



Consultation Response Questionnaire

**‘Leaving Prostitution:
a strategy for help and support’**

September – October 2015

Responding to the Questionnaire

The Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) is seeking your views on the draft Strategy, 'Leaving Prostitution: a strategy for help and support'. Please use this questionnaire to tell us your views on the draft document.

The consultation runs from **11 September 2015** and the closing date for comments is **23 October 2015**. Responses received after this date **will not be considered** due to the tight legislative deadline.

Please send your response or any other queries you may have to:

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Please note that all responses will be treated as public and may be published on the DHSSPS websites. If you do not want your response to be used in this way, or if you would prefer for it to be used anonymously, please indicate this when responding (See Statement of Confidentiality and Access to Information Legislation below).

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Please tick the box below if you want your response to be treated as anonymous. (NB: response details may still be shared under any future Freedom of Information requests.)

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Thank you for completing this questionnaire and providing input to this consultation.

About You

I am responding ... (please tick appropriate option)

as a member of the public

on behalf of an organisation

other _____ (please specify)

Please enter your details below:

Name	Ruth Breslin (on behalf of Sarah Benson, CEO of Ruhama)
Job Title (if applicable)	Awareness Outreach Coordinator
Organisation (if applicable)	Ruhama (a specialist NGO providing holistic support on a national basis in the Republic of Ireland to women affected by prostitution, including women who have been trafficked – supporting on average 300 women per year)
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Part 1 – Draft Strategy

Question 1 – Scope

Do you agree with the scope of the Strategy as detailed in Section 2(b)?

Yes (but with the caveats outlined below)

No (please tick one option only)

If No, please explain why and let us know how you think this could be improved.

Ruhama is a specialist NGO providing holistic support on a national basis in the Republic of Ireland to women affected by prostitution, including women who have been trafficked. We have been providing our services for over 25 years, and have worked with 2,500 women of over 60 nationalities. We currently support approximately 300 women per year, including women who have been exploited in prostitution in Northern Ireland. We are a holistic service offering a wide range of supports, including the following:

- Needs assessment
- Individual casework support and advocacy
- Care planning and case management
- Out-of-hours emergency response
- Crisis accommodation in emergency situations
- One-to-one and group education, training and development opportunities
- Support for women participating in the criminal justice process
- Support into mainstream training and education
- Support with job-seeking
- Housing and social welfare support
- Mobile street outreach to Dublin's 'red light' areas
- Outreach service to Dóchas Centre (Women's prison)
- Outreach service to HSE Women's Health Service (sexual health clinic)
- Emotional and psychological supports including access to counselling
- Addiction support
- Support with immigration issues and repatriation
- Practical support (material needs) in certain circumstances
- Interpretive support
- Referral to other key agencies that can offer additional support.

Please note that as Ruhama works primarily with women and transwomen in prostitution, our responses that follow relate primarily to women, as this is where our expertise lies, alongside the fact that the vast majority of people exploited in prostitution are women.

Ruhama offers the above services to women affected by prostitution regardless of whether they have been trafficked or not. In our experience, the needs of trafficked and non-trafficked women in prostitution are more similar than different.

This is why, whilst we broadly agree with the scope of this proposed Strategy, we would question the rationale for completely separating out support for victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation from support for women in prostitution, when both groups can equally benefit from a very similar approach. We elaborate on this point further under Q4.

Question 2 – Barriers

Do you agree with the main barriers to exiting prostitution as described in Section 5 of the Strategy?

Yes

No *(please tick one option only)*

If No, please explain why and let us know how you think these could be improved.

The Strategy rightly identifies the barriers to exiting prostitution, based on the most comprehensive piece of research conducted on this issue in the UK to date (Bindel, J., Brown, L., Easton, H., Matthews, R. and Reynolds, L. [undated]. *Breaking down the barriers. A study of how women exit prostitution – Executive summary*. London: Eaves and London South Bank University: <http://i4.cmsfiles.com/eaves/2012/11/Breaking-down-the-barriers-a37d80.pdf> and Matthews, R., Easton, H., Young, L., and Bindel, J., 2014. *Exiting prostitution: A study in female desistance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Question 3 – Existing Services

In Section 6 of the Strategy, do you agree that the key existing services available for those wanting to exit prostitution have been identified?

Yes

No *(please tick one option only)*

If No, please explain why and let us know how you think these could be improved.

Mental health of women in prostitution: there is limited mention here of how the support programme will respond to the mental health needs of women involved in/seeking to leave prostitution. At Ruhama, much time is devoted to working with women to improve their mental health following the trauma they have experienced in prostitution – we provide individual counselling, a dedicated trauma healing

group programme and a range of holistic therapies to address stress and enhance coping skills. All of these services are specifically tailored to the needs and experiences of women who have been sexually exploited. The women we support can suffer the following as a consequence of prostitution:

- low self-esteem and a low sense of self-worth
- anxiety
- extreme isolation
- dissociation
- depression
- self-harm and suicide ideation
- addiction issues
- trauma as a result of constant sexual objectification, which affects all personal relationships
- in the most severe cases – post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Thus, while those who are exiting can greatly benefit from lots of practical support, they will still really struggle to move on from their prostitution ‘selves’ without complementary emotional and psychological support, which also serves to address and alleviate those vulnerabilities that may have played a role in drawing them into prostitution in the first instance.

We acknowledge that there is mention of existing counselling services here, but it is absolutely vital that those providing these services have a full understanding of the trauma and harm associated with prostitution, of the exploitation involved, and how women (as the Matthews *et al* research shows) often need to rebuild their identities when they emerge from prostitution. Any services that position prostitution as ‘work’, rather than as inherently exploitative, are unlikely to have a full understanding of these issues and address them accordingly, which is also not in keeping with the spirit of this Strategy and indeed the new legislation that underpins it.

Housing: as the research and our own practice demonstrate, suitable housing can be a significant barrier to women exiting effectively and building new lives. The Strategy rightly identifies the conditions women should not live in (near drug use, ‘red light’ areas etc.), but it is important to note that in the research (Matthews *et al*, 2014) many women describe the sense of isolation and loneliness experienced when they have tried to move themselves physically away from their old lifestyle, friends and associates. We can only expect a woman to be able to do this where she has an alternative source of support in place, such as that provided by a dedicated support agency who can properly coordinate her care and minimise her isolation (more on this under Q4).

Sexual violence: It is noted that ‘some’ of those involved in prostitution ‘may also be victims of sexual violence’ – in our experience, and again borne out by the research, it is not just ‘some’ but the vast majority who will have experienced violence at the hands of buyers, pimps and partners during their time in prostitution. Some women in prostitution even come to view sexual violence as entirely expected and ‘par for the course’ in prostitution. But its impact cannot be underestimated, and women exiting often need quite a lot of specialist support to be able to overcome these traumatic experiences and go on to be able to enjoy positive, healthy personal relationships.

Outreach and drop-in services: The Strategy document notes that ‘Outreach and drop-in services are considered to be the most effective aids to helping those who wish to exit prostitution’ – but there is no known evidence to support this. This kind of service model can be effective at engaging women primarily based in on-street prostitution with some basic but important harm reduction measures (e.g. condom and clean needle provision), but there is no evidence that services of this type support effective exit, and exiting is rarely their focus.

In fact, the research (Matthews *et al*) demonstrates that while harm reduction services have their place, when it comes to exiting it is the casework/keyword model that is by far the most effective. This is not to undermine outreach/drop-in services as they do tend to be especially important in terms of initial harm reduction – addressing women’s most immediate and urgent needs, such as physical and sexual health needs, addiction support etc. But while these services are vital, they cannot be expected to fulfil the role of an exiting service – rather they are a starting point for exiting, and need to be complemented by services with a longer-term focus that can open up the conversation with women about their future plans with the view to exploring exiting as a genuine option.

In the Republic of Ireland, Ruhama works very closely with the dedicated Sexual Health Service for women affected by prostitution and sex trafficking, the HSE (Health Service Executive) Women’s Health Service (WHS). The projects mutually refer to each other, and Ruhama has an outreach presence in the WHS clinic which serves many women in the indoor sex trade. This collaboration creates a comprehensive overall response which covers sexual health through to emotional support, direct advocacy, education, housing and welfare support and other specific needs that individual women present with. Ruhama advocates this ‘joined up’ approach between holistic health care and broader support services as an excellent practice, and would strongly recommend that support/exiting services work in collaboration with dedicated health services for women in prostitution. Recognising that exiting is neither a linear nor a simple process (see additional comment under Q10), this approach facilitates a supportive response to women at all stages of their experience, including the point where they may wish to exit

prostitution. Both services are confidential, free to users, do not require users to have a regular immigration status and are non-judgmental.

Service reach: Some of the services mentioned here are confined in their reach and remit to large urban areas such as Belfast, whilst we know that there are women in prostitution right across the jurisdiction, many of whom may have no access to support whatsoever in their local area, and no-one to help coordinate access to the different services they may need and may have to travel some distances to attend.

Question 4 – Programme of Assistance and Support (PAS)

Do you agree with the proposal to deliver the Programme of Assistance and Support (PAS) as described in Section 7?

Yes

No *(please tick one option only)*

If No, please explain why and let us know how you think this could be improved (within the confines of the severe restriction on resources).

Women's wish to exit: the Strategy, as outlined, focuses on those who clearly state that they want to exit, and seems to over-rely on them proactively requesting support to exit. In our experience women do not come through Ruhama's doors saying 'Hi, can you help me to exit prostitution please?' This circumstance would be extremely rare. Our remit is broad – we work with women 'affected by' prostitution – this means those who were involved years ago, those who are currently involved now, those who have been directly coerced/trafficked and those who ended up drawn into prostitution as a result of vulnerabilities and other adverse life circumstances. Most women currently involved in prostitution who access our services (whether by agency referral or self-referral) come to us with much more immediate and practical concerns than 'exiting' – they may have experienced a violent assault, are facing homelessness, want to address serious addiction, or simply know that they 'need help' without even being entirely sure exactly what it is that they do need. It is at this starting point that we assess women, and then take some time to work together with them to help identify their needs, gradually building a care plan to address their different problems and also their goals. Women typically need their most pressing problems and concerns addressed first (e.g. serious health problems, housing issues etc.) before the conversation about a woman's future and the potential for her to even contemplate exiting can really begin.

All the research points to the fact that exiting is not a linear process, it is more accurately described as 'journey', and in this sense it is also rarely a 'snap decision' that a woman suddenly makes to leave prostitution (Matthews *et al*). It is more a thought/idea that has been building over time and it often needs an experienced professional to really help a woman draw that idea out.

The research further explores 'entrenchment' in the 'lifestyle' of prostitution – demonstrating that no matter all the challenges and harms faced within prostitution it can still be an incredibly difficult thing to extricate oneself from. Women entrenched in prostitution rarely believe that there are other options and possibilities open to them. They have become so embedded in that way of life, but also had their confidence and self-esteem so eroded by prostitution and the stigma, shame and harm associated with it, that they can barely imagine a better life for themselves, or sometimes even believe that they deserve one.

The Strategy notes coercion into prostitution as a barrier to exiting – yet the question often posed of women in prostitution, and particularly those who have been coerced, is in some ways similar to that posed of women living in situations of domestic violence – 'why doesn't she just leave?'. We know that in the context of domestic violence the circumstances are often complex and 'just leaving' is in fact extremely difficult and indeed potentially dangerous. Similarly, a woman controlled and coerced into prostitution by a 'boyfriend/partner' or someone else who has significant power over her is unlikely to turn around one day and simply ask a service for help to exit.

In short, for all the reasons given above, if the approach of this Strategy is to rely on women to come forward to services without any particular expertise in this issue, and proactively state their desire to exit prostitution, it is very likely to fail at the first hurdle.

The coordination of support: the Strategy rightly acknowledges that 'others may require more focused support or a dedicated exit plan, especially where multiple barriers are at work'. In our experience, the vast majority of women who want to extricate themselves from prostitution cannot 'go it alone'. Although in a small numbers of cases women can 'self-exit', this is rare, and often these women had their own more informal sources of support to rely on. Most women will need some kind of dedicated support and someone to advocate on their behalf with the very many statutory and voluntary agencies that can potentially assist with their exit. This can really only be effectively and efficiently achieved when one agency, and preferably a single key/caseworker knows the woman's 'story', and has a full assessment of her experiences, needs, fears and hopes for the future. ***Expecting very vulnerable, and sometimes chaotic, women to traipse from agency to agency asking for the different types of help they need and requiring them to***

recount traumatic experiences again and again is setting a woman wishing to exit up for failure from the outset. Just as women who have experienced the trauma of domestic and sexual violence hugely benefit from an independent advocate (IDVAs and ISVAs) to help coordinate their support, so too do vulnerable women in prostitution, many of whom could not be successful on their exiting journey without such an advocate.

The Strategy as it stands also places a huge burden on statutory and non-statutory agencies to know how to respond to a woman wishing to exit prostitution without any specialist knowledge or experience of dealing with this issue. It is well known that it only takes one negative experience with a service to turn a woman off the path of exiting, unless she has someone supporting her and 'walking' with her through this process (Matthews *et al*, 2014).

Talking about prostitution: research commissioned by the London Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime on prostitution and trafficking in the city, demonstrates that whilst women currently involved in prostitution are often extremely reluctant to tell support professionals about their involvement, at the same time professionals are similarly reluctant to ask a woman if prostitution is an issue for her (Bindel, J. Breslin, R. and Brown, L., 2013. *Capital exploits: A study of prostitution and trafficking in London*. London: Eaves:

<http://i3.cmsfiles.com/eaves/2013/06/Capital-Exploits-June-2013.pdf-da8819.pdf>).

Professionals in this study recount their fear of 'opening a can of worms' by asking service users about prostitution, not least because many feel they would have no idea how to respond or what to do with this information. It seems an unlikely and also an unfair prospect to ask vulnerable women to walk into the plethora of agencies listed in the Strategy and start talking to staff about help to exit prostitution, particularly those who feel highly stigmatised as a result of their involvement. But it may also be unrealistic to ask non-specialist services to provide an appropriate response – do the services identified have this level of expertise? Have they been asked if they feel willing and equipped to support women with experiences of prostitution? Do they understand the particular vulnerabilities and safety risks faced by women in prostitution and how to tailor any service response to ensure that these are not exacerbated (e.g. not using the 'friend' that accompanies a woman to an appointment to interpret for her as he/she may be part of the chain of control, or not putting a woman exiting prostitution in a mixed-sex hostel or rehab)? **These are all essential questions to address before this Strategy can proceed.**

A holistic response: whilst it may be the case the many of 'the barriers to exiting prostitution [can be] addressed through the provision of existing services provided by the state', **this can only be achieved if this multi-agency response is properly and proactively coordinated.** The research (Matthews *et al*) and

Ruhama's own practice very clearly demonstrate that the most effective service response likely to yield the best results is a holistic one that is able to work with a woman to address all of her needs, so that even if she needs many different services, this can be coordinated by a key or caseworker in a planned fashion, who is there to step in if any further barriers or problems are faced, and to act as her advocate as necessary. Connecting a woman to services just by making onward referrals and sending her on her way is very unlikely to be enough.

Making use of existing expertise: As a service provider to a variety of victims of sexual exploitation, Ruhama would question the complete separation of approaches to supporting victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation and approaches to supporting persons seeking to exit prostitution – yet it is specifically noted that victims of trafficking are excluded from the scope of this proposed Strategy. This seems odd as it does not reflect the principles of Northern Ireland's new legislation on exploitation, which recognises the inextricable links between prostitution and trafficking. All women with experience of prostitution who access Ruhama can avail of our casework and care planning service regardless of whether they have been trafficked into prostitution or not. In general, the needs of trafficked and non-trafficked women as a result of their involvement in prostitution tend to be much more similar than different. So while there may be specific types of support a woman will need because of the circumstances of trafficking (e.g. with her immigration status, or in assisting police with a trafficking investigation), all women who have been sexually exploited can benefit from the advocacy, counselling, education & development, housing & welfare support, and other services that Ruhama provides. ***We would argue that separating out this support and treating trafficked and non-trafficked women in prostitution as two distinct groups is an erroneous thing to do. With two groups that are similar in many ways, the service response can also be similar, and should not be silo-ed off.***

Also, given the stated lack of resources to put behind this Strategy, we would suggest that you are 'missing a trick' by not drawing on the existing infrastructure and expertise that already exists in Northern Ireland for victims of trafficking who have been sexually exploited – namely the dedicated, specialist services for this group that are being provided by Northern Ireland Women's Aid. Many aspects of these services could be extended out to vulnerable women in prostitution who have not been trafficked, but who demonstrate very similar needs, and would similarly benefit from a victim and woman-centred, holistic service response. Indeed, Women's Aid has been supporting women exploited in prostitution for many years, most commonly in the context of domestic violence, where women are pimped by abusive partners. Furthermore, Women's Aid already provides a range of key services that evidence shows are highly beneficial to exiting, such as safe accommodation, and emotional and psychological support

that is grounded in a full understanding of the impact of physical and sexual violence on women. ***Thus, we believe it would be short-sighted to ignore the expertise and good work that is already being done in this area and could conceivably be extended to the vulnerable women in question – obviously this would have to be properly and sustainably resourced, but ultimately would be far less expensive in the long run than setting up any new services ‘from scratch’ and without the level of cumulative expertise that already exists in this area.***

The business case for exiting support: the Strategy mentions the potential for considering the business case for providing exiting support in the future. This would be a helpful exercise and it is safe to say that a very strong case does exist – it has been shown that resourcing prevention or early intervention for victims of sexual exploitation is hugely less expensive than ‘picking up the pieces’ from the fallout of prostitution and the highly detrimental impact it has on women’s lives in the longer term. Recent research emerging from France has made a very useful effort to estimate the social and economic cost of prostitution, and highlights the vast cost to the nation of prostitution (1.6 billion euro per annum) versus a tiny fraction of that amount that is actually invested in supporting people to exit ('ProstCost' by Mouvement du Nid and Psytel, France, 2015: <https://prostcost.wordpress.com/en/>).

Question 5 – Governance

Are the proposals on future governance for the Strategy and the PAS, as described in Section 8, appropriate?

Yes

No *(please tick one option only)*

If No, please explain why and let us know how you think these could be improved.

The planned review is essential to ensuring that people who wish to exit prostitution in Northern Ireland are getting the appropriate support that they need. At present it is unclear how this review will be undertaken and what exactly will be measured or monitored to assess the progress of the Strategy – greater clarity on this is required. Given our expertise in delivering exiting services, Ruhama would be happy to contribute to this review in some way, if that would be helpful.

It is vital that any organisations invited to participate in the ‘task-and-finish’ groups have a genuine interest in and commitment to exiting, as well as a thorough knowledge of the exiting process and the challenges this entails. In our

experience, those who take the position that prostitution is a form of 'work', have very little real interest in proactively supporting women to get out of prostitution when they deem it 'a job like any other' that has to be gotten on with rather than left behind. It is recommended that membership of these groups is confined to those who have experience of delivering frontline support services that have a genuine exiting focus, rather than those whose support seeks solely to maintain people *within the sex trade*, and fails to take a longer term, more holistic view.

Part 2 – Equality Screening

Introduction – Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires Departments to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; between men and women generally; between persons with a disability and persons without; and between persons with dependants and persons without.

Departments are also required to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of a different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

Question 6 – Adverse Impact

Are the proposals set out in this consultation document likely to have an adverse impact on any of the nine equality groups identified under Section 75 of the NI Act 1998?

Yes

No *(please tick one option only)*

If Yes, please state the group or groups and let us know why you think they would be adversely affected and how this could be reduced or alleviated in the proposals.

Question 7 – Equality of Opportunity and Good Relations

Are you aware of any indication or evidence (qualitative or quantitative) that the proposals set out in this consultation document may have an adverse impact on equality of opportunity or on good relations?

Yes

No *(please tick one option only)*

If Yes, please explain why and let us know what you think should be added or removed to alleviate the adverse impact.

Question 8 – Improved Equality of Opportunity and Good Relations

Is there an opportunity to better promote equality of opportunity or good relations?

Yes

No *(please tick one option only)*

If Yes, please give details as to how.

Question 9 – Human Rights

Are there any aspects of the policy where potential human rights violations may occur?

Yes

No *(please tick one option only)*

If Yes, please give details.

The proposed Strategy, if executed effectively, should have a positive impact on a wide range of the ‘equality groups’ mentioned. In particular, addressing the issue of prostitution in the way that Northern Ireland’s new legislation does, is likely to have an especially positive impact on gender equality. Other jurisdictions that have criminalised the purchase of sex, decriminalised the seller and provided exiting support, have some of the best gender equality ratings in the world (e.g. Sweden, Norway and Iceland). Women and girls, migrant women and girls, Black and minority ethnic women and girls, poor and socially excluded women and girls, and women and girls who have grown up in state care are all significantly over-represented in prostitution. A Strategy that seeks to alleviate the impact of prostitution and provide viable routes out is likely to benefit these particular groups the most.

Part 3 – Additional Comments

Question 10 – Additional Comments

Please use the space below to provide any additional comments you may have.

It would be helpful if you reference which part of the document you are commenting on. If you refer to any other documents, please provide the title, author and if possible approximate date of publication.

Decriminalisation (throughout the document): Ruhama welcomes the emphasis made throughout the Strategy that women in prostitution are not criminals and should not be treated as such. This is very much in keeping with the spirit of Northern Ireland’s new legislation, and also helps to address one of the key barriers to exiting – namely the criminalisation of very vulnerable people. Nevertheless, this important emphasis is contradicted somewhat by reference to a number of strategies and services (Section 6) targeted at ‘women offenders’. Women in prostitution in Northern Ireland should no longer fall into this bracket as a result of their involvement in prostitution.

References to ‘work’ and ‘sex work’/‘sex workers’ in relation to prostitution (throughout the document): it is not in keeping with Northern Ireland’s new legislation in this area to refer to prostitution as ‘work’ or ‘sex work’, an attribution which fails to recognise the exploitation inherent in prostitution. In our experience as a frontline service provider, very few vulnerable women drawn into prostitution ever describe their experience as ‘sex work’.

Exiting conditional on agreement of the person (Section 7): it is absolutely right that no-one should be pushed into exiting when they are not ready or willing to do so. Putting overt pressure on someone to exit is poor practice and will only lead to relapse/return to prostitution (as the research demonstrates), by which both the woman and the service may feel they have ‘failed’ and be reluctant to try again. Therefore, we are very much in agreement that the offer of exiting support needs to be predicated on each individual’s agreement. However, as highlighted in our response to Q4 above, the situation is not quite as simple as just gaining the woman’s consent, trust has to be built, a full needs assessment undertaken and any emergency needs addressed before work towards exiting can really begin.

We would restate the need for **dedicated and focused services working specifically for those in prostitution** rather than relying on ‘ad hoc’ service provision by existing services who may not have an understanding of the issues those in the sex trade face. ***In our experience, dedicated services working collaboratively to offer both sexual health and broader casework services***

which can support exiting create the most effective way to engage with those in prostitution. Providing women with practical assistance while they are engaged (health services), but also building trust and extending supports based on individual need, ultimately lead to the best exiting outcomes (more on this under Q3 above).

Gender of the support worker (Section 7): while it does make sense that persons wishing to exiting prostitution should be offered support by someone of the same gender, there should perhaps be some flexibility allowed within this. For example, there are men in prostitution whose main experiences of abuse and exploitation have been at the hands of men and so they may in fact be more comfortable with a woman support worker. In supporting women, our experience is that women value the opportunity to begin their exiting journey in a women-only environment.

The need for education and development (Section 3): the Strategy highlights the need for persons exiting prostitution to have access to alternative paying jobs as well as qualifications and training to support them to pursue other viable routes to making a living. It is absolutely right that anyone exiting prostitution is provided with the opportunity for an alternative livelihood and not left to languish in poverty. This is why the Education & Development programme provided by Ruhama is so very important in helping women who have exited to secure new skills, qualifications and employment. Similar opportunities should be explored for women seeking to exit in Northern Ireland, tailored specifically to their needs.