

CASE STUDY: THE NELSON TRUST WOMEN'S CENTRES IN GLOUCESTER AND SWINDON

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As outlined in the Corston Report¹ and the Justice Select Committee report entitled *Women Offenders: after the Corston Report*,² women in contact with the Criminal Justice System (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 recognition, barriers still remain that prevent both the provision of and access to gender-specific support for many women.

As Clinks seeks to highlight the specific and often neglected needs of women offenders and to provide support to the organisations which work with them, we are publishing a series of in-depth case studies of services working to support women in contact with the CJS. This series aims to highlight the impact of current policy and funding arrangements on both the clients and the organisations themselves.

For this case study we spoke to Rose Mahon who, at the time, was Women's Services Manager at The Nelson Trust. Rose had responsibility for two Women's Centres – one in Gloucester and the other in Swindon.

Section 1: the women's needs

What are the needs of the women you are supporting?

"Poor accommodation; not much in terms of finance; difficult relationships - many women have had their kids removed; lots of experiences of childhood abuse. This can then cause stress levels to really start rising. Many women use substances to cope, which then creates its own difficulties. It just spirals down. And that is often what happens to our women. They spiral down in terms of their situation...their behaviours. Attitudinally. Mood. They become depressed and highly anxious. Our job is to help them to spiral back up."

All these experiences lead women into poor mental health. Rose also highlighted how it can lead women to self-harm:

"But because their difficulties have been very profound, lots of childhood abuse for example, lots of the hurt goes into self-harming behaviour. Because that is what women do, they take it out on

their own bodies. They take out their stress on their bodies. Prolific self-harming. Terrible self-harming.

That is why it is really important that women have the space where they can think, calm down a bit, feel safe, recuperate and resource, and hopefully that can help them and make a difference in their lives.”

“For a lot of our women it is really tough. For some of the women who end up in prison, they are often the ones who say ‘do you know what? I am just going to do something as it is easier to go back inside’. That is extremely sad to hear an individual say because it means that there is nothing in the community for them. It is so tough that they would rather sit in a jail cell.”

Have you seen any recent changes in the needs of the women you are supporting?

“People are getting poorer and some of the recent housing legislation [like the spare room subsidy] has meant that people are really struggling around finding decent accommodation. And if you think about accommodation as a need it is imperative that someone has a safe space, a safe base, from which to operate their life.

There is a lot more anxiety around benefit legislation. People are getting worried about how that affects them.”

When we asked whether the situation was getting worse for the women, Rose told us:

“I think it is. I do think it is and I will qualify that statement. We have more and more women who are coming here saying ‘I have a friend who would benefit from coming here.’ And they’re not cosying up. They see the Women’s Centres as somewhere to help in a crisis. They see their mates having a crisis and they tell them to come here.”

Section 2: working to meet those needs

How many women do you work with per annum?

“Over the course of a year we are easily working with 500 women plus. The Change Team works with around 25-30 women at any one time and probably works with about 80 women per annum. Sadly, we have a bit of a waiting list for that one, which isn't ideal.

We get 110 new referrals per annum from probation, but we had 310 women accessing the service through previous referrals. The Family Focus team works with 40 families and the young girls and young women Rural Outreach Project works with 25 clients at any one time.”

Section 2a: services provided

Can you describe the services you deliver?

“We have one women's community centre in Gloucester and one in Swindon. And we do some outreach into Wiltshire. In Swindon we work solely with women who are caught up in the Criminal Justice System, so we get referrals from probation and from prisons, including HMP Eastwood Park. We also work with street sex workers in Swindon, which is work commissioned by the local Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC).

The Gloucester project, has been here for seven years and Swindon has only been open for two. In Gloucester we also work with female offenders and have referrals from probation and HMP Eastwood Park. We also work with women who street sex work in Gloucester.

We do rural outreach to young women and girls in the 15-24 age group. They get referred to us by local neighbourhood teams, schools and colleges in rural areas in Gloucestershire. That is more preventative work. They might be young women and girls who are getting involved in anti-social behaviour locally so we are just trying to make some interventions there so that they do not end up as adult women in our centre or in the CJS. This project has been running for nearly two years, funded by the Gloucestershire PCC.

And we have recruited a Family Support Worker, supported by Gloucestershire PCC. She will work with families where a girl or young woman has been affected by childhood sexual exploitation. But that is working with the whole family and not just the young person.

Another strand of work is the Change Team, funded by LankellyChase and The Big Lottery. That team is working with women who experience what is termed as multiple disadvantages, so working with women who present in service with four or more needs. They take a range of referrals - anyone can refer into that. Most of the referrals are social care.

The other element of our service is the Family Focus Team who provide systemic family therapy and psychotherapy to families.

We also have a Partner Liaison Worker, who is working to support women who are the victims of perpetrators sentenced to programmes facilitated by probation. It is a programme they are sentenced to by the courts and is called Building Better Relationships. The women are the partners of the men who attend those programmes and we contact to see if they want any help or support. And also, we go and measure the impact that the programme is having.”

Could you explain how you work with other agencies?

“We work closely with a lot of agencies - statutory and voluntary sector agencies. Our Women’s Centres are run as a one stop shop. It is not a new model, and a lot of women’s centres operate in the spirit of a one stop shop... we have lots of activities; social-based activities, arts and crafts, domestic abuse services, drug and alcohol awareness, emotional health and wellbeing, confidence building, and relapse prevention....

Over the course of a week we have many different services. So, for example, Turning Point, a local drug and alcohol agency, have a worker placed with us because a lot of the women struggle going to a mixed service. And more than that – say you have a whole host of difficulties, you are a chaotic drug user, you have to keep an appointment at that place. It becomes really hard to negotiate and navigate that. We have two ways of tackling that – we have services delivered in the building so that women are able to access them from the place that they feel safe. Or we have our intensive key working model where the Key Worker can hand-hold if you like. That might sound disempowering, but for some women at the beginning that is necessary.”

Section 2b: providing a women-only space

Why is it important to have a women-only space?

"Safety first and foremost. What is imperative is that women have a safe space to think, to feel, to reflect - somewhere they feel comfortable....because women adapt their behaviour around men. And women facilitate male learning.

Some of the magic happens in a women-only space when they are in groups. If someone is brave enough to describe how they are feeling or an experience and another woman in that room might not have dared to share her experience says 'I know that because I have been there too, and that is when it is really helpful. And women tend not to disclose very vulnerable or intimate experiences if there are men around."

Do you have a process where women can come back to the service if they have stopped using it for a period of time?

"Yes, absolutely. We were sent Prof Lorraine Gelsthorpe's desistance theory that has nine lessons of desistance. If those nine things are in place women are likely to stop offending, so I set up the whole service to support those lessons. One of those things is that women can come back to an agency for what they call 'top-ups' if they are getting into difficulties again. "

Rose then went on to explain the ways that the key workers at the women's centre work to engage with their clients.

"I really like the concept of being held in mind. If you are experiencing difficulties, you might not seek help for those difficulties (like shame, lack of resource, not knowing what there is). There are a whole range of barriers for why women do not receive support.

When we are aware of a woman, even if she doesn't engage, we send them a text, just to let them know that we are there if they need us. Ask any of the key workers in this building - if you do that sort of texting the women will come back because it is permissive. Especially if the woman hasn't engaged and they are doing well and they mess up...whatever it is [When that happens] they often think that they have let us down [and we say] 'You haven't let us down. Are you happy with where you are? No? Let us help you.'"

Section 2c: ensuring staff are adequately supported and trained

What impact do the changing needs of the women you are supporting have on staff?

“Staff work really hard and I value them for their hard work and their contributions. Sometimes they do work above and beyond and I think it is really important to acknowledge that.”

“When you are supporting a woman in crisis it often happens on a Friday afternoon because a woman can’t bear to go through another weekend. I have had my workers out until 11pm trying to support a woman and I say don’t come in Monday... It is really important just to be mindful of the impact on the staff.”

Rose also told us about one of the training courses that the staff take part in:

“All staff members at The Nelson Trust do some training called Understanding the Impact of Trauma and they do this for two reasons. The first is an assumption that all women, no matter what service they access, have experienced trauma in their lives, and that impacts a person in a variety of ways.”

“The training also looks at ways of managing triggered distress and emotional regulation. This is also really important for staff because it is easy for the staff to get knocked out into deregulating. They are dealing with a lot of trauma and a lot of distress and that impacts them as well.”

“For some of the staff members that might have been triggering them. We employ a lot of people who come with their own lived experiences. I feel that the manager of the service has a responsibility around keeping an eye on all of that. You have got to try and make your service as healthy as possible.”

Section 3: funding and the impact of Transforming Rehabilitation

Rose told us about the contracts and grants the Women’s Centre is currently in receipt of.

“In Gloucester, we have been working under the contract from the old Probation Trust, and are now negotiating a contract with Working Links (owners of the Bristol, Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire; Dorset, Devon and Cornwall and Wales CRCs).”

In terms of grants... that is such a mishmash. We get grant funding from the PCC, LankellyChase Foundation, The Peter Lang Children's Trust, and The Pilgrim Trust. I think that the projects would not be able to function without this interest."

Have you experienced any changes in your funding recently?

"In previous years I felt really confident. A few years ago we didn't get our contract [from the Probation Trust] until the 28th March. It was just a delay in doing all the paperwork. Probation were saying to me 'don't worry. We will be recommissioning them.' I trusted that because of the nature of the relationship we had at that time."

Rose went on to tell us how the situation has now changed:

"Well, here we are in the spring of 2016...I am having the staff coming up to me asking 'are we going to be alright, Rose?' I can't say yes and I can't say no. You know, we have got some challenges. All our funding comes to an end at some point and we are doing everything we can to sustain that and to sustain our services...we are doing a lot more bids at the moment because we are very nervous about whether or not we will get anything from the new probation provider and that is a significant chunk of our work. We have had a particularly anxious year because of that, because we do not know what is ahead for us in terms of female offender services."

As outlined above, the Women's Centre previously received a significant amount of their funding from what was the probation trusts. Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) is the government's programme for managing offenders in England and Wales. Under this reform programme there has been a replacement of the previous 35 individual Probation Trusts with a single National Probation Service, responsible for the management of high-risk offenders; and 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) responsible for the management of low to medium risk offenders in 21 areas across England and Wales, referred to as Contract Package Areas (CPAs). The CRCs will also have a new responsibility for supervising short-sentence prisoners (those sentenced to less than 12 months in prison) after release.

Rose went on to tell us about the impact that the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms have had, not only on their funding but also on the service more widely.

“I think the whole TR process has been so huge, from my view, and unwieldy and lots of people are trying to get their heads around lots of changes. If you think about Working Links [the CRC owner], they took Bristol, Somerset, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Wales, Dorset and Cornwall. These are huge areas...we are talking about the South West and Wales...

It is massive...it is a massive change. Obviously Working Links are dealing with probation first... then there is the new legislation that came in – the ORA [Offender Rehabilitation Act, 2014]. They had to start doing the under 12 month resettlement work. Women’s services are a bit further down the list.”

How are your services being delivered now?

“We are still doing it and have co-located probation officers. We have a fantastic working relationship with them and have worked really closely with probation services in Wiltshire. We are only six doors down from the probation office there.

This went out for tender.³ Bearing in mind that we have been given that contract year on year, we’re now working hard to retain that service.

Our service delivery model for probation has been for going into the prison, working with women in the prison...picking them up at the gate and bringing them back into the community. Basically, we do community to custody, custody to community and we stay in a relationship with the women.

If you go to any women’s centre in the country, that is how they work. It is about the relationships that women have with their key workers and with our service.”

Rose went on to outline that other services have been put out to tender by the CRC Working Links, and it is currently unclear where the Women Centre’s service delivery model will fit in.

Section 4: conclusion

In her concluding thoughts, Rose said:

“I can tell you, from someone who has been managing services, this has been the toughest year I have had yet.”

Unfortunately, the challenging experiences Rose cited when we spoke to her are not unique to The Nelson Trust Women’s Centres. In Clinks’ response to the HM Inspectorate of Probation’s thematic work with women offenders, we outlined that “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.”⁴

This is supported by the findings from *Early Doors: the voluntary sector’s role in Transforming Rehabilitation* which gives the results from a preliminary survey of voluntary sector organisations working in criminal justice, which ran during May 2015.⁵ The report, published as part of Clinks, NCVO and Third Sector Research Centre’s project that tracks the voluntary sector’s involvement in and experiences of the TR reforms, found that the pace of change has been slower than many in the voluntary sector anticipated. This has left many organisations in a state of limbo, waiting to see how or if they will be involved in service delivery, making strategic planning and staff retention difficult.

Rose’s experience outlined in this case study is not isolated. Other organisations were concerned that although funding for their services had initially been continued, it was only confirmed for a further three months, with no guarantee of future funding. One of the organisations responding to the survey said that “core funding for our Female Offender services expired at the end of March 2015 ... some of this has been extended by three months but we have not got any assurance of continuity thereafter.” This makes it difficult for organisations to plan budgets, assess necessary staffing levels, and retain skilled staff in a climate of uncertain funding.

Clinks will continue to track voluntary sector organisations experiences of TR and highlight the unique experiences of organisations working to support women in contact with the CJS. If you would like your service to be featured as a case study, please contact Nicola Drinkwater on Nicola.drinkwater@clinks.org.

More information about The Nelson Trust Women's Centres can be found on their website [here](#).

¹ Corston, J. (2007) *The Corston Report: A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System*, Online: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf> (last accessed 10.02.2016)

² Justice Select 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 10.02.2016)

³ Working Links put this contract out to tender in December 2015

⁴ Clinks (2015) Clinks response to HM Inspectorate of Probation thematic inspection of work with women offenders, Online: <http://www.clinks.org/responses> (last accessed 11.05.2016)

⁵ Clinks (2015) *Early doors: the voluntary sector's role in Transforming Rehabilitation*, Online: <http://www.clinks.org/resources-reports/early-doors-voluntary-sector%E2%80%99s-role-transforming-rehabilitation> (last accessed 11.05.2016)

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