



Women's networking forum 20th February 2018 – London

Clinks and Agenda have held the sixth networking forum for voluntary sector organisations working with women in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS). The meeting was chaired by Clinks and Changing Lives.

23 voluntary sector organisations were represented at the meeting, including the partner organisation Agenda. This note aims to give a brief overview of some of the key issues that were discussed by both partners and attendees. These include: the main current issues they are facing; how to commission for the right outcomes; and what the voluntary sector can offer in terms of the design and delivery of good probation services.

Current issues

The organisations present highlighted their key challenges after a brief policy update from the partners.

Information and resources: Organisations reported that there can be insufficient communication and sharing of information and resources from the statutory sector. They went on to report that many statutory organisations provide insufficient information and resources for women to support them through their rehabilitation journey, and there is also a shortage of resources that are developed by or include the voice of women with lived experience of the criminal justice system.

Access to prison: Some organisations expressed difficulties in gaining access to prison to deliver services due to prisons being in lockdown or there being insufficient staff to give them access to the building or bring women to these sessions. They further raised the issue that they often also experience a lack of suitable desk or computer space to operate in prison.

Lack of trauma informed responses: Organisations said there is a lack of understanding of the impact of trauma on women amongst statutory services, and services are not delivered in a trauma-informed way. This creates barriers to service-users accessing services.

Funding and commissioning: Organisations reported some funders are unwilling to fund activities they regard as being statutory duties, such as engagement with the delivery of probation services. There is also a perception that some Community Rehabilitation Companies are not appreciating the value of women's services. Organisations highlighted that they are often in receipt of short-term contracts and noted that this can make the recruitment and retention of staff problematic, as well as strategic planning for the future.

Housing: Obtaining safe and suitable housing for women on release from prison was identified by many organisations as a key issue for their clients. Due to the fact that they have committed an offence, some women are being regarded as "intentionally homeless" by local authorities, which means that they are not entitled to longer term housing. Organisations gave examples of some women who are defined as being intentionally homeless when they left accommodation due to threats of domestic violence or aggressive neighbours.

Maintaining family ties: Women are often in prison at a great distance from their families, creating difficulties in maintaining important relationships. Maintaining family relationships is a key element to supporting women to live fulfilling lives on release and turn away from offending behaviour. Organisations reported variation in support for children of women in prison and provision for visits. They reported the temporary closure of the mother and baby unit at HMP Eastwood Park, which was having a detrimental impact on the women there, especially as it wasn't clear when it would be open again. They also said there was little support for mothers whose children had been removed from prison.

Continuity of services: Organisations cited lack of continuity of services through the gate as being a huge barrier to effective provision of support. They said women can receive high levels of support within prison but these often do not continue through the gate into the community. This was felt particularly to be the case for health and mental health services. This is compounded by women receiving short sentences, which leaves little time for rehabilitation work.

Healthcare: Organisations identified accessing healthcare and prescriptions as a big challenge for women being released from prison. There were instances of women being banned from GP surgeries and mental health services due to what was perceived by staff as "challenging behaviour" and meant the women had to access healthcare through A&E services, which is costly and a poor use of emergency services. Organisations reported that there was a lack of drop-in healthcare services for the women they worked with, an approach which is more appropriate than scheduled appointments for women with chaotic lives.

Dual diagnosis: Organisations described encountering a lack of understanding by many statutory services of the link between concurrently experiencing mental health issues and problematic substance use. They highlighted that often services providing support to help women address these challenges operate in siloes which prevents women receiving the holistic support they need.

Commissioning for the right outcomes

The organisations discussed evidencing outcomes for funders and commissioners and explored what was important to their service users, organisation and commissioners.

Differing priorities for service users, organisations and commissioners/funders

There can be tensions between the outcomes that are important to service users and voluntary organisations, and those that they need to record and present to commissioners. Organisations work to provide holistic support to meet or achieve 'soft' outcomes, such as a woman developing a greater sense of herself or self-confidence, but these can sometimes be difficult to quantify. Often commissioners require organisations to measure and report back to them on 'hard outcomes' such as how many appointments a woman has attended, for example.

The disparity between how commissioners often look to measure success, and the successes that are important to service users and the organisations supporting them was demonstrated by one organisation giving the example of a woman who reoffended but managed to abstain from drinking alcohol. For the woman this is a huge step forward and a big success but this would likely be measured as a negative outcome by the commissioner as the women had reoffended.

Commissioning for the right outcomes was seen as key. Organisations wanted to challenge commissioners to use a set of outcomes which is developed using research on what works and in consultation with voluntary organisations and their service users. There was a definite feeling that the voice of the sector in the commissioning process is missing.

Commissioning inhibiting organisations working to clients' priorities

The organisations identified a number of ways in which the way services are commissioned prevents them working towards outcomes that they feel are important for their clients. These are highlighted in detail, as follows:

Administration required to submit bids

Many of the organisations present (and indeed voluntary sector organisations working with women in contact with the criminal justice system in general) are small and saw the amount of work and administration that goes into applying for funding as a barrier, as well as the time and resource that goes into measuring outcomes. One organisation said that it is difficult to explain what the organisation achieves on paper and this is much easier to do through face-to-face meetings with grant-making bodies but getting a “foot through the door” is difficult to achieve. A need for an intermediary body to broker relationships between small organisations and large commissioners was identified.

Idea: commissioners should make more grant and “trust-based” rather than contract funding available.

Learning about a woman's journey

Organisations spoke about the value of funders, commissioners and MPs seeing the journey of the women the organisations work with first-hand and seeing what organisations are achieving with, and offer to, the women they work with. Organisations said that it “would open their eyes to experience what we do – the life and obstacles an offender faces. Then perhaps we would have funds being allocated to where they need to be.” Organisations cited examples of this being done successfully through funders shadowing staff or sitting in on meetings. There was a call for commissioners to “work with us – recognise what we do and see us as part of the solution.”

Idea: commissioners should be more involved in experiencing service users' journeys and what the organisations they fund do, for example through coming to “taster days”.

Impact of short term contracts

Organisations also identified short-term contracts as being a barrier for effective working, requiring them to deliver on outcomes within a short timeframe rather than being able to work towards longer-term, more meaningful goals.

Ideas for Clinks

Organisations had some feedback for Clinks about what the organisation could do to support them.

1. Clinks could be involved in changing the narrative around how we measure whether women's services are working, promoting the value of 'softer outcomes' and the need for the sector and their service users to be involved in the whole commissioning process.
2. Clinks could disseminate and share research on what works, which organisations would then be able to use as evidence to legitimise their approaches to funders.
3. Clinks could share information with organisations about what models and tools are available for measuring progress, such as the Ministry of Justice's datalab and the outcomes star (an online tool for measuring organisations' impact).
4. Clinks could provide training and support for commissioners to help them better understand the work of women's organisations.

Designing and delivering good probation services for women

During the last part of the event organisations considered what good probation services look like for women and what voluntary organisations can offer in terms of design and delivery of probation services. The information from this session will be used to inform discussions taking place during the next meeting of the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3) on 6th March 2018.

What voluntary organisations can offer in the design and delivery of probation services

Organisations identified a wealth of ways in which voluntary organisations working with women contribute towards the effective delivery of probation services.

Co-location of services

Women's centres provide a one-stop shop for women and can offer the co-location of probation services; providing them with a women-only space for clients to attend probation meetings. Co-location can not only encourage engagement of women with probation services, but has other benefits, including probation staff benefiting from the expertise of the voluntary sector and the voluntary sector gaining a stronger understanding of the way probation staff work and the constraints they operate under.

Voluntary organisations working with women are able to complement the delivery of statutory services, through the co-location of services, for example, which enables women to receive holistic support for their needs. Organisations highlighted that it is important that voluntary organisations, including those who have been commissioned directly by Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) remain distinct, in terms of roles and responsibilities, from statutory probation services.

Holistic long-term support

The voluntary sector offers long-term support beyond contact with the criminal justice system and is often able to be more flexible than statutory organisations. The voluntary sector can provide personalised services in response to what the woman herself identifies as priorities. Voluntary sector staff are often able to provide support to women throughout their whole criminal justice journey, thereby providing consistency of support.



Organisations also support both women who have and have not come into contact with the criminal justice system. They offer services such as foodbanks, clothes, childcare provision, counselling, access to interpreters and professional translation of documents, support to recover from alcohol or drug addiction, creative and arts sessions, pro bono barristers, solicitors and immigration advice, peer-mentoring, drop-in testing for substance misuse, a listening ear, mental health services (including home visits) and outreach services. They can also focus on social inclusion to prevent loneliness.

Expertise

The voluntary sector provides a range of expertise in understanding women's needs and can recognise, share and enforce good practice. As organisations are embedded in their local communities, they are also able to provide local intelligence about, for example, where a woman may have gone if she slips off the radar.

Organisations raised concern about some probation officers' lack of knowledge and expertise about the distinct needs of women and how best to support them and felt that they could offer them mediation support. This can be achieved through joint appointments with probation staff, clients and third sector workers. In terms of the design of probation services, organisations can offer specialist knowledge and expertise on what is needed and what works, as well as insight into service users and their perspectives.

Maintain strong relationships

Voluntary organisations often work to provide strengths-based, trauma-informed support to their clients and proactively work to develop and maintain strong relationships with them. This means that women trust them and are likely to engage in their services. Due to organisations being plugged into their local communities and being engaged with other services, they are also able to successfully refer women onto services if they cannot provide the support themselves, ensuring continuity of care.

Joined-up working

The voluntary sector often sits between different services and can support probation to make links with different parts of the criminal justice system, as well as between other statutory organisations, such as health services and those providing debt advice.

Barriers to achieving successful outcomes

Organisations went on to identify a number of barriers to the design and delivery of effective probation services.

Lack of resources

Insufficient funding for Community Rehabilitation Companies to deliver their services was identified as a barrier to effective delivery. In part this has led to probation officers having heavy caseloads, which is preventing effective communication, and instances of poor case management were described. Participants also said that in some cases probation officers were not referring women to support services, including those provided by specialist women's organisations.

One organisation said there had been the re-location of reporting centres to sites outside the city centre to generate cost savings. This was having a negative impact on the women as it makes it more difficult for clients to attend appointments, which can result in penalties such as them being recalled to prison.

Lack of knowledge/expertise

Organisations reported that probation staff sometimes do not have sufficient belief in women's ability to change and are not offering sufficient positive support. They identified a lack of managerial and supervisory support for probation staff and at times a lack of understanding about women's needs. They raised safeguarding issues around the practice of probation centres having "women-only days" where the women still have to access the service through the same entrance as men. High turnover of probation staff was recognised as inhibiting probation staff from establishing strong relationships with their clients.

Organisations also raised the issue of how women are classified as low-risk. Given that staff allocation is decided on a risk basis, this means they receive services from less-qualified probation staff, despite having a high level of need.

The rate card

The NPS contracts services from voluntary sector organisations for high-risk offenders through Community Rehabilitation Companies using the rate card. Participants high-lighted various instances of this being poorly co-ordinated and having a negative effect.

Pre-sentence reports

Organisations said that often pre-sentence reports were not being carried out. Pre-sentence reports consider a person's history and whether there are any extenuating circumstances which should affect the harshness of the sentence.

Lack of through the gate services

Organisations also identified a lack of continuity of provision from prison, through the gate and into the community. They stressed that professionals need to be working with women before the day of release and be starting relationships with them while they are in custody. They said that there is insufficient consideration of the risk for women around when they are released, such as heavily pregnant women being released from prison.

Solutions to overcoming barriers

The organisations suggested a number of recommendations to improve the delivery of probation services.

1. Probation officers should be located in women's centres in order to benefit from the expertise of staff working there and be located in a friendlier, less intimidating environment for women to attend. There should also be greater co-location of services.
2. Women should be given personalised budgets to enable commissioners to commission personalised support.
3. Probation staff should receive specialist training on women and trauma, delivered by voluntary organisations. Where possible only specialist staff should work with women.



4. It is important that probation staff receive robust supervision and management support, which could include peer support or co-supervision between practitioners.
5. The opportunity to co-opt experts from voluntary organisations to work with probation staff should be explored.
6. There should be a designated person (a single point of contact) in each geographical area with statutory responsibility for women's probation in that area.
7. There needs to be more joined-up working between agencies, including those in the statutory and voluntary sectors to ensure all the needs of a woman are addressed.
8. Funding should be less restricted and more flexible to enable organisations to provide holistic support to their clients.

What next?

Clinks will use this information to inform its work going forward and the support that it offers the sector. Clinks will ensure it is representing the women's sector at meetings with all relevant stakeholders, at the Advisory Board for Female Offenders and at meetings of the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3).