Written evidence submitted by Alan Caton OBE

Executive summary

1. This submission of evidence will outline the events that occurred in Ipswich during the winter of 2006, when sex buyer Steve Wright murdered five young women who worked as street prostitutes.

2. This submission will also include evidence of:
   - Suffolk's approach to prostitution prior to the murders;
   - The multi agency response to the murders and prostitution;
   - The way the agencies worked together to develop a strategy to 'remove prostitution from the streets of Ipswich';
   - The details of the strategy which included, amongst other things, introducing a zero tolerance approach to those men who abused and exploited women engaged in street prostitution, whilst at the same time offering a wide range of holistic support to the women in order to support them to exit a harmful and dangerous lifestyle;
   - The practical application of the strategy, including taking new approaches to problems that, in my view, ill informed people refer to as the 'oldest profession', which infers, nothing can be done to tackle prostitution and all its inherent harms;
   - The outstanding success of the 'Ipswich Strategy', which has helped many women to exit the harmful and dangerous lifestyle of prostitution, changed behaviour in men who abused women and prevented a new generation of children and young women entering the dangerous and abusive world of prostitution; and
   - The independent evaluation of the Ipswich strategy over a period of five years that concluded 'There is, therefore, much to commend this Strategy to other regions of the UK, as an innovative, effective and cost-effective means of achieving criminal justice for all stakeholders in this very challenging area of policy-making'.

3. My recommendation that parliament urgently reform prostitution laws so paying for sex is a criminal offence, selling sex ('soliciting') is decriminalised, and exiting services are provided to support women wishing to escape the exploitation and harm which results from prostitution.

Introduction

4. My name is Alan Caton. I am currently the chairman of Islington and Central Bedfordshire Safeguarding Children Boards. I am also a member of the independent Commission on the Sex Buyer Law - which has been analysing how reforms to prostitution laws in the UK could practically be implemented in the UK. Prior to these roles I served as a police officer with Suffolk Constabulary for over 30 years. During the winter months of December 2006 I was the Superintendent – Operations Manager in charge of Ipswich. It was during that time that five vulnerable young women, namely Tania Nicholl, Gemma Adams, Anneli Alderton, Paula Clennell and Annette Nicholls, were brutally murdered by Steve Wright - a self confessed buyer of sex.
5. In the wake of these tragic murders I was responsible for leading Suffolk Constabulary’s response to the issue of prostitution. I knew that maintaining the status quo was not an option. I also knew from experience that arresting vulnerable women for soliciting and putting them through the criminal justice system didn’t work; they would simply go straight back onto the streets to earn money to pay their fine. This is because women involved in prostitution in Ipswich were highly vulnerable and had complex needs arising from addiction, trauma and the abuse they suffered on the streets. It was also understood that tolerating or ‘managing’ this harmful trade could not continue. Permitting men to continue exploiting women by paying for sex on the streets of Ipswich was not a situation we were willing to entertain.

6. Hence the ‘Ipswich Street Prostitution Strategy’ was developed. It was decided that one of the aims of the strategy was to tackle demand for prostitution, so we promoted a zero tolerance approach to kerb crawling and made sure that the message got out far and wide that paying for sex on the streets of Ipswich would not be tolerated. We also made every effort to divert women away from the criminal justice system and worked with local agencies to support women to exit prostitution and start the process of recovering and rebuilding their lives.

7. The results, as reviewed almost a decade on from those tragic murders, speak for themselves. We eliminated street prostitution, helped women to access support and find alternatives to prostitution.

Policing prostitution in Ipswich prior to 2006

8. The investigation surrounding the murders committed by Steve Wright provided a wealth of knowledge to help us understand the prostitution problem in Ipswich prior to 2006. This research gave us an important insight into the lives these women led. It informed us that there were in excess of 107 women who were, or had been involved in the on-street sex trade in Ipswich over a five-year period. This was many more than agencies had suspected. On any one night there could be 10 or 12 women soliciting on the streets in a small residential area of Ipswich. This activity often generated complaints from local residents and businesses, which would lead to police ‘enforcement only’ activity to remove the women from the streets. As highlighted above, enforcement only activity did not address the wider problems associated with prostitution and certainly did not deter women from being on the streets in the long term.

9. From years of policing in this field I firmly hold the view that prostitution is inherently dangerous and harmful and cannot ever be made ‘safe’. I fully support the Crown Prosecution Service policy that recognises prostitution is ‘violence against women’.

10. Our experience in Ipswich showed that women who were involved in prostitution did not freely make a choice to be there; they felt they had no other option - in most cases fuelled by drugs and coerced by so called ‘boyfriends’ or ‘partners’. The situation in Ipswich mirrored what was known nationally, that as many as 50% of women involved in street prostitution started as children and 95% being addicted to class A drugs such as heroin or cocaine. Many of the women involved in street prostitution in Ipswich did not have access to housing, education or to basic health services. Many that had children had them taken into care. Most were marginalised in society. When asked, the vast majority wanted to get out of prostitution - where they were subjected to regular abuse, violence and sexual assault.
11. Policing of prostitution prior to the murders in 2006 was inconsistent, with ‘enforcement only’ activity linked to complaints by businesses and local residents. There was no overarching strategy or principle that drove activities. This, however, was totally consistent with current legislation and is the same strategy still pursued by some UK police forces today. This was sadly the backdrop in Ipswich in 2006 when, during a six-week period, sex buyer Steve Wright brutally murdered five young women, all of whom were struggling with drug addiction and involved in prostitution. The investigation into the murders, known as Operation Sumac, was unprecedented and became the biggest investigation in the history of Suffolk Constabulary. Steve Wright was subsequently convicted of all five murders and is currently serving a ‘whole life’ sentence.

**Suffolk’s response to prostitution following the murders by Steve Wright**

12. Following the tragic murders, a Joint Agency Strategic Group was formed to implement a new approach to prostitution. This group comprised of senior officers from local agencies, namely Ipswich Borough Council, Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Constabulary, Suffolk Probation Service, Suffolk Primary Care Trust, Suffolk Drugs and Alcohol Team and Suffolk Mental Health Partnership. One of the key objectives of this group was ‘to remove street prostitution from Ipswich’.

13. As the police superintendent for Ipswich, I was given the task of leading this work. I saw this as a real opportunity to work differently as I recognised that previous strategies to deal with prostitution had not been effective and that maintaining the status quo was not an option. I recognised that punitive laws against women did not work and that many of those women involved in prostitution in Ipswich were coerced, fuelled by drugs and were very often victims of crimes such as assault, robbery and rape. I wanted to challenge the common view that prostitution is ‘the oldest profession’ and that there will always be a demand for prostitution.

14. It was against this backdrop that the first ‘Ipswich Street Prostitution Strategy’ was drafted. I acknowledged that prostitution was highly complex and could not be dealt with by any one agency alone. It needed a coordinated and sustained approach if it was to be successful. I convened a small working group to draft the strategy comprising of a Police representative, a representative from Ipswich Borough Council Community Safety, Suffolk Drugs and Alcohol Service and a Health representative.

15. The strategy sought to address the concerns of the local communities affected by street prostitution with regard to nuisance, disruption, anti social behaviour and safety concerns. The activities of kerb crawlers, and men who approach the women on foot, were also high priorities for preventative action due to the very real concerns expressed by the local community.

16. The significant challenge facing partner agencies was the complex and enduring needs of each of the women involved in prostitution. Due to this complexity, the strategy was a long-term document covering the period 2007 – 2012.

17. The new Ipswich prostitution strategy had five main objectives:

- **Identifying the Problem**: gaining an understanding of the key issues, the extent of the problem, the impact on the local community and the motives behind those involved in prostitution. This helped to focus, prioritise and allocate resources
and finances where they were needed most and ensure that the situation was continually monitored.

- **Developing Routes Out**: by offering multi-agency case conferences for each individual involved in street prostitution and ensuring that drug treatment programmes, health services, accommodation, and other supportive interventions were available to those individuals who wanted to leave street prostitution.

- **Tackling Demand**: responding to community concerns by deterring those who create the demand and removing the opportunity for street prostitution to take place. By utilising and exploiting all available technology, for example Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) and Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR), to provide the police and their partners with the intelligence to support their aims.

- **Prevention**: Awareness raising and early intervention measures to stop individuals, particularly children and young people, from becoming involved in prostitution.

- **Community Intelligence**: to respond appropriately to the needs of the communities affected, by keeping them informed of our activities. By listening to their concerns we ensured the environment was kept clean, safe and designed in such a way to deter and prevent street prostitution.

### The results of the strategy

18. The strategy commenced operation in Ipswich in March 2007 having been approved by all senior stakeholders from a wide range of agencies. All signed up to the aim of ‘removing street prostitution’. From a police perspective there was a commitment and sustained approach to deal with perpetrators. Over the first two years of the strategy 140 kerb crawlers were arrested. All those arrested were fingerprinted, photographed, had their DNA taken and signed up to an Acceptable Behaviour Contract (ABC). If it was a first offence and they admitted their guilt they were dealt with by way of police caution. If it was not a first offence or they did not admit their guilt they went to court. Of those 140 arrests, 6 men were charged and later convicted at court. A strong message was sent that men kerb crawling in Ipswich would be prosecuted and I am firmly of the view that this changed behaviour. It is worth noting that the vast majority of men who were caught kerb crawling and paying for sex in Ipswich were either married or in long term relationships, and most had children.

19. After the first two years, prostitution effectively disappeared from the streets of Ipswich. Residents in the area where street prostitution used to take place reported that their area has become a quiet, tranquil and safe place to live, no longer blighted by anti-social behaviour created by prostitution and kerb crawling.

20. Over 80 women have been helped and assisted by the multi-agency ‘Make a Change’ Team who, in a non-judgemental way, provided assistance to vulnerable women and supported them to move away from the dangerous and harmful world of prostitution. Over 400 children were identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation and those considered high risk were helped by the team, to prevent them entering prostitution.

21. The University of East Anglia were commissioned to undertake a review of the Ipswich prostitution strategy. A summary of their work can be found at [https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/55750/](https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/55750/). In conclusion their review states: "The evaluation of this Strategy showed that co-ordinated multi-agency activity had been successful in: Eliminating street prostitution and kerb crawlers in Ipswich; Helping
women make life changes to move on from prostitution; Making effective in-roads into preventing others, especially the young, from becoming involved in prostitution; and Reducing demand and costs on the criminal justice services." It also concluded that there was much to commend in this collaborative strategy both to other regions of the UK and to other countries, as an innovative, effective and cost-effective means of achieving justice for all stakeholders. The review also found that prostitution in Ipswich had not been either ‘displaced’ or ‘driven underground’ and that for every £1 that was spent as part of strategy there was a saving of £2, by reducing the burden on the courts and social support systems.

The limitations imposed on the strategy by current law

22. The laws surrounding prostitution are certainly confusing and complex for those involved in applying it. I totally agree with the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade who stated in 2014: "the law is incoherent at best and detrimental at worst. The legal settlement around prostitution sends no clear signals to women who sell sex, men who purchase it, courts and the criminal justice system, the police or local authorities."

23. From years of policing in this field I believe that prostitution is dangerous and harmful regardless of whether it takes place on the street or in an off-street location. I have highlighted above how the police and their partners tackled the issue of on-street prostitution in Ipswich using current legislation. Whilst the Ipswich strategy evolved to deal with criminal activity linked to off-street prostitution offences such as trafficking and exploitation of children, we were prevented from cracking down on sex buyers who exploit vulnerable women in off-street locations because paying for sex is not a crime. That cannot be right. I do not believe we can continue to turn a blind eye to the exploitation of women working in off-street locations because it is a crime. In my view sex buyers feel the present law gives them licence to exploit vulnerable women working in off-street premises and they are right.

The reforms needed

24. The law should be changed to criminalise paying for sex, decriminalise selling sex (soliciting), and provide exiting services for people exploited through prostitution. It's a model often referred to as the 'Sex Buyer Law' and is designed to end the demand that underpins the prostitution trade. It was this 'end demand' approach that was taken to street prostitution in Ipswich, which has proven to be extremely successful in discouraging paying for sex and supporting women to exit to change and rebuild their lives.