



It's six years since Stephen Wright was convicted of murdering five Ipswich prostitutes. Concern about access to drug services was one of the issues raised at the time. Jeremy Sare looks at what has happened since.

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The murders of Gemma Adams, Tania Nicol, Anneli Alderton, Paula Clennell and Annette Nicholls prompted local partnerships to make a fundamental re-assessment of what police, local authorities, voluntary sector, health and housing associations were doing to help women who had turned to the street sex trade to fund their drug habit.

The Ipswich Street Prostitution Strategy included all stakeholders and was launched in 2007 with support from senior police and councillors. It was a five point plan addressing supply and demand sides with a combination of creating incentives to move out of prostitution, community action and sustained enforcement against kerb-crawlers.

Figures contained in a report compiled by the University of East Anglia showed 128 kerb crawlers were arrested in 2007. This figure fell to just 14 in 2008 and there were none in 2009 and 2010.

The main organisation which the community and street workers cite as instrumental to change is the Icenii Project led by Brian Tobin. He said, "What was critical was to show patience and compassion to the women. The needs of all the community had to be led by a ground-floor organisation which could slowly build up the necessary trust." Paula Clennell had made an appointment with Icenii the day before her death.

The Icenii project offered the women treatment for their drug use (mainly

heroin and crack cocaine) and paths away from exposure to the dangers of sexual attack and other forms of physical violence. In the short term, Icenii bought them mobile phones for security, paid rents and utility bills, delivered food parcels, even children's Christmas presents. They then treated their addiction mainly through methadone, identified safer housing and helped women gain employment. Brian Tobin said, "Our approach is to address the whole person, and consider the underlying psychological issues as well as the socio-economic ones. Most of the girls were severely damaged people. Sixteen were from statutory care system; most had been raped and abused. They were also bereaving the loss of five of their friends."

Former street worker, Jade, who now works with women's groups said, "My friends were murdered and it shouldn't have taken that but it was the catalyst. Before we were criminals and after we were victims. Icenii in particular gave us the support and strength to stay off the drugs and not go back."

Six years on, the more proactive interventions of education, housing and debt management are still firmly in place to prevent the emergence of a new generation of vulnerable street girls. The new structures created by the 'Make a Change' team targeting sexual exploitation and the creation of Suffolk's Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) ensure the problem

of drug using street workers is now close to negligible.

Getting all senior police and councillors backing to the strategy was critical to a successful outcome although they may also have been driven by the desire to diminish the reputational damage to the area from tabloid headlines such as 'Town of Fear.' The Drugs and Alcohol Team (DAAT) found it hard initially to build trust and credibility but the first step was to treat the women as the victims.

Simon Alders, Head of Suffolk DAAT said, "Previously there had been something of a laissez faire attitude – considering these girls' lifestyles as their personal choice. But following the murders, we took a much more assertive stance. We had to develop a 'good offer' for them and abandon the old model of just handing out condoms and needles. We gave them all the help we could to stop them finding a reason to go back to putting themselves at such extreme risk on the streets." There were fears that the women would simply transfer to off-street sex trade but it did not materialise. There has also been a concerted programme of prevention in schools which was "critical" to stemming the flow of new street workers.

Members of the 'Make a Change' team were invited to share their conclusions at a higher Government level and in other regions but so far there has been little application of the Ipswich experience elsewhere. See also feature on p16-17.