attitude to their situation.

"We also have a duty to protect the residents and businesses who are affected by street workers and the people who seek their services. The increase in police officers in the town centre shows how we are helping to protect everyone in our community."

But the collective is concerned that an increased focus on the use of anti social behaviour orders could drive women into more unsafe areas and embolden potential attackers while removing a vital level of protection for sex workers, who are 12 times more likely to be murdered than other women.

"It's OK the police telling women to move on, but then you end up with desperate women taking more desperate risks," said former sex worker Millie. "When I was working there were a few murders and they weren't sure if there was a killer on the streets, so the police were doing the rounds.

"They were really quite supportive, asking us if we were OK, if we had any dodgy punters, their attitude was quite nice. That's gone, they're there to punish now, and not to support."

### "Naming and shaming"

Humberside Police said: "Earlier this year tasking groups were set up to look at all aspects from the street workers' welfare and safety to the people seeking out sex and addressing the causes. Where it is felt appropriate the Criminal Behaviour Order process can be adopted, this is done in coordination with the local authority.

"The police and other agencies including the council, support agencies and local charities are focused on reducing the impact on the local community of prostitution in the Hessle Road area."

Millie said getting a criminal record was bad enough, but the "naming and shaming" of women by publishing their photographs and personal details was harmful to both them and their families

"Girls are out there for one reason only – to



Punitive measures are supposed to work in tandem with support but women are scared to seek help for fear of being "named and shamed". Photo: Meta-4 Photos

support addiction. They are vulnerable. They're facing so much, and they've got really complex needs," she said. "To have prostitution on your record, you can never get away from that. There's such a stigma attached to prostitution, it sticks."

Millie said cuts in staffing levels and the closure of services and agencies in Hull is making it almost impossible for women to get the help they need. Women are intimidated by police vehicles parked on Hessle Road and reluctant to use outreach services for fear of being identified, she said. Millie believes the reduced

presence of Hull police's sexual exploitation team and the sporadic crackdowns represented a reversal of previous more supportive policing.

### Clampdowns across England

"I've been in recovery for a number of years and it has got worse, the agencies I engaged with no longer exist," she said. "The women are literally fighting a losing battle with addiction and we shouldn't be punishing victims, we should be looking at ways for better treatment, better support."

The Untold Story collective urged Hull's authorities to

look at examples like Leeds, where the country's first Sex Working Managed Area was set up last year in line with official guidance. A Home Affairs Committee report of July 2016 recommended a change in the law 'so that soliciting is no longer an offence' and guidance issued by the Association of Chief Police Officers stresses the need to ensure the safety and protection of sex workers.

But a survey by the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) in July included 11 reports of civil orders being issued, between January and April this year, and

showed that clampdowns on prostitution in the form of raids, arrests and prosecutions had taken place in cities and towns across England, including Birmingham and Doncaster.

Laura Watson of the ECP said: "At a time when unemployment, benefit cuts and sanctions, lowering wages, increased homelessness, and debt are forcing more women, particularly mothers, into prostitution, it is unacceptable for the police to be focused on criminalising women."

JULIE TOMLIN

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### SUICIDE DROP

The suicide rate in Britain fell by 4.7 per cent last year to the lowest level since 2011, with prevention work in England credited for the drop. The rate fell in England and Wales but increased slightly in Scotland. Overall there were 10.1 suicides per 100,000 in 2016, compared with 10.6 in the previous 12 months.

### LAW BURSARIES

Poet and broadcaster Lemn Sissay is launching a new university bursary in a bid to increase the number of black males embarking on careers in the legal sector. The Lemn Sissay Law Bursaries will offer eligible applicants an annual grant of £3,000, funded by the University of Manchester's School of Law. The bursaries will take into account applicants' race, gender and socio-economic background.

### CARE LEAVERS SUPPORT

A Barnardo's study reveals that two thirds of care leavers identified as having mental health needs are not receiving any help from a statutory service. The *Neglected Minds* report suggests that nearly half of England's 26,340 care leavers may be suffering with mental health problems. The charity called on the government to ensure that some of the £1.4bn promised to improve children's mental health is used to support vulnerable care leavers.

### UNEMPLOYMENT FALLS

UK unemployment fell by 75,000 in the three months to July but wages have stagnated. People aged 16-64 not in the labour force because they are looking after family or home is the lowest since records began, at less than 2.1 million but inflation hit 2.9 per cent in August and pay is failing to keep up.

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