

September 2015



CLINKS
RESPONSE

Clinks response to HM Inspectorate of Probation thematic inspection of work with women offenders

About Clinks

Clinks is the national infrastructure organisation supporting voluntary sector organisations working with offenders and their families. We are a membership organisation with over 600 members including the sector's largest providers as well as its smallest, and our wider national network reaches 4,000 voluntary sector contacts. Overall, through our weekly e-bulletin Light Lunch and our social media activity, we are in contact with up to 10,000 individuals and agencies with an interest in the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and the role of the voluntary sector in the resettlement and rehabilitation of offenders. Our aim is to ensure that the sector and all those with whom it works, are informed and engaged in order to transform the lives of offenders and their communities.

About this submission

We welcome the opportunity to respond to HM Inspectorate of Probation's call for evidence and wish to highlight two research reports that explore the experiences of projects providing community-based services to women in contact with the CJS. [Run Ragged: the current experiences of projects providing community based female offender support services](#) and [Who Cares? Where next for women offender services?](#) provide a range of evidence and insights, including the first-hand experience of women offenders and those working with them, that are of particular relevance to the questions the Inspectorate is seeking views on.

Below we have summarised some key points from these reports and included other knowledge Clinks has collated from the voluntary sector, focusing on the questions that are of most relevance to our work, and that of our members.

Our submission

Location, leadership and funding of women centres

Clinks' Directory of Offender Services is an online database listing details of over 800 organisations and projects working with offenders and their families. Details of women's centres, including their location, as well as organisations providing gender-specific support can be found on the database, which we encourage the Inspectorate to utilise when undertaking thematic inspections.

As women's centres provide holistic support for their service users, they are able to access funding from a range of local and national commissioners, including statutory bodies as well as charitable trusts and foundations. However, due to increasing pressure on resources and the recent changes to the criminal justice landscape by the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms, women's centres are experiencing increasing financial uncertainty that is impacting negatively on service delivery.

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Barriers to gender-specific work

In 2012 Clinks, as part of our work as secretariat for the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector (RR3) Advisory Group to the Ministry of Justice, convened a Task and Finish Group to explore meeting the needs of girls and women at risk of offending. The resultant paper proposed a transformation in the way that services are designed, commissioned and delivered for girls and women at risk of offending that would, crucially, be underpinned by a gender-responsive approach. There has been a recognition, outlined in the Corston Report and recent Justice Select Committee report that women in contact with the CJS need gender-specific, holistic and personalised support to enable them to rebuild their lives and begin their journey to desistance from crime. Despite this, barriers still remain that prevent both the provision of and access to gender-specific support for many women.

These barriers are highlighted in detail in the Run Ragged report, in which services outlined that they were involved in an ongoing struggle with local decision makers and commissioners who did not understand that female offenders need a gender-specific service, with one organisation saying "you're still having to start from the beginning every time and just start with the basics." Due to this lack of understanding, the research found that the specific needs of female offenders were still not embedded in local strategies and provision of gender-specific services were still considered as an addition to mainstream support.

One of the recommendations from our report More than a provider: the role of the voluntary sector in the commissioning of offender services is for commissioners to "provide flexible but systematic routes for all voluntary sector organisations (not just providers) to share intelligence about emerging needs, pitch ideas and advocate for service improvements." If voluntary sector organisations providing specialist support to women were involved in the commissioning cycle in this way, it could help to address the lack of understanding of women's needs and the services essential to support them on their journey to desistance from crime.

On the 15th May 2015 women represented approximately 4.6% of the total prison population and represent a minority group in contact with the CJS. This can render women and their distinct needs invisible, and is one of the reasons used by commissioners and decision makers to de-prioritise specific services for women. This can in turn lead to local services de-prioritising women-specific services. Clinks' Who Cares report highlights this issue, offering the example of a drug support provider that did not provide a specific service for women as they only represented a small percentage of their caseloads; a local women's service said "that's the same in most organisations; the percentage is very low for women, but that's why they have been forgotten within the services."

Changes in the needs of female service users over the last two years

The complex and multiple needs experienced by women in contact with the CJS are well documented, with many facing mental ill health, homelessness, problematic substance and alcohol misuse and have experiences of sexual and domestic abuse. In recent years Clinks' members have reported an increase in the complexity and severity of women's needs - leading one organisation to tell us that these are "shockingly desperate times for women." Clinks' 2015 state of the sector report shows that 79% of voluntary sector organisations report an increase in the needs of their service users over the last three financial years.

Clinks' Run Ragged report outlines that "there is an emergent crisis amongst [female] service users, as a result of the current austerity measures, most significantly welfare changes, including rising debt, an inability to purchase food, increased anxiety, self-harm and depression."



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Clinks supports, represents and campaigns for the voluntary sector working with offenders. Clinks aims to ensure the sector and all those with whom they work, are informed and engaged in order to transform the lives of offenders.

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Organisations told us that: their referrals to food banks had quadrupled; they were increasingly using their emergency fund to help women buy food and pay bills to ensure they are kept "afloat" rather than to help them "get back on their feet"; and there had been an increase in women taking out pay day loans. Many organisations supporting women report that they have seen an increase in their caseloads alongside cuts in their own funding, and cuts to statutory provision for women.

Examples of good practice

We would like to signpost HM Inspectorate of Probation to three good practice case studies of organisations working to support women that can be found on our website. We have included a brief summary of the case studies below:

- [Community Links: Changes - support for women with complex needs and personality disorder in Yorkshire](#) - This case study focuses on the Community Links 'Changes' project which supports women with personality disorder. It looks at the vital support they provide to clients, what it's like to work with this client group, how the project is funded, and a client's individual journey through the service.
- [Pecan: Moving On](#) - A case study of one woman's journey with Pecan's Moving On programme, a one-to-one mentoring service supporting women aged 18-25 through the transition from prison into the community.
- [Lancashire Women's Centres](#): Ensuring the best health outcomes for vulnerable women - Explores one voluntary sector organisation's experiences providing NHS-commissioned mental health services to improve health outcomes for the women they work with.

In the coming months we are planning to collate and publish further case studies focussing on the experiences of voluntary sector organisations supporting women in contact with the CJS and would welcome the opportunity for these case studies to support and inform the future work of the Inspectorate's thematic inspections.

Clinks looks forward to further engagement with the Inspectorate on these important issues and would be happy to discuss any of the points raised in this submission of evidence in more detail.

End notes

1. *Clinks (2014) Run Ragged: interim report*, Online: <http://www.clinks.org/resources-reports/run-ragged-interim-report> (last accessed 10.09.2015)
2. Clinks (2015) *Who Cares? Where next for women offender services?* Online: <http://www.clinks.org/resources-reports/who-cares-where-next-women-offender-services> (last accessed 10.09.2015)
3. Clinks' Directory of Offender services can be accessed here: <http://www.clinks.org/directory>
4. Clinks (2012) *Breaking the cycle of women's offending: a system re-design*, Online: <http://www.clinks.org/rr3-women-tfg> (last accessed 10.09.2015)
5. Home Office (2007) *The Corston Report: review of women with vulnerabilities in the justice system*, Online: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf> (last accessed 1st September 2015)
6. House of Commons Justice Committee (2013) *Women offenders: after the Corston Report*, Online: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/justice-committee/news/women-offenders-report-published/> (last accessed 1st September 2015)
7. Clinks (2014) *Run Ragged: interim report*, Online: <http://www.clinks.org/resources-reports/run-ragged-interim-report> (last accessed 10.09.2015)
8. Clinks (2014) *More than a provider: the role of the voluntary sector in the commissioning of offender services*, Online: <http://www.clinks.org/resources-reports/more-provider-role-voluntary-sector-commissioning-offender-services> (last accessed 10.09.2015)
9. Ministry of Justice (2015) *Population and capacity briefing for Friday 15 May 2015, as cited in Prison Reform Trust (2015) Bromley Briefings- the factfile*, Online: <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Publications/Factfile> (last accessed 10.09.2015).
10. Clinks (2015) *Who Cares? Where next for women offender services?* Online: <http://www.clinks.org/>