

Staff who provide support to help sex workers exit prostitution fear their services could be made less effective if new vice laws are introduced. At a conference hosted by the Nottingham's Prostitute Outreach Workers, **MICHAEL GREENWELL** listened to the debate about criminalisation

### Bad record that is a barrier to getting a job

AGAINST the odds, a lot of people have given Tasha a second chance: the parents she abandoned for two years; the father of her child who accepts her past; the health professionals who have overseen her rehabilitation.

But, despite being clean for three years, starting a family, completing college courses and working as a volunteer, the 26-year-old cannot get a job.

"I've applied for loads, but once people do checks on me they're not interested," she says.

The reasons for her current situation began at 15 when she started smoking crack; soon she was taking so much she used heroin to come down.

Before long, despite her boyfriend's income from dealing, she couldn't afford her habit and turned to prostitution.

A large drug debt to some "heavy people" forced Tasha, then 17, to flee with her boyfriend to Norwich and for two years she made no attempt to contact her parents. She later returned to Nottingham, having split from her boyfriend.

She served a three-year jail sentence for robbery, "a blessing in disguise" as the time allowed her to sort herself out. She was reunited with her parents.

But three years on from leaving prison and with no blemishes on her record since, Tasha remains a prisoner to her past.



**INTENSE PAIN:** A drug user curls up PICTURE POSED BY MODEL

### Alice working streets to feed a heroin habit

ALICE has been going cold turkey for 48 hours. Weak and fidgety, emitting huge, heavy sighs, her body gradually contorts into a ever smaller ball.

The stomach cramps become so intense her right arm wraps itself under her left leg, pulling her knee up so it is brushing her forehead. One foot twitches uncontrollably.

With eyes clamped tightly shut, she says: "You feel like you're being hit in the head with a brick. You feel sick; you cry; can't sleep for days and weeks on end while your whole body just drips with sweat."

The doctor with her "script" – her methadone prescription – is only minutes away, but it seems a lifetime.

Alice is still working the streets and, despite efforts to quit, still smoking crack and heroin.

Staff at POW believe 90% or more of women working on Nottingham's streets are there to feed their drug addiction.

Like hundreds of others before her, POW is the only place Alice feels comfortable enough to talk honestly and to try and confront her problems.

Today, they include possible eviction from her Bilborough flat, which due to her lengthy absences has become a soft target for vandals and thieves.

The few flickers of hope in her life come from POW. "As soon as I came here three or four years ago they told me, 'Come here any time and we will help you out.' And they have done."

# Sex trade women in danger of losing out

**PROSTITUTE Outreach Workers know their clients are difficult to reach and support.**

But they fear their work could be phased out and their clients pushed even further away if a hard-line approach towards the UK sex trade is adopted.

Members of outreach project POW supports women who work in Nottingham's red-light areas. Those using class A drugs are given advice and offered a place on a methadone program.

Gedling MP Vernon Coaker is currently consulting on the Government's six-month review of prostitution laws in the UK, which could have a major impact on the red-light zone in Nottingham.

Mr Coaker said no decisions have been made about future policy but some MPs are expected to try and criminalise buying sex in an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill going through parliament.

Prostitute Outreach Workers director Susan Johnson believes such an approach would be unrealistic and impractical.

"It will result in more women and men falling into a trap of chaotic class A drugs, homelessness, poverty and many other issues," she said.

At a conference last month, POW hosted delegates from the English Collective of Prostitutes and the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective to discuss the current debate. All three organisations said prostitution would be driven underground if buying sex was made an offence.

At the meeting, Niki Adams, from the English Collective of Prostitutes, said: "A lot of support services will go underground as well. It's one of our biggest fears."

"It's harder for organisations like POW to meet with clients as they are less accessible. In Sweden for example, there are no more support services for prostitutes, they have been phased out."

Mr Coaker has visited representatives of the collective following a visit to Sweden, keen to "take on views from all sides".

Catherine Healy, of the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective, spoke about the decriminalised sex trade in New Zealand and its perceived benefits.

Her visit to Nottingham follows talks given in the House of Commons, Ipswich, Canterbury, Liverpool and London.

Mrs Healy commended outreach workers on their work in the city.

POW can currently identify clients in Nottingham's red-light area, around Forest Road and Mapperley Road, easily and offer drug rehabilitation and advice.

Ms Johnson fears POW's work would be made more difficult if a prostitution crack down was implemented.

"Girls would be pushed out into even more unsafe areas,

### What's illegal...

THE present law in England makes the following offences illegal:

- Soliciting – making an approach offering sex.
- Kerb-crawling – driving round areas known for prostitution and looking for sex.
- Running a brothel or working in one – a brothel is defined as a place with more than two prostitutes at work.
- Trafficking – importing people and forcing them to work as prostitutes.



### 'POW has given me the keys to a new life'

IT'S three years since Lisa walked out of her home in Scunthorpe and on to the streets of Nottingham.

Three years since she watched her twin baby boys die in her arms within minutes of being born, the result of the last beating her husband would administer.

"I called him from the hospital and told him what had happened," she said.

"He said, 'What are you trying to do to me? Put me on a guilt trip?' and hung up.

"It made me realise it was now or never."

She had been with her ex-husband for ten years, ever since he introduced her to heroin aged just 13.

He was 21 at the time; she was his babysitter.

She fled to Nottingham and met some homeless women working as prostitutes who took her under their wing.

Immediately her drug use spiralled out of control and she pushed herself closer and closer to death.

When she wasn't working, the only roof over her head would be that of a crackhouse, a squat or the home of a dealer or punter.

"I went from being married to the same bloke for ten years to working the beat," she says. "I stayed with punters or places where I could take drugs. 'I'd even come to POW and fall asleep on the settee. Sue would cry and say she wished she had somewhere with beds."

Today, she is on the verge of receiving the keys to her first flat.

The turning point came when her ex-boyfriend locked her up and threatened to torture her if she refused to get back on the street. She fled to POW, where they kept her safe inside and arranged for a place in the London Road hostel.

"They've done absolutely everything for me," she says of POW. She has been clean for more than a month for the first time in 13 years and has put on three stone. "They made me stick to it. They've even said if I stay clean I can volunteer so I've something to aim for."

**HERE TO HELP:** New Zealand's Catherine Healy, left, Sue Johnson from Prostitute Outreach Workers, and Sarah Walker from the English Collective of Prostitutes all offer support to sex workers C220108BT3-3

Coaker will visit Amsterdam where prostitution is decriminalised, to compare their approach.

Mr Coaker said: "POW do lots of really good work and services to help sex workers get out of prostitution are very important."

"This review is due to concerns about the rise in trafficking linked with off-street prostitution and the concerns with drugs linked to on-street prostitution."

Ms Johnson and her team at POW believe certain issues involved in the Govern-



**CONSULTING:** Vernon Coaker



such as industrial estates, to avoid being arrested, making it easy for the dodgy punters and drug pimps to get access to them" she said.

"It is a worry that a hard line approach will make it harder to reach our clients because at the minute they come for help voluntarily."

Labour councillor Marcia

Watson, councillor Katrina Bull, Ellen Martin from the Crime and Drugs Partnership, who is writing the prostitution strategy for Nottingham, also attended the conference.

Community representatives, other members of POW's management, as well as prostitutes themselves gave their views.

In the next two weeks Mr