About St Mungo’s

Our vision is that everyone has a place to call home and can fulfil their hopes and ambitions. As a homelessness charity and housing association our clients are at the heart of what we do.

We provide a bed and support to more than 2,500 people a night who are either homeless or at risk, and work to prevent homelessness, helping about 25,000 people a year. We support men and women through more than 300 projects including emergency, hostel and supported housing services, advice services and specialist health, skills and employment services.

We currently work across London and the south of England, as well as managing major homelessness sector projects such as StreetLink and the Combined Homeless and Information Network (CHAIN).

We influence and campaign nationally to help people to rebuild their lives.

For any queries regarding this submission, please contact Catherine Glew in the Policy, Public Affairs and Research team.

Summary of main points:

- St Mungo’s supports our clients to recover from homelessness and related issues including mental health, physical health and substance use problems. As part of their recovery, we support our clients to exit prostitution.

- St Mungo’s calls for access to safe and appropriate accommodation for all women, including a choice of mixed or women-only services.

- St Mungo’s calls for specialist support to be available for women involved in prostitution. Support services must understand the range of problems women can experience, including homelessness, mental and physical health problems and substance use.

- St Mungo’s supports the full lifting of criminal sanctions from women involved in prostitution. Decriminalising those involved in prostitution would help them engage with support services, reduce stigma and allow more women to exit.

- St Mungo’s supports efforts to reduce demand from sex buyers, which our clients identify as a barrier to their recovery.

- In areas where we work, local approaches that align involvement in prostitution with violence against women have allowed agencies to work more closely and in a holistic way that recognises that those involved in prostitution often experience other forms of violence.

1. Introduction
1.1 St Mungo’s has led research and campaigning on women’s homelessness, including women’s involvement in prostitution, through our Rebuilding Shattered Lives project.¹ This written evidence is based on information contributed by clients, staff and other organisations and experts as part of that research, as well as additional data from our client records and comments from our staff.

1.2 According to our 2015 Client Needs Survey, complex physical and mental health and substance use problems are common for our female clients. 78% of women living in our supported housing services need support for their mental health, 52% have a substance use problem and 43% have a significant physical health condition. 59% of female residents presented with problems in at least two of these areas, and 1 in 5 presented with all three.

1.3 As part of our work to end homelessness, St Mungo’s provides a range of services to support clients who are involved in prostitution, including specialist accommodation and outreach services. According to a 2015 survey, 1 in 4 women living in our supported housing services (and 1 per cent of male residents) had current or past involvement in sex working², rising to 1 in 3 female residents who have a history of sleeping rough.

1.4 Our specialist women-only supported housing services provide a safe space for women to process trauma they have experienced, address any substance use or mental health problems, and work on building confidence and self-esteem. As part of their recovery from homelessness and related issues, we support clients to exit prostitution.

2 Evidence relating to the inquiry's terms of reference

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

2.1.1 St Mungo’s first priority is supporting our clients to recover from homelessness. Our female clients in particular may have complex, interlinked and entrenched needs – they may be involved in prostitution at the same time as dealing with mental health, substance use and alcohol problems. Holistic support is vital for women to recover and move on from homelessness.

2.1.2 St Mungo’s supports the full lifting of criminal sanctions from women involved in prostitution. Prison sentences, fines, and court orders can have a catastrophic effect on women’s lives, leaving some at greater risk of homelessness. Criminalisation and spending time in and out of court does not help women to recover and move forward.

2.1.3 Criminalising involvement in prostitution reinforces the negative stigma that women who are homeless can face. In addition, acquiring a criminal record as a result of involvement in prostitution can be a barrier to for women moving in to employment.

¹ For more information, see: http://rebuildingshatteredlives.org/theme/being-involved-in-prostitution/
² St Mungo’s uses ‘women involved in prostitution’ as a term that does not define women by the act of selling sex, but also recognises that selling sex is not a job like any other. We are aware that different agencies use different terminology and actively sought a range of contributions during our Rebuilding Shattered Lives research. For the sake of accuracy, the language used in this survey is replicated here.
2.1.4 As part of our research, one woman said: “Warning notices are issued but they don’t really help. I feel penalised when the wrong conclusions are drawn.”

2.1.5 Decriminalising those involved in prostitution would help them engage with support services, reduce stigma and allow for more women to exit and move into employment.

2.1.6 St Mungo’s supports efforts to reduce demand from sex buyers, including the End Demand campaign. Experiences shared by our clients involved in prostitution highlight that continuing demand and harassment from sex buyers in the community can be a barrier to recovery:

2.1.7 “It’s difficult because I’m faced with people who try to offer me drugs on a daily basis, and people who know my past – I’ll be walking down the road and I’ve had men who know me from the past and they’ve tried to stop me in the street, begged me to take a lift from them, asked me for my number and tried to lure me back into that way of life.”

2.1.8 “I’m known to a lot of people so even when I try to change my life people know me so there’s always going to be that continuous persuasion, temptation and people trying to lure me back into that lifestyle.”

2.2 What the implications are for prostitution-related offences of the Crown Prosecution Service’s recognition of prostitution as violence against women.

2.2.1 St Mungo’s provides specialist support to women who are homeless with a substance use problem who are involved in prostitution. Our experience indicates that women with these complex needs who are involved in prostitution are very likely to have past experiences of violence and abuse and remain at very high risk of continued violence.

2.2.2 Our women-only Chrysalis project in Lambeth provides an accommodation pathway and support for clients with complex needs, including support to exit prostitution. 57 per cent of Chrysalis clients are known to have experienced violence or abuse from a partner or family member, as have 50 per cent of all our female clients. 50 per cent of women at Chrysalis experienced childhood violence or abuse, compared to 1 in 5 of all female clients. These figures exclude violence and abuse from outside the family, for which data is not available.

2.2.3 A Safer Glasgow annual report on ‘Routes Out’ notes that women involved in prostitution are at high risk of physical and sexual assault: women involved in street prostitution are 12 times more likely to be murdered than all women in equivalent age groups.

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3 For further information, see: http://rebuildingshatteredlives.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/chrysalis-project.pdf

2.2.4 Local evidence from areas where our services operate indicates that aligning involvement with prostitution with violence against women allows St Mungo’s and our clients to work with local agencies more effectively.

2.2.5 In Lambeth, where our Chrysalis project is based, a local commitment to recognising prostitution as a form of violence against women has enabled more innovative working with the justice system, local authorities and housing services to help women exit both prostitution and homelessness. It has allowed violence against women, safeguarding adults teams and local voluntary sector agencies to work more closely and in a holistic way that recognises that those involved in prostitution often experience other forms of violence.

2.2.6 Lambeth Council’s approach supports women to exit prostitution by referring them for drug testing and diverting them away from court into support services. A key element of this is the Lambeth Prostitution Group (LPG), a multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) style approach to providing protection and support for women engaged in prostitution and for those seeking to exit. The group is chaired by the Lambeth Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Programme Manager.

2.2.7 Women involved in prostitution are no longer discussed by anti-social behaviour panels. Any enforcement activity must be agreed by the LPG and have clear social inclusion objectives.

2.2.8 In this context, the Chrysalis project has successfully increased the number of homeless women exiting street prostitution and moving on to live independently, benefiting from the local joined up approach and support from VAWG teams.

2.3 Whether further measures are necessary, including legal reforms, to:

Assist those involved in prostitution to exit from it

2.3.1 St Mungo’s calls upon government to ensure that all women have access to safe and appropriate accommodation, including a choice of mixed or women-only services. Specialist support to help women exit prostitution that is non-judgemental and understands the range of problems women are likely to experience is essential.

2.3.2 “The most important thing was I had a roof over my head, it was my sanctuary. I could close my door, that’s my time behind there, somewhere where I was safe. No one could come and invade me. No one could come and violate me.”

2.3.3 Services should recognise the close links between involvement in prostitution and other forms of violence against women and girls, as evidenced by our own client data.

2.3.4 St Mungo’s recommends that the government ensures those involved in prostitution are able to move between local authority areas in order to access the accommodation and support they need to exit, as is the case for domestic violence.