

# **Understanding the support needs of sex workers in the West Midlands using the Internet for their work**

## **Scoping research for the Red Project**

### **Final Report**

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## Summary

This report considers the findings from a research study for the Red Project in Birmingham and Solihull, which explored the service needs of women sex workers who currently or recently worked online in the area, as well as those living in the wider West Midlands who might have future need of the services of the project.

### Aims and background to the research

The Red Project, which was established in July 2017, delivers services in Birmingham and Solihull. It provides emotional support, specialist information and advice to women sex workers affected by sexual violence. A previous evaluation of the Red Project had identified that the project was not reaching sex workers who advertise or provide services via the Internet.

The Red Project received a small grant from the Feminist Review Trust to investigate what online sex workers wanted from services and how they preferred to access support. The research study explored the support needs of online-based women sex workers who lived or worked in Birmingham or Solihull or were based in the West Midlands, who had been affected by sexual violence or felt they might need future support from the Red Project, in order to shape service provision.

### Research methods

The research included:

- A short literature review providing an overview of sectors of sex working, sexual violence and reporting, and delivery of services to online sex workers;
- Promoting the Red Project research study and accessing potential participants through existing networks;
- Designing and managing a short online survey to explore promotion of the Red Project, sex workers' knowledge of the project, preferred services and barriers to access;
- Undertaking a small number of semi-structured telephone or Skype interviews with women online sex workers, to gather their views on sexual violence services for sex workers.

The researchers drew up protocols for informed consent and data protection prior to commencing fieldwork. The survey ran from the end of May to mid-August 2020, with interviews taking place concurrently. Responses to the survey were received from 18 women working in Birmingham or Solihull or based in the West Midlands, although only 13 completed all the survey questions. In addition, interviews were undertaken with four women who were currently or had previously worked in the Birmingham area.

## Main findings

Awareness of the Red Project amongst survey respondents prior to the research was limited. The project had previously advertised on an online forum providing peer support for escorts and this appeared to be the main source of information, as well as a partner sex work project in the city. There appeared to be less knowledge of the project in mainstream agencies, however, including sexual violence services. A further issue was that there was some perception that the project was primarily aimed at street-based sex workers and not workers in other sectors.

While only one survey and one interview respondent had previously accessed the Red Project's services, the feedback was very positive. Of particular importance was the role of the Independent Sexual Violence Advocate based in the project, who had liaised with the police and acted as an intermediary between the sex worker and other agencies. One interview participant noted that the advocacy work provided had influenced the actions of the police, who otherwise might not have pursued her case.

The Red Project services that survey respondents would be most likely to use were support for health and wellbeing, support to report crimes to the police, and counselling support. Respondents also indicated that they would be interested in National Ugly Mugs alerts, support after experiencing sexual assault, rape or domestic abuse, and safety information and advice. An interview participant also identified safety information and provision of information on screening potential clients as important, particularly for women new to online sex work.

The most preferred means of accessing project services and support was online, with telephone services also being an important means of communication. Interview participants noted that because of their working times, the availability of online or telephone support was more convenient for informal support as well as reporting violent incidents. Knowing there was a non-judgemental service which understood the working circumstances and support needs of sex workers was also important to participants. The optimum times to access services were afternoon or evening.

Nearly all survey respondents stated that if they were to seek support after an experience of sexual violence, they would prefer that service to be a specialist one for sex workers. The main concerns were that they might experience prejudice from staff in generic services, that staff may not have experience of the specific needs of sex workers, and that some services may see sex work itself as sexual violence, which might influence the support they received. Some respondents had previously experienced a lack of understanding or judgemental attitudes from some agency staff. Interview participants also expressed concern that the stigma attached to sex work might have some impact on their treatment and felt that staff in a specialist service would be more informed about the experiences of women in the sex industry, and more likely to provide non-judgemental support. One participant, however, identified that if there was a perception that specialist services were primarily for workers in street-based or managed settings, they may be seen as less appropriate for those in online sectors. Moreover, some sex workers may not disclose their occupation to service providers. These findings illustrate the need for increased

awareness amongst generic services of the diverse working circumstances and service needs of sex workers.

Survey respondents and interview participants referred to a range of online platforms where the Red Project might advertise its services to reach a wider number of online sex workers. The main platforms to promote the project were considered to be Twitter, the SAAFE Escort Forum, AdultWork and National Ugly Mugs. Other online platforms for adult services are being developed all the time and it is advisable for the project to have up-to-date information about which sources online sex workers are likely to use. It is also important for the project to raise awareness amongst mainstream agencies where sex workers may access their services, to ensure that they are informed about the specialist provision available from the Red Project. Ideally, information should also be available in languages other than English, to ensure that migrant sex workers in the area are aware of the services provided.

### **Main recommendations**

The findings from the study suggest a number of actions to increase awareness of the Red Project and to inform service delivery for online sex workers. These include:

- Raising awareness amongst staff in mainstream agencies, including the managing agency of the Red Project, of the services offered by the project and the service needs of online sex workers;
- Consideration of diversity and equality matters in relation to promotion, netreach and marketing of services;
- Continued close liaison and joint work between the Red Project and other specialist services for sex workers in the area, to ensure coordinated provision;
- Flexibility of delivery which includes access to support and advice for online sex workers via the Internet and telephone;
- Providing the opportunity for informal chat with sex workers considering reporting violence, or wishing to discuss safety;
- Ensure there is prominent messaging that the project is for a range of online workers and not just those who offer in person services;
- When reviewing website content, consider including links to UK sex worker rights organisations and other national or local sex worker-led organisations;
- Review the Red Project's online presence and netreach to consider expanding its reach, and ensuring regular posting on sites currently used, to refresh information and improve prominence.

## **Introduction**

This report considers the findings from a research study for the Red Project in Birmingham and Solihull, which explored the service needs of women sex workers who currently or recently worked online in the area, as well as those living in the wider West Midlands who might have future need of the services of the project. The report explains the background to the study and research methods, reviews the literature relating to sex work, sexual violence and services, discusses the research findings and presents recommendations for future practice.

## **About the Red Project**

The Red Project was established in July 2017. It provides emotional support, specialist information and advice to women sex workers affected by sexual violence. The project was funded initially by the Tampon Tax and was delivered in three locations in the West Midlands: Coventry, Birmingham and Solihull, and the Black Country, via a consortium of three specialist charities: Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (CRASAC), Birmingham and Solihull Rape and Sexual Violence Project (RSVP) and Black Country Women's Aid (BCWA). Each area had a dedicated Sexual Violence Prevention Worker, two of whom had been trained as specialist Independent Sexual Violence Advisors. After the initial funding ceased at the end of March 2020, the project was funded by RSVP to continue its work in Birmingham and Solihull, with the original project worker continuing as Independent Sexual Violence Advocate (ISVA).

The project provides a range of advice on issues such as sex workers' rights, sexual health and reporting incidents of violence. As part of its holistic approach, it also offers referral to specialist counselling and therapeutic support. In partnership with other agencies, the project has provided drop-in sessions, although during the Covid-19 crisis support has continued by telephone and online.

An independent evaluation report was produced in March 2020 (Pitcher, 2020). It drew on a review of project documentation, including feedback from service users, and interviews with project staff and partner agencies to reflect on outcomes and provide recommendations for future delivery and monitoring.

## **Background to the research**

One of the gaps in provision identified by project staff and in the evaluation was that currently the sex workers who access the project are mainly street-based, with a small proportion working in parlours/saunas, whereas the project is not reaching independent sex workers who work via the Internet, which research shows are the majority of the sex working population.

The Red Project received a small grant from the Feminist Review Trust to explore the needs of online sex workers. The Trust has previously funded other projects related to sex work, including the Sex Worker's Opera. The two researchers appointed to undertake the study had previously worked together on a large study of

Internet-based sex workers in the UK, 'Beyond the Gaze' (<https://www.beyond-the-gaze.com/>), and were experienced in survey design, qualitative interviewing and data analysis.

## **Research methods**

The research study explored the support needs of online-based women sex workers who lived or worked in Birmingham or Solihull or were based in the West Midlands, and who had been affected by sexual violence or felt they might need support from the Red Project in future, in order to shape service provision from the Red Project.

### **Summary of methods**

The research included:

- A short literature review;
- Design of survey questionnaire, interview schedule and other research tools;
- Preparing and managing a short online survey;
- Promoting the Red Project research study and accessing potential participants through existing networks;
- Undertaking a small number of semi-structured telephone or Skype interviews;
- Data analysis and writing up key findings for this report, which includes recommendations for future practice.

### **Research stages and processes**

The initial stage was to discuss the research with the Red Project ISVA and the RSVP manager responsible for the study, to explore the research focus and processes, issues of access, baseline information and data collection.

This stage was followed with design of research tools to gather the views of women sex workers (including trans women) working in Birmingham and Solihull who advertise their services online. This included women working in independent or agency escorting, webcamming, BDSM or fetish work, adult film or sexual massage. The research was also expanded to women based in the West Midlands who felt they might have need of the Red Project services in future.

The research project commenced slightly later than anticipated, due to work disruptions caused by the Covid-19 lockdown in late March. Work on the project commenced in early April 2020, including agreement of a revised work plan, scoping of literature and design of research tools.

During April, we designed the survey questionnaire, interview schedule, participant information sheet and informed consent form and also the promotional text for the survey and interviews. These were then finalised by early May, in discussion with the RSVP manager responsible for the research and the Red Project ISVA. Agreement was also reached on the vouchers for completing the pilot survey and interviews,



and the amounts for the survey prize draw, as well as the process for distributing these and ensuring respondent confidentiality.

A list of potential sites for advertising the research was drawn up and agreed during May. The field work commenced at the end of May and finished in mid-August 2020, as detailed below.

The research was promoted through the networks of the researchers and the Red Project, including on Twitter, forwarded to projects in the region providing services to sex workers and on the SAAFE escort forum website. The promotional text for the study was also put on the Red Project website and links to this were shared by the research team. Although one NHS-based project in the area was unable to refer service users to the research, because within the financial and time constraints of the study we were unable to go through the extensive NHS ethical approval procedure, the project was able to retweet and give out information about the survey and interviews to women working online. The researchers also obtained the support of two of the leading adult services advertising platforms who agreed to help promote the research. AdultWork posted information on their Insider website <https://insider.adultwork.com/red-project-survey/> and Vivastreet sent information emails to service providers in the West Midlands. Several reminders were sent out to contacts, placed on websites and tweeted during the field work period. By the time the fieldwork closed in mid-August 2020, more than 500 people had viewed the information about the research on one website, indicating that the research itself may have increased awareness about the Red Project.

### ***Survey of sex workers using the Internet for their work***

The survey questionnaire was put into online format using SmartSurvey, a UK-based company hosting online surveys. The survey was then piloted over two weeks during May 2020, with two respondents testing the questionnaire and providing their comments on the questions and supporting text. Following this, there was a small revision to one of the questions listing potential online platforms where the Red Project could be promoted.

The final survey questionnaire covered the following topics:

- Which are the best online platforms to promote the Red Project to women working in online sex work in the area?
- Where had respondents seen information about the Red Project?
- Had respondents ever used the Red Project services?
- Which services would they be most likely to use, how would they prefer to access services and at what time of day?
- Would respondents prefer to access a specialist service for sex workers if they were seeking support after experiencing sexual violence?
- What are the barriers to accessing general sexual violence services?

Respondents were given the option of participating in a prize draw, with a first prize of an online voucher for £100 and five runner-up prizes of £50 vouchers. Respondents who wished to participate were asked to provide an email address,

which was not linked to the survey data. Email addresses were password-protected and were deleted after the prize draw was completed.

The finalised survey went live on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2020. At 16<sup>th</sup> August, when the survey closed, responses had been received from 18 women sex workers, including 13 completed<sup>1</sup> and 5 partially-completed questionnaires. In total, 38 people had viewed the survey.

### ***Interviews with a sample of sex workers***

Interviews were also undertaken with four women online sex workers, in order to gather their views on sexual violence services for sex workers, including the Red Project if they had used these services, any problems encountered, how specialist services could be most effectively promoted to workers in the online sector, and what support they felt would be helpful to enhance support for online sex workers experiencing sexual violence. It was anticipated that access would be sought initially through the Red Project, but as one of the issues informing the research was that few online sex workers were using the services of the project, the research focus was widened to get the perspectives of women in the area who had not used the project but wanted to contribute their views to inform services.

Those interested in taking part were asked to SMS, call or email the researchers and then were sent further information in the form of a participant information sheet and informed consent form and the researchers offered to answer any further questions. For those who wished to take part a time and date convenient for them to participate in a telephone interview was arranged. Participants received a £40 thank you e-voucher for their time and participation.

### ***Ethical and methodological issues***

As part of the ethical protocol for the evaluation, procedures for informed consent were drawn up. These included being explicit about the aims and processes of the research in advance of setting up interviews, ensuring that participation was voluntary and that participants were aware of their rights to withdraw from the research at any point. Interview participants were given a participant information sheet and consent form to read and sign before taking part in the research and the research was also explained to them. The survey and information materials were in English only, as within the resources of the study it was not possible to provide translations, and it is recognised that this may have been a barrier for participation for some sex workers whose first language was not English.

The survey was anonymous and no information was collected about respondents' IP addresses, or any other digital trace used. The researchers followed British Sociological Association and Social Research Association guidelines concerning the need to avoid unnecessary intrusion into the private and personal lives of participants, and being sensitive to their needs during the interview process. With consent, interviews were recorded for partial transcription. Research data, including

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<sup>1</sup> This includes a respondent to the pilot survey based in the Red Project service area, as there were no substantial changes to the questionnaire following the pilot.

anonymised survey responses and interview transcriptions, were held securely by the researchers on password-protected computers to which only they have access. The Feminist Review Trust also approved the ethical statement for this study.

## Literature review

### Context: Different sectors of sex work and implication for services

The term “sex work” encompasses a wide range of direct and indirect commercial sexual services, including street-based prostitution and brothel work, erotic dancing and online services such as webcam performances, which are subject to different regulatory frameworks in the UK. A recent study of the sex industry in England and Wales identified a broad range of settings of indoor-based sex work, including BDSM, brothels, erotic dance, erotic massage, escorting independently or via an agency, pornography, sex parties, telephone services, therapeutic services and webcamming (Matolcsi et al, 2020).

There continue to be different theoretical and policy perspectives on the sex industry, which can broadly be seen as being fractured along two oppositional lines: prostitution seen as violence against women, versus sexual commerce treated as a form of work (Sanders, O’Neill and Pitcher, 2018). “Sex work” is the term used by the Red Project and is felt to be less discriminatory than the term “prostitute”, which is seen to have negative connotations contributing to stigma against sex workers. It is also a term preferred by many people working in the sex industry. Moreover, if service providers view all prostitution as rape, then it raises the question of how it is possible to distinguish between experiences of rape or sexual assault, either in or outside a working situation, and instances where sexual commerce may be seen by all parties as consensual (SWARM, 2018).

There are no comprehensive statistics on the numbers of people working in the sex industry in the UK. An approximate figure of 80,000 sex workers related to a survey of 17 projects in urban areas in England and Scotland which provided estimates of numbers in their area (Kinnell, 1999). Other estimates suggest there may currently be 72,800 or more sex workers in the UK (Cusick et al, 2009; Home Affairs Select Committee, 2016), although as much sex work remains hidden, particularly independent online work, it is difficult to know precise numbers working in the industry (Pitcher, 2015; Hester et al, 2019). From what is known, a large proportion of sex workers in the UK are women and the majority work in indoor locations, although street-based work remains the most visible aspect of the industry and continues to be the main focus of much policy attention (Sanders, O’Neill and Pitcher, 2018). A study into online sex work in Birmingham and Solihull (Lowe et al, 2018), estimated from advertising sources that there were nearly 600 women sex workers actively advertising for clients. Nonetheless, assessing numbers of active sex workers from advertisements on adult websites may be problematic (Sanders et al, 2018; Hester et al, 2019) and as Lowe et al (2018) note, individuals advertising in any one city may change on a regular basis.

While there is no defining set of characteristics that differentiates indoor from street-based sex workers, there are certain issues that tend to predominate for women

working on the street compared with those working in indoor sectors. For example, women street-based sex workers in the UK are more likely than indoor workers to use 'Class A' drugs and experience problems such as homelessness and debt (Harding and Hamilton, 2009; O'Neill et al, 2016). They are also much more likely to be subjected to violence, for example, from clients, pimps or managers, drug dealers, robbers, other sex workers, or passers-by (Kinnell, 2006; Pitcher et al., 2006). Nonetheless, as discussed below, indoor-based sex workers may experience different forms of violence and other crimes, which has implications for services providing support to sex workers (Goldring et al, 2017; Sanders et al, 2018).

## **Sexual violence and reporting**

### ***Sex workers' experience of violence***

Many studies of sex work discuss occupational health and safety, particularly in relation to sexual health and physical and/or sexual violence. Studies comparing groups of street-based and indoor sex workers have found that indoor sex workers are considerably less likely to experience physical and sexual violence than their street-based counterparts (Church et al, 2001; Jeal and Salisbury, 2007; Sanders, O'Neill and Pitcher, 2018). While some indoor workers, particularly those working alone or in vulnerable circumstances, may experience work-related violence, this has tended to be less prevalent than for street-based workers (Church et al., 2001; Kinnell, 2006; Deering et al, 2014). Although indoor workers on average experience less violence than those on the street, robbery, verbal abuse, disrespectful client behaviours, stalking and intimidation may be issues faced by brothel and lone indoor workers such as escorts (Sanders and Campbell, 2007; Dodsworth, Sorensen and Larsson, 2014). Moreover, the online world of web services may well pose new forms of exploitation and risk that have been relatively unexplored (Jones, 2015). These are discussed below.

Many sex workers have developed strategies for averting or dealing with violence (Sanders and Campbell, 2007). For example, for those working indoors, the presence of others can act as a deterrent, as can CCTV and locks. Nonetheless, negotiating risk and safety is an everyday reality and these are often unaddressed concerns (Davies and Evans, 2007; Laing and Pitcher 2013).

### ***Online sex work: experience of violence, other crimes and risk***

Many Internet-based independent sex workers in the UK operate in isolation, because if they work collectively they are exposed to laws relating to brothel management or controlling for gain (Pitcher and Wijers 2014). This may make them more vulnerable to certain crimes. For example, in countries where sex work is partially criminalised, including the purchase of sexual services, sex workers may be at risk of threats by clients and others to report them to the police, leaving them open to exploitation (Ellison, Ní Dhónaill and Early, 2019).

A major survey of 641 people working in Internet-based sex work in the UK (Sanders et al, 2018) found that respondents were less likely to report experiencing crimes such as sexual assault, physical assault or threats of violence (7.6%, 5% and 12.6% respectively). There were no significant gender differences in these crime categories.

Ellison et al (2019) reported similar proportions in their study of sex workers in Northern Ireland. Although the study methodologies are not comparable, Lowe et al (2018) in a survey of online sex workers in Birmingham and Solihull found that 29% of women respondents reported having being sexually assaulted in their work.

While incidents of physical and sexual assault may be lower for Internet-based than for street-based workers, sex workers advertising online are nonetheless likely to experience a range of harassing or threatening behaviour. For example, Sanders et al (2018) found that more than 56% of their respondents had experienced threatening or harassing texts, calls or emails in the past five years, and nearly half had encountered verbal abuse. The proportions experiencing this kind of abuse were higher for female than male respondents. Moreover, 65% had received persistent or repeated unwanted contact through email, text or social media, with 29% experiencing repeated unwanted contact in person. Whilst levels of physically violent crime may be relatively low in the online sector compared with street-based work, therefore, there has been a shift in crime trends towards digitally-enabled crimes, which may also cause considerable distress, particularly as many sex workers are concerned about privacy (SWARM, 2018). Because of social stigma, many sex workers may not be open about their work and thus have serious concerns about the potential repercussions if their identity is revealed (Pitcher, 2019; Scoular et al, 2019).

### ***Reporting of crimes***

The majority of studies have found considerable under-reporting by sex workers to the police of crimes of violence against them (Kinnell, 2006; Pitcher and Wijers, 2014; Changing Lives, 2016). The reasons for this may include that sex workers do not expect sympathetic treatment, particularly if violence against them is treated as “part of the job”, or they may be in fear of arrest for prostitution-related or other offences. Some migrant workers may be particularly reluctant to report crimes because of concerns over their residency status (Mai, 2009). Indoor workers may be more likely than their street-based counterparts to report certain crimes against them, particularly non-violent crimes and robbery (Brooks-Gordon, 2006). Nonetheless, recent studies have found that many online sex workers are reluctant to go to the police if they need support (Connelly et al 2018; Trueman, 2018; Ellison et al, 2019). Campbell et al (2019) found that out of 496 online sex workers who reported having experienced a work related crime, only 114 (23%) stated that they had reported this to the police. A salient concern was a fear that reporting to the police and consequent criminal justice investigation would jeopardise their anonymity, with family, employers and colleges/universities finding out about their sex work. Other factors included anxiety that the police might take action against them or others they worked with and also that commonly experienced crimes such as in-person and online harassment and abuse would not be taken seriously.

Intermediaries such as National Ugly Mugs can facilitate reporting of crimes, but many sex workers are fearful of taking reports further through the criminal justice system, because of factors such as the risk of not being believed, the potential harms of “outing” and the likelihood of being re-victimised through the court process (SWARM, 2018). Reporting of violence to the police may also be dependent on local

policing policies, which may be more liberal in some areas than others (Goldring et al, 2017).

The problems online sex workers face in receiving support when they experience violence against them may also relate to the fact that many police forces, as well as some mainstream and specialist sex work services, appear to have limited knowledge of online markets for sexual services, or the support needs of sex workers advertising online (Goldring et al, 2017; Sanders et al, 2018). Furthermore, continuing judgemental attitudes towards sex workers, including the conflation of sex work with violence against women, may prohibit sex workers' access to essential services such as domestic violence support, even in times of crisis (Holt, 2020).

### **Role of intermediaries, including sex work projects and ISVAs**

In the UK since the mid-1980s, a cumulative body of research has developed which highlights the barriers to access to mainstream health and social welfare provisions for sex workers (Faugier et al, 1992; Ward and Day, 1997; Jeal and Salisbury, 2004; Pitcher, 2006). This body of research informed the development of specialist targeted outreach and support provisions for sex workers which were adopted to reduce these barriers.

This is in a context where it has long been recognised that many sex workers are reluctant to use mainstream services and face a plethora of barriers in doing so, in a context where sex work is highly stigmatised, quasi-criminalised and sex workers experience high levels of social disadvantage and structural discrimination (Platt et al, 2018). Some sex workers, particularly indoor-based workers, may be hidden from service agencies, partly because of fear of stigma if they disclose their working status, and also because many projects are not funded to work with independent indoor-based sex workers (Sanders et al, 2018). Many sex workers have encountered barriers to accessing health, drugs and social care services, for example because of judgemental attitudes of some staff, fear of contact with authorities which may lead to criminalisation, inconvenient opening times or location of services (Pitcher, 2006; Bright and Shannon, 2008).

The advantages of specialist projects have included an ability to make services more accessible by taking them to sex workers via outreach and sex worker-friendly community based provisions and referring people to mainstream services, i.e. acting as a bridge into mainstream health and other services. Such specialist projects have played an important role in meeting sex workers' safety needs. Amongst the generation of HIV and health promotion services for sex workers that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, many quickly developed to address the safety needs of sex workers, identifying high levels of violent and other crimes experienced by sex worker populations in the UK. Local outreach and support services for sex workers in the UK incorporated ugly mugs schemes into their provisions, to meet the needs of sex workers who were reluctant to go to the police but keen to let other sex workers know about dangerous individuals. They were encouraged to make reports to projects who circulated alerts verbally or via warning boards. Projects would also offer emotional and health support to sex worker victims of crime. Such schemes developed and some projects also offered the option of acting as intermediaries between sex workers who reported crimes to them and the police. Projects shared

information about their local schemes through national networking groups which culminated in good practice guidance for ugly mugs published by the UK Network of Sex Work Projects (2008; 2011). A National Ugly Mugs Scheme (NUM) was established by UKNSWP in 2011, which is now a national charity.

At a local level some projects identified that sex workers were not accessing mainstream sexual violence services and hence missing the specialist victim support they could offer, including the support of Independent Sexual Violence Advisors, a role increasingly provided with sexual violence services in the late 2000s. Generic Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs) were initially developed in 2005 in England and Wales, with pilot funding from the Home Office. Their role is to provide support, advice and help for victims and survivors of sexual violence (Home Office, 2017). Robinson and Hudson (2011) comment on the importance of the independence of the ISVA role from statutory services, while it is also necessary to maintain close relationships with those services. Thus multi-agency partnerships are crucial to the effectiveness of the role. The Stern Review (Home Office, 2010) made a number of recommendations in relation to victim care and reporting. The review noted the varying provision of ISVAs across England and Wales and recommended that the role *'should become part of the standard arrangements in all areas where the number of rape complaints justifies it'* (Home Office, 2010: 118). The Government does not hold information on the number of ISVAs in England and Wales, but up to March 2017 had made provision of £1.72 million per year for part-funding of 87 ISVAs, and continues to fund additional ISVA support.<sup>2</sup>

Some sex work projects developed expertise supporting sex worker victims of sexual violence over time as part of general support for sex workers around safety, crime reporting and victim support. Some formalised this by securing funding for specialist sex worker sexual violence advisors, who could develop expertise and dedicate time to this role. The Armistead Project, which supported sex workers in Liverpool, identified the need for a specialist ISVA providing services to sex workers encountering sexual violence (Campbell and Sanders, 2014). The reasons for the specialist role included the higher levels of rape and sexual assault amongst sex workers, with low levels of reporting, the under-representation of sex workers accessing mainstream ISVA services, and the multi-layered support needs of this group, which required dedicated workers who were trained in this role. Hence the first specialist Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) for sex workers, offering support to sex workers who had experienced rape or sexual assault from reporting to court appearance, was established in 2006 in Liverpool. The role also had flexibility to support sex workers who were victims of other crimes. This was concurrent with crimes against sex workers being treated by Merseyside police as hate crimes. Campbell (2016) identified the following key duties of the Armistead SWISVA: taking reports and coordinating the ugly mugs scheme, a range of practical crisis support (e.g. safety planning, support to access health care, SARC services, housing), ongoing emotional support, court support, advocacy, and police liaison. Campbell (2014) notes that positive outcomes in the area included an increase in the proportion of sex workers reporting incidents of sexual violence, an increase in conviction rates for crimes against sex workers and enhanced victim support for sex

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2017-09-04/8430/> accessed 29<sup>th</sup> June 2020.

worker victims of crime. The Home Office (2011) also included Liverpool as a case study example of an area that has prioritised safety of sex workers and referred to the specialist ISVA service in the sex work project as having contributed to an increase in the proportion of sex workers consenting to share details of offences with the police. The sex work ISVA was also adopted within a number of other sex work projects in the UK, including Open Doors in East London (Blair 2011) and in the SWISH project in Coventry and Warwickshire, run by the Terrence Higgins Trust, which also provided a service for sex workers in Sandwell. Whilst the early sex work independent sexual violence advisors were located within specialist projects some of the roles later developed were housed within generic sexual violence services. This was the case in Coventry where the SWISH project lost its funding towards the end of 2016, but the specialist ISVA role (and worker) subsequently transferred to the Red Project (Pitcher 2020).

Whilst available research or evaluation studies which examine or touch on the SWISVA role suggest they have supported street sex workers to a greater extent than parlour or online workers, they have in most services been there to support sex workers in all sectors and have provided support to workers in the online sector. Campbell and Sanders (2014) in an evaluation of the SWISVA in the Open Doors Project reported that a total of 63 sex workers were referred to the SWISVA between October 2010 and end of March 2013. Amongst these street sex workers were the larger group referred each year but the proportion of indoor/online sex worker referred increased each year, growing from 8.3% in 2010/11 to over a third in 2012/13. The people referred received a range of support from the SWISVA, from report to court, and sixteen cases went to court and secured a successful prosecution. This had included cases involving online sex workers: in one case three offenders were convicted of robbery and rape of a Brazilian sex worker who worked as an online escort, who was undocumented when the crime took place. The Red Umbrella Project, which had a SWISVA post in their team, supported sex worker victims of hate crime in Merseyside between 2017 and 2020. An evaluation of the service (Campbell 2020) found that the majority of sex workers the SWISVA had supported were street sex workers but they had also supported a small number of online workers, including two women whose separate cases went to court and the offenders were convicted. Regular netreach was introduced in the latter year of the project, to reach more online workers.

## **Barriers to service use for online sex workers**

It is only in recent years, that research has considered the barriers online workers specifically encounter (Sanders et al, 2018). Sanders et al (2018) argued that whilst the sex industry had been transformed by online technology, policy and service provision was slow in catching up with these changes. A key finding of Goldring et al (2017: 2) was that *'The growth in online sex work means that a radical rethink is required with regard to the support of sex workers, particularly those who are working online'*.

For many sex workers, the fear of facing judgemental attitudes/assumptions about themselves or their sex work and discrimination from staff within services presents a barrier. An issue highlighted by research is that those online sex workers who do access generic or mainstream health or sexual health services and social welfare



provisions often do not disclose their sex working for fear of stigmatisation and judgement. This could mean workers may not get support they need. Trueman (2018) found that the services online workers in Teesside were most likely to access were generic sexual health services and GPs, yet 82% did not let those services know they were sex working. Lowe et al (2017) found that amongst sex workers in their study who did not use a specialist sex work project for their sexual health care, only 26% disclosed their sex work. As with sex workers in the Beyond the Gaze study, the Birmingham workers valued sex worker projects because they provided a trusted service space where they were free to discuss sexual health issues without fear of stigma.

Online sex workers who have children share with sex workers in all sectors a fear that having contact with a mainstream service may lead to them being referred to social services child protection services (Trueman, 2018). While online sex workers do not encounter the threat of arrest under soliciting legislation faced by street workers, studies have found that those who work together indoors with a colleague for safety fear police attention and legal action under brothel-keeping legislation or the possibility of public identification (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014; Sanders et al, 2018). Hence there is a fear of identification by any organisation seen as part of the authorities, which can be a barrier to access (Campbell et al, 2018).

Sanders et al (2018) found many online sex workers did not necessarily perceive specialist sex work services as relevant to their needs. They understood many services to be for sex workers involved in street sex work and did not see them as having the experience, knowledge or provisions relevant to the online/indoor sector. Some services were perceived as having an ethos which directly or indirectly “judged” some in the online sector or they were at odds with the sex workers’ own approach to their sex working. Trueman (2018) also found that while all service providers interviewed demonstrated knowledge of street sex work, few had knowledge of the online sector, with some understanding amongst rape crisis services and police but based on cases involving exploitative situations. Online migrant sex workers face many of the barriers to accessing health and other support services faced by nationals, yet some of these can be heightened and they face additional barriers, such as limited knowledge of services or how to access rights and entitlements (Mai, 2009; Sanders et al, 2018). They may also distrust services and authorities, including health workers and people from other support services, due to fear of action regarding immigration status, particularly for people with irregular or undocumented immigration status and language barriers.

Goldring et al (2017) identified three main reasons why the needs of online sex workers in Manchester were not being met: these were the inability to be open about their work, that they tended to work alone, and that they were often not aware of support for online workers. It has been argued that services need to not only provide relevant provisions but to promote them in a way which reaches the online sector (Sanders et al, 2018; Trueman, 2018). This is discussed in the next section on good practice.

## Support for online sex workers: good practice learning

As part of the Beyond the Gaze participatory action research project a Practitioners' Forum was established to share practice about working with online sex workers, which helped to inform the 'Practice Guidance for Working With Online Sex Workers' (2018). The guidance and other studies have described the main provisions which online sex workers identify as meeting their needs. These include:

- Easy access to free, confidential, non-judgemental sexual health services. Whilst some sex workers want to access a mainstream sexual health clinic or other sexual health services, others prefer a specialist sex work outreach project or clinics where they can go for information, advice and screening. Lowe et al (2018) recommended that sexual health and support service information also be provided in Romanian, with a significant cohort of Romanian sex workers in Birmingham and Solihull;
- Safety, crime reporting and support for online sex worker victims of crime with safety information (Goldring et al 2017), promotion of and access to national and local 'ugly mugs' third party reporting and alerting schemes, specialist support for sex worker victims of crime including specialist sex work Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (SWISVAs);
- Emotional support and safe space with non-judgemental listening support, including help to manage emotional labour of sex work and the impact of working in a stigmatised profession, often lone working. Access to non-judgemental counselling and therapeutic support is important (Maciotti et al, 2017). A recent survey of online workers carried out during the Covid-19 crisis found anxiety about financial survival during the crisis was creating high levels of anxiety amongst online sex workers and advised that mental health support was even more important (MASH, 2020);
- Legal information, advice and support related directly to laws on sex work (e.g. brothel management legislation) and a broader range of rights issues such as privacy, harassment, immigration, housing, safeguarding and welfare benefits;
- Advice and support re self-employment, tax and other business matters. There is some evidence financial matters are of increased importance for online sex workers whose livelihoods have been hit hard by Covid-19, often unable to work due to restrictions and yet excluded from government crisis funds (Platt et al, 2020; MASH, 2020);
- Targeted work with migrant sex workers due to additional and heightened barriers for migrant online sex workers;
- Enabling spaces and opportunities for peer support, sex worker-led initiatives, voice and advocacy, recognising the important of and building on peer support networks or "communities of practice" (Goldring et al 2017);
- Whilst some online sex workers describe a "safe space", drop-in for online workers as valuable others are fearful these could jeopardise anonymity and lead to outing (Trueman 2018);
- Some online sex workers may want support to leave sex work yet others do not, hence services need to approach the provision of support with sensitivity, respect the choices of sex workers, not pressurising those who do not want to leave (MASH, 2020), and recognise the complexities of people's experiences

of moving between sex work and other work (Sanders et al, 2018). Research has shown a minority of online sex workers identify current or former problematic drug use, with drug and alcohol support less prevalent as a need compared to street sex work populations. Projects need to enable access to support for the minority who need it but avoid generalisations from specific sectors which may not apply to sex workers in other forms of work.

Digital marketing and netreach<sup>3</sup> to promote specific services is an important aspect of service provision for online workers (Trueman, 2018). An ethical, nonintrusive presence in sex work community spaces, in line with data protection law, and an active online presence across a range of platforms, with content relevant for online sex workers and virtual access to support is important to reach online workers ((Dodsworth et al, 2014; Goldring et al, 2017). Beyond the Gaze (2018) described a range of “netreach” methods to promote services to online workers and deliver information, advice and support, detailing a range of online platforms and methods used by projects and necessary skills for netreach workers, drawing on learning from projects in the UK and more widely in Europe (Correlation, 2011; Indoors, 2014). A recent survey of online workers during Covid-19 reported that the most requested support was online workshops providing information about online safety, how to keep in good mental health, peer support, creating boundaries with customers and financial advice (MASH 2020).

Beyond the Gaze (2018) guidance placed a strong emphasis on meaningful sex worker involvement in the development of support service provision for online sex workers, with current and former sex workers as paid workers in the delivery of netreach provisions. As well as proactively reaching out to the online sector, guidance has stressed services need to dedicate staff resources to such work and include work with online workers in service plans (Indoors, 2014) to ensure it is mainstreamed and not eroded.

Notably during the Covid-19 crisis many projects working with sex workers in the UK looked to online methods to stay in touch with service users, enable access and deliver information and support, netreach advice sessions (some increasing their level of such provision). Some ran Zoom support sessions or webinar events<sup>4</sup>. We have yet to see if this will leave a legacy with changes to service delivery in the longer term.

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<sup>3</sup> Defined as ‘outreach and service provision using the internet, social media, other online platforms and digital technologies to communicate with sex workers, promote services and provide information or support’ (Beyond the Gaze 2018, p. 2)

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with Chair of Sex Work Practitioners Forum, University of Leicester

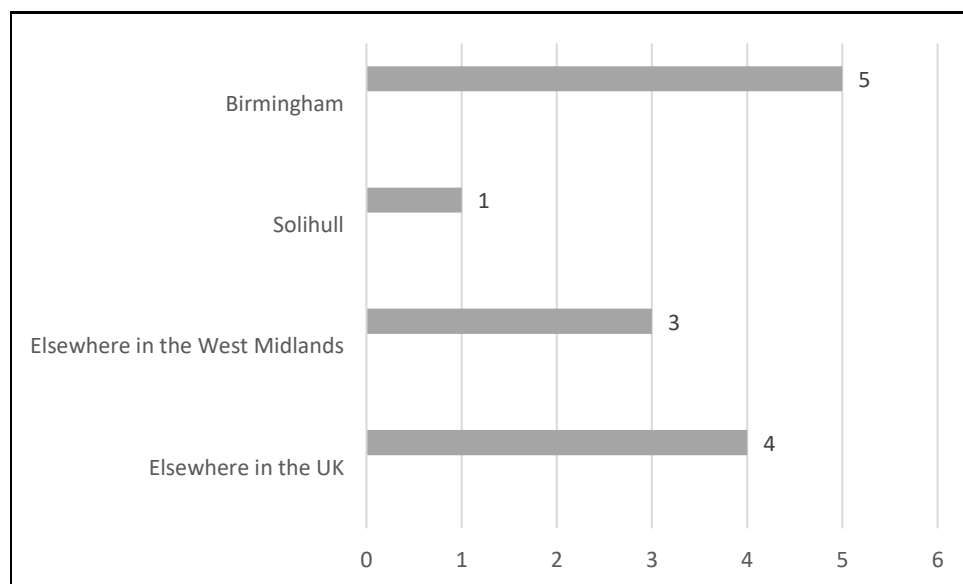
## Research findings

This section discusses the analysis of the online survey and semi-structured interviews, under headings related to the main questions asked during the research. These include: awareness of the Red Project and use of the project’s services; preferences regarding types of services provided; support for sex workers who have been victims of sexual violence, including barriers to accessing services; and promotion of services.

### About the respondents

We received either partial or complete responses to the survey from 18 women working in Birmingham or Solihull, or based in the West Midlands. Of these, 13 responded to all the questions, including place of residence and area of work. More than a quarter (28%) lived in Birmingham (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Area of residence**



N=13

Respondents worked in a number of online sectors, with the main area of work being independent escorting (Table 1). Eleven respondents worked in more than one sector concurrently.

**Table 1 Sector of work**

Sector	Number	Percent
Independent escorting	11	84.6
Phone sex	5	38.5
Webcamming	4	30.8
BDSM	3	23.1
Sexual Massage	3	23.1
Adult Film	3	23.1
Agency escorting	2	15.4

N=13. Multiple response question so percentages add up to more than 100.

The four interview participants identified as female, two were white British, two identified as from a black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) background and one identified as lesbian. Three worked predominantly in the Birmingham area and one had regularly visited the area 'on tour' for some years. Two worked predominantly as escorts, one worked as an escort and dominatrix and one offered webcamming, SMS, phone sex and prodom meets.

## **Awareness of the Red Project**

Survey respondents were asked if they had ever seen information about the Red Project on specified online platforms. Only 11 respondents had seen information about the project. This was primarily on the SAAFE escort forum (8 respondents), which may have been as a result of the promotion of the research on that site. Additionally, three had seen the information via the Red Project Twitter account, two on the Red Project website and one via the AdultWork Twitter account and on their Insider page.

One survey respondent who had previously used the Red Project's services commented on the importance of promoting the project to online sex workers. This respondent felt that knowing the project was there would encourage more people to report violent crimes:

It would be great if the Red Project would be able to reach more workers, as they may feel more inclined to report an incident of violence to the police. I, personally, would not have bothered if I wasn't aware of the Red Project. They have also been my first point of call when I have had any other violent incidents at work, this is great, as a worker may not feel confident enough to report to the police straight away. (Survey respondent)

Two interview participants were aware of the Red Project before learning about and taking part in the research, and two were not. The participant who had received support from The Red Project was informed about the project by workers at a sex work project in the city, SAFE, which is part of Umbrella Sexual Health Services:

Basically I told SAFE about a crime that had been done to me I said I didn't want to go to the police because they are not interested in this kind of crime, you know you get a bad response if you're a sex worker. But when I told SAFE they gave me like a leaflet on the Red Project and they referred me to them and when I next saw the SAFE Project they gave me [the Red Project ISVA's] mobile and we liaised from there. (Participant 1)

Another had read information about the Red Project on the SAAFE escort forum:

I saw it advertising also on SAAFE, properly about a year ago when I first started sex work. So I read the SAAFE website and saw about the advice and information services (Participant 4)

Interestingly one of the interviewees who had not heard of the Red Project was aware of the wider RSVP project:

I hadn't actually which was more surprising to me when I saw what the Red Project was connected to, but I hadn't heard of it. I saw it [research information] on AdultWork and that was the first time I heard about the Red Project and then I saw it was connected to RSVP. I'm currently with RSVP and the counsellor knows my background but she never mentioned the Red Project. (Participant 2)

One participant identified the perception of services as for street workers as a key barrier:

From my point of view it's not being clear about what these different charities provide...I assumed that pretty much all sex work charities although they would be happy to be approached by online workers mostly exist for street workers which was my assumption. So it's the perception. (Participant 4)

These comments highlight the importance of providing services directly tailored to sex workers, ensuring that those services are promoted widely amongst colleagues and in online forums, as discussed later in this report, and that there is clear and prominent messaging that services are for online workers.

### **Use of the Red Project services**

Out of 15 survey respondents, only one respondent had ever used the Red Project's services. The interview participant who was aware of The Red Project had accessed its services following a crime she experienced and being referred by SAFE. She went on to receive a range of support from The Red Project ISVA related to crimes of sexual violence she experienced, as discussed below.

One of the participants who had not previously been aware of The Red Project had accessed the wider RSVP service for support relating to a rape she had experienced. It was a surprise to her that she had not been made aware of the specialist provision for sex workers within RSVP by staff, as she had disclosed her sex work and this was relevant to the incident for which she was seeking support. Had she known of the Red Project's existence at the time she would have opted to access support through this project:

In my case at least two of the assaults that I've experienced, have been because of my online work, directly I would say. They have taken place in the context of my work. And I think that is something that people don't think about with online work often. (Participant 2)

This participant's experience may have been exceptional but combined with the survey responses, it highlights the importance of ensuring all RSVP staff are fully aware of the Red Project service and offer this option to women who disclose sex work.

One interview participant had received support related to sexual violence victimisation from the Red Project ISVA, who had also helped her in reporting the incident:

She helped me write everything down, she helped me make the report to the police and she was there when I reported it, she sat with me and she also said like 'If you want me to update you I can do'. (Participant 1)

Following this initial support to report the crime the Red Project ISVA played an important role in liaising with the police about the investigation and acting as an intermediary between the victim and the police. The participant described the advocacy work of the ISVA, which she saw as influencing the actions of the police, who otherwise might not have pursued the case:

[The Red Project ISVA] wasn't particularly impressed with the way they dealt with the case, because they closed it saying they couldn't identify the offender... she said do you want a review? Do you want me to speak to somebody about it? Her manager wasn't very happy about it either and actually the police opened it up again. So due to [the Red Project ISVA] and her colleague that was reopened. If I had called the police alone that wouldn't have happened. (Participant 1)

This participant subsequently experienced another crime of sexual violence early in 2020 and again accessed the Red Project:

Also I had another crime committed against me just before, in [early 2020]. [The Red Project ISVA] was the first person I told, well the first outside person I told. So I told [her] the next day and because of that the next day the case was allocated. So the first one I reported to the police and the Red Project supported me through that and that was reopened very recently like two weeks ago, because I had reported it like last December and they closed it. The police called me, a woman who knew me and said 'that person has been actually arrested and questions and you'll have to do an identify parade'. So I'm waiting for that to happen and [the Red Project ISVA] will support me with that. (Participant 1)

This participant was very positive about the support she had received. She noted particularly the impact it had had on the policing response:

They have always accelerated things for me and I always say to people on the industry if you ever need help kind of thing, you should always contact the Red Project to help you, going to the police alone is pretty much useless. And I know the two incidents of violence I have reported which were quite serious I just know they would not have been acted upon if I had gone by myself. (Participant 1)

While most of our research participants had not previously been aware of the services offered by the Red Project, the feedback from service users suggests the ISVA has provided vital support to report incidents of violence and also acted as an intermediary between sex workers and the police. As we noted in the literature review, many online sex workers may be reluctant to disclose their working status to the police and other mainstream services, and having access to a non-judgemental service which is aware of sex workers' support needs is important for encouraging reporting of violent crimes.

## Services most required, preferred access and times

Survey respondents were asked which of the Red Project services they would be most likely to use. Most important were support for health and wellbeing, support to report crimes to the police and counselling support (Table 2). Respondents could also add their own categories, but did not make use of this option.

**Table 2 Which services offered would you be most likely to use?**

Services most likely to use	Number	Percent
Outreach visits from the Red Project worker	2	14.3
National Ugly Mugs alerts	7	50.0
Safety information and advice	5	35.7
Support to report crimes (including online harassment) to the police	9	64.3
Support around health and wellbeing	10	71.4
Support if you have experienced sexual assault, rape or domestic abuse	6	42.9
Counselling support	8	57.1
Help with accessing other services	4	28.6
Drop-in for online workers	5	35.7

N=14. Multiple response question so percentages add up to more than 100.

One interview participant identified safety information as important and felt that the provision of information on screening was particularly useful and relevant for women new to online sex work:

For online workers what springs to my mind is obviously you get quite a few clients, a memorable minority, who send abusive messages and can be nasty and threatening, often these are not clients in the sense that they never intend to give you any money but they will contact you. What I've found with experience there are a lot of red flags you can pick up on from somebody's communication which kind of tells you from early on that they are not quite right or they don't have good intentions toward you. So maybe girls could benefit from advice on how to recognise these kind of sinister people really. Especially for new girls that could be really useful. When I first started I was reading SAAFE a lot and reading posts by more experienced women, who would advise 'If somebody messages XYZ block them because they'll turn out to be not very nice'. At first I was thinking that message seems quite innocuous so why is it a red flag, but when you have more experience you realise it's something you need to be aware of, so screening stuff. (Participant 4)

Respondents were also asked to rank the way in which they would prefer to access services. Most important was online, followed by via the telephone (Table 3).



**Table 3: Preferred way to access Red Project services and support**

Means of access	Ranking (mean)
Online	4.47
Telephone	3.20
Website chat facility	2.73
Drop-in for online and indoor workers	2.33
In person with an individual support worker	2.27

N=15

The preferred times to access services for the 12 survey respondents who completed this question were early afternoon (83.3%; n=10) and late afternoon (75%; n=9). Half of respondents (n=6) would access services in the evening and only a quarter (n=3) in the morning.

The one interview participant who had accessed support from The Red Project, reported satisfaction with the service she had received and the telephone and face-to-face support:

I like the service I've had because The Red Project is quite personal, it's very friendly and down to earth. I would personally prefer to speak on the phone and face to face. And I think because we, a lot of us are busy and we're in quite an isolating job so it's nice to be able to arrange a face to face meeting or phone call with her that suits me best. And you're talking about very intimate issues. (Participant 1)

The interview participant who had received counselling from RSVP but not been informed about or accessed the Red Project described how the more bespoke, informal immediate support from The Red Project would have been valued by her:

I think it would be really useful to have someone to call on a more informal basis just to say this happened to me today on Cam or in the real world I think that is really important. Because you do experience things that are threatening online as well and I often think that I feel more alone than when I used to do full service sex work, which I used to do. I never know where I can report incidents to for people where there is clearly something going on there. (Participant 2)

She felt having a non-judgemental specialist support service was important:

Even if you are just working online you still have that thing over you of you still could be viewed as a sex worker. I don't really tell people what I do for a living, so I think to be kind of free in that environment to say what you do is really important. And I think it would definitely be useful and I think that a lot of online sex workers think that their safety isn't being looked after. So I think to have that support is invaluable. (Participant 2)

Participants One and Two named SAFE Project (Umbrella) as the other place they accessed, feeling comfortable to do so. Fear of judgment in other sexual violence or generic sexual health services when disclosing sex work was still a major factor:

Mainly I'm just too scared about their judgement really. I know Umbrella are really good with stuff like that, so that is where I do get checked when I need to but I'm still always very guarded and I hate being guarded. (Participant 2)

Participant Three explained that she did not access sex work support services, although she had done so when she first started sex working in her forties:

I used projects for a couple of years but mainly when I first started. But after a while you do get the feeling that they, well I wouldn't say despise you for what you do but they are not service providers themselves they are more concerned by risks so I don't really need free condoms I think some people do like going to have a chat and so on. But because of my age I'm a little bit more, well I don't really need to be supported. (Participant 3)

She recognised services such as the Red Project could be useful for other sex workers, and that the circumstance in which she may use such a service would be in a crisis:

However I think it's useful when you find yourself with someone who could be potentially trying to harm you and you need help when you prefer not to deal with the police yourself. (Participant 3)

This is reminiscent of one of the findings of *Beyond the Gaze*, which found a spectrum of use of health and other support services amongst online workers, with many seeing themselves '*as resourceful being able to find information online and navigate services independently*' (*Beyond the Gaze*, 2018: p. 6).

It may also be that her being an older sex worker heightened this sense of self sufficiency. Whilst she referred to her possibly using the Red Project or other such specialist sex work projects in a crisis situation where the police may need to be called, she went on to reflect that she would still be unlikely to want the police involved or go through the criminal justice system in which she had little faith:

I think that [reporting to police or a project] would be far more stressful, so that would be the end of it. You know the rape prosecutions so far in this country have not been great and it's a time consuming process. They may be changing. But I'm sure they would judge. (Participant 3)

This participant's perception of services is a reminder not only that some people may not choose to access services but their decision may also be shaped by their past experiences.

One interview participant who had not accessed the Red Project said she would in the future if she experienced sexual violence. This was due to raised awareness about the service and having seen positive feedback from other sex workers who have used other such specialist services:

Off the back of this conversation I think I would contact the Red Project as well for support because it's a confusing experience that you wouldn't want to go through on your own really and you can't talk about things with friends because

it's not fair on them, you can't expect them to understand. I've heard from other women who have had dramas going on who have had support from Ugly Mugs and sex work charities that say that they have been really, really supported and can't speak highly enough of them. That's on forums. So I think I would do the same. (Participant 4)

These findings emphasise that online sex workers may wish to access a range of services from support projects, but that flexibility in delivery is important. Because of their working times and styles, online support is particularly useful, but also access to telephone support. Having the opportunity for informal discussions may also sometimes be preferable to a more formal setting for reporting incidents of violence. As discussed in the following section, the knowledge of project staff and their attitudes towards sex work are also important factors.

### **Support for sex workers who have been victims of sexual violence**

Survey respondents were asked whether, if they were seeking support after an experience of sexual violence, they would prefer that service to be a specialist service for sex workers. Of the 13 respondents to this question, nearly all (12) stated they would prefer a specialist service. Some respondents provided comments on the reason for this preference, particularly because they were concerned about, or had experienced prejudice from staff in generic services who did not have experience of the specific needs of sex workers. One respondent stated that:

I have found it very difficult to explain my profession to the police and crisis workers in case of judgement and possibly not helping me. If there are fellow workers I feel like my situation and a lot of other women's is relatable so much more comfortable to speak out. (Survey respondent)

Another commented on how a counsellor's misunderstanding of the legal situation relating to sex work had led her to report the respondent's working situation to the police without her consent. She felt this counsellor's response to her was judgemental and violated relations of trust:

This is important, because sexual violence imposed upon a sex worker is a more complex situation. Also, some support services are ignorant of sex work; for example, when I disclosed to a rape crisis counsellor that I had sold myself for sex, she didn't really comment, then at the next session she told me that she informed the police? Who, obviously, told them that it's not a crime. Sex workers are also sometimes viewed as victims as a whole, which is destructive and ignorant, as many choose to do this job and enjoy it. It would be abhorrent for a support worker to then try and discourage the client from being a sex worker. (Survey respondent)

Respondents were asked if they had experienced any barriers to accessing general sexual violence services, with a list of pre-specified possible reasons and the option to add their own comments (Table 4). The main concerns were that they may be judged, that staff might lack knowledge about sex work and that some services may see sex work itself as sexual violence. For a smaller number, the availability of

appointments and location of services were also barriers. No reasons or comments in addition to the list of tick box options were added by respondents.

**Table 4 Barriers to accessing general sexual violence services**

Barriers	Number	Percent
I am concerned that I might be judged for being a sex worker	10	76.9
I am concerned staff won't know anything about sex work or sex workers' support needs	9	69.2
Opening times of services	3	23.1
Limited availability of appointments	6	46.2
Inconvenient location of services	4	30.8
I am concerned services may see sex work itself as sexual violence and not focus on my personal experiences of sexual violence	8	61.5

N=13. Multiple choice question so percentages add up to more than 100.

Three of the four participants interviewed also supported specialist sexual violence support for sex workers such as The Red Project. They were of the view that with sex work still stigmatised, such provisions would be more likely to be accessed and be more appropriate because they are seen as non-judgemental, with staff more informed about the experiences of women in the sex industry:

I don't think that a sex worker should go to say [a generic sexual violence service in the area], they are a service tailored for women suffering sexual violence, you don't know if they have had that kind of training or what their attitudes are. Sometimes people have very negative views on sex work and I think that the main thing that we need is like a non-judgemental approach. And a service like the Red Project, they are very non-judgemental and they are very educated to what is needed. Others might think they are educated about the industry but they don't really, they are talking about things they have heard in the media but like the Red Project they are like working just with people in the business so they really understand what we are going through and [the generic service] perhaps not. With [the generic service] you wouldn't know if you were getting someone with a bad attitude or knew nothing about the business.  
(Participant 1)

Participant Three was of the view that specialist provision was more suitable, stressing that staff in such services were more likely to have empathy with sex workers and understanding of sex work:

I think it's better to have a specialist one definitely, I'm thinking if I was in that position myself, especially having heard other women's experiences I wouldn't hesitate to contact the Red Project but I wouldn't want to go to Rape Crisis. I'm not ashamed of being a sex worker so it's not fear over how I'll be perceived it's more like I think they wouldn't be able to empathise with my situation because I think when you're a sex worker everyone tends to kind of assume anything bad that happens to you, or any dramas, are because you are a sex worker and that that is the root of the problem. But with sexual assault it's not that you are a sex worker, they are rapists or an abuser or whatever it is. So they may gloss over issues which are to hand. (Participant 3)

Participant Two drew on her experience of receiving support within the RSVP service (following referral from a local mental health team) to highlight why she felt a specialist provision was preferable. Her experience also illustrates the importance of truly non-judgemental counselling and wider mental health interventions for sex workers, which has also been noted in the Beyond the Gaze project and in the paper by Maciotti et al (2017), discussed in the literature review.

I'm really glad that I have got the counsellor that I do have. It took a lot of goes to get the right counsellor and my counsellor now is kind of *au fait* with sex work. But the previous two weren't. But again my current counsellor still hasn't mentioned the Red Project. There are still things that you just shouldn't say to someone who works in the sex industry but she mainly doesn't understand why it might be problematic and we have discussed it. So I think having a targeted service would be really important. (Participant 2)

She had two counsellors before being comfortable with the allocated practitioner:

... one of them yes their attitude to sex work was a bit old fashioned I guess, they just didn't know how to deal with it and they kind of avoided talking about it although it was so obviously linked. Then the other one didn't fit with my personality but I think my sex work and my sexuality in general was a bit of an issue unfortunately. (Participant 2).

This interview participant identified the greater possibility of judgmental attitudes in generic sexual violence or mental health services. Her concern was that staff may pathologise sex workers or operate with certain pre-conceived notions, with little knowledge about sex work and its diversity in terms of organisation and people's complex experiences:

I think it is still the danger of having a counsellor or advisor who hasn't really got the right idea about sex work. And even though they have training they just still don't seem to understand sex work and that we are potentially at a greater risk of sexual violence...I think maybe some of the people I have spoken to within the community mental health team when I have been speaking about this trauma they have been suggestive of 'well it's my own fault for being in that profession' and I would say that's still quite prevalent within mental health services. (Participant 2)

This participant did however identify that some online sex workers may be uncomfortable accessing a specialist sex work provision which catered for sex workers in all sectors:

I understand maybe some online workers kind of distance themselves from other kinds of sex work but for me personally I think it should be all integrated. You know we are all in the same industry, some have greater risks than others obviously, but it would still be nice to feel that it had a community within the care I think that is really important. (Participant 2)

Interviewer: you implying it might be those folks who might prefer to go to a mainstream sexual violence support service, is that what you were implying?

Participant 2: Yes and from people even that I know, that is what they have said to me themselves.

Participant Three expressed a preference for general provisions for health and support, for example preferring to go to general sexual health provisions and to not disclose her sex work, with a strong view that this would risk judgement: *'I think you would be silly to do so. I don't see why I should when I live in a society where we are judged'*. But she did look to beyond her personal preference and recognised that some sex workers who had been sexually assaulted may want to report and achieve justice and want support to do so:

I think women who have issues such as assaults that would need to report, although the majority wouldn't, but I am sure there are women who would like to go through and go into the court and so on, so it would be useful for them if they can access that type of support but in my case I just sort of deal with it.  
(Participant 3)

These responses illustrate the need for increased awareness amongst mainstream counselling, physical and mental health services of the diverse working practices and situations of sex workers. While some online sex workers may prefer to access a specialist service, there are relatively few projects funded specifically to work with sex workers. Moreover, some may see them as tailored more to the needs of street-based sex workers or those working in managed settings, whose working circumstances may differ substantially from those of online workers. The Red Project might play an important role not only in promoting its own services, but also liaising with other sex worker support organisations to provide training and awareness-raising to mainstream agencies to enable them to deliver a service which is more responsive to sex workers' needs.

### Promotion of services

Survey respondents were asked which they felt were the best online platforms to promote the Red Project to women who lived or worked in Birmingham or Solihull. The main platforms were Twitter, the SAAFE escort forum and AdultWork (Table 5).

**Table 5: Best online platforms to promote the Red Project**

Platform	Number	Percent
Twitter	10	62.5
Switter	3	18.8
Facebook	2	12.5
Instagram	5	31.3
SAAFE Escort Forum	9	56.3
National Ugly Mugs	7	43.8
YouTube	2	12.5
AdultWork	9	56.3
Vivastreet	3	18.8
Other adult services platforms/other	2	12.5

N=16. Multiple response question so percentages add up to more than 100.

Survey respondents and interview participants also made other suggestions for online promotion of the Red Project, including Client Eye, Adult Seek and Adult Zone:

There is the SAAFE forum and that's popular... Some women now use something called 'Client Eye' this is like a really fast way of reporting. I know they have banners, so that's an app that we use every single day now and I think they use that more than SAAFE now, just an idea maybe advertise there, you could have a banner there. I mean I use that app like 20 times a day. (Participant 1)

I would also say Twitter, Switter, just promoting on there and making sure people are aware of the outreach that is available. AdultWork as well they used to be fairly terrible but they are picking up on their kind of care now which is good to see. Yeah so I'd say those are the main places I look and where I conduct my work as well so would notice while I was working. (Participant 2)

They also suggested considering exploring how 'Only Fans' could be utilised for promotion:

There's Only Fans and stuff like that but I don't know what the set up would be for a community organisation on there. That could be an interesting way to get into people's lives. (Participant 2)

One interview participant was aware the Red Project had a profile on the SAAFE escort forum but suggested more regular posting: '*They have a SAAFE account but they need to post more often on there, that would be good for them*' (Participant 1). The potential for peer advocacy and promotion was highlighted by this participant, who described how she already promoted the project to other sex workers particularly the support offered regarding reporting to the police:

I always say to people on the industry if you ever need help kind of thing, you should always contact the Red Project to help you, going to the police alone is pretty much useless. And I know the two incidents of violence I have reported which were quite serious I just know they would not have been acted upon if I had gone by myself. (Participant 1)

Beyond the Gaze (2018) also recommended that projects develop peer involvement initiatives and include sex workers in outreach and service promotion. Moreover, an email comment received from a sex worker-led support group in response to the research notification suggested that providing links to UK-based sex worker-led initiatives and resources might also help to promote the project amongst online sex workers and encourage them to access the services.

As well as online promotion, the importance of support from other established and trusted local sex work outreach and support services was highlighted, in this case the SAFE project:

They are NHS so they offer a clinic for working women whether you're working online, street or whatever. So you have their numbers, it's quite a personal service you get from them. And they speak highly of the Red Project, I'd say if you're working with SAFE you will have heard of the Red Project as well. (Participant 1)

This participant also suggested the Red Project ask SAFE (Umbrella) to display posters about their services in SAFE clinic waiting rooms and general sexual health clinics:

I would also say you could have posters in clinics, the first time I started working when I was 18 I went to the sexual health clinics and you could sit there for like four hours... Some women aren't going to feel safe to say they are sex working, especially foreign women. I said to SAFE you should put a poster up in the waiting room, now they have those. So I think that is something obvious they could do, as sex workers you go to the clinic a lot so the Red Project should have a poster there. (Participant 1)

Participant Four also suggested information in sexual health services and strong links with these:

For girls that don't know SAAFE I don't know where they would get that info. I think the GUM clinics any kind of sexual health to get a mention there or to have a relationship with those services that's good. (Participant 4)

This interview participant raised the issue that with more than one service in the region, sometimes similar names, there could be confusion about services and who offered what: *'Everything to do with sex workers seems to be called Umbrella, Red or Red Umbrella so I do get a bit confused'* (Participant 4). This respondent had email contact with a Midlands service regarding access to sexual health screening, but could not recall which:

I definitely approached a sex work charity last year within the first months of me starting I'm pretty sure it was the Red Project, but I'm not 100% sure. (Participant 4)

The interview participant who had accessed RSVP for support but not been made aware of the Red Project also noted the importance of ensuring that staff at RSVP who did not work specifically with sex workers are briefed about the Red Project and have information materials available:

I don't know how they can encourage this but try and encourage if someone does mention sex work maybe like give them a flyer or at least tell them at the first instance, I don't understand why the people at RSVP failed to do this. (Participant 2)

One participant suggested also exploring the possibility of linking in with escort agencies in the region to reach agency workers:



I would imagine for girls that work for agencies it would be good to have a presence with them but you know how agencies operate, I don't know if that would be successful. (Participant 4)

As well as the matter of where to promote the service this interview participant stressed the need for content and messaging that made it clear the service could be accessed by online workers, including those who provide virtual online services only:

...they need now to really put on their websites that they are there for online sex workers, especially with how the industry is changing now. A lot of girls are only working online and Covid will only have accelerated that, there are a lot of girls doing Only Fans, there are a lot of girls doing that now. If I was them I might think these services are not for me, thinking unless I provide services in person it doesn't really count. I don't know but I think some would think that. (Participant 4)

In terms of content one participant also raised the issue that information should be also provided online in other languages, specifically identifying Romanian because in her experience in Birmingham a significant number of current sex workers were Romanian:

They should definitely have it all in Romanian because a lot of sex workers are Romanian and many speak very poor English so you need messages in Romanian. (Participant 1)

Beyond the Gaze (2018) identified a range of ways projects had tried to make services accessible to migrant online workers. This included translating marketing netreach messages, information resources and their organisational website into languages used by the key local migrant sex work populations. It also highlighted the mistrust of authorities, particularly the police, amongst migrant workers and the importance of messages stressing confidentiality and independence from the police, with support to report to and liaise with the police being an option based on service user preference.

One participant raised the issue of the fear of judgemental staff acting as a barrier to service access for sex workers. She also noted the possibility of encountering racism and racial stereotyping as a factors that could deter BAME and older sex workers:

I'm minority ethnic as well, I think that's also probably something to do with it. Racism is there and it makes people think about who you are. I don't like to deal with that, unless as we commented earlier, unless it's a crisis situation. (Participant 3)

This highlights the need for projects such as the Red Project to consider issues of equality and diversity in the design and delivery of all aspects of their services from recruitment to staff training and promotional material content. The findings here also emphasise the importance of promoting the service across a range of platforms and forums where sex workers advertise their services and which provide peer support and advice. Currently, the Red Project already notes on its website that its services are available to women working independently, via agency or indoor premises as

well as street-based workers, but it might clarify that it works with sex workers in a range of sectors who advertise online.

## Conclusions

The research confirmed that one of the reasons that women online sex workers had not been accessing the services of the Red Project was because many had not previously known about the project prior to engaging with the study. Since the project's services have been promoted on a wider range of platforms during the research, however, awareness of the project has increased. Recommendations were made for a number of platforms where the project might advertise its services, including social media, particularly Twitter, peer-led escort forums and adult services platforms.

The research participants who had accessed the project were very positive about the support provided, particularly in relation to the advocacy work, liaising with the police and helping to ensure that cases of sexual violence were pursued through the criminal justice process. They also emphasised the importance of having specialist services for sex workers affected by sexual violence, particularly because project staff are more likely to understand the working circumstances and support needs of sex workers, whereas from experience, some staff in mainstream services did not have much understanding of sex work and in some cases could be judgemental. The responses from research participants who had not accessed the Red Project also confirmed that the majority of respondents would prefer to use a specialist service. The main barriers to accessing general sexual violence services were concerns about being judged for being a sex worker, lack of knowledge amongst staff and also that in some cases a particular ideological perspective about sex work might detract from the support they received in relation to specific incidents of sexual violence. These findings echo those from other studies of online sex workers experiencing sexual violence, which show that some sex workers may be deterred from reporting incidents of violence because they are concerned about social stigma, the potential for being judged and limited knowledge amongst some service providers about the support needs of sex workers advertising online (e.g. Goldring et al, 2017; Sanders et al, 2018; Holt, 2020).

An interview participant in the current research made the observation that some online sex workers might be deterred from approaching specialist sex work projects, because they believed that these services catered more for sex workers in other sectors, who had different service needs. Some online sex workers may prefer to use mainstream services for their health and other support, although they might not always disclose their occupation in these circumstances. This highlights the importance of ensuring that the Red Project promotes its services on platforms accessed by online sex workers and also emphasises in its promotional materials that its services are available to sex workers in a range of sectors, including diverse indoor and online areas of work.

The services research participants were most likely to use from the Red Project were support for health and wellbeing, support to report crimes to the police and counselling support. Various other services would also be useful to some

participants, although for online workers, outreach visits appear to be less important. Participants were most likely to access the project's services online or via the telephone. This may relate to their working circumstances and hours, with traditional formal in-person appointments often being less convenient. This also accords with other research with Internet-based sex workers (e.g. *Beyond the Gaze*, 2018; Trueman, 2018). As these studies note, an ethical and nonintrusive presence across a range of online platforms is important to reach sex workers using the Internet in their work.

## Recommendations

The findings from this study suggest a number of actions that might be taken to increase awareness of the Red Project within services locally and on online platforms, in order to promote its services to online sex workers. There are also lessons for service delivery. The main recommendations are:

1. Ensure all staff across RSVP are aware of the Red Project and routinely offer the option of accessing support via this specialist project to women who disclose their sex work.
2. Provide awareness-raising and training to all staff in RSVP about sex work; this could be delivered by the Red Project ISVA. Also review whether counselling staff require further training from practitioners experienced in counselling sex worker victims of sexual violence. This expertise may be within RSVP or external professionals may need to be identified.
3. Awareness-raising or distribution of material to other mainstream organisations in the region (including sexual health clinics) who may have contact with sex workers (dependent on resources). This may be done in cooperation with other sex worker support organisations.
4. Consideration of diversity and equalities matters, particularly in relation to promotion, outreach and marketing (e.g. representation of BAME and older sex workers, additional language versions of materials).
5. Consider coordinated promotion in the context of more than one support service and continued close liaison and joint work between the Red Project and Umbrella, to ensure services are as seamless as possible for sex workers in the West Midlands.
6. Flexibility of delivery to ensure that online workers can have access to support and advice via the Internet and telephone. Findings suggest that afternoon and evening would be the most popular times.
7. Providing the opportunity for informal chat with sex workers considering reporting violence, or wishing to discuss safety, as some may not wish to go down a more formal reporting route immediately.

8. Ensure there is prominent messaging that the project is for a range of online workers and not just those who offer in person services. Ensure there is content relating to online harassment and abuse.
9. When reviewing website content, consider including links to UK sex worker rights organisations such as SWARM, ECP and other national or local sex worker-led organisations, under the Further Resources section which includes links to national organisations: this grows out of feedback received by the researchers during the project. This could also include links to safety resources provided by these organisations on the safety tips and sex workers' rights sections of the website. An additional resource to refer to might be the 2017 Release guide on sex workers and the law (<https://www.release.org.uk/publications/sex-workers%27-rights>), which has guides specifically relating to street-based and indoor sex work.
10. The Red Project already has a website and online presence on Twitter, SAAFE and Vivastreet. As a result of this research it now has a profile on the services area of AdultWork. The research promotion has involved more regular posts about the Red Project on these and other sites such as Client Eye and the number of views of the posts about the research indicates that a larger number of online sex workers are now aware of the project and its services. We recommend a review of the Red Project's online presence and outreach to consider expanding presence with a profile on Twitter, information on Client Eye (local projects can provide information and links) and more regular posting on SAAFE to refresh information and improve prominence.

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