1. **PURPOSE**

1.1 To provide a briefing on the extent of prostitution on the streets, the measures being taken to reduce such activity.

1.2 The briefing also includes initiatives being undertaken by some agencies working the community to deter prostitution and deal with some of the reasons associated with prostitution.

1.3 Members are asked to note the contents of this report.

2. **INTRODUCTIONS**

2.1 When Tower Hamlets Council developed its 10-year vision through the Community Plan the community did not see prostitution as a large problem, or as an issue, which was synonymous with the Borough.

2.2 This report arises out of a request from the Living Safely Scrutiny Panel to identify the action taken by the Council and its partners in dealing with this issue.

2.3 The Council is able to address the issue of prostitutes through the Community Safety Partnership now led by the Service Head for Crime Reduction Services. As part of its role in developing the Borough Crime and Disorder Residents Strategy 2002-2005, it formulated an action plan.

2.4 The Crime and Disorder Act 1998, requires local authorities and the Police Service to work in partnership with such agencies as the Health Service, Probation Service, Fire Services and all recognised agencies to develop a strategy from the audit of illegal activities in the Borough.

2.5 As a consequence of a series of developed meetings between the Police and the Council, “Making Communities Safer” was identified as one of six priorities. Within this priority
(six) an objective was established to deal with prostitution;

- To reduce the number of sex workers operating in residential areas and the number of under age sex workers in the Spitalfields ward.

2.6 Whilst the Police and other volunteer charitable and community groups have been working with prostitutes, the Council and the Police have recognised the need to co-ordinate and work together to deal with problems associated with sex workers.

2.7 This report does not deal with sex workers in organised establishments such as clubs, brothels, and saunas. The Police, Planning Department and Environmental Health have not raised this off street activity as being identifiable or a problem within Tower Hamlets at this time.

However, in respect of street activity the Police work will aid agencies such as Door of Hope, Maze Marigold, Providence Row Charity, Drugs Action Team and others.

3. PROSTITUTION IN TOWER HAMLETS

3.1 Prostitution within this report is defined as offering or soliciting sexual acts in a public place for financial reward. This is legislated within the Street Offences Act (1959).

3.2 Kerb crawling is a nuisance whereby potential customers travel to an area known for prostitution with the intention of picking up prostitutes, and/or opportunising women for sex whether willing or not. This offence is covered by the Sexual Offence Act (1985).

3.3 In its relationship with the Police, the Council is mainly aware of widespread prostitution in the Whitechapel/Spitalfields area. Commercial Street in the west to Valance Road in the east with Bethnal Green Road and Whitechapel Road becoming the northern and southern boundaries. On occasion, sex activity spreads beyond these areas but such is the history and safety issues that large-scale activity is not witnessed or sustained.

3.4 Historically Spitalfields and Whitechapel have been associated with prostitution for at least 200 years, with the height of its notoriety in Victorian times of the mid to late nineteenth century. At this time prostitution was rife in many parts of London, being active on street and in brothels.

3.5 Within the last 30 years Spitalfields and Whitechapel has increasingly become more important as both an affordable and improving residential area as well as an important commercial area adjacent to the City. Whilst the sex industry has been declining in Whitechapel and Spitalfields, other historically action areas like Westminster, and Kings Cross have become more popular with prostitution.
3.6 As a result of the decline, the catchment area for customers has contracted with kerb crawling activity showing a greater area profile due to the cause of car travel to the area.

3.7 Media reporting of sex activity including details of arrests and prosecutions is a fairly unimportant news item. However details of drug use, human defecation and vomit, drunkenness and nuisance make for sensational reporting thus depicting a poor local environment, raising irrational fears in the local community. One aspect of history, which will always prevail, is the unsolved murders of prostitutes in the nineteenth century by the so-called ‘Jack the Ripper’.

3.8 So far, Police intelligence and information from agencies assisting with problems of prostitution have not indicated any obvious under-age sex activity. At least one agency attempts to help discourage under-age workers, however due to both the stigma and the secretive nature of this activity, it is difficult to establish a way of identifying, preventing and dealing with this issue.

3.9 Current operations co-ordinated by the Police appear to indicate a high proportion of local people using the services of prostitutes. The majority of sex workers are local to the East End with others from more popular areas like Kings Cross where it is more organised with associated problems of aggression and violence from fellow sex workers on their protectors.

4. **CURRENT STRATEGY TO PREVENT PROSTITUTION**

4.1 Current Police intelligence appears to identify prostitutes in Tower Hamlets as a visible issue in Whitechapel and Spitalfields. Sex workers are generally female and do not show signs of being controlled by pimps. A “pimp” is defined as a person who lives off the earnings of a prostitute.

4.2 It would appear that the majority of sex workers interviewed by Police engage in this activity to support their drug dependency, mainly crack cocaine.

4.3 The Police are aware of ‘crack’ houses i.e. Premises used for dealing and using substances being set up in Whitechapel and efforts are made to raid and close down operations before they become too well known, and consequently attract undesirable activity to the area.

4.4 The Police and help organisations like Maze Marigold, Door of Hope etc., are working together to help prevent reoffending, offer advice and assistance with self-abusive and finding alternative accommodation, employment and health advice.

5. **ANTI-VICE OPERATIONS**

5.1 As all vice operations are carefully planned, it is not practical to publish details of locations targeted or specific information on issues raised due to the sensitive nature of the work.
5.2 Currently the Police are committed to delivery the following operations as part of the "Making Communities Safer" initiatives.

5.2.1 Anti-vices on street prostitution operations are per month. This involves New Scotland Yard Clubs and Vice Chief and Local Police targeting streets where frequent complaints are received.

5.2.2 Anti-kerb crawler operations once every two months. This activity enhances the quality of life for residents, and reduces incidences of lone women being accosted or approached for sex.

5.2.3 Development of long term strategy for vice authority in Tower Hamlets. The Vice Sub Group will meet regularly and develop links with all relevant groups to explore a co-ordinated approach to the problem.

5.2.4 Tackling identified problems associated with young people involved in vice. Working with the National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and other organisations to divert young people from the sex industry through assistance, education and enforcement against procurers.

5.2.5 Police/LBTH joint initiatives in Spitalfieds. This will comprise information gathering and working with Tenant Management Support Unit (TMSU) to identify vice problems on housing estates and formulates a plan for obtaining Anti-Social Behaviour Orders where residents/tenants are involved in off street activity.

5.2.6 Existing initiatives between the Police and LBTH include:-

- Changing road layouts to deter kerb crawling
- Lighting improvements to move away sex worker activity
- CCTV installation to reduce fear of crime and deter nuisance
- Informative signs to work and deter sex workers and kerb crawlers

6. **CONCLUSION**

6.1 Prostitution occurs in all major cities in the United Kingdom. In London this problem is partly historic and partly led by demand. Tower Hamlets at present does not exhibit a wide scale problem that is regularly in the media, but where it occurs it reduces the quality of life for the local community.

6.2 The sex industry is notorious for exploitation both of sex workers and clients. The association with Class A drug misuse, alcoholism, poverty and abuse targets its reduction as a major crime initiative.

6.3 The current anti-vice action plan in partnership with the Council and Police sets out to reduce and remove a perceived problem in the community. Other Police initiatives in conjunction with special units from New Scotland Yard are part of a national crime
reduction activity and address off street premises, gay prostitutes and other illegal sex activities.

7. **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 As the initiatives set out in this report are contained within legislation on Council policy, there are no specific issues arising from this report.

8. **EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 Anti-vice operations will help redress equality issues through improved choice and awareness.

9. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 There are no financial implications arising out of the initiatives set out in this report.