

Women's networking forum

17th January 2017 –Swansea

Clinks, Women's Breakout, Women's Resource Centre and Agenda have held the third networking forum for voluntary sector organisations working with women in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS). The event was hosted by Hafan Cymru at their domestic abuse one stop shop in Swansea and was jointly chaired by Clinks and Lancashire Women's Centres.

Nine voluntary sector organisations were represented at the meeting, including the partner organisations. This note aims to give a brief overview of some of the key issues that were discussed by both partners and attendees.

Gender specific support

Organisations felt that there is a lack of recognition by commissioners and some statutory service providers that women have specific, unique needs and the value of gender-specific services is being lost. There was a real concern that this is leading to gender neutral provision of services as women are not seen as a distinct group, as well as a loss of women's spaces.

National policy and devolution

Organisations noted that national policy makers are having far less influence over local commissioning decisions and there is an increasing disconnect between ministerial decisions and how that is translated into local practice. Devolution is likely to increase this and make the national landscape increasingly fractured. However, justice devolution may also create opportunities for the voluntary sector working with women.

Organisations noted the recent success of the South Wales Pathfinder and said that it has diverted around 600 women from the CJS in the last 2 ½ years. The cost savings for this work are considerable, with organisations highlighting the need for these to be fed back into the local justice system to enable to work to continue. The Making Every Adult Matter Approach is a non-prescriptive framework for developing a coordinated approach to meeting the needs of people experiencing multiple disadvantage. Some organisations thought this was an interesting model and thought it could be introduced in Wales.

They said there was a need for a clear loud collective voice for women, which they think is missing.

Focus on prevention

Organisations said that there is more focus on prevention services, but there is a lack of resources for full investment in them. Although investment in prevention is positive, one organisation highlighted a danger that commissioners view this investment as an immediate cost-saver. In reality this is not the case as it can take some time for any savings to be realised, especially as the cohort of women they are working with are likely to be complex. Investment in prevention needs to take place alongside investment in other services in the short-term.

Needs of women in contact with the CJS

Organisations spoke about the needs of their clients which often include substance misuse issues, homelessness, domestic and sexual abuse. They noted there is a strong business case for using terms

such as multiple and complex needs to communicate the challenges their services users experience to decision makers and commissioners.

Older women serving prison sentences experience distinct challenges as prisons are often not designed to meet their needs. An organisation that works to support women aged 50 and over in prison said that there is a lack of wheelchair access in prisons, and in some cases the door frames are too narrow for women to go through them. Further to this, prisons can be very noisy, which older women can find particularly challenging which can lead them to isolate themselves.

Experiencing stigma

Women who are returning to their community in Wales after serving a prison sentence can experience stigma, especially if they are returning to more rural, close knit communities. Organisations said that in some cases local papers report details of the woman's offending, which can lead them to feel isolated, judged and unsafe.

Housing and appropriate accommodation

Organisations said a lack of appropriate housing for women is becoming an increasing issue for their service users. They spoke of cases where women they are supporting have gone back to abusive partners on release from prison because that is the only accommodation available to them, whilst others have reoffended so they will be sent back to prison because they feel safer there. They also highlighted a recent case where one woman who left prison was given a sleeping bag and offered space on the floor of a local housing provider, to sleep alongside men, as there was nothing else available for her. This raises real concerns about safety and about future reoffending.

Further to this, organisations said that all the support that women receive in prison and in the community to help them on their desistance journey is undone if they are unable to access secure, safe and appropriate accommodation.

Another organisations highlighted that older women and those with a disability face additional barriers to accessing appropriate housing. One organisation knew of a case where a woman had been provided with temporary accommodation but she was a wheelchair user and the housing provider had no lift, meaning she was unable to stay.

- *The Pathway*

In Wales there is a duty on Local Authorities to work to prevent homelessness, which means that someone should receive support and have a housing application made by their probation officer (if applicable) 56 days before they leave prison. This change has been introduced by the Housing Wales Act 2014 and the Welsh Pathway, which was seen as positive by organisations and has helped to ensure women access accommodation on release. They also noted that in all local authorities there should be named person who is responsible for people leaving the secure estate in need of accommodation.

However, they noted many challenges to supporting this in practice including a lack of finances to enable this focus on prevention; a lack of housing stock, especially that which is appropriate for women; and staff changes making continuity of support in prison and through the gate challenging.

Organisations were pleased that the requirement for a woman to be able to demonstrate a 'local connection' to an area before the local authority will house her has been removed from housing legislation in Wales. It can be inappropriate and unsafe for some woman to return to their

community on release from prison. women were still required to demonstrate a local connection before local authorities will support their housing application.

However, they said that in some cases

- *Supported accommodation*

One organisation said it is often unclear when a woman will be released from prison, meaning that they can lose their bed in a supported accommodation service because they are unable to hold them due to demand.

Legislative changes in Wales

Organisations said that there has been a lot of legislative change in Wales recently which is taking organisations time to interpret and embed. These include: the Housing (Wales) Act 2014; Social Services & Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014; Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015 and the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015.

Further to this, organisations spoke about devolution as currently justice is not devolved in Wales. If it were to be in the future, they questioned what impact this would have for women as there is no women's prison in Wales. They also spoke about the Wales Act (2017) as it wasn't clear what impact this would have on their work.

Contracts and commissioning

One organisation noted that they felt there was an 'uncomfortable commodification of women' taking place. She went on to say that it is important commissioners take into account women's needs during the commissioning process as services or interventions for people differ substantially from others, such as manufacturing services for example.

- *Transforming Rehabilitation*

Some organisations noted that when Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC) won the bids for each Contract Package Area they spoke to the organisations providing women's specific services as they needed to develop their knowledge about what services work for women, and what they will need to commission to meet their service user's needs. The CRCs recognised voluntary sector expertise. However, organisations feel that this has changed and there is now an unequal power dynamic between them and the CRCs who are commissioning these services.

One organisation has a service that they are able to offer to the CRC for free, as they have been able to secure funding from alternative sources. However, the CRC has requested that they fill out multiple expression of interest forms as they will not use the service without this information. This is unnecessarily time consuming and resource intensive.

Another organisation said that a similar thing was taking place in their area, as the CRC required an organisation offering another free service to submit it through their portal, as they are unwilling to refer to programmes that have not been through this process. The CRC would not be funding this service as they already had their supply chain in place so said they were unable to be flexible.

This was challenged by another organisation who is delivering on a CRC contract. The targets and outcomes they are required to meet as part of delivering on that contract are challenging, and if CRC

Responsible Officers (ROs) begin to refer to services outside of the supply chain, they are unlikely to be able to achieve their targets.

- Investing in commissioners

There was a request for a “resource bank” for commissioners and for there to be investment in them. Organisations said that if commissioner’s resources are cut too much, it is likely that poor commissioning will result as there will be inadequate staff time to commission well.

Organisations stressed the importance of commissioners consulting with voluntary sector organisations, and their service users to determine what the need is before they commission services. They also said there is an opportunity for commissioners to jointly commission services.

- *Innovation*

Organisations said they feel there is an expectation from commissioners and policy makers that they will innovate and continue to undertake new and different work. This however is challenging, especially in the current economic climate as organisations find that they are spending increasing time maintaining the funding for their existing, gender specific services, rather than being able to develop new ones.

We were told that in some cases the CRCs are quite prescriptive which is stifling innovation and the services that the voluntary sector are delivering.

Organisations spoke about the importance of grant funding for the sector. Clinks is working to promote this through [being a member of the Grants for good campaign](#), coordinated by the Directory of Social Change.

Linking up with other agendas

Organisations spoke of the importance of bringing together the voluntary sector working on the violence against women and girls agenda, with those working specifically in criminal justice. As is well known, women in contact with the CJS have often experienced domestic abuse but organisations highlighted a concern that women with an offending history can be excluded from some domestic abuse services on this basis.

Future work

Organisations noted that it is the 10 year anniversary of the Corston Report this year and felt it was important for the sector, and others, to collectively come together to keep women’s needs on the agenda.

What next?

Clinks will share contact details of attendees with each other to enable them to stay in contact after the meeting.

Clinks will use this information to inform our contributions to the next Advisory Board for Female Offenders meeting, which will take place on the 28th March. Sarah Swindley will use the feedback to ensure she represents the sector at the next meeting of the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3), which will take place on the 14th February.

The next meeting of the women’s networking forum will take place in the coming months.