

The Joanna Project: a faith based project supporting street sex workers in Leeds

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This case study focusses on the work of the Joanna Project (JP); a small, faith-based project, which supports street sex workers in Leeds. This study will explore some of the challenges arising when working with this service user group and some of the ways in which the values of community development contribute towards tackling the systemic disadvantage and disempowerment experienced by women who sell sex. The workers at JP have an explicit commitment to work with the marginalized and dispossessed, and it is their Christian beliefs that in turn feedback into the project and has helped to create a strong and consciously realised identity which forms the core of its philosophy and identity. These ideas have helped the project to identify that for a group of marginalised, stigmatised women simply valuing that person for themselves is an important act of humanity and helps, in that moment, to give back some dignity or love that life on the streets may have stripped away. The fundamental nature of the work is relational, with an emphasis on building positive relationships based on unconditional positive regard for another human being.

The street sex industry in Leeds operates in a long-established and relatively condensed area close to the city centre, which can be described as mainly urban industrial and partial wasteland, with some residential streets and close to a site of major urban regeneration. In 2014, Leeds City Council and the West Yorkshire Police piloted a new approach to street sex work in the Leeds area of Holbeck; the managed approach. Within a designated non-residential area, between the hours of 8pm and 6am, there would be no police prosecutions for soliciting or selling sex. The

introduction of this initiative came after a ten-year struggle trying and failing to end street sex work in Holbeck. The managed approach has specific operational rules, agreed through consultation with residents, businesses and sex workers. Sex workers can work in designated streets away from residential housing between the hours of 7pm until 7am, recently revised, now 8pm until 6am, without being cautioned or arrested for loitering or soliciting. The area is policed for the safety of sex workers and all other laws are enforced. On-going attention is given to litter in the vicinity. There is now a dedicated police liaison office who works directly with the sex workers, a greater police presence and five day a week support from outreach workers.

The approach is novel in some respects in that a strategy of minimal enforcement of soliciting legislation is supported by state agencies. In other ways, it is less novel, in that it has the potential to simply be a formalisation of commonly occurring informal local practices of sporadic non-enforcement, which operate in many towns and cities across the UK. After regular monitoring and an independent evaluation (Sanders, 2015), the managed approach was confirmed by the partners as an ongoing arrangement in September 2015. The area has had, and continues to have quite a high profile, much has been written about it, and several documentaries have been filmed there. This in turn has attracted people to the area who want to have a look around, as well as those who just want to abuse the women working there. The area has now been earmarked as a site of major urban regeneration, which also brings new concerns about where the sex workers will be displaced to next, possibly even more deeply into the residential areas, around which the regeneration is occurring. The Joanna Project has operated for 14 years, working exclusively with street sex workers; initially offering street outreach, and more recently centre based services to

women who sell sex in the Managed Area. During this period the project has grown, firstly, in the range of services offered and secondly, in how those services are delivered. There is a clear intentionality to help women service users to develop an exit strategy from sex work, associated issues of homelessness and drug and alcohol use. The project works holistically and one of its stated aims is to actively promote the health, safety, civil and human rights of service users. The project has a low threshold approach, meaning it makes little or no demands on its service users, which is an important component of the support and care crucial to its core offer (Hill & Laredo, 2018), furthermore in keeping with this approach the team have consciously eschewed a more traditional focus on targets and outcomes. This counterintuitive way of working means the project workers can support their service users for as long as the women themselves require. Whilst there is a zero-tolerance policy to drug/alcohol taking on site, or bringing substances into the house, there is a deliberate attempt to lower all other barriers to access. This approach has developed as a direct response to the multiple and complex needs of the women who access the service. It is clear that the staff team understand both what motivates their service user group, but equally what deters them from accessing service provision. This knowledge is borne out of an approach that seeks to accompany the women who use the project, in their own words they 'journey with women', rather than determine and define solutions for them.

Although Joanna House now forms the central hub of the project, the design of the house and the support Joanna offers has grown out of working closely with the service user group. The approach has developed organically because of the vision and commitment of the staff to the project, which in turn is a response developed through the level of insight and 'knowing' the service user group and their needs.

Very simple things, like understanding that many of the women, because of their lifestyles; many of the women are precariously housed, so may have personal hygiene issues, or no-where to wash their clothes, therefore having a safe place to shower and maintain their hygiene and dignity was very important.

Treating women with dignity and respect is core to the offer at JP, and there is a consciously realised desire to recreate a familial setting at the house. This is manifested in several ways, but rather than externally imposing discipline on the service users, the preferred approach is to encourage service users to treat each other with respect. This principle is constantly underlined and reinforced and is fundamental to the aspiration of creating an inclusive and respectful community.

The precarious, complex and chaotic lives of those who are involved in on street prostitution are well documented; difficulties include: violence, 'problematic drug and/or alcohol use', homelessness, 'low self-esteem', 'harassment from police and communities' criminalisation and 'negative experiences of accessing statutory services' (Pitcher, 2006:236). The process of exiting can be a cycle within which individuals can become trapped for years at different stages. They may progress rapidly through the various stages, only to fall out completely or go back to stage one. This means that having a support service like the JP is vital to sustaining women on their journey through this cycle. The ethos of Joana Project is to work holistically with its service users, accepting that they will take a long time to get to where they want to be, and indeed may relapse frequently. The strength of the project is it will never turn anyone away and will continue to work with women over many years, despite what might appear to be little or no change in their circumstances. JP supports women to exit prostitution, but in the full knowledge that knowledge that exiting is not a linear one-off process but rather it is an exceptionally

difficult and lengthy process, often involving periods of re-engaging in sex work and multi-agency support (see, for example, Hester and Westmarland, 2004; Cusick et al., 2011). In moving out of lifestyles associated with street sex work, problematic drug use and homelessness, women often encounter many barriers, changes in external circumstances alone are not enough, changes to internal worlds are also required. This makes the 'exiting' process complex and lengthy.

The staff team at the JP acknowledges just how difficult this process is, and often for very clear practical reasons, such as homelessness, complicated medical histories, poverty, interrupted education, but also frequently related to complex mental health issues. As a result, there is a high level of practical support on offer to the women who access JH; helping to sort out problematic substance abuse, housing, medical issues or benefits, but from a position which is clear about the nature of the barriers their service users face because of their substance misuse. Where JP stands out in terms of the support delivered is the breadth and depth of the workers' understanding of the complexities of the lives of the women they work with, and inevitably then, their provision must then go beyond offering instrumental help. JP stands out because in addition to all the above it is a project which provides emotional support, friendship and community. The project workers refer to this as the 'humpty dumpty' approach, meaning that in their professional roles it is more important to 'hold someone together' when they're down, rather than trying to fix them before they are in the right space. Great emphasis is placed on developing JH as a recovery community, where support, solidarity and community are the touchstones. There is a clear recognition that to overcome years of self-harm, stigma and the violence the women experience as part of their everyday requires a depth of emotional support. One of the very distinctive approaches adopted by the Joann team is building on the

idea of family and offering the kind of unconditional support that families offer, the idea of wrap around care. This does not mean staff don't challenge the service users and will accept them on any terms rather, that through their experience of working alongside this client group they have a very good understanding of the fragility of these women's lives and complexity and depth of their support needs.

It is widely recognised that women's lack of economic choice is a key reason for entry into 'marginalised' lifestyles including street-based sex work and associated issues of homelessness and problematic poly drug use. This is the position that underpins the work at JP without explicitly engaging in political debates about the nature of sex work, their approach is informed by an understanding that street sex work is not a career choice for anyone, furthermore the project defends a position arguing that sex work is exploitative and inherently violent and no woman is on the streets through her own choice.

Ros:

- What was learnt from this work? This includes a discussion that could include; analysis of power, personal and community empowerment, inequality / anti-discriminatory practice, leadership development / community building, etc
- Literature underpinning the development of this work and the analysis of it.

So we need a bit of a focus on how JP's philosophy is a good example of CD practice, and what can be learned.