



## Women's Networking Forum notes

19th March 2019 – Manchester

Clinks and Agenda held the tenth women's networking forum. The networking forum provides support, information and networking opportunities for voluntary sector organisations working with women in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS). It provides updates on policy, member activity and hosts speakers on relevant topics.

The networking forum is a reference group for the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3)<sup>1</sup> and enables Clinks to gather intelligence from the women's voluntary sector to inform our representative work on the Advisory Board for Female Offenders (ABFO).<sup>2</sup> The key issues raised at the forums are brought to the RR3's quarterly meetings. 17 voluntary sector organisations, including partner organisations, were represented at the meeting. This note aims to give a brief overview of some of the key points that were discussed.

### 1. Policy update

Clinks delivered a presentation highlighting key national policy issues relating to women in contact with the CJS and how delegates can engage with national lobbying and campaign work led by voluntary organisations. The presentation included updates on:

- **The Ministry of Justice's (MoJ) review of probation** – The MoJ has proposed a new regional commissioning budget; are considering plans to strengthen Rehabilitation Activity Requirements; and introduced an enhanced through the gate specification.
- **The female offender strategy** - covered an update on the MoJ's progress in developing plans for the residential centres announced in the strategy and the work the department has been doing to map the provision of women's services across England and Wales.
- **Women in wales** - a blueprint to address offending by women in Wales is currently being developed. Clinks, alongside the Prison Reform Trust, also gave oral evidence to the Commission on Justice in Wales about the needs of women in contact with the CJS.

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<sup>1</sup> The Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3) group is made up of senior experts from the voluntary sector. It comes together with civil servants each quarter to provide guidance and feedback on MoJ policy developments. It was set up by the Ministry of Justice, in partnership with Clinks, with the aim of building a strong and effective partnership between the voluntary sector and the MoJ. The group is chaired by Clinks' Chief Executive Officer Anne Fox and Clinks' policy team provides the secretariat.

<sup>2</sup> The Advisory Board for Female Offenders is a group made up of representatives from government departments, criminal justice agencies and other key stakeholders including voluntary sector representatives. Kate Aldous, Head of Strategic Development at Clinks, is a member of the board and represents the women's voluntary sector. The board is chaired by Edward Argar MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary (Ministry of Justice). The group meets four times a year and provides expert advice and challenge to the government. It is responsible for the oversight of delivery of the government's Female Offender Strategy. For more information visit the government's website at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/advisory-board-for-female-offenders> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> May 2019].

- **The NHS Long Term Plan** - which commits to expand Community Sentence Treatment Requirements and invest in trauma-informed services for the most vulnerable children and young people at risk of entering the youth justice system.

## **2. Back to the Grassroots: Building a women's centre movement & sustainable funding model**

The leaders of three specialist women's organisations –Joy Doal, Anawim; Rokaiya Khan, Together Women; and Dr Kate Paradine, Women in Prison – gave a joint presentation on building a women's centre movement and a sustainable funding model.

The presentation discussed the shared challenges that specialist women's organisations are facing, including: the difficulties of evidencing impact and value of services for funders; and dysfunctional commissioning and funding models which have impacted on the sustainability of services. Increased competition from larger, non-women's specialist organisations was raised as a particular issue that is making it more challenging for smaller, women's-only organisations to secure funding. The way in which funding from the Tampon Tax grant programme has been allocated was cited as an example of this.

The speakers explored, with the networking forum, how the women's voluntary sector can respond to these challenges and where the opportunities are for women's services, including:

- **The female offender strategy** - the strategy has put women back on the agenda as a priority for justice policy and its approach recognises the value of women's centres. To maintain this momentum, women's services need to come together as a collective voice and support each other in making the case for a sustainable women's centre model.
- **Presumption against short sentences** – the push to introduce a presumption against short sentences in England and Wales is getting stronger. The Justice Committee has recommended the presumption be implemented and David Gauke MP, Secretary of State for Justice, has publically signalled his backing for the policy. Women disproportionately receive short custodial sentences and a presumption against them could improve the use of community alternatives for women supported by specialist women's services.
- **Stronger partnerships** – women's specialist services could look for more innovative ways of partnership working, for example collaborative funding applications, to improve chances against competition from larger non-specialist organisations. Rather than seeing each other as competitors, women's centres should also look for opportunities to work with other women-only organisations that traditionally operate outside of the CJS such as refuges and rape and sexual assault services.

## **3. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Consultation: Tackling Homelessness Together**

For the final session of the forum, Clinks sought the delegates' views on the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's (MHCLG) consultation, [Tackling Homelessness Together](#), on the implementation of local homelessness reduction boards.

MHCLG are seeking views on; the effectiveness of existing local accountability and partnership structures; whether to introduce homelessness reduction boards and how this could be done most effectively; and how else local accountability and partnership working in homelessness services

could be improved. Clinks will be submitting a response to MHCLG and wanted to gather the views of delegates to inform our response.

The following summarises the key points raised by the delegates:

### ***Overarching issues***

For people in contact with the CJS, homelessness reduction boards do not address the lack of accountability for probation in supporting people with convictions into safe and suitable accommodation. The implementation of the boards will also not address the wider, systemic issues that contribute to the rise in homelessness including local housing policies, changes in welfare and cuts to services. Ultimately there is lack of housing as well as a lack of temporary and emergency accommodation, especially ones that are safe and suitable for women. To achieve meaningful improvements in accommodation outcomes for women, these wider issues need to be addressed.

### ***Implementing homelessness reduction boards effectively***

- Homelessness reduction boards could be an important step in supporting partnership working but there needs to be sufficient funding for them to achieve meaningful outcomes.
- Local voluntary sector organisations need to be represented on the boards and engaged as strategic partners in decision-making. The boards will be more effective if they recognise the expertise of the voluntary sector delivering accommodation services and wraparound support.
- The boards could be an important mechanism for safeguarding homeless people and ensuring the join up of services so that the needs of those experiencing multiple disadvantage, in particular, are met and they do not fall through the gaps in service provision. To do this, the boards need to be multi-agency and proactive in engaging with wider services, not just housing and accommodation services. Implementation of the boards must recognise the complexity of support needs for those that are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- For the boards to be strategic it must be clear where it fits within the existing structures in place. The boards need to have strong and accountable leadership and a consistent and transparent membership.
- The boards must be action-driven, not just another layer of bureaucracy. It was suggested that if implemented the homelessness reduction boards should create small task and finish groups to ensure it achieves tangible outcomes and can better show its impact.

### **Issues and challenges**

- The size and scope of the boards can be a challenge to effective implementation. If the boards are too large it will be difficult to co-ordinate and could prevent meaningful action.
- A number of examples of existing local structures and strategies were criticised by delegates for failing to recognise the needs and experiences of women. Any new structure needs to have a gender-informed approach and ensure there is representation from the women's voluntary sector so that it can identify gaps in service and respond to the needs of women.
- Similarly the needs and particular vulnerabilities of people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act (2010), if not explicitly set as a priority, will not be addressed. The boards must have specific commitment to those with protected characteristics to ensure their accommodation needs are met.
- Delegates gave examples of existing structures where engagement with the voluntary sector has been a tokenistic gesture and services have not been meaningfully involved as a partner.

There is often a power imbalance between the statutory services that sit on similar boards and the voluntary sector. Large voluntary sector providers are sometimes used as a tick box to say the voluntary sector has been engaged but small, specialist organisations with expertise of local needs are not.

#### **4. What next?**

Clinks will consider the delegates' feedback in our submission to MHCLG's consultation. We will also continue to ensure that we are raising key concerns brought by the networking forum with the RR3 and bring it to the attention of the MoJ.

If you wish to get in touch with Clinks about the issues raised this forum, please contact [jackie.lowthian@clinks.org](mailto:jackie.lowthian@clinks.org).

The next meeting of the women's networking forum will take place on 18th June 2019 in London.