



Department of  
**Health**

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

[www.health-ni.gov.uk](http://www.health-ni.gov.uk)

**Report on the review of  
'Leaving Prostitution: A Strategy for Help and  
Support' (revised 2019)**

**August 2022**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

- 1.1 In May 2019, the Department of Health published a revised version of *Leaving Prostitution: A Strategy for Help and Support*. The purpose of the Strategy is to set out requirements for the development of a Programme of Assistance and Support for those wishing to leave prostitution, which the Department originally published in 2016 and revised in 2019.
- 1.2 The Department is required under section 19 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 to carry out a review of this work at intervals of not more than three years. This report reviews the period 2019 – 2022.

### **Methodology and approach**

- 1.3 Our approach was as follows:
- Stage 1: Review of relevant information
  - Stage 2: Engagement with relevant stakeholders
  - Stage 3: Report

### **Structure of Report**

- 1.4 The report is split into four sections to convey the information and feedback gathered from relevant stakeholders. The structure of the remainder of the report is as follows:
- Section 2: The strategy
  - Section 3: Review of progress
  - Section 4: Conclusion and future actions

### **Note on the use of language**

- 1.5 The Department recognises that there are different views on language used. This report adopts terminology that aligns with the current strategy in line with the above legislation.

## 2. THE STRATEGY

### Background

2.1 Prostitution is not a crime in Northern Ireland however, section 19 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 has made it an offence for someone to obtain sexual services in exchange for payment.

2.2 Accordingly, the overall aim of the Strategy is to help connect those individuals who want to leave prostitution with appropriate advice and support services by making available a Programme of Assistance and Support. In doing this, the Strategy:

- provides a background to prostitution in Northern Ireland;
- identifies and considers the barriers to leaving prostitution and the services currently available to those who want to do so; and
- sets out a proposal for the Programme of Assistance and Support including how the Programme will be monitored and evaluated which requires a collaborative effort across a number of Departments and agencies and the statutory, voluntary and community sector.

2.3 It should be noted that the scope of the Strategy excludes under 18s and victims of human trafficking for which there are other tailored support mechanisms in place. This includes:

The revised policy guidance *Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland* which was published by the Department in 2017. This provides the overarching policy framework for safeguarding children and young people and incorporates specific guidance for professionals, practitioners, children, young people, parents and carers relating to sexual exploitation of children and young people.

Revised guidance on the *Working Arrangements for the Welfare and Safeguarding of Child Victims and Potential Child Victims of Human Trafficking*

*and Modern Slavery* published jointly by the Health and Social Care Board and the PSNI in 2018. This Guidance provides information on human trafficking and modern slavery and the arrangements that are in place to identify and support child victims and potential victims of these offences. In particular, it sets out the working arrangements that should be followed by Health and Social Care Trust staff and PSNI when they encounter a child who they suspect may be a victim of human trafficking or modern slavery.

Revised guidance on the *Working Arrangements for the Welfare and Protection of Adult Victims and Potential Victims of Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery* published jointly by the Department of Justice, the PSNI and the Health and Social Care Board in 2018. This guidance sets out the actions to be taken by the PSNI, Health and Social Care Trusts and other relevant frontline practitioners in relation to adults where human trafficking or modern slavery is suspected or claimed or where potential victims are recovered during police operations.

### 3. REVIEW OF PROGRESS

#### Overview

3.1 This section provides a summary of the progress made for the period covered by this report (2019–22) and considers progress against the recommendations identified in the review undertaken in 2019:

#### Actions

##### (1) Programme of Assistance and Support

3.2 A Programme of Assistance and Support was first published by the Department in 2016 to help connect individuals wishing to leave prostitution to existing services by providing information and contact details across a wide range of areas. It was later reviewed in 2019 at which point it was recommended that the Department should:

- ***Update the information and contact details within the Programme of Assistance and Support; and***
- ***Explore whether it would be feasible to produce the programme in alternative formats should future resources become available.***

3.3 A revised Programme of Assistance and Support was published in May 2019. Further work was then undertaken during 2021 to consider whether there were alternative ways that the programme could be presented.

3.4 In June 2021, a new information page entitled ‘Help for people leaving prostitution’ was uploaded to [NI Direct](#).

3.5 The Department also engaged with a number of stakeholders both via correspondence and by meeting with organisations on a one to one basis to consider other formats. There was a general consensus that producing the Programme of Assistance and Support in the format of a small information card, such as a ‘Z-fold Card’, could provide more opportunities to raise awareness of existing support services.

- 3.6 The Department secured additional funding to take this work forward and continued to engage with stakeholders to inform the design and content of the card. This resulted in the insertion of additional information within the Programme of Assistance and Support including a new section on 'Mental Health and Wellbeing'. A QR code has also been incorporated which can be scanned by smartphones should people prefer to access information online.
- 3.7 A total of 4,000 Z-fold Cards were printed. An online version has also been made available on the Department's website and can be accessed [here](#). Also printed were 10,000 smaller information cards displaying the QR code (similar in size to a credit card). The cards were distributed to a number of locations in July 2022 (details at **Annex B**). For any queries relating to distribution please contact [DSVUnit@health-ni-gov.uk](mailto:DSVUnit@health-ni-gov.uk).
- 3.8 Some stakeholders were of the view that further resources could be developed to support the information cards, such as an 'aide memoire' or a webinar. In discussions, it was highlighted that staff across frontline services (e.g. health, housing, jobs and benefits offices etc.) may not be well informed about the barriers to leaving prostitution or the importance of providing a caring and non-judgmental response. There were also views that more needed to be done to support those individuals involved in prostitution who are homeless with addiction/substance use issues, recognising that these individuals are less likely to proactively follow up contacts provided in the information cards.
- 3.9 The Department welcomes the feedback received and agrees that these particular issues should be explored further, as noted in section 4.

## (2) Equine Therapy Pilot

- 3.10 Whilst the development of information cards has been welcomed by relevant stakeholders across the statutory, voluntary and community sector, there was some disappointment that the Programme of Assistance and Support is not

delivering new services on the ground, although ongoing financial constraints were acknowledged.

- 3.11 Mindful of this, the Department continues to explore other possibilities and, in March 2022, identified an opportunity to run an Equine Therapy Pilot. This was taken forward by the Belfast Health Inclusion Service and offered to six women from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds who had previously been trafficked into prostitution and were being supported by Women's Aid. It was funded by the Public Health Agency and delivered in partnership with 'Horses for People'.
- 3.12 Equine assisted therapy is a holistic, experiential form of therapy, to help build trust and confidence and improve self-esteem. It involves working in collaboration with a horse and carrying out a number of tasks such as feeding and grooming. Agreed objectives were set to enable the participants to use the skills learned and to be able to transfer them into everyday life, such as how to deal with difficult feelings and cope with challenging circumstances. Feedback from the pilot was very positive -

**A sample of some of the comments made:**

*"Leading the horse made me feel more confident and in control of my life"*

*"Confidence, happiness, ability to engage with other people"*

*"The horses didn't judge me"*

(3) Strategy

- 3.13 A further recommendation of the 2019 review was that the Department should **update the strategy to reflect wider strategic developments across government since the strategy's publication**. This was taken forward and an updated strategy was published in May 2019. However, there may be merit in making some additional revisions in light of recent developments and stakeholder engagement (as outlined above).
- 3.14 It was also recommended that the Department **considers the findings of the review commissioned and published by the Department of Justice into**

**the operation of the criminalisation of paying for sexual services.** The Department notes that this review has highlighted a shift away from on-street prostitution (which is the focus and language of the current strategy) to off-street and that it suggests the Strategy could adopt more supportive language, a view that some stakeholders have also shared.

- 3.15 The Department is also mindful that the strategic landscape continues to change with other new strategies starting to emerge, such as the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy which is being taken forward by the Executive Office and a new Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy which is being led jointly by this Department and the Department of Justice.

(4) Stakeholder engagement

- 3.16 When the Department developed the first iteration of the Strategy, it was envisaged that a 'Stakeholder Governance Group' would be convened. As outlined in the 2019 review, this was not progressed and it was recommended that the **establishment and membership of the Stakeholder Group should be reviewed**. As a result, the Department undertook targeted engagement to inform recent work, largely on a one-to-one basis, with those stakeholders who had responded to the original consultation in 2015 (as listed at **Annex A**). This was, however, a particularly difficult time for organisations to engage due to the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3.17 The Department is very grateful for the valuable contributions made and would like to thank all of those individuals and organisations who shared their views during this review period, which have informed this report and the development of the information cards and Equine Therapy Pilot, in particular. We have in recent months, taken the opportunity to meet collectively with those organisations that contributed. There was a general consensus that this dialogue should continue, to consider how recent progress can be built upon and the Department will consider how best this can be reflected as part of any work that is taken forward to update the Strategy.



## **4. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE ACTIONS**

- 4.1 Good progress has been made during the period covered by this report (2019 - 2022), with actions taken forward to address previous recommendations and to contribute to the Strategy's aim.
- 4.2 The development and distribution of information cards and the delivery of an Equine Therapy Pilot are new areas of work and have been successful due to a collaborative approach by stakeholders across the statutory, voluntary and community sector as well as other government Departments. It is evident that partnership working has provided an important basis for ongoing work in this area.
- 4.3 Whilst there was general agreement amongst stakeholders that the information cards will be a useful resource, the Department recognises that there may be further opportunities to build upon this work, should additional resources become available. It is also clear, from the very helpful stakeholder engagement, that opportunities should be explored to make connections with other relevant strategies and services (both within and outside the health sphere) rather than being viewed as a stand-alone strategy.
- 4.4 The following actions will be progressed by the Department to inform the future implementation of the Strategy:
  - I. Keep the content and distribution requirements of the Programme of Assistance and Support information cards under review. This will include continued engagement with key stakeholders and the consideration of actions so that relevant front line services develop a better understanding and awareness of the barriers to leaving prostitution, subject to available resources.
  - II. Consider how the Leaving Prostitution Strategy can complement and make connections with wider strategic developments. This will include, for example, strategies relating to domestic and sexual abuse; violence

against women and girls; alcohol and drugs; homelessness; and sexual health.

- III. Consider further opportunities for Equine Therapy and other programmes, subject to available resources.
- IV. Consider whether future revisions are required to the Leaving Prostitution Strategy to reflect progress to date and actions arising from the above recommendations.

**STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid  
Belfast Inclusion Health Service  
Children in Northern Ireland  
Christian Action Research Education NI  
Department for Communities  
Department for the Economy  
Department of Health  
Department of Justice  
Health and Social Care Board  
HERE NI and Cara-Friend  
Law Society  
Men's Action Network  
Nexus NI  
NI Housing Executive  
Police Service of NI  
Probation Board NI  
Rainbow  
Royal College of Nursing  
The Executive Office  
Ugly Mugs  
Victims Support NI  
Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

**Distribution of Information Cards**

Advice NI  
ASSIST NI  
Belfast Inclusion Health Service  
Carrickfergus Foodbank  
Cithrah Foundation  
Common Youth NI  
Community Advice Causeway  
Depaul  
Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline  
Drug and Alcohol Services  
Extern Multi-Disciplinary Homeless Support Team  
First Housing  
Footprint Women's Centre  
Foyle Foodbank  
GPs  
Homeless Connect  
Homeless Hostels  
Hospital A&E Departments  
Housing Advice NI  
Housing Rights  
HSCT Adult Gateway Teams  
Hydebank Prison  
In This Together  
Jobs and Benefits Offices  
LCC Community Trust  
Lifeline Operators  
Link Family Community Centre  
Make the Call Wraparound Service Operators  
Maternity Services  
Men's Action Network  
Men's Advisory Project  
Newtownabbey Foodbank & Children's Thrift Shop  
Nexus NI  
NIACRO Women's Project  
NI Housing Executive Area Offices  
Positive Life NI  
Probation Board for NI  
PSNI Custody Suites  
PSNI Sex Worker Liaison Officers  
PSNI Stations  
Public Prosecution Service  
Rainbow Sexual Health Satellite Clinics  
Roe Valley Foodbank  
The Rowan Sexual Assault Referral Centre  
Regional Service User Network  
Samaritans

Sexual Health GUM Clinics  
Simon Community  
South Belfast Foodbank  
Street Pastors  
Substitute Prescribing Team  
The Rainbow Project  
Victim Support NI  
Welcome Organisation  
Women's Aid

For any queries relating to distribution please contact [DSVUnit@health-ni-gov.uk](mailto:DSVUnit@health-ni-gov.uk).