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Working with Women Offenders Returning to the Community

Focus Group Research Report

This document provides a summary of focus group research carried out with 3 groups of women offenders within prison and community settings. It explores women's perceptions of offending, the violence they experience and their engagement with supports. Women's views provide insight on how services could better meet their needs to support them to change their lives and desist from offending.

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Working with Women Offenders Returning to the Community

Background

It was highlighted through joint working between organisations, that there were increasing concerns about young women who very often moved between prison and homelessness being vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation. These women were becoming increasingly difficult to accommodate through violence against them, their own violent behaviour and their lack of apparent life skills. A group made up from representatives from HMP Greenock; Homeless Services; Alternatives Throughcare Project and Women's Safety and Support Services met to look at this issue. The actions proposed from this meeting were:

- To determine the number of women in HMP Corton Vale / HMP Greenock who are West Dunbartonshire residents.
- To carry out focus groups in terms of researching the needs of women offenders returning to the community.

The group then agreed to meet again to look at the information gathered and to propose suggestions to improve services.

Focus groups were arranged within HMP Corton Vale, HMP Greenock and the Criminal Justice Female Offenders Group. The groups were facilitated by Lorraine Wrigley, Women's Safety and Support Services, Criminal Justice and Morag MacLeod, Homeless services. A questionnaire was developed – Appendix 1 – and this was used to gain insight into the women's personal experiences. In all, 22 women took part in the focus groups and individuals spoke openly about their experiences.

This information has been collated into 3 areas:

1. Offending Behaviour
2. Violence Against Women
3. Engagement

1. Offending Behaviour

All three of the focus groups highlighted the following issues relating to women and their offending behaviour.

- The groups stated that it was up to the individual in terms of motivation for changing their offending behaviour. Whilst in jail it was felt that it was easier as it was stress free in terms of there was structure and you knew what was expected of you and what you were doing on a daily basis.
- On returning to the community it was felt that the housing you were offered pushed you back into areas where there were negative influences and that you had no choice in your housing situation. Once in these areas it was felt that you were encouraged back into 'your old ways'.
- All groups stated that services were not reactive enough, did not listen to what women thought they needed and organisations needed to work closer together. Appointments may be given to women leaving prison however they were too far away and women often got caught up in their previous negative behaviour. It was felt that once women attended appointments then they were expected to go down the route the organisation wanted and they did not feel they were listened to e.g. group work was very often offered to women however many women did not like this method.

Two of the focus groups focused on

- The structure in prison being a very positive influence. The fact that your day was set out for you meant that you knew what was going to happen. This helped in reducing or stopping drug use.
- Drugs and Alcohol were seen as the main reason women were offending. It was felt that if women were not using drugs then they would not be in the situations they were in and thus would not end up in jail.

2. Violence Against Women

All three groups highlighted the following:

- Verbal violence can be as dangerous as physical violence. Verbal violence lowers confidence and self-esteem meaning that women do not feel that they can speak out. Women can become depressed and a downward cycle prevents them accessing support for their situation.
- More women are being charged with domestic violence now. Some women believed they were being treated more harshly by the courts to “teach them a lesson”. Women were more likely to retaliate to violence now however the outcome was that they were being charged.

Two of the focus groups stated that:

- Alcohol and drugs played a major role in domestic violence – violence usually happened when alcohol was involved.
- They also believed drugs and alcohol play a major role in prostitution. The women believed that prostitution is still very much a hidden problem. They believed that it does go on, one group stating it went on in homeless units, however were not aware of any support in West Dunbartonshire for it.
- Women accepted violence as part of the relationship that they were in for various different reasons. The reasons given were :
 - Assistance in getting drugs
 - Keeping the family together
 - Can't cope without their partner – they needed the company.
- Women stated that they leave negative relationships when they believe their partner has gone too far and they have to leave for their own protections i.e fear of death.

3. Engagement

On the issue of engagement the women highlighted the following points:

- Organisations should contact women and be more proactive in their approach to working with women. It was felt organisations close cases when you don't turn up for appointments but sometimes women are unable keep appointments due to low mood, lack of confidence etc.
- Women want to work with one worker who can provide advocacy and support in terms of working with all other agencies. The feeling that they have to tell their story time and time again means that they stop engaging with services as they do not want to go over and over it. The women hated being shunted about from one worker to another.
- Having a worker that you could trust was seen as the most important thing and if you had a worker that you could be honest with you are more likely to keep appointments.

Female Offenders Focus Groups

To discuss issues relating to the vulnerabilities, difficulties and unmet need of young women offenders who serve short-term prison sentences.

1. Offending

1. Some women say prison is their security and the outside is their hell. Is this the case and why do people say that?
2. Why do you think women re-offend and can be in and out of prison?
3. What would have stopped you re-offending?

2. Violence Against Women

What does the following mean to you - are any of these issues linked to offending?

Domestic Abuse

Physical/emotional abuse/ sexual abuse

Prostitution

Pornography

1. Why do you think some women crave relationships and feel they can't manage on their own?
2. What are your experiences of domestic abuse?
3. How has domestic abuse affected you?
4. If you were in a domestic abuse relationship and it ended, how did it end – what made you walk away or ask him to leave?
5. If your partner was on a probation order for domestic abuse are you aware of work being done with him in sessions and if so, what do you feel is the impact of this work on you?

3. Engagement with services

1. What services are you aware of?
 2. What services do you need?
 3. What stops you using services?
 4. What support would help you if you're experiencing domestic abuse/what services are you aware of?
 5. What do you see as the benefits of engaging with services?
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