

SAFE AND SOUND

The SAFE Project in Birmingham was one of the agencies involved in the joint DrugScope/AVA prostitution/drugs project. Rebecca Lees pays a visit.

The SAFE Project has provided a specialist drug treatment service for sex workers in Birmingham for 10 years. As well as providing the only dedicated on-site dispensing service for sex workers in the UK, SAFE helps women access housing and benefits and offers holistic services such as well women clinics and arts and craft.

The SAFE Project started in 1987 as a project for sex workers, with the need for a specialist drug treatment service being identified in 2002. "The Community Drug Teams had massive waiting lists and were meeting resistance from women having to attend at established times," says deputy clinic manager Maggie Vernon. "The appointments were inflexible and the women would have to wait in rooms with abusive men and felt like they were being identified and belittled. Our service started in February 2003. It's very rapid access and we hold the hands of the women coming in.

"The service has grown a lot in the last decade. It started with one worker and one full time nurse, with one GP session per week. Now there is a drugs outreach worker, a through-care and aftercare drugs worker, a mental health nurse, a part time general and sexual health nurse and a nine-hour slot with a sexual health and reproduction nurse. There is also a manager, myself as the deputy manager and three GP sessions a week. This is quite an intensive, expensive scheme."

Three times a week there is a three-hour slot where women can take methadone. They are given a prescription for the other days, with the team checking with pharmacies to make sure the women have presented. "We see between 20 and 25 women a week for methadone, and their lives tend to be quite chaotic as they are straight off the streets," says Ms Vernon. "Then we see up to 30 women who are in through-care, who have stabilised and might be ready for education or employment, and we

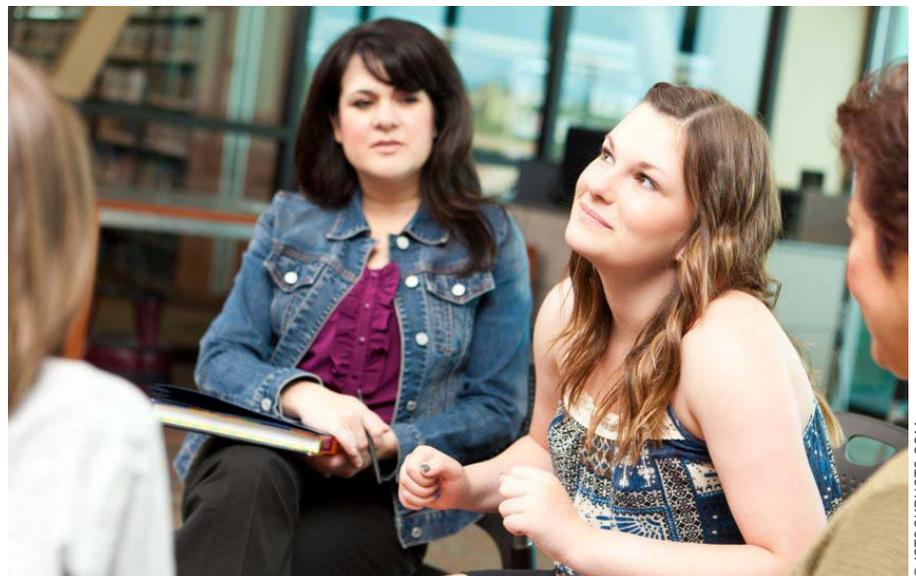
also see up to 25 per week in outreach." "Alcohol used to be very separate and heroin users tended not to use it, but now it seems that all are using alcohol as well. We are seeing poly-drug use, with the main three being heroin, crack and alcohol, but some clients also use benzos, cannabis and whatever else they can get their hands on."

With widespread cuts in public funding and changes in the NHS, the SAFE Project faces challenges. "All drugs and sexual health services have all gone into public health England, so things are uncertain at the minute," says Ms Vernon. "Drugs and sexual health services are up for tender next April so nobody is sure what's going to happen. Welfare reform is also going to have a big impact and we are seeing it already. When women first come to us they are generally homeless and don't have benefits. Quite often they are in abusive relationships and have been abused from a young age. Also, they have had limited school education and have limited social skills, so our first job is about

basic socialisation – teaching them not to scream and swear down the phone and that there are better ways of getting what you want!"

"We have quite a good success rate, with a lot of our women getting stable on methadone. We have a GU and family planning clinic but we see lots of pregnancy, so we work hard to try and keep mothers and children together. We have lots of women who move on and out the other side, and they text us to say their children are growing or that they have a job, which is really nice."

"We try to make the service as holistic as we can," says Ms Vernon. "We hold well women days about breast awareness, ovarian cancer and general health, and offer STI testing and smear tests. We also have links with a dentistry care service, which is brilliant as some of our women's teeth are so bad they don't want to smile or go to their children's school. Clients have written that we are kind, helpful and funny, and that our hearts seems to be in it. Our women tell us that they get a lot from SAFE."



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