

## OPEN GATE: SUPPORT THROUGH THE PRISON GATE

Case study of a Clinks member in the North East

June 2014



## Clinks case study

### Open Gate: support through the prison gate

Mentoring and support for people leaving prison has been identified by the Ministry of Justice as being vital to reducing reoffending and it is a key ingredient in the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda. The Secretary of State said in Parliament in 2013 “*When someone leaves prison, I want them to already have a mentor in place. I want them to be met at the prison gate, to have a package of support*”.

Open Gate is a small charity that works out of HMP Low Newton<sup>1</sup> in County Durham providing support to women leaving prison and resettling into the local authority areas of the North East. This case study demonstrates the impact they have on vulnerable women’s lives, helping them re-enter society and get their lives back on track.

#### About Open Gate

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Open Gate began in 2005, from an idea of the then prison chaplain, Elizabeth McGurk, who was awarded an MBE for her work developing the charity. She saw women who kept coming back to prison, despite them saying that they would not offend again and who said they were determined to stay out of prison. The current project manager said: “*she was seeing the same faces ... The revolving door prisoners that we all know so well. She asked them, why do you keep coming back? And they said, there's nothing for us on the out*”. The organisation was created to address this need and began with a project development manager and a project administrator funded by Northern Rock Foundation, working from premises provided for them by the prison. The organisation grew and now consists of two project workers and one manager, with some admin support. Volunteers also play an important role in their organisation, providing mentoring to released prisoners. Currently (2014), they have six volunteers. They receive most of their funding from charitable trusts, such as Pilgrim Trust, Tudor Trust and J Paul Getty Jnr Trust with some funding from a local authority and a probation trust.

**“Open Gate are only a phone call away and I know from past experience that I can pick the phone up and the support will be there”**

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<sup>1</sup> A closed, female prison and young offender institution accommodating 336 women

Open Gate provide through the gate mentoring, advocacy and practical support to women leaving prison, which starts before they are released and continues in the community. They meet women at the gates of the prison and take them to any appointments that have been made for them, such as drug and alcohol support, probation, medical and benefits or to the train station or their accommodation. The support they provide is available for up to two years in the community.

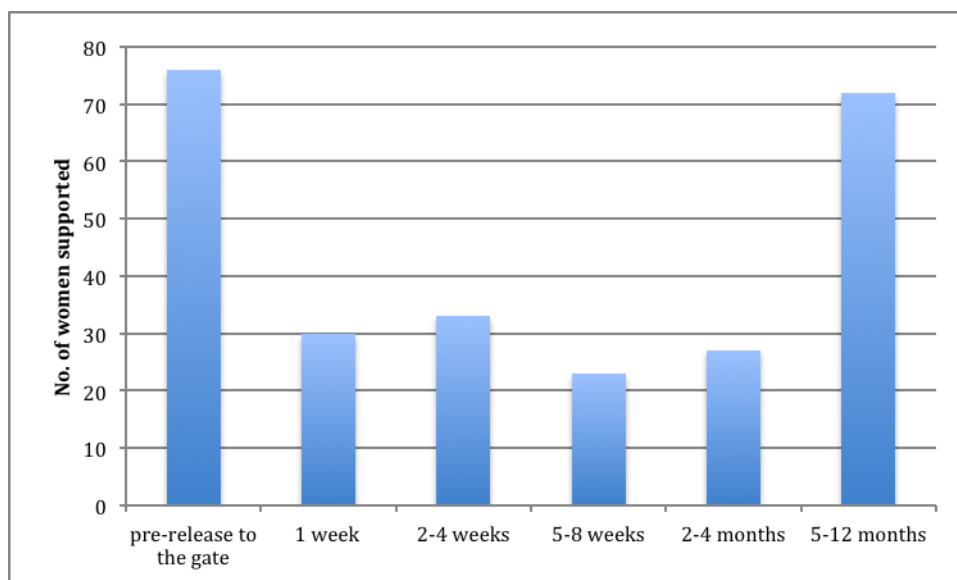


Women self-refer into the project: the project workers wear bright pink hoodies around prison, where they are key holders, and women can approach the workers directly. Offender Supervisors from the prison will also refer into the service and there are posters and leaflets on the wings.

In the last three years, they have provided through the gate support to a total of 261 women, over 80 women per year. As can be seen in figure 1, most women receive support leading up to release and are met at the gate. The other common duration period is up to 12 months, illustrating the need for support which lasts longer than the immediacy of release.

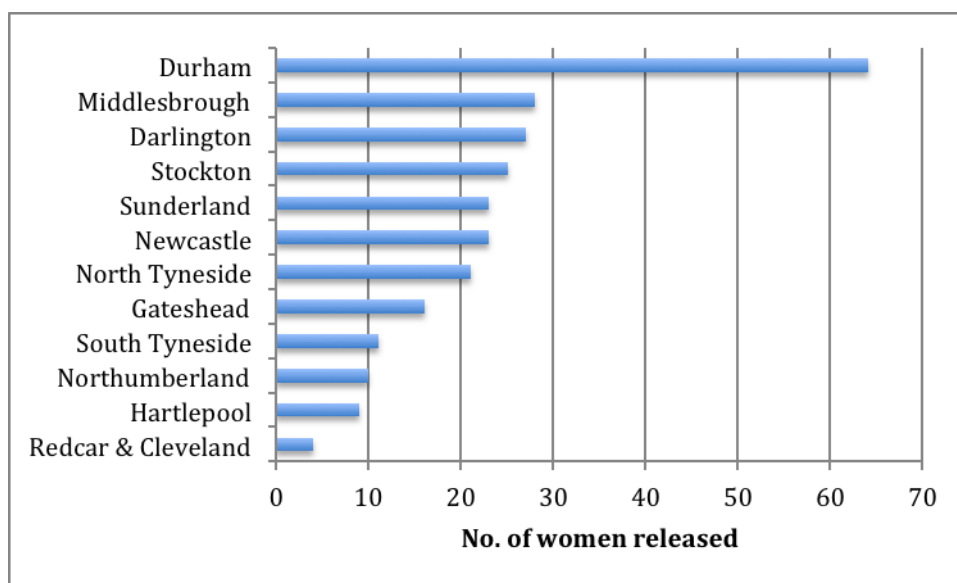
**“You saved my life and you know it!”**

Figure 1: Duration of support, 2011/12 to 2013/14



The women come from all over the North East as can be seen from the following figure 2.

Figure 2: Release destination for women receiving support, 2011/12 to 2013/14



For many women, leaving prison is a very difficult time and without support, the risk of reoffending is high. The risk is higher for women who are vulnerable as a result of historical substance misuse or mental health problems. For women, there are often two contrasting experiences of prison, depending on where they are in the sentence. The first is during their sentence; women will often say that this is the last time they will be in prison and that they cannot wait to be released. This then changes as the release date becomes nearer and when release is imminent the overriding experience and feeling of women is one of fear. Women become worried and fearful of many things and the expected complexity and chaos of release is contrasted with the structure and certainty of life in prison. One female prisoner illustrated this by saying: *“in prison, everything is done for you, you are told what to do, your meals are cooked for you and it is simple”*.



When faced with the release, the complexities of women's lives become clear: finding somewhere to live; reuniting with their children; sorting out benefits or looking for a job; arranging for medication; dealing with debts. These issues either individually or as a whole often seem insurmountable and therefore, the time of release is one characterised by worry and fear, particularly for women with low self esteem and poor mental health.

The time of the immediate release carries a high risk of reoffending for some, particularly those with historical alcohol or drug abuse problems. As all prisoners are released with a £47 discharge grant, there is a high risk for some of immediately buying alcohol or drugs. When a project worker from

Open Gate meets a prisoner at the gate, they immediately offset this risk. One ex-offender illustrated this: *“if you hadn't met me at the gate and put me on the train, I'd have gone straight back inside”*. Women also report that this support stops them contacting peer groups or family that were linked to their offending. As the project manager said: *“Sometimes family and friends are a negative influence on the women and can be detrimental to women attempting to change their lives.”*

## The approach

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In HMP Low Newton, Open Gate attends each prisoner induction and tells the prisoners about the service they provide, both in prison and outside. When the prisoner is nearing release, a project worker will meet the prisoner and discuss with them their worries and concerns and they will put a plan of action in place. Unfortunately, most of the issues that need resolving, such as housing, benefits and arrangements with social services for child contact, cannot be resolved from inside the prison, as most of them require contact in person. For those women that want help, a project worker will meet them at the prison gate. Women are then taken where they want to go, which may simply be to the train station or it may be to start resolving the many issues that require attention.

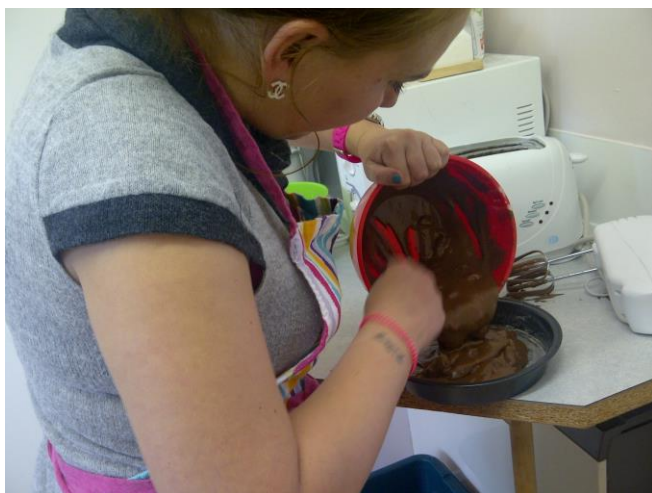
*“I think the work Open Gate do is invaluable. I personally could not have even started to cope with life since I came home. With all of the help, support and guidance Open Gate have shown to me over the past two years....”*

The top priorities for women will vary depending on need and circumstance, however, the top common priorities will include:

- **Accommodation:** this is a key problem area for female offenders as there is a dearth of suitable accommodation. A project worker said: *“There are no options for women leaving prison without accommodation. They have no choice where they end up, there's no female only hostels in the area, so they end up in a mixed hostel or a B&B where they're open to drug dealers or people they're trying to avoid”*.

- **Benefits:** ex-offenders need to access benefits on release from prison to pay for housing and basic living and need to put their application in as early as possible, particularly as there is such a long delay between application and receiving funds.
- **Appointments:** most women will immediately need to keep appointments, either with their probation officer or a drug and alcohol service. If women are on substitute prescriptions for drug addictions, they will need to immediately see the service to arrange for their medication, or they may need to see Children's Social Care about contact arrangements for their children. Women's self confidence and self esteem is often so low just after release that they often need advocacy support at these meetings, which can be intimidating; someone to help speak for them.
- **GP registration:** the women may have immediate physical and mental health needs and may need a sick note to claim benefits.
- **Basic needs such as food, heating and equipment:** as benefits often take three to four weeks to come through, the project helps to ensure that women have enough food to eat through using food banks and will put money on gas and electricity meters. They also provide women with small household items such as bedding, towels or kitchen utensils which are donated to the project .

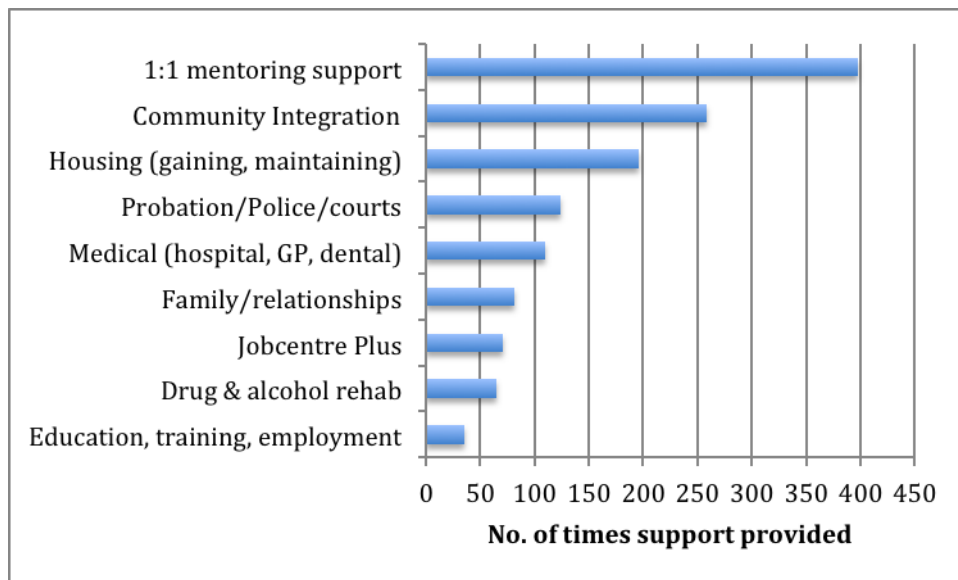
It may be that women need help with all of these issues and it is not unusual that the project worker will spend all day with a prisoner upon release. The following figure 3 shows how the women had been helped. As can be seen, most support was one-to-one mentoring, which consisted of emotional support, listening and mentoring work; essentially being a source of support to give the ex-offender the strength they need to



address the challenges of a new life on the outside. This is followed by community integration which is support that links the women back into the local community. This may be something as simple as accompanying women to the shops or helping them to find their ways around the local community. It may

also include joining a library or a gym or finding a place to volunteer. The other common areas of support are housing, criminal justice appointments and medical issues, such as joining a GP or finding a dentist.

Figure 3: Area of support provided to women ex-offenders, 2011/12 to 2013/14



## The impact

Open Gate measures its impact using a series of tools, including the Outcomes Star<sup>2</sup> and their own bespoke monitoring system, which measures customer satisfaction and impact on women's lives. In relation to the latter, of those questionnaires which were returned, the women unanimously rated the service and the quality of support as either excellent or good. Here are examples of typical impacts, illustrated by women's comments:

- *"They made me feel positive when I've been really low"*
- *"They helped me attend appointments"*
- *"They've been there for me when I had nobody to turn to"*
- *"They've helped me with practical things, like getting grants, furniture and things I need for my house"*

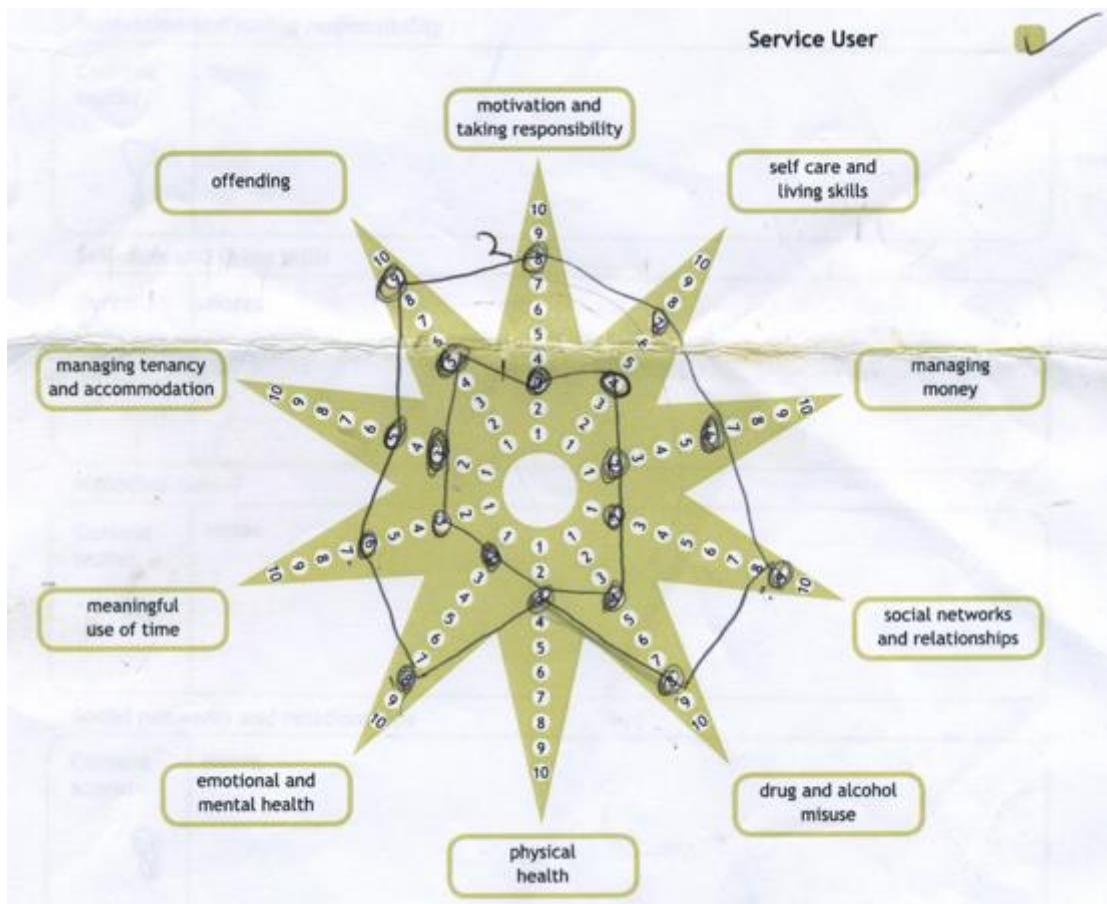
<sup>2</sup> [www.outcomesstar.org.uk](http://www.outcomesstar.org.uk)



- *“They got me food when I had nothing to eat and my benefits hadn’t come through.”*

The Outcomes Star measures impact in a number of key areas including: offending; motivation and taking responsibility; managing money; health; and substance misuse. They do this by asking standard questions about these areas at a point before support, then repeating these questions after support and measuring the difference (see figure 4). In a dip sample<sup>3</sup> of 10 Outcomes Stars, improvements had been shown in an average of eight areas out of 10 per client during the period of support, demonstrating significant positive impacts across all areas.

Figure 4: Outcomes Star completed by an ex-offender after support



<sup>3</sup> i.e. randomly choosing a selection of Outcomes Stars from the case files.

After spending time in prison, there are many life issues to sort out on release. The list of priorities that need immediate attention such as somewhere to live, benefits, doctors, etc., would be difficult enough for a strong and resilient individual. However, with poor mental and physical health, no knowledge of local administrative systems, little money and no transport, the task becomes almost impossible alone. Open Gate addresses this and supports women to work through what would have been insurmountable alone.

The impacts of the work of Open Gate are evidenced as being many and include:

- Improving women's mental health: reducing depression, anxiety and suicide risk.
- Improving self esteem and confidence: giving women the ability to represent themselves to other professionals.
- Reducing reoffending: helping women stay out of trouble, stay away from problem peers and family and clean from substance misuse.

They play an important social welfare, public health and criminal justice role that keeps women out of prison, just as Baroness Corston recommended in 2007.

**“When I was inside prison, Open Gate visited me and reassured me when it was time for release they would assist in any way possible. When I was released they arranged for someone to drive me home so that I didn't have the anxiety of going outside by myself. After taking me home, I was contacted regularly and have meetings with the staff member who has supported me to remain crime free for 20 months now, giving advice, guidance and even goods to assist in setting up my own home.  
A big thank you to all staff!”**

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This case study has been prepared by Barefoot Research and Evaluation. For more information see [www.barefootresearch.org.uk](http://www.barefootresearch.org.uk)

To find out more about Open Gate, visit the website at [www.opengate-ne.org.uk/contact](http://www.opengate-ne.org.uk/contact)



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