

Women's networking forum

May 2018 - York

Clinks and Agenda have held the seventh 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.

Nine voluntary sector organisations were represented at the meeting. Clinks delivered a presentation highlighting key national policy issues relating to women in contact with the CJS, demonstrating how delegates can engage with national lobbying and campaign work led by voluntary organisations. This was followed by a presentation from Rachel Kinsella, Lecturer in the Policy, Evaluation and Research Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University. Rachel is currently working on the evaluation of the Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance and has recently completed the evaluation of the Whole System Approach for Women Offenders across 10 boroughs in Greater Manchester. She spoke about defining 'success' in terms of working with women in contact with the CJS, and how we measure it. Key points from her presentation include:

- Binary measures do not reflect the complexity of women's lives; solely relying on reducing reoffending or cost savings hides key aspects of a woman's journey to desistance and do not do justice to the importance of empowerment, confidence and improved relationships for example.
- For many women, engagement is an outcome in itself.
- The Justice Data Lab is a free service that allows organisations to access government reoffending data. Sufficient time needs to be built in for accessing this data, as data returns can take a long time to receive. The Justice Data Lab only shows whether organisations have had an impact on reoffending, which can mask some of the smaller, incremental changes people experience on their desistance journey. There needs to be a willingness from organisations and the Ministry of Justice to learn from what has not worked, alongside what has worked.
- Collecting data can be challenging for organisations as it can be resource intensive. Adequate funding is required to support this and the processes and data collection systems need to be built in from the outset. Creating a theory of change is really important.

During the latter part of the meeting organisations were consulted to feed into Clinks' response to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System's inquiry into the sentencing of women. [The response can be accessed here](#). This note aims to give a brief overview of some of the key issues that were discussed by both partners and attendees.

Current issues

- The impact of Transforming Rehabilitation (TR)

Organisations told us that when TR was implemented, there was a perception that voluntary organisations commissioned by the CRC were taking work from other voluntary organisations who weren't directly commissioned by the CRC in that area, rather than supporting their work.

One organisation told us that they were a tier two provider and were therefore subcontracting services on behalf of the Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC). They didn't think the CRC

understood the work that they deliver or commission and stated that the CRCs approach is too prescriptive; being led by their needs as opposed to the needs of the clients.

- A lack of through the gate provision

Through the gate provision was demonstrated by organisations as a particular challenge, with one organisation saying that providing one to one support for their clients as they leave the prison is no longer an option. One organisation said that it was no longer part of their contract to meet women at the prison gate. They said in some cases women have been met at the prison gate by taxi companies who had just taken them back to their local areas, but the women did not receive any support alongside this. The Greater Manchester Women Support Alliance identified this as a gap and were able to access funding from the "Tampon Tax" fund and the Big Lottery's Women and Girls Initiative Fund to pay for staff to provide through the gate support for women being released into the Manchester area and referring them to women's centres.

Organisations pointed to an example of good practice and said that at HMP Lincoln there is a departure lounge, where CRC staff alongside other services (including those provided by voluntary sector organisations) meet people who are returning to the Hull and Humber region on their release.

- Outcome measurements

Organisations said that the CRC's focus on reducing reoffending is too narrow and masks the other aspects that are important for a woman's desistance journey. Organisations said that they provide 'bottom line' support and work to meet the needs their clients identify that they want to address. One of the most important aspects of their work is empowering and supporting women to get their confidence, which they highlight is an essential part of a woman's desistance journey. The organisation told us it can take a long time for a woman to develop self-confidence and it is challenging to access appropriate, long term funding to enable them to support this change. They went on to say that 'empowerment' is often not on the list of outcomes that commissioner's use, but it is a central part of working to support women.

- Siloed funding provision

Many organisations received funding from their Local Authority but said that this funding wasn't implemented and delivered in a 'holistic way', leading to siloed service provision. One organisation was almost all volunteer led and received no statutory funding but that then meant that they were not aware of the which statutory organisations were working with the women they are supporting.

Organisations felt there is a particular lack of resources for mental health services, which was having a negative impact on their clients.