

CLiCK Evaluation 2019–2021

Summary Report by The Diffley Partnership

June 2021



From many voices to smart choices

CLiCK's National-Level Programme

Women selling and exchanging sex can have complex and multiple needs as a result of overlapping issues such as addictions, poverty, poor health, domestic violence, sexual abuse and mental illness. There is a shared understanding in Scotland that no single agency can respond to all of these issues. Rather, what is necessary is the engagement of the full range of actors including, local authorities, Police Scotland, the NHS, the civil and criminal justice systems, social work, housing, media, the business sector, trade unions, third sector organisations and individuals and communities.¹

CLiCK sought to enhance provision of community-based services across Scotland to improve the accessibility of frontline services for those engaged in selling or exchanging sex in-doors or online.

The initial aims of CLiCK, shaped within a VAW framework were to:

1. improve access to information and the availability of local support.
2. improve access to specialist and mainstream services.
3. increase levels of safety and wellbeing for women involved in selling/exchanging sex online.
4. capture the voices and experiences of women selling sex online to help shape service development.

Set up as an inter-agency initiative, charities involved from the outset to design, deliver and adapt CLiCK included:

- Sacro
- Women's Support Project (WSP)
- Aberdeen Cyrenians
- Glasgow & Clyde Rape Crisis
- Vice Versa – Dundee
- Quay Services, Alcohol and Drugs Action–Aberdeen (up until 1 April 2021)

Within two years CLiCK designed, delivered and adapted support for women in partnership. Multiple support options were utilised and staff took a 'women centred approach' for each

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/exploring-available-knowledge-evidence-prostitution-scotland-via-practitioner-based-interviews/pages/20/>

individual referral. CLiCK employed innovative online methods to reach women selling and exchanging sex online and to link them to essential universal services.

The Beyond the Gaze Research project (2015–2018) highlighted the diversity of people using the internet to exchange and sell sex.² A key trend was the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Skype to form private groups for networking, support and sharing safety information between those selling sex online. People providing both direct and indirect sexual services via the internet experience digitally facilitated crime such as online harassment and threats, or non-consensual use of their data. Protecting privacy was found to be an important concern:³

CLiCK's support can be broadly classed as:

- Emotional and practical support through website, online chat, one to one support
- Making women's voices heard through the YourVoice project with produced resources such as podcasts and the CLiCK e-magazine (www.clickmagazine.online)
- Financial support, which became available as part of the Immediate Priorities Fund through the Scottish Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The full evaluation report is the culmination of formative and summative monitoring evaluation by CLiCK staff and Diffley Partnership throughout the whole programme. The evaluation included a literature review and primary qualitative research and analysis of secondary data across the two years of CLiCK.

From our analysis we have identified four main themes:

- Designing and operating a layered and blended model
- Coordination and progress through a multi-agency approach
- Addressing operational challenges
- Working within a pressurised climate

We recommend that these findings are taken into consideration for future programming in Scotland and beyond for women selling and exchanging sex online.

² <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/criminology/people/teela-sanders/briefing-summary>

³ <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/criminology/people/teela-sanders/briefing-for-practitioners>

Recommendations for Future Work

Interventions to Reduce Harm for Women Selling and Exchanging Sex Online

There are overlaps between women selling and exchanging sex online and in person, especially because the adoption of online tools to promote and arrange the sale of sex are prevalent. At the same time, women in the online sex industry are very much a 'hidden' demographic with distinct needs which differ from the needs of women who sell/exchange sex on-street.

Specialist online support services specific to women selling/exchanging sex online, as developed during the delivery of CLiCK, can be extremely effective in supporting women. This change allowed the service additional flexibility for women to access support as, when, and where they need it.

CLiCK included a blended and layered model of different support options and CLiCK was involved in distributing crisis funding and counselling through the Encompass Fund.

Women who have taken part in selling and exchanging sex online are likely to require legal support with exiting to allow them to access alternative employment opportunities, for example, help to erase their digital footprint or to file requests for the removal of their private content online.

Harm reduction in an online context includes all types of harm affecting women in other areas within the sex industry, as well as specific support to report online abuse and harassment, and to seek legal advice and support following online crimes such as doxing, harassment, online abuse and stalking.

For the needs of women selling or exchanging sex online to be adequately addressed:

- 1. A harm reduction approach for women selling/exchanging sex online needs to respond to their specific needs.**
- 2. Effective support and interventions need to be broadly and extensively available both in the online world and the 'real' world.**
- 3. Any support provision should consider the complex needs of women involved in selling and exchanging sex and take a "whole person" approach.**

4. Future programming should develop CLiCK's digital methods further to counter barriers to engagement through face-to-face appointments and disclosure of involvement in selling and exchanging sex.
5. It is vital that services are proactive and confident in both discussing involvement in the online sex industry with women, but are also prepared to offer short, medium and long-term support.
6. Those charities and groups which include support to help women exit, need to be prepared to support women to exit online selling and exchanging of sex accordingly.
7. Beyond the pandemic, funding is needed to adequately support women in financial crisis, but also to prevent women seeing online selling and exchanging sex as their only way out of financial difficulties.
8. A universal understanding between services of all ideological standpoints and the public is essential with regards to privacy, healthy relationships, respect and consent and the repercussions of uploading and sharing intimate images.
9. Policy and legislation need to be updated on an ongoing basis to respond to the trends in online selling and exchanging of sex.

Steps to Equip Violence Against Women and Girls Practitioners

It is important to treat women as experts in their own experience. CLiCK has made strides in this through making women's voices heard.

CLiCK's evaluation highlighted the tensions between groups seeing selling and exchanging sex as exploitation and groups seeing this as choice. There was negative press focusing on CLiCK's VAWG interpretation of selling/exchanging sex online. A learning from CLiCK is how this critical environment creates another barrier for women to access services which could benefit their safety and wellbeing whilst selling and exchanging sex.

The reaction to CLiCK in the online sphere was very challenging from the offset. This needs to be considered by any future national programme focussing on selling and exchanging sex online operating within a VAWG framework.

CLiCK staff shared how the impact of criticism on social media and through the press affected their day-to-day service delivery. Staff were scared to put a foot wrong in the online environment. CLiCK's evaluation showed just how crucial a strong and adaptable communications strategy is to accompany any innovative service provision.

For VAWG practitioners to reach more women:

- 1. Best practice participatory research and design within services should be encouraged, taking on board learning from previous work to ensure that a range of voices are included, and women are compensated for their input.**
- 2. Staff employed by organisations delivering services within a VAWG framework need to be equipped and supported to deal with online criticism by vocal opponents regarding selling and exchanging sex as a women's right to choose.**
- 3. All staff supporting women selling and exchanging sex online should be given information on challenges at recruitment, provided with training and appropriate supervision in post, including clinical supervision if available.**
- 4. Resources must be allocated to managing social media and responding to comments and correcting misinformation, along with proactive work to communicate the service offer and the benefits it can bring.**
- 5. All organisations should discourage communications that may lead to women feeling intimidated and unable to take up support from a service because of its affiliation.**

Designing, Resourcing, Delivering and Improving Services for Women across Scotland

Creating any new service across partners on a national-level and on a topic with stigma and different viewpoints and supporting women who can be hard to reach will be slow to take off.

CLiCK designed, developed and adapted services in a short period of time. This included creating a new brand, with new web domains.

CLiCK, as a specialist service, recognised that no single agency or service can address all of the needs of each individual woman. Indeed, CLiCK involved national partner coordination dovetailing

to services with regional and local provision. Although a national service, many workers under CLiCK were working within a geographic region. All encountered different set ups, organisations and service level provision for women selling and exchanging sex.

This evaluation found an appetite and appreciation from mainstream and specialist service providers to understand online selling and exchanging sex, especially the experiences and needs identified by women involved.

For services across Scotland to have a sustained impact in line with national strategies:

- 1. All parties should recognise any new service model takes time to embed before it can be widely known and generating referrals from other agencies and self-referrals.**
- 2. Branding, naming and search engine optimisation must be considered carefully so that women can find online resources easily as the name, service and reputation of a service becomes established.**
- 3. All specialist services need to be prepared to act as a key contact point for individual women, but also to support them to access additional services better able to respond to additional needs such as financial assistance, housing, sexual health and mental health services, employability, skills development, and legal advice.**
- 4. When bringing together people at a national level, ensure there is tailoring for local context and local autonomy to deliver towards programme goals.**
- 5. Need for national-level thinking and action to alleviate geographical inequalities in accessing services and for a joined-up approach that applies to all areas unilaterally.**
- 6. Longer-term, sustainable funding models are required across VAWG services and projects.**

To conclude we finish on the words on an interviewee:

'More resources and funding is something everyone always asks for. But something key if we really care about this group in Scotland is that we resource services properly'



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