

Supporting People: Good news for women ex-prisoners?

Sally Malin

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Abstract

The importance of housing in the resettlement of women ex-offenders is well established. Supporting People (SP) is a UK government programme which took effect in April 2003, bringing together at local authority level the main partners of housing, health, social services and probation to plan strategically and commission services which are cost effective, reliable, transparent and needs-led.

This research project carried out between October 2003 and December 2004 sought, through interviews and document review, to explore the early impact of SP at both national and local levels on planning and provision for women ex-offenders. A comparative perspective was secured by review of two community based ex-offender initiatives outside the UK.

Findings

- SP sought to improve housing related support for a very broad – and diverse – group of people. In order to achieve this goal it introduced a new integrated funding framework and necessitated stronger cross-agency partnerships.
- Approaches to needs assessment and gap analysis have been varied, particularly for hard to reach groups such as ex-offenders. User involvement in service review and planning has been equally patchy.
- The research suggests that commitment to, and experience of, effective inter-agency partnerships has been extremely varied. The Probation Service in particular seems to have struggled in many areas to sustain a place at the planning table, and involvement of the voluntary sector has been uneven.
- There do not seem to be readily available channels for information exchange about voluntary sector projects for ex-offenders funded through SP, and the process for securing funding through SP for new voluntary sector projects can be unduly complex.
- The research suggests that floating support may have particular relevance for ex-offenders, including women ex-offenders, and this view was also voiced by a number of interviewees for this research.

Recommendations

- The Griffins Society should promote a wider debate about the values which underpin, and define the scope of, 'what works' in reference to women ex-offenders.
- The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister* (ODPM) should consider identifying notional funding through SP for ex-offenders for each local authority in order to help ensure that local spend is not geared to either historic spend or to more politically popular groups.
- The ODPM should compile a handbook of 'best practice' SP examples of planning and provision for ex-offenders.
- The ODPM should develop a SP training package to support local authorities in their development of effective inter agency partnerships with the NHS, criminal justice agencies and the voluntary sector. The training package should address the needs both of civic leaders and of front line staff.
- The ODPM should ensure that its SP capacity building programme recognises and supports the role of the voluntary sector in planning and provision.
- Consideration should be given to ways in which successful voluntary sector projects funded through SP, such as the Liverpool New Bridge Project and community chaplaincy, could be replicated more widely.
- Consideration needs to be given to ways in which innovative practice with ex-offenders, including new models of floating support, can be encouraged more widely through SP.
- The Griffins Society should organise an event, in partnership with the Probation Service, Prison Service and ODPM, to share local experiences of planning and provision for women ex-offenders through SP. This event should focus on the sharing of good practice in strategic planning and effective involvement of service users.

* In July 2001 a new office of the Deputy Prime Minister was created within the Cabinet Office. From June 2003, the ODPM was formed as a department separate from the Cabinet Office.