

Women's Networking Forum

19th September

Clinks, Women's Breakout, Women's Resource Centre and Agenda have hosted the second networking forum for voluntary sector organisations working with women in contact with the Criminal Justice System. The event was hosted by Joy Doal, Chief Executive of Anawim Women's Centre and chaired by Clinks.

Eleven 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.

Recognising women's needs

One organisation felt that the argument for gender specific services and the distinct needs of women is being lost politically and they questioned how the voluntary sector working with women can come together to influence national policy in a positive way.

A competitive funding environment

Organisations told us that the funding environment is becoming increasingly competitive, which is having a disproportionate impact on small, specialist organisations. Increased competition for funding opportunities made organisations feel isolated from others in the voluntary sector, exacerbated by the resulting reluctance for collaborative or joint working.

Funding opportunities were increasingly short-term, which was having a negative impact on organisations ability to strategically plan for the future and their long term sustainability.

- *The need for a gender specific approach*

One organisation said increasing numbers of non-specialist organisations are winning contracts to support women. They said that many contracts for women's services do not require applicants to demonstrate their previous work or track record with providing gender specific provision, which is of concern and is leading to women receiving generic services that are not tailored to meet their gender specific needs.

Another organisation felt that commissioning processes are leading services to pigeon-hole their service users into categories such as 'offender' or 'victim' which is problematic, not least because these categories are often interchangeable and overlap. For them the most important thing about their service users is that they are *all women* and they feel that that focus is being lost in commissioning processes.

- *Partnership working*

Organisations told us that funders were encouraging them to work in partnership with each other to deliver their work. Some organisations said they had had positive experiences of working in this way and felt it created an opportunity for organisations to complement each other's strengths.

However, other organisations said that partnership working can be challenging as different organisations can have a different position on certain issues, and they were concerned that coming

together in this way could lead to organisations being required to compromise their position or ethos.

- *Women's Lives Leeds*

One delegate told us about *Women's Lives Leeds*, which is a partnership of 12 of the 14 women specific organisations working across Leeds. The partnership was launched in May and has buy in from the local council. They are developing a 'competition and complement framework' which will allow them to safeguard and support each-others work.

- *Collecting data*

Collecting and analysing statistical data has resource implications for organisations, and we were told that collecting data often takes frontline workers away from supporting their clients "face to face." Someone told us that they felt they spend "half my time recording, rather than doing." Organisations didn't feel this utilised the strengths of staff, or used the resources of voluntary sector organisations most effectively.

In some cases, organisations in Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC) supply chains were being required to record data using a collection tool owned by the CRC, which meant that they were not able to see the final, collated data or analyse the results. One organisation told us that although they were required to collate more data they didn't actually have the resource to carry out any meaningful data analysis. As a solution to this, another organisation said university students often volunteered for them and they have also worked with academics at universities, including the University of Birmingham.

Transforming Rehabilitation

Overall, organisations raised concerns about the delivery of probation services and said that in many areas through the gate support was taking time to bed in, leaving many women without adequate support on release from prison. Further to this, some women were unaware that they were still under supervision when they were released from a short term sentence, because they were unaware of the change in the system.

- *Negotiating with Community Rehabilitation Companies*

Organisations said that when they were negotiating with Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) they gave them "mixed messages" about the services they were willing to commission, and kept "moving the goal posts." Another organisation told us that the CRC in their area was initially reluctant to refer clients to their services, even though they had a contract with them. This has now improved, and they have developed a positive working relationship with the CRC.

- *Work commissioned by CRCs*

In some cases, providers have been commissioned by the CRC to deliver group work for women. Organisations raised concerns about this as women often find it challenging to engage with group work, and in some cases this can be re-traumatising for them, especially if the work is taking place in small towns where the women are likely to have existing relationships with each other. Organisations stressed that women require an individually tailored package of support to meet their needs.

Many women's centres allow their clients to self-refer and will work to support as many women as they can as they do not want to turn anyone away. Some organisations were concerned that CRCs

are encouraging women to self-refer to women's centres as they will not have to commission the services but their clients will still benefit from the specialist gender-specific provision. Organisations also said that there is no motivation for CRC's to provide contracts to the voluntary sector who are already working with women that have been referred to them.

In some areas the CRC is dividing their clients into different cohorts, depending on their needs. One example of this is MTC-Novo, the CRC for London. Some organisations felt that cohort models were more effective and useful for service users.

- *Probation staff working under pressure*

Organisations felt probation officers working for CRCs were under increasing pressure and stress as they were managing higher caseloads. This had resulted in a high turnover of staff in some areas, which has had a negative impact on partnership working, as the voluntary sector were having to invest time in developing relationships with new probation staff.

- *National Probation Service*

There was considerable concern about the allocation of cases between the CRC and the National Probation Service. Some said the NPS kept hold of cases which were not high risk. Others said that high risk clients were handed on to them, and they ended up working with clients with a level of risk for which they were not equipped.

The Criminal Justice System

- *Courts*

Magistrates can be unaware of the services available in their area and organisations said more work needs to be done to inform them of what voluntary sector services are available to them.

- *Prisons*

Access to prisoners was highlighted as an issue for organisations who said that the prison regime and reductions in prison staff numbers was preventing them from being able to work with people when they are in prison.

Service user involvement

Organisations told us that meaningful service user involvement is really important, and said that they saw having experience of the criminal justice system as a strength in their staff and volunteer teams. Some organisations told us that they had worked to ensure service users could be involved in all stages of their service, including in strategic decision making.

We were told that in some areas statutory organisations saw service user involvement as a 'risk' or a 'threat' and organisations said there is an element of prejudice against people with convictions.

Accommodation

When we asked about the key issues organisations and their service users were experiencing, accommodation was the one most organisations highlighted. They told us that there is a real lack of appropriate accommodation for women which is having a negative impact on their rehabilitation and desistance from crime.

Opportunities for engagement



Women's Resource Centre are running a Women's Commissioning Support Unit. This is a three year pilot project funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation which aims to develop the strategic and delivery capacity of the women's voluntary sector who are working in areas of criminal justice, violence against women and girls, women's health, employment and education. The project will concentrate on working in and around Cambridge, Newcastle, Birmingham and Manchester. [For more information and to get involved please visit Women Resource Centre's website here.](#)

What next?

Clinks will feedback the key issues raised during the Advisory Board for Female Offenders meeting on the 13th October 2016, and Sarah Swindley will use the feedback to ensure they represent the sector at meetings of the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3).

The next meeting of the women's networking forum will take place on **17th January 2017**