



Evaluation of the Whole System Approach for Women Offenders

Executive Summary of full Interim Report

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Although women remain a minority group in the criminal justice system (CJS), there is increasing recognition amongst policy makers of the importance of understanding the needs of female offenders in order to better target resources and provide support that is responsive to these needs. The whole system approach (WSA) that has been funded by Partnership Funds from Cheshire and Greater Manchester Community Rehabilitation Company (CGM CRC), NHS England and resources from the Financial Incentive Model (FIM), a payment by results reward for a reduction in demand on the CJS,¹ aims to embed gender-responsive support for women at three points of the criminal justice system - arrest, sentencing and upon release from prison. Nine women's centres across the boroughs provide the support 'hubs' for women referred via these different routes. The governance and funding of the WSA is overseen by the Justice and Rehabilitation Executive (JRE).

The evaluation of the WSA undertaken by the Hallam Centre for Community Justice at Sheffield Hallam University and the Policy Evaluation and Research Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University aims to build on current knowledge regarding the needs of female offenders and to explore how services can best be integrated across the whole criminal justice pathway from arrest to sentence and custody discharge. The learning will provide a foundation from which the approach can be refined with the potential for wider roll-out across other areas. This report provides a summary of the findings from the full interim report, which focused on early implementation of the WSA across Greater Manchester. The final report from the full evaluation, including an impact assessment is due in November 2017.

We undertook a number of activities to meet the aims and objectives of the evaluation. These included a review of project initiation documents and data collection systems; semi-structured interviews with service users, women's centre project staff, partner agencies and strategic stakeholders; review of anonymised case studies from the women's centres and analysis of performance monitoring data from the centres.

Key findings

Perceptions of the WSA

Levels of awareness of the WSA and the local and national policy that had informed its development varied between participant groups and appeared to be linked to length and

¹ Throughout the remainder of the report we have referred to this as the Justice and Rehabilitation Executive or JRE funding. At times, this funding is referred to as the 'PCC money' or 'PSR money' in quotes, as this is how participants perceived this funding.

level of involvement with the approach. For some, this integrated and collaborative approach to working with women offenders was 'nothing new', but the JRE funding had enabled increased capacity across services. Others identified the triage and 'through the gate' referral routes as the *new* aspects of service delivery. Overall, there was a clear rationale amongst participants for engaging with the approach. Many women's centres were already offering these services, had relevant expertise, skills and experience and a strong commitment to offering gender-responsive ways of working with women. For other centres whose existing provision felt restrictive in terms of space, staffing and types of services on offer, the JRE funding had enabled them to extend and/or tailor their services. For example, by offering a 'women-only' space and increasing staffing to better support a gender-responsive service. At a strategic level, potential cost savings were a key driver for engagement with the WSA, although it was noted that these savings would likely be accrued by the Ministry of Justice rather than at a local level. Alongside cash savings, there was also a belief in the value of reducing the numbers of women being sent to prison and addressing the often disjointed nature of service provision for women. Reducing re-offending and reducing risk for both women offenders and their families was another important rationale for involvement in the WSA amongst some of the partner agencies.

The history and the future of women's services in Greater Manchester

Central to the WSA are the nine women's centres that operate as central hubs for referrals from the various stages of the criminal justice system. Although the centres are all working towards a common goal (i.e. to provide safe spaces for women where they can begin to address needs that may contribute towards their offending behaviour), they vary significantly in terms of their histories, size, staffing levels, services provided and the drivers underpinning their work. Despite these differences, the creation of a network of women's centres has undoubtedly increased the provision of safe spaces for women across Greater Manchester.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, funding was an issue raised across all the interviews and gaps in service provision due to limited funding were identified, for example, being unable to provide crèche facilities and also limited capacity to provide intensive one-to-one casework for every service user. Various funding sources for their work were identified by the women centres, with some being solely reliant on the JRE funding and others receiving funding through other sources such as NHS England. Multiple funding streams presented challenges for women centre staff in terms of differing expectations for service delivery, outcomes and reporting requirements. Uncertainty over future funding was said to impact on staff well-being as well as service delivery, due to the high turnover of staff which results from job insecurity in an uncertain funding climate. In addition, the pressure of frequently needing to 're-invent the wheel' to compete for new funding pots was highlighted. Concerns were also raised over external agencies potentially 'spot purchasing' aspects of the service available at the centres, leaving a gap in terms of funding the overall holistic approach. Similarly, funding cuts and the resultant reduction in wider service provision (e.g. mental health and housing)

is a potential threat to the holistic approach integral to the WSA. This was particularly concerning given the prevalence of mental health and accommodation needs amongst the women presenting at the centres and the need for centre staff to refer women on to these services for specialist support or advice.

For some, a potentially important factor in the long term sustainability of the WSA is the 'internal alliance' which has been created between the nine women's centres as one of the strategic aims of the programme. A wide range of benefits were highlighted in relation to the formation of an alliance including: sharing of best practice; supporting each other; standardising reporting requirements; enhancing referral pathways between centres and ensuring a minimum standard of service delivery for women across the whole of Greater Manchester. However, it was also noted that centres differed greatly in terms of their models of delivery and this variability may present challenges when applying for future funding, if funders have an expectation of standardised provision within an alliance or consortium approach across Greater Manchester.

Equally important to the approach are the partnerships between the women's centres and other key stakeholders; Greater Manchester Police (GMP), Cheshire and Greater Manchester Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) and the National Probation Service (NPS)² (previously known as Greater Manchester Probation Trust), problem solving court staff, prison staff and other non-statutory organisations (e.g. accommodation providers or community mental health services). Amongst the partner agencies interviewed, there was a broad understanding of the women's centres and the services on offer but the extent to which all partners recognised the features and values of gender-responsive ways of working was variable, often depending on different levels of involvement with service delivery. Similarly, lower than anticipated numbers of referrals being made to the centres via the different pathways may indicate varying levels of 'buy in' to the WSA amongst the different partner agencies. Whilst there appears to be 'buy in' at a strategic level, the extent to which this is happening among staff 'on the ground' is less clear.

Referrals to the women's centres

The interim evaluation provides an overview of the women being referred to the nine women's centres between 1st September 2014 and 30th June 2015. Of the 640 women who were referred to the services during this period, the majority (76%, n=485) were aged 25 or over and were White (77%, n=492). These figures raise questions as to whether younger women (18-24 year old) and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women have the same opportunities to access the support on offer at the women's centres. Of the 377 women who had their needs assessed at assessment or support planning stage, the vast majority (79%, n=299) had multiple needs (3 or more) and half (51%, n=191) of the women had between four and six needs, highlighting the vulnerabilities faced by this group. A wide

² Participants often referred to 'probation', 'probation trusts' or the 'probation service' during interviews rather than the CRC or NPS, so at times these terms are used in the report as this reflects participants accounts and roles that existed prior to the introduction of the CRC and NPS under Transforming Rehabilitation.

range of needs were identified,³ but the prevalence of problems with mental health and well-being was noted in both monitoring data (79%, n=293) and interviews with services users and project staff. High numbers of women presenting with financial difficulties (56%, n=209), attitudes, behaviour and thinking (54%, n=198), substance misuse (51%, n=191) and accommodation (50%, n=189) were also identified in the monitoring data. In addition, nearly half (47%, n=300) of the women referred had one or more child under the age of 18. The negative effects of involvement with the criminal justice system on women and their families, particularly when women receive a custodial sentence is well documented (Prison Reform Trust, 2013⁴) and was reflected in evaluation data with 24% (n=151) of women reporting their children were either in care, mixed care (living in multiple locations) or living with relatives.

Women's centres were receiving referrals from all of the main referral pathways - CRC community sentence referrals (35%, n=226), NPS community sentence referrals (4%, n=26), police triage (29%, n=187), 'through the gate' (8%, n=51) and the problem solving court (6%, n=36). However, there were variations in the numbers of women being referred via the different routes in different areas and lower referrals than anticipated were reported in relation to the CRC and NPS community sentence referrals, police triage and 'through the gate'. This was particularly notable in relation to the 'through the gate' service, as just 51 women were referred to the women's centres via this pathway during the first 10 months of operation, which is low when compared to indicative figures on the numbers of women who were released from HMP Styal in 2014 (n=347)⁵. Probation was described as the most established referral route during interviews, largely due to their existing relationships with women's centres and the introduction of 'women's leads' who promoted gender-responsive approaches to working with women offenders amongst CRC and NPS staff. Although some areas reported positive working relationships with police in their local areas and high referrals as a result of these partnerships, challenges with referrals from police triage and 'through the gate' were also highlighted. These challenges largely centred around women's centre staff not having a consistent presence in custody suites or at HMP Styal, thus being reliant on others to inform women about the services available at the women's centres. Practical barriers were also outlined (e.g. the lengthy vetting process necessary to gain access to HMP Styal). Lower than anticipated referrals and barriers identified in interview data raises questions about whether resources are being spread too thinly across the different CJS entry points to the WSA.

Variation in referrals also differed between the women's centres with the length of time centres had been operating and the geographical areas they covered appearing to influence levels of referrals. Uncertainty over which women were deemed eligible to access services

³ In relation to needs at initial assessments, projects report whether there is a 'need identified' or 'no need' for each of the need areas. However, there were also cases with missing data and the numbers of missing cases varied by each need area, so the percentages for each need area are calculated out of different total numbers.

⁴ Prison Reform Trust (2013) *Bromley Briefings*, Prison: 'the facts'.

⁵ This data was provided as part of a Ministerial Briefing that was produced by the Public Service Reform team in September 2015.

as part of the WSA may also have impacted on numbers of referrals, with some centres initially only working with CJS *involved* women and not with those '*at risk*' of offending.

Service users and practitioners perspectives on engagement with the women's centres

Engaging women in the services available at the women's centres was highlighted as often being extremely time consuming and resource intensive. At the time of writing it was not possible to obtain a clear picture from monitoring data regarding engagement due to high numbers of cases with missing data (n=343). This may be due to ongoing engagement as this information is collected at case closure or this information may not have been inputted by women's centre staff. Thus we were only able to report on 297 cases. The data available showed that 34% of women (n=101) referred to the centres 'did not engage' and 22% (n=64) attended just one appointment. However, qualitative data revealed that it is often necessary to work very gradually with the most complex women and it may take several months (and great persistence from project staff) for women to get to the point of trusting the service and/or worker enough to frequently access the service. The data also showed that 24% (n=71) of women engaged for 3 months or less and a further 20% (n=61) engaged for 3 months or more. Again, qualitative data offers a more complete picture of the intensive and extremely time consuming nature of the work undertaken with service users who engage with services in the longer term.

A number of key enablers for engagement were identified including: the presence of project staff who were perceived by service users as reliable, consistent, non-judgemental, warm and caring; flexibility regarding level and length of engagement; transparent information sharing and supporting women to access other services. This was felt to be an important aspect of the 'one stop shop' model offered in some centres and also necessary to minimise the risk of over-dependence on women's centre provision, given that centres do not have the resources, capacity and in some cases skills or experience to provide specialist support in relation to specific need areas. Ease of accessibility to the women's centres was another important factor in supporting engagement, in terms of both physical location and also facilities available (e.g. crèches) which supported access to the services. Provision of such services varied between centres. The importance of having 'women-only' space was raised in the interviews, particularly given the vulnerabilities and prevalence of domestic violence amongst services users. However, a small number of partner agency staff suggested mixed gender group work may be beneficial to help women to 'deal with men' in the outside world. Project staff however, felt very strongly about the necessity for women-only spaces.

Benefits of the WSA

A broad range of benefits were identified from the interview data and can be broadly categorised into seven areas; outlook for the future, likelihood of (re)-offending, feelings about self, health improvements, developing practical/life skills, reduced risk of harm and providing a streamlined system and reduced demand on other services. Interviews with

service users revealed a strong sense of despair, hopelessness and isolation prior to engaging with the support on offer. However, engagement with the women's centres was said to have given women a sense of purpose, structure to their day, aspirations for the future in terms of employment and volunteering opportunities, improvements in health and opportunities to re-engage with children and families. Feelings of embarrassment, shame, self-loathing and guilt were all evident in service user accounts. These negative self-perceptions could act as a barrier to engaging with support. The development of a positive sense of self was deemed necessary to improve well-being, reduce isolation and build confidence which meant women were less likely to become overwhelmed when issues arose and also actively seek help at times of crisis. What was particularly notable from the service users' accounts was the absence of such intensive and tailored support prior to their engagement with the women's centres. Providing a more efficient service with less duplication and burden upon statutory agencies was also reported as a perceived benefit of the approach. The women's centres were said to offer women somewhere to turn to in times of crisis and were also able to link them in with organisations in the community. This was important given that the statutory agencies which women are involved with may not be aware of or not have the time to research or make links with further available sources of support.

Evidencing outcomes

As part of the evaluation, performance monitoring data has been analysed to provide information on the numbers and demographics of the women being referred to the centres, referrals routes, types of needs they are presenting with and engagement levels. This is helpful for assessing demand and take-up of service provision. However, it is important for this data to be considered in conjunction with qualitative data from interviews and case studies provided by the women's centres to fully understand the extent and nuanced nature of the work being undertaken by the centres to support women accessing their services.

All of the women's centres were committed to measuring and reflecting upon success in order to improve their 'offer' to women and also to assist with accessing future funding. However, their accounts revealed frustrations at the lack of recognition (from commissioners of services and policy makers at all levels) of the huge amount of work involved in building trusting relationships with women who are often very anxious or distrustful of 'professionals', building confidence and empowering women to respond to challenges and move forward in addressing their needs. These outcomes are often the most difficult to capture and measure and are frequently excluded as outcome measures in service delivery contracts. This creates real challenges for service providers in terms of balancing reporting requirements expected of them by funders and their approach to engaging and working with women in a holistic and person-centred way. Thus, it is vital to consider differing definitions of success and look beyond re-offending and cost saving towards a stronger focus on the safety and well-being of women and their families.

Key reflections and points for consideration in the future

Overall, the WSA to working with women from point of arrest through to release from custody was viewed positively amongst the participants. The creation of women's only provision across Greater Manchester was viewed as a positive move towards addressing the unequal provision that had existed previously and this enhanced provision was felt to be much needed in addressing the very complex needs of women involved with the CJS. Whilst the evaluation revealed many positive aspects to the implementation of the WSA, a number of challenges were also identified, which need to be considered moving forward. These largely centred around: achieving 'buy in' from partner agencies who may be referring women into the centres; the 'types' of women being referred into the women's centres to ensure equality of access is achieved for all women who are eligible for support; the extent to which resources are appropriately spread across the different entry points to the WSA and the adequacy of these resources. Questions were also raised around whether there would be a need to standardise service delivery across the women's centres alliance when applying for future funding in order to enhance the 'attractiveness' of bids. This raised concerns amongst participants, as variation in service delivery was deemed necessary for responding to differing needs in different localities. Similarly, the uncertainty around future funding and potential risks to aspects of service delivery within the WSA due to limited resources were also highlighted.