

Women's networking forum

27th April 2017 –London

Clinks, Women's Breakout, Women's Resource Centre and Agenda have held the fourth networking forum for voluntary sector organisations working with women in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS). The event was hosted by Clean Break, a women-only theatre company that delivers high-quality theatre-based courses, qualifications and specialist support for women with experience of the criminal justice system. The meeting was chaired by Clinks.

Thirteen 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.

Lack of women only spaces

During the discussion, organisations spoke about an instance where a women's centre had closed as they lost funding from their Local Authority at short notice. This not only meant that the women who were accessing that service were no longer able to get support, but also meant that experienced and knowledgeable staff were made redundant.

Another organisation highlighted that due to funding constraints and a reduction in services working specifically to meet the needs of women, there is a lack of appropriate women-only spaces in the geographical area in which they work. This is making it challenging for them to deliver their services, as they provide outreach support for women, which they need to deliver in women-only spaces. Organisations stressed that working in a holistic way and providing a multi-service offer to support a women's needs requires a physical building and space.

One of the key strengths of women's organisations is their ability to work closely in partnership with one another in order to provide a holistic service to meet their client's needs. Organisations said it is important that they continue to work closely together, so they can collectively raise the profile of their services and the needs of the women they support. They also said there is an important role for infrastructure organisations to support organisations to work together and build partnerships.

Organisations said that funders were encouraging them to work in collaboration with each other, but competitive commissioning has meant that they are often operating in competition to each other for increasingly limited funding opportunities, which makes this challenging.

Commissioning and the challenge of short term funding

Some organisations were commissioned directly by Community Rehabilitation Companies, and said that there was a clause in their contract that prevented them from speaking out if they felt there were problems with that contract, the resultant service delivery, and the impact of these on their service users. This is particularly concerning as voluntary organisations need to have the freedom to speak up on behalf of themselves and the service users they support. Organisations said it is important to continually engage with infrastructure organisations, as they have the ability to speak up on their behalf.

- **Achieving full cost recovery**

Organisations spoke about instances of poor commissioning practice, but recognised that in many cases, this was due to understaffed commissioning teams. They said that some contracts did not offer enough funds for them to achieve full cost recovery, which meant they had to subsidise the work with funding from other sources or work more closely in partnership with other organisations. One organisation said that the contract they were delivering for their local CRC had reduced the unit income per woman by half. This meant that they had to bid for supplementary grants from other funders, including trusts and foundations to meet the shortfall in funding. They also noted that some funders are moving away from funding organisations who have CRC contracts as they do not want to be subsidising government contracts. On the other hand, some said funders would not fund them if they were NOT working with CRCs, recognising them as a key player in the criminal justice landscape. Further to this, organisations said that CRCs are often not sub-contracting small, specialist, local organisations who work with women.

Another organisation stressed it is important the commissioners are realistic with the funds they offer for the services they want. If this is not the case, they said it is often staff that ‘bear the brunt.’ They went on to say that voluntary organisations need to work with commissioners to demonstrate to them how much full cost recovery is, and that voluntary organisations need to opt out of contracts that they feel are unattainable.

- **Funder requirements**

Some organisations felt that in order to respond to funding opportunities, they have had to re-focus their services and ‘re-package’ them to meet funders requirements. They felt that this had led to mission drift, and also meant that some of the services they were delivering were shaped by funders- rather than staff and service users.

Organisations said that reporting back to funders could be resource intensive due to the nature of the feedback they were expected to submit, which posed particular challenges for staff time. They said that infrastructure organisations can help to support them and communicate these challenges to funders.

It was highlighted that larger organisations had more resources to fundraise, as they often had a team or a department with that dedicated function, which meant that they found it easier to proactively fundraise for services, especially those that they felt were under threat. Small organisations had different models of fundraising, with some employing a specific member of staff to submit funding bids; others integrating it into the job descriptions of other members of staff; and still others commissioning external consultants to fundraise. Organisations said that being able to ‘passport’ the essential information about their organisation to different commissioners, thus avoiding having to complete various forms multiple times, was really useful and saved them considerable time and resources.

- **Building relationships with commissioners and decision makers**

Organisations said that some commissioners don’t know the value of specialist women’s services, especially as women in contact with the justice system are a minority in the CJS. They said this meant they needed to continue to be proactive in engaging with these commissioners, to support

them in their understanding of the needs and value of these services. Organisations also said that it was particularly important for them to build a relationship with funders if they were planning on submitting a bid to them.

Further to this, organisations said that as they work to provide a holistic service to women, it is important that they are able to access funding opportunities that allow them to provide their services in this way. Some organisations therefore spoke of the need to work to influence commissioners locally to encourage them to co-commission services, which would support the development of holistic services.

- **The challenge of short term funding**

Organisations said that receiving short term funding makes it challenging for them to strategically plan and develop their services, as they do not know what resources they will have to support their work. It is also difficult for them to be innovative with short term funding, as it can take considerable time and resource to plan and deliver a new, innovative service, especially as the organisation may encounter challenges along the way. Short-term funding can cause uncertainty and lack of continuity for staff, which can be stressful and lead to staff burn out.

Staff and volunteers are working under increasing pressure

Due to higher numbers of clients, with more complex and immediate needs, staff and volunteers are required to take on larger caseloads. To respond to this challenge, some organisations are recruiting more volunteers to support their clients as it is too costly to recruit staff. However, volunteers are not a free resource and recruiting a higher number of volunteers has cost implications; they need to be recruited, trained and continually supported. One organisation had just recruited a volunteer co-ordinator, but they were concerned about their capacity to provide the level of support that their volunteers need.

- **Organisations are proactively supporting staff and volunteers**

One organisation said that they work to proactively recruit staff and volunteers who have had contact with the Criminal Justice System, which has meant that they have had to proactively put in place robust mechanisms to ensure they are providing them with any additional support needs they may have. Also, they said it was important that they had in place appropriate training for staff and volunteers. As some of their staff and volunteers are on their journey to desistance, they might relapse, which means the organisation needs to continue to work flexibly to ensure they are able to provide the support they need.

Another organisation highlighted that it is important to recognise and reward (where possible) the work of staff, as well as focusing on volunteers. Organisations told us how they work to support their staff, with examples including: giving staff additional benefits including 30 days annual leave; allowing staff to leave early on a Friday afternoon or take part in an organised yoga class; having a weekly 'wellbeing hour'; and flexible working times. Organisations said that this helped to promote a healthy work/life balance for staff but for it to be effective, it had to be integrated into the culture of the organisation. Further to this, some organisations said that they offered clinical supervision for their staff.

Support from infrastructure organisations

Organisations said that it was important that infrastructure organisations do not provide frontline services but continue to advocate on behalf of their members. They said that they would value increased collaboration between infrastructure organisations whose members work with women to strengthen their voice.

They also said that they would value increased training delivered by infrastructure organisations including good practice in supporting, training and managing volunteers and effective time management for staff.

What next?

Clinks will use this information to 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).