Written evidence submitted by One25 Charity

Executive summary:

The evidence presented focuses on:

- Whether criminal sanction in relation to prostitution should continue to fall more heavily on those who sell sex, rather than those who buy it.
- Whether further measures are necessary, including legal reforms to assist those involved in prostitution to exit from it.

The law should focus on:

- safeguarding vulnerable women trapped in street sex work
- limiting violence towards women involved in street sex work
- ensuring women are able to access support services
- allowing for adequate funding and resource for support services to make a difference and be effective

- Street sex work can be described as a ‘choice made out of no choice’.
- It is One25’s view that criminal sanction should not fall on women selling sex.
- If the law did not criminalise women for selling sex, then the women would be more likely to turn to the police for help and support.
- If demand is reduced, the women become more desperate and consequently they take more risks whilst working.
- The best option would be a law which reduces the risk of violence, exploitation and discrimination and provides support pathways for women to exit.
- Total decriminalisation is not a perfect legal solution but provides women involved in street sex work with better protection against violence, increased chances of seeking justice against those who exploit or abuse them and increased support in establishing routes out of street sex work.

An introduction to One25

One25 is the only organisation in Bristol specifically supporting street sex-working women. These women are amongst our city’s poorest and most vulnerable individuals. Each year we help around 230 women: around 150 of whom are street sex-working. Most of the women we see on the streets are homeless, acutely malnourished and addicted to drugs and/or alcohol, because of this their safety and health is neglected. We see women who are deeply traumatised – from childhood abuse and the violence of life on the streets. Each year the women report many violent attacks against them; last year 32% of the women engaging with us received support around domestic and sexual violence (up from 20% in 2013/14). Yet these courageous women show tremendous skills and potential: in their supportive peer relationships, their creativity and humour and their survival.

One25 is submitting evidence to the Prostitution Inquiry because we have considerable insight into and knowledge about the lives of women trapped in street sex work in Bristol. Within our own organisation, we have carefully considered the question of how prostitution is treated in legislation. We have awareness about the measures necessary to assist those in prostitution to exit from it.

Whether criminal sanction in relation to prostitution should continue to fall more heavily on those who sell sex, rather than those who buy it

1. One25 have considered the various legal stances; legalisation, criminalisation, total decriminalisation, partial decriminalisation and we considered the laws in other parts of the
World. Individuals involved in the discussion were asked to put aside their own personal views of morality, religion etc. and instead to focus on which laws would:
  o safeguard vulnerable women trapped in street sex work
  o limit violence towards women involved in street sex work
  o ensure women are able to access support services
  o allow for adequate funding and resource for support services to make a difference and be effective

2. There are many and varied reasons why women become trapped in street sex work. Unless these issues are addressed in society, women will always be at risk of street sex work. The demand is always there. The women One25 works with are responding to a demand in order to gain finance in the only way they can, given the extreme circumstances they find themselves trapped in; life-controlling addiction, abusive relationships, homelessness, complex trauma, debt, poor mental and physical health. They see street sex work as a ‘choice’ when they have no viable options in front of them; ‘a choice made out of no choice’.

3. It is One25’s view that criminal sanction should not fall on women selling sex. Women who sell sex on the streets need to be provided with support to keep them safe and support pathways for them to exit the lifestyle. Chloe recently told us:

"I couldn't have asked for more support. One25 have supported me in ways I never thought possible, they have been with me while I've been interviewed by the police after being assaulted, provided me with encouragement, sent me cards of encouragement, pyjamas, slippers. It's just been so strengthening to know that I'm not alone. The women who work so hard at One25 are supporting me and letting me know that, no matter what, I'm not alone and, no matter what, they plan to keep me safe and protected. Words cannot express my gratitude and the love I have for these dedicated women who have devoted their time in helping women like myself (inside prison and outside in the community) piecing their lives back together and learning to live without drugs and without fear. WOW just how awesome is that!"

4. This can be achieved by working in partnership with the police to ensure that the women are safe whilst working and they are signposted to specialist support services which provide pathways out. If the police could focus on safety and support rather than imposing sanctions on women, the women would be more prepared to report violence and abuse without fear of arrest. In Bristol, the police and One25 work well together and in an environment of mutual respect. However, we acknowledge the fact that the police are required to enforce the law and One25 exists to provide support and pathways out of the lifestyle.

5. If the law did not criminalise women for selling sex, then the women would be more likely to turn to the police for help and support. Women would be more able to access support services and get the help they need to exit. Street sex work would be less likely to be forced ‘underground’ where women become hidden from services and support and they live in fear of arrest.

6. The question of whether criminal sanction should fall on the purchasers of sex has also been considered at One25. It is our experience that if demand is reduced, the women become more desperate and consequently they take more risks whilst working. The women no longer take the time to fully assess situations and use their instincts to inform their decisions. When
demand is reduced the ‘more decent’ purchasers of sex are driven away and the ‘more
dangerous’ purchasers of sex are left to prey on the women.

7. Street sex work is dangerous and there are many inherent risks with the behaviour. We believe there is no law which would remove the risks altogether. Legalisation would give the balance of power to employers / pimps and criminalisation would lead to extremely vulnerable and marginalised women becoming branded as ‘untouchables’ and the courts would become full of women who are just trying to survive. However, in our view, the best option would be a law which reduces the risk of violence, exploitation and discrimination and provides support pathways for women to exit.

8. In order to support these priorities, One25 is minded to support decriminalisation of both purchase and sale of sex where no abuse, exploitation or underage activity is involved. This stance is backed by the United Nations and World Health Organisation. It has been taken up by New Zealand, whose Review Committee has reported no increase in sex-work and improved opportunities for sex-workers to report violence and leave prostitution.

9. Total decriminalisation is not a perfect legal solution but provides:
   o Better protection against violence.
   o A reduction in sex workers’ criminal records, which represent a barrier to future alternative employment.
   o Improved trust in reporting violence to police and other victim support services.
   o An end to sex workers being forced underground into higher risk situations where support services are unable to reach them.
   o Funds raised by criminalising sex work to be diverted to improving care, harm reduction, establishing routes out for sex workers and seeking justice against those who exploit or abuse them.