



2013 Study: Interim Headlines

Run Ragged:
The current experience of projects
providing community based female
offender support services

Key Findings

- **89% of projects felt their service was less secure than or as insecure as it was 12 months ago**
- **The sustainability of gender specific services for female offenders is often not embedded in local strategies**
- **There is an emergent crisis amongst service users, as a result of current austerity measures, most significantly welfare changes; including rising debt, an inability to purchase food, increased anxiety, self-harm and depression**

1. Introduction

Since the Corston Report of 2007, there has been a move to develop and grow high quality, gender specific support projects, for female offenders in non-custodial settings.¹ Many such projects now exist across England and Wales.

Against a backdrop of a change in criminal justice policy, a challenging economic landscape and high levels of welfare reform, Clinks asks how are such projects currently sustaining provision? And what impact is this environment having on them, their service users and their on-going ability to influence strategic direction at both a local and national level?

A key area of change is the Transforming Rehabilitation programme, the Coalition Government's plan to reform the way that rehabilitation services are structured, commissioned and delivered in England and Wales. In particular it opens up to competitive tender the provision of services for low to medium risk offenders. Those offenders will be managed by independent providers from the voluntary, not-for-profit or private sectors. Services will be procured via a bid process covering large geographical contract package areas, with a lead provider securing the contract and subcontracting arrangements for local delivery.

As part of this policy shift, the Offender Rehabilitation Bill makes changes to the sentencing and release framework to extend supervision after release to offenders serving short sentences. It also creates greater flexibility in the delivery of sentences served in the community. The bill also states the Secretary of State must consider the specific needs of women offenders, and identify how these are being met under the new arrangements. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has announced their intention to publish guidance on good practice in women offender services which will be used to influence the market. The procurement process will then take note of how women's services are included within each lead provider's bid.

¹ Home Office (2007) *A report by Baroness Jean Corston of a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System: The Corston Report*, Online: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/corston-report-march-2007.pdf> (last accessed 04.02.2014).

The changes under Transforming Rehabilitation were progressing during the period of time in which this study took place. The increasing level of knowledge about these changes within the criminal justice sector informed those participating in the study, and therefore the responses in interviews are influenced by that timeline.

Since the completion of the initial interviews which form the basis of this interim report, a number of Government reports have been published that again highlight the needs of female offenders, for example in July 2013 the Justice Select Committee published the findings from its year-long inquiry, that reviewed progress made since the Corston Report²; and in October 2013 the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) published the Women's Custodial Estate Review.³ Due to the timing, this interim report does not reflect any views or discourse that have since arisen from those papers. The final report will however contextualise the final findings and make recommendations reflecting the current discourse.

About the study

Clinks started this study in 2013, working alongside frontline services in order to inform national and local policy and strategic development.

The aim of this qualitative study is to identify and share what issues female offender services currently face and to reflect the experiences of what is and isn't working for them at this time. A particular focus is to develop a better understanding of how these organisations are coping with a changing policy context, the current funding environment, and explore the impact of this upon their service users. In addition the study aims to identify good practice by the projects, as well as by partner organisations, local decision makers and local commissioners with whom they may work.

The study involves two interviews each with 9 different projects. The first set of these interviews was carried out in Spring-Summer 2013, and this interim report presents initial headlines from those interviews. The second set of interviews in Autumn-Winter 2013 will form part of the final report of findings and recommendations due in early 2014.

²Justice Select Committee (2013) *Women offenders: after the Corston Report*, Online: www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmjust/92/92.pdf (last accessed 04.02.2014)

³ NOMS (2013) *Women's custodial estate review*, Online: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/252851/womens-custodial-estate-review.pdf (last accessed 04.02.2014).

Methodology

The first interviews were semi-structured with questions focused on:

- Current funding and future security of local provision
- Impact on projects of current policy and economic climate
- Projects' ability to influence local policy makers, decision makers and commissioners (including other criminal justice agencies)
- Local responsiveness to and understanding of women offenders' specific needs
- Changes in service user demand and need; and emergent needs

The interviews were carried out by Clinks' Local Development Officers, Louise Clark and Isabel Livingstone, and were recorded and transcribed. All material is presented anonymously to allow for frank discussion of what can sometimes be very sensitive issues. The interview data has been analysed using Framework Analysis, a method of analysis used in applied policy research to meet specific information needs within a short timescale.⁴

Participants

Nine providers of female offender projects (including some Women's Community Projects⁵) were selected for interview. Participants are from both Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations and statutory services.⁶

All the organisations are, or were until recently, specifically funded to work with female offenders; and all have some paid staff. Organisations that work more broadly with all women and who may have offenders within their service users group, are not included. This is to enable the study to focus on those who have the female offender agenda as their core business and who are or were most centrally impacted upon by current policy and funding changes in relation to female offenders.

Some participant projects are standalone, some are part of a wider women or offender focused service, and others sit as a project of a larger - sometimes national - organisation (though usually still with a strong criminal

⁴ Lacey A. and Luff D. (2007) *Qualitative Research Analysis*. The NIHR RDS for the East Midlands / Yorkshire & the Humber, 2007.

⁵ Women's Community Projects developed as a result of The Corston Report, building on existing women's community centres and developing new gender specific one-stop provision for female offenders in the community, to be used ideally as an alternative to a custodial sentence.

⁶ Some statutory services were included as they were the main service provider in some geographical areas.

justice focus). Most projects are well established, mentioned in numerous reports as examples of good practice, including statutory and national reports. Some have won awards for their work with female offenders.

The projects have a mixed source of income including local probation trust funding, NOMS funding, local health trust funding and funding from charitable trusts.

2. Findings

This report presents the findings from the first interviews, a snapshot of the current experience. The findings are categorised under three main headings: Service Users; Service Landscape; From Service to Strategy. Examples of good practice are included in each section.

Recommendations will be made in the Final Report, reflecting these findings and those from the second interviews. The final report will also outline two innovative approaches by statutory partners to meet the needs of female offenders, by Wiltshire Probation Trust, and Integrated Offender Management Cymru.

2.1 SERVICE USERS

Gender specific and user-centered approaches are the cornerstones of today's women offender support services. The cohort that these services seek to help and rehabilitate is made up predominantly of low risk, but high need, chaotic and vulnerable individuals. These needs are well documented, from victims of abuse and domestic violence, to those with poor mental health. This presents a challenging service user group, but one which has been best serviced by a holistic community based approach, diverting women away from prison where possible and appropriate.

It was vital to hear what, if any, barriers exist for women who would benefit from accessing a local project; or what emergent needs there may be for women offenders in the current economic landscape of austerity measures. As well as emergent needs, the impact of the experience when attending court and the impact of sentencing was also discussed.

Sentencing and women's experience in court

Interviewees felt that sentencers still seem to vary in their understanding of the female offender cohort and the impact of sentencing to a custodial setting. A project said a magistrate had queried why a woman couldn't find

the £10 per week for her TV licence debt, leading the project to highlight the poverty and debt issues present in the lives of many female offenders.

Court staff were described as sometimes lacking understanding of the needs of female offenders. One project said that on occasion women in court cells informed court staff that they had children and needed to collect them from school or make arrangements for their care, but had not been believed. That same project suggested addressing this, by courts arranging for women with children or caring responsibilities to be seen in the court first, rather than being kept in a cell all morning. They added that “a woman’s caring responsibilities don’t end when she becomes an offender”.

Conditional Cautions and Female Offender Specified Activity Requirements (FOSAR) are both sentencing tariffs that can be used in some areas, to enable engagement by a female offender with their local gender specific service. However, even where those tariffs exist or have been developed, they are not always utilised. One project attended several productive meetings with partners and had drawn up protocols for such a scheme, then momentum stalled with a key statutory partner and the scheme has not yet been released. Another project spent vast amounts of time engaging their local Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to ratify the initiative and whilst it had positive verbal responses, again the scheme never came to fruition. This highlighted a frustration for projects that could see there were more women who could access and benefit from their service, but they were just as likely to end up in prison or with a less productive sentencing option.

The impact of austerity measures

“Shockingly desperate times for women” is how one project described the current financial situation for their service users. Participants were asked whether they were seeing any changes in their service users’ needs or could identify specific emergent needs. Changes to the benefits system were particularly highlighted⁷. What was most noticeable was the increase in needs relating to welfare reforms that emerged over the timeframe of the interviews, from spring, when the reforms were first introduced, to summer, when the consequences of the reforms were more apparent. Explaining

⁷ In April 2013 a limit or cap to welfare benefit levels was introduced, which for some people has seen a reduction in the income that they had previously received, despite no change in their personal circumstances.

how this manifested, projects stated they were seeing “women who simply can’t afford food”. Other indicators were:

- Referrals to food banks had quadrupled
- Women were said to be “Being tipped over the edge and seeing spiralling debts”
- An increase in client anxiety in relation to benefit changes and resulting debt issue
- Debt issues were so prominent that they had become a designated agenda item for team meetings.

One project is now specifically training staff on increasing benefit knowledge and even looking to recruit staff with a heavier focus on their debt work experience. Projects said whilst it had always been frustrating to have to be heavily involved supporting service users appealing benefit decisions which were reversed on review - “basically doing DWP’s work for them”, they are now seeing an increase in refusals of benefit claims and fewer successful appeals.

Housing provision was felt to be an increasing cause of crisis now, and even if women were able to move under the new under occupancy rules⁸, there were often no suitable premises to relocate. It was also reported that criteria appeared to be getting stricter on schemes like tenancy support, with one interviewee noting that the tenancy support services which are offered tend to be heavily curtailed: “What used to be 2 year support is now only 6 months”.

Austerity measures have heavily impacted on project resources and whilst it is clear the projects are flexible and responsive to need, the crisis situation that many of the service users are now in is taking its toll. For example projects are utilising emergency funds to help women get back on their feet, but these funds are now consistently getting used to buy food and pay bills just to keep the women afloat.

In the last 3-4 months, one project had seen a marked increase in depression, self-harm and a sense of hopelessness in the women. In turn

⁸ In April 2013 benefits changed so that council tenants and housing association tenants will have their housing benefit entitlement reduced if the council decides their home is too big for their needs. This is often called the 'bedroom tax' or 'under-occupancy rule'.

this requires more support to the women and more supervision of staff dealing with women in deep crisis. A project described themselves as being “Run ragged” in dealing with the current crisis.

The projects we interviewed worked tirelessly to respond to these new challenges, for example, working more closely with local food bank to support their service users. Good examples given showed food banks requiring clients to negotiate with a debt worker prior to a food hamper being issued. Because the local advice bureau has a backlog of existing cases, the women’s project is ensuring their own staff collaborate with debt workers at the food bank to support the swift resolution of the woman’s financial issues.

The stark experience for some service users is well summarised by one project: “We are seeing more women with a chaotic lifestyle....we’ve seen more and more women [who] are, actually worse, in their desire to take their own lives”.

Engaging service users

Much good practice is undertaken by the projects to capture the views of the service users, to both ensure that the services remain responsive to the needs of the women and to inform local developments. Examples include:

- Focus groups with service users and probation staff present to collate feedback on the service.
- Service user representation on the Management Committee.
- Other women’s services invited partner projects along so that the women are more inclined to engage in a feedback session. So it may be a Citizens Advice session or a well-being/pamper session built into the group.

Engaging women fully in their own support planning and discussions with partner organisations is considered to be core to a holistic approach. Projects described 3-way meetings with the referring agency, the potential service user and the project, at referral stage as well as during the lifetime of the case work. “It’s much less confusing for the poor woman who’s probably been through many agencies and services ... it makes it clearer, makes the transition smoother”.

Activities such as those listed above have been used by the projects to successfully improve services and inform wider policy, for example:

- One project was able to amend their assessment tools and waiting list criteria following input from service users, to better meet the women's needs.
- Another project has used service user feedback to ensure they create an environment in which women feel fully supported, and which does not trigger anxiety or a state of defensiveness "...they [can] feel threatened by [some] environments they walk into... how that individual is greeted and worked with has been considered and there's an ethos and model to it".
- Another ensured service users views were fed in to a local mental health consultation. This reflects their service delivery model of ensuring service user voice in local and national consultations.

2.2 SERVICE LANDSCAPE

We asked Women's services about the financial sustainability and security of their provision, what issues impacted on that security and the perceived consequences of impending funding and policy changes (including Transforming Rehabilitation). Their experience of commissioning was discussed, as was the ability to influence local strategic approaches.

Security of service

Participants were asked to express how secure they felt their service will be under future funding arrangements, compared to 12 months ago. No service was able to say that they were more secure:

- Four projects reported that their funding was less secure than 12 months ago
- Four projects said that their funding had never been secure and that that feeling remained: "We just get on with it"

Whilst one interviewee felt optimistic, this was not attributed to any local strategic commitment to women's services or positive funding indications, but based on their view that an area of work that they delivered

(mentoring) had been popular of late: “I remain optimistic about it. I think that mentoring is getting a lot of profile at the moment”.

Experiences that have compounded concerns about a precarious financial future include both poor communication and unconfirmed funding arrangements:

- One project at the time of the interview (June 2013) couldn't confirm their income was agreed and secured for that financial year 2013-14. They were continuing to operate on the expectation of funds being continued, as they had not been told otherwise.
- One project did not hear until the 28th March that funding would commence on 1st April that same year. They were given several verbal assurances by the statutory funder that funding would be granted, but the project obviously wanted the signed contract as a guarantee.
- One project had their funding officially end two months earlier and had still not heard at the time of the interview (June 2013) whether they were to be refunded. They were continuing to operate on the verbal understanding that further funding would be granted.

It was often seen as perplexing that statutory commissioners did not seem to want to protect their investment in a bespoke service for women, which had been developed with their support. They had interpreted this from the apparent lack of desire by the funder to enable the project to participate in negotiations, secure its future and up-skill staff to aid sustainability. Another project said that whilst they get a set income, it was not enough to actually run the service. Funds were described as “stringy” and some projects said they had been unable to accumulate reserves, meaning they had no capital to draw upon if funding was cut, or reduced. This puts organisations in a very vulnerable financial situation.

As well as the funding uncertainty, pressure also arose when targets within the contracts sometimes changed. A project described how they had exceeded their target for referrals, but in response the funder had increased it. This continued until they were working flat out to reach a very high target, but they had to agree to the new targets in order to maintain their existing level of funding. Even then, they were unsure of that future funding. So this meant the organisation was working above capacity, whilst

simultaneously thinking about how to wind down support, because of the very real threat that they might need to close their service.

How services are viewed

Examples of how services are viewed were also given to describe the service landscape. Some interviewees felt that statutory partners did not value the professionalism or uniqueness of voluntary sector run projects: “the [local] Probation Service doesn’t believe that a voluntary sector service can deliver as efficiently and effectively as they could. Therefore you lose the credibility of your experience. It’s something about different sectors not appreciating each other”.

Some interviewees also felt that partners do not always recognise how stretched resources are, with one project believing it was assumed by statutory partners that “the voluntary sector can do things for nothing”. And participants felt voluntary sector staff were viewed as somehow unprofessional. One project commented: "Yes, we are a specialist service and, actually, that's because we've got the expertise to do it right. Although, having said that, we have won a [prestigious] award and you would have thought that would be enough credibility to justify the need to engage with us effectively”.

Impact on services

A negative impact of the funding uncertainty highlighted by participants was the need for them to reduce staffing levels: “I have to keep putting my staff into [redundancy] consultation...and they're all beginning to leave. So, it's really difficult ...to lose [staff] experience and skills; and the amount of money that we've input into [staff] gaining all that experience and skills and knowledge is just going to be lost." Another project said that skilled and valuable staff were leaving, as they could not cope with the ongoing insecurity.

The uncertainty of a project’s future could not always be hidden from service users, due to staff leaving or projects being unable to take on new referrals until their future situation was confirmed. This was said by some projects to lead to an increase in client anxiety, and therefore impacted on

their projects' resources in terms of staff and management time needed to support service users who were feeling distressed. In addition, the increasing time that managers had to spend trying to get to grips with new commissioning procedures took them away from being able to adequately support staff. This is particularly damaging, as consistency of staff and the importance of developing relationships between staff and service users are both known to increase engagement in support and aid positive outcomes for service users.

Transforming Rehabilitation

The Transforming Rehabilitation agenda will directly impact on how most of this study's participants will be funded and commissioned in the future. In response to the Transforming Rehabilitation green paper, many leading women's and criminal justice organisations voiced concerns that the need for female specific provision was not adequately included in the proposals for reform.⁹ The MoJ has since announced their intention to publish guidance on good practice in women offender services which will be used to influence the market. But for some projects interviewed, the sense is that the specialist projects providing a gender specific service (that the Corston Report highlighted as good practice), are not part of core business for the probation service and that they will therefore be at risk in future funding arrangements under Transforming Rehabilitation.

At the time of the first interviews, little detail was known on how projects may be commissioned under Transforming Rehabilitation and who the main contract holders (or the Tier 1 provider) in their area would be. Some projects felt very uncertain "I'm getting tied up in knots, trying to figure out what's happening with local commissioning". Some projects are looking at consortia approaches; others are currently competing with other women's services for future funding in their area. One project felt that they would just be "bid candy" for larger organisations.

Some participants have already experienced supply chain negotiations. One project said that they had a "Baptism of fire" when negotiating with private companies leading on the Work Programme: "They won't pay what it costs... only 20% of our cost was offered". The project then had to make the

⁹ Ministry of Justice (2013) *Transforming Rehabilitation: A revolution in the way we manage offenders*, Online: https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/transforming-rehabilitation/supporting_documents/transformingrehabilitation.pdf (last accessed 04.02.2014)

financial decision to walk away. But the same project now feels that if they don't take similar low percentage contracts, then they won't get any referrals into their service and will therefore be unsustainable.

Negotiating strategic partnerships for securing future funding is sometimes difficult for projects that are part of a larger organisation. This is because such projects are part of a much broader business portfolio. These projects appeared at a disadvantage, as their internal business staff did not - in the view of the projects - see the importance of the project within that wider portfolio. In addition, not all project managers have oversight of their organisation's business planning, so sometimes rely on managers at a much higher national level in their organisation to develop strategic partnerships with the projects' local partners. The projects who raised this issue, did not feel that those strategic partnerships were always developed.

Coping with the changes

Participants gave many examples of their resilience and how they coped with all the recent policy changes. They remain committed to the success of their projects and core values of providing stand alone, holistic, women only services, which offer a safe place and in turn reduce anxiety for the women they support.

- One project has recently lost out to another provider in a local drug contract, but is negotiating to keep the drug workers co-located at the project to maintain the service provision
- Another is negotiating with a social housing landlord to provide shared accommodation, to alleviate the housing pressure from benefit capping
- One project is considering providing shorter term interventions, to address the immediate crisis situation their service users are now facing
- And one project put it bluntly: "Now [we] have to say locally we can't take referrals if you don't fund us."

The climate was summed up thus: "... we feel in the churn of the Government's policies and the crisis it creates for clients", but then "you just keep fighting whilst you have life in you".

2.3 FROM SERVICE TO STRATEGY

All the projects have relationships with other organisations in their locality, be that a funding, strategic or service user focused relationship. With this in mind, participants were asked to describe their ability to influence at a local level with policy makers, commissioners, criminal justice agencies, local authority and health structures. This was followed by asking if there were any advocates/champions for their project in partner organisations and how the needs of women offenders were addressed locally. Some frustrations were highlighted, but we also gathered examples of support and an understanding of the need for gender specific services.

Influencing decision makers and the need for gender specific services

We were told that there is an ongoing struggle with local decision makers who don't understand that female offenders need a gender specific service. The specific needs of female offenders are still not embedded within local strategies. Participant responses suggest that it's very much considered an addition "You're still having to start from the beginning every time and just start with the basics".

All participants felt that they had some influence, but most felt it was not at a high enough level within partner organisations. It also varied, one project may have a good relationship with probation, but not with their local authority; another may have a local authority or Health and Wellbeing Board with a high level of understanding in one geographical area, but not across boundaries into another. The frustration with local partnerships can cause a lack of strategic direction, one organisation stating, "We're influencing such low level changes that should just be common sense...It's difficult to expect the high level changes that you would hope for. Such as commissioning being specific for women; or ring fenced money."

Commissioners were in some cases said to be responding to the idea that there are gender specific needs and that gender specific provision is necessary. However, it was felt that "they aren't responding to good practice models" to effectively meet that need and provide an adequate service. A project described it as commissioners being happy to purchase a non-gender specific service that can tick a box to say "Yes, we run a

women's morning." But the commissioners don't look at the detail about how the service does that: "It's not a women's service, it's a mixed service with a women's group once a week"... [Some commissioners] do not look at best practice".

Local gender specific projects are often the experts in knowing what can work in their communities, but projects did not feel that was recognised or that their experience was utilised by decision makers. They also indicated that without this available expertise being embedded, the strategic approach was weak, one organisation noted, "...and if we we're gone, I think the city wouldn't have a strategy for female offenders".

Even if there are good strategic links, the ethos of the need for the gender specific service is not embedded across partner organisations, with projects often coming across front line staff who don't know the project's role or the reason for the work taking place. Despite projects often attending partner organisations' team meetings or giving presentations, they are left with a feeling of: "What more do we have to do?" Or even in one instance, why the local authority department was even funding the project. And where they think they have a good strategic link, it is not always the case. A project that links with a prison said "You think you link with a prison, but it's one hundredth of a link really, through one person".

Projects felt that they have more of a voice nationally than locally, though one said "We feel all at sea and need someone to fight our corner". It was suggested to "Decrease the gap between central government and those on the ground. We asked to join a national advisory group.....we've not heard back". There was a sense that the momentum that had sprung from the Corston Report, was diminishing, with some wondering where the next push will come from, "It feels a tad hopeless and after 10-12 years I don't know where the new energy is going to come from [to take this agenda forward]."

One project described how working within a multi-agency model is a relatively new concept for some providers. They said that they "had strived to engage local agencies and are proud to have a group of around 20 direct partners". However this may, as they described, "*come at a price. We have experienced a number of occasions when partner agencies have shown an interest in joint working only to adopt our idea and approach and break*

contact. I personally worked with one organisation to build a joint commissioning bid for some small pots of local funding. The agency offered to write the bid following numerous planning meetings. We were unable to make contact with the agency following this and it transpired that they had submitted the bid without any reference to our service. A further example occurred following a visit from a local homelessness day centre. We often give our day service schedule to partners in a bid to encourage them to refer appropriate clients. Around 6 months after the visit a member of staff showed me a copy of the day service's own schedule which had significantly changed and which now mirrored our own, any attempts we made to continue a partnership with this agency had proved futile". The project believed that this type of behaviour "is to be expected when agencies are expected to compete for commissioning opportunities; however it conflicts with our underlying mission of partnership working".

The same project described such challenges as an example of how it takes time to change attitudes, to challenge conventions and to gain the confidence of partners.

Other frustrations included:

- Drawing together an initiative around attachment work on the Troubled Families' Agenda, with a trust funder willing to provide a grant, but when they took the proposal to the Local Authority, the authority "were not interested. The whole county would have benefited."
- Being cited as best practice in their local Supporting People strategy, but they have never received any funding from the Local Authority.
- That despite winning awards, encouraging referrals, rehabilitating female offenders and evidencing a reduction in reoffending, projects were still left asking the question: "What is it? What is it about our organisation? What don't they [strategic partners] like? What are we doing wrong?"

Champions

Some projects have been able to work in such a way to establish champions with partner organisations. Champions understand the key elements of the

success of the projects, including the ethos of the project, services that meet gender specific needs and the benefits of diversion from custody. This means that the projects have a voice inside partner organisations and if that champion is at a strategic level, decision making is better informed. It also gives them a profile if the champion is in senior management and refers to their local project in reports or in speeches. In some cases the champion is a local judge or magistrate.

In Wales, it was said that each Local Delivery Unit in the probation trust has a women's champion, who takes on the responsibility for promoting women only services. And champions in other probation trusts have enabled the development of women only supervision sessions or women only induction groups.

Effective Partnership Working

Projects were able to highlight where partnerships were working effectively and where they felt supported.

One probation trust was seen as valuing the project: "I do think we have a good relationship with [our probation trust]. Around service delivery, I think they probably will listen to us. I do feel that they value what we do. We get really positive feedback. I think they see women's organisations as a great strength, and they do get the need for gender-specific services ... it's been quite refreshing actually that they do and I think they need to be commended for it".

Projects discussed the opportunities they had to be part of local strategies and forums, focusing on alcohol or employment for example. They have been able to bring their expertise to the table and ensure female offenders are part of the considered cohort. Local criminal justice mental health boards, early years, and accommodation boards were all mentioned.

In some areas, projects have secured partners onto their own boards "We have key stakeholders around our strategic board table, which means that we have a strategic voice [locally]".

Projects have also been partners in developing other provision, with one participating in the writing of the local domestic violence tender. In another example, a local authority engaged with their local female offender project to ensure female offenders were captured in their needs analysis studies on homelessness, drugs and alcohol.

Engaging with local Police and Crime Commissioners has been beneficial for some projects, particularly in discussing the use of conditional cautions that could utilise the local projects. Where commissioners have been enthusiastic and pro-active in meeting projects, it has led to productive discussion on future opportunities for closer working to improve outcomes for the service users.

Engaging local sentencers

Although there are examples of poor experiences for some women attending court and a lack of take up of diversionary options when sentencing, local sentencers in some areas have fully embraced the Female Offender Specified Activity Requirements (FOSARs). Projects in such areas, have kept magistrates up to date with newsletters that included FOSAR case studies. Sentencers have also been regular visitors to projects and been advocates to peers on the benefits of sentencing decisions that utilise local gender specific projects.

3. Conclusion

The initial interviews have provided a snapshot of the current climate in which community based female offender services operate. That climate is extremely challenging for projects and their service users.

There has been strong criticism within participants' responses of the lack of local strategic approaches. But, there were also examples of good practice and where that occurred the success of the projects can be attributed to the commitment of those partners.

Participants exhibited a high commitment to continued delivery of their specialist services. There was a huge amount of pragmatism in facing the current and future challenges and remarkable creativity in finding solutions.

It is hoped that these initial headlines will assist decision makers, commissioners and local and national strategic leads in developing approaches to overcome some of the criticisms and best utilise the cross sector good practice, specialist skills and commitment evident at a local level. The final report will seek to make recommendations that build on the good practice examples.

What we must not forget is that the interviews highlighted an emerging crisis in which many female offenders are now living, partly as a result of austerity measures (particularly recent welfare reforms). This emphasises the urgent need to sustain and support on-going high quality services for female offenders in our communities.

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Clinks

Clinks is the national umbrella body that supports the work that Voluntary and Community Sector organisations undertakes within the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales. Clinks' vision is of a vibrant and independent Voluntary and Community Sector working with informed and engaged communities to enable the rehabilitation of offenders for the benefit of society. www.clinks.org

Feedback and further information

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