

# CASE STUDY



# SEX WORK STRATEGY CO-PRODUCTION

# Context



Newham set out a Manifesto pledge to *‘Develop a Tackling Sex Work strategy, to reduce the stigmatisation and exploitation of street and off-street sex workers’*.

The intention to develop a strategy was informed by concerns expressed by residents and sex workers relating to anti-social behaviour, fears about personal and familial safety, health inequities and access to public services.

A needs assessment examined data held about the impacts of sex work and the needs of sex workers in Newham. Data about sex workers was drawn from those in contact with services. This was however limited due to the low numbers accessing services at that point.

There was a high degree of commonality of concerns and asks of the strategy between residents and sex workers.

These concerns included safety on the streets, attention to infrastructure to keep residents and sex workers safe, improved support for sex workers and further community engagement to continue to develop, support and deliver the strategy

# Strengths-Based Approach



The strategy and action plan were co-developed and co-designed with Newham residents and sex workers. A strengths-based and trauma informed approach was taken.

## **Sex workers**

Sex workers voices are often sidelined, ignored and devalued. They are also reluctant to speak to statutory organisations.

To ensure that sex workers were a core part of the strategy development an advisory panel of three current or former sex workers was recruited to conduct 1-1 interviews. The advisory panel received intensive training and support, including access to an independent psychotherapist and reflective supervision. In total 20 sex workers took part in interviews.

## **Residents**

Newham residents were invited to take part in a series of community conversations.

Three resident engagement events and a specific faith leader engagement session were held in June 2024. Some individual sessions were held with residents who could not access the in-person sessions. In total 55 residents took part.

# Outcomes and Impact



Work on areas of concern was progressed during the development of the strategy, this has included:

- The use of external funding to increase capacity in the sex work service
- The opening of three hubs for sex workers across the borough and increased outreach support
- An integrated approach to community safety where anti-social behaviour is investigated in partnership across agencies and a supportive approach is taken to both residents and sex workers.
- An intelligence-based and geographically targeted approach to community safety
- A multi-professional panel focusing on safeguarding sex workers at most risk

As a result:

- Reports of anti-social behaviour relating to sex work has reduced with reports to the Police reducing by 26% in the period April to October 2024.
- The numbers of sex workers using the hubs and engaging with services has increased, with 49 sex workers engaged in structured support with the service over the last 12 months (from point of no engagement at all in late 2023).
- 27 high risk cases have been discussed at sex worker high risk panel. Safety has been increased for these residents including identifying domestic abuse, accessing accommodation, referral into mental health services and information sharing to take action against those who have harmed the sex workers.

# Lessons Learnt and Reflections



The engagement with residents and sex workers allowed for rapid changes to approaches to community safety and the service offer to sex workers while the strategy was in development. As well as improving current issues, this also helped demonstrate an intention to action which developed buy-in and trust in the process.

The advisory panel reflected that the process of conducting interviews had *'been a fantastic journey'*.

Residents expressed that *'this is giving us a voice but we need more sessions like this'*

Sex workers expressed that they were glad to have been involved in the co-design of the strategy and action plan, but were careful to state that *'they listen to what I've said and do things that turn into action...that you're not wasting my time...that they do things to genuinely improve and if they don't do it they're wasting my time.'*

All were clear that they wanted to continue their involvement in the development and delivery of the strategy. It is clear from previous experience of a similar model in the development of the Newham Domestic Abuse strategy that such engagement increases trust and the responsiveness of the strategy and action plan to live concerns.