

Research Paper
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Executive Summary

'A two way process'
Women offenders,
personality, power
and partnerships

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Executive Summary

This research is a Griffins Society Research Fellowships report that explored partnerships in Bradford District who are working with women offenders.

Partnership work, with women offenders and the probation service has been both formal (from contracting out of services) as well as informal (picking up the telephone with an offender and signposting them to a service). Increasingly this process has become formalised since the publication of the Carter Report (2003), which specifically promoted the concept of a purchaser and provider split within probation. In addition, it asked whether the probation service was providing the best value service to offenders. Alongside these changes there has been the development of specific services for women offenders as part of the Corston Report (2007) ; the impact of which is explored in the context of local partnership work for women offenders in Bradford.

This research focuses on those organisations who are members of the Women's Forum in Bradford, and their experiences of working with probation and other statutory organisations to provide services for women. A snowball approach to selecting respondents was used to gain a cross section of workers from manager to key worker and also the perspective of women offenders themselves.

Broadly there was a real will to work together to improve outcomes for this group of offenders. However, it was also evident that partnership work with or for women is difficult for two reasons. Firstly, due to the complex needs of this particular client group and secondly the way in which the work was carried out. Specifically, some agencies had more power to direct services than others and as the processes for partnership work were formalised some of the flexibility of smaller groups was lost.

There was also evidence of competing priorities for women around health needs and criminal justice needs, which could be real barriers to achieving positive outcomes. Partnership work for women is seen as positive, and necessary. However, there is a lack of consistency amongst probation staff working with women offenders. The service women offenders receive largely depends on who they get to supervise them rather than a policy that dictates practice. This leads to a sense of powerlessness by other agencies who have more contact with women on a day to day basis than offender manager.

The creation of specialist roles, and a new contract with women specific services for 50% of women offenders in Bradford was perceived as a positive means to enhance and mitigate the lack of knowledge amongst offender managers of the needs of women offenders.

Conclusions of the research:

The service women offenders receive are often driven by the personalities behind who is delivering the support. Concentrating activity amongst a smaller pool of Offender Managers to assist in 'skilling' them up to work in a gender sensitive way was welcomed by those involved in the research.

Avenues to share knowledge, ideas and resources are important in developing partnership arrangements that cater for women offenders. Forums in Bradford such as the Domestic Abuse Forum, Together Women's Local Implementation Group and the Women's Forum were all avenues for partnership agencies to share knowledge about this client group. There was evidence to suggest that this was facilitating less duplication in services, greater cross agency working and better outcomes for women.

In future Local Area Agreements are going to be an important mechanism for resourcing interventions for women offenders. At present women offenders are not considered a priority group within Local Area Agreement Targets, and this is because they rarely feature as priority persistent offenders (PPOs) or classified as 'high risk'. This means that women are often hidden within partnership arrangements within Safer Communities in Bradford.

The current offender management model that allocates resource (in offender manager time) to risk is not suitable for women offenders. The importance of building a relationship with women to improve confidence to access outside resources is undermined by the level of intervention that can be offered under the current workload measurement tool within the probation service. The current workload measurement tool does not assess on the cost of women re-offending, or the level of intervention required in delivering a sentence plan to the holistic needs of women. This means that offender managers are given the minimal allowance to build relationships with women offenders, and help them to address issues that are often complex and inter related.

Those who are best placed to provide gender specific services should do so, whether within the voluntary sector or statutory. However, this should not be on the premise of efficiency gains in contracting out to the voluntary sector – rather looking at quality and value added. The success of those contracts should not simply be measured on the attainment of restrictive inter agency performance outputs, rather related to outcomes.

Service User involvement at all levels of organisations is crucial in developing services that are both gender sensitive and meaningful for the women who use it. This includes the probation service, where women feel that they are subjected to a process rather than being empowered to make life changes.

The needs of sex workers in particular was an area where there were competing initiatives and targets. Offender Managers had a poor knowledge of the health risk, and risks to personnel safety experienced by them. Often these women were those who were most chaotic, utilising a range of partners to receive interventions, but also a group likely to breach probation orders due to their lifestyles.

Recommendations:

1. Reducing re-offending rates by women should be included within Crime Disorder Reduction Partnership's performance data. This is because the cost of offending extend to children and families of women. The social impacts extend to families and children. When the Probation Service become a responsible authority within CDRPs later this year, part of their strategy should include a needs assessment of women offenders, and a strategy to provide services for women offenders across the CDRP partnership that takes into account their specific pathways into crime.
2. The needs of substance using offenders, particularly those of street sex workers are currently not being met by the offender management model. Training for all offender

managers in Drug Rehabilitation Requirement units should encompass an element of work specifically focussing on street sex workers.

3. All offender managers should receive dedicated training on how to implement the Offender Management Guide for Working with Women Offenders (2008).
4. A new gender sensitive model for women offenders should be developed to take into account the time needed for offender managers to help build meaningful professional relationships with women. This should take into account the whole life cost of women's offending, to allow for adequate resource time to be allocated. This would mean that women classified as low risk but complex needs, are afforded time. In addition, this model should take women's needs as a whole, blurring the Reducing Reoffending Action Plan pathways currently given to offenders. This would allow offender managers to deliver meaningful interventions that look at women's offending holistically.
5. Probation should seek to develop its own women's service user groups which is able to feedback directly to the District Management Group and the Senior Management Group to inform probation practice and contracting for women's services.
6. A Woman's Champion that links to the Local Strategic Partnership would assist in bringing a sharper focus to the needs of vulnerable women in Bradford District and to drive the delivery of The Gender Equality Duty.