

Chch residents expect sex workers to return

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Some Christchurch residents are dreading the summer as they expect street based sex workers to return to their neighbourhood.

Residents in St Albans, a suburb just north of the central city, said, for the last six years, they had been abused, they had seen sex workers engaged in sex acts in their backyards and they frequently saw condoms and needles littered across the driveways.

Christchurch City Council had been grappling with how to deal with it, although last month it threw out a potential bylaw which would limit where sex workers could work, proposed by the residents and their lawyers.

The council believed enforcement would not be practical - instead they opted for a community-led working group, backed by the police and the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective.

But one resident, Matt Bonis, said he was sceptical it would change anything in the long run.

"We'll give it six months, and if it looks like it's going back to what we've had in previous years we will gather evidence and look at going to the high court," he said.

Mr Bonis and the other residents were already gathering pictures of condoms and needles in their gardens, video of sex workers shouting as well as pictures of business transactions taking place in front of their homes.

Recently, he had seen fewer sex workers outside his house, which he credited to increased media exposure and intervention from former lawyer and new Christchurch Central MP Duncan Webb, but as the weather got warmer, he expected the sex workers to return.

"It gets quiet for a while and you hope for the best, but then you see one or two appear and then you know you'll get more and more numbers."

Lisa is a solo mum, whose son is 12-years-old, and said she worked as a sex worker on Manchester Street to support her family as health issues made it difficult for her to find a regular job. She said working on the street was not easy.

"There is a big drug underworld out here," she said. "We get cars driving up and down yelling abuse at us, I had a glass bottle thrown at me a few weeks ago ... eggs [are] also common."

Lisa said she stayed well away from St Albans, as she did not want to get involved in a dispute with its residents.

"I think the girls that are working up there, that are doing all of these things, are displaying disgusting behaviour," she said.

Lisa believed drugs were also a problem, and a major contributor to anti-social behaviour.

The problems began after the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, when the army blocked off the central city. That forced the sex workers out of their traditional red light district into St Albans. This was exacerbated by the closure of the quake-damaged parlours, whose working girls had to also work on the street.

The cordons fell several years ago, but still a few sex workers remained.

Kelly, who has been working on the street for 22 years, said it could sometimes be dangerous.

"About six weeks ago there was a car load of idiots who decided to pick on a particular trans working girl, and they tried to run her over.

"She rang the police ... but they never came. Half an hour later the people came back and tried to run her over again ... lucky she was a tough girl and knew to get out of the way," she said.

Kelly said it was unfair to point the finger solely at sex workers.

"I know there are flats out there ... that house people coming straight out of jail ... if [the residents] want to start throwing blame around they should actually start looking at people in that area as well," she said.

A trans sex worker, Phoenix, who used to work north of Bealey Avenue, said she had a simple reason for moving.

"There is no traffic there," she said. "You just follow the work, you kind of know when it is dead and when there is nothing you have to move."

Records from the Prostitutes' Collective show a downward trend in numbers of sex workers seen in St Albans.

The next step

Christchurch City Council voted for a community working group last month, partly due to the impracticalities it saw with the legal-framework and enforcement of a bylaw.

But none of the sex workers RNZ spoke with said they had been spoken to by council staff, before it decided a community-based working group was the right approach.

RNZ put this to the council, who confirmed no staff had been deployed to Manchester Street to consult with the sex workers directly prior to the council vote.

The council's head of strategic policy, Helen Beaumont, said there was no need to, as the focus was on the legal viability of a bylaw.

"No, we didn't speak to the sex workers, we used the Prostitutes' Collective as their sort of union," she said. "They have a very good understanding of the situation for the sex workers on the street, so they were able to provide that perspective to us."

Ms Beaumont said representatives from the working group would be sent out to Manchester Street in the coming weeks.

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