

Work and Pensions Select Committee Inquiry: Getting ex-offenders into work after prison

Response from Women's Breakout

April 2016



Women's Breakout

- 1 Women's Breakout is the only organisation that exists to shape national and local approaches to working with women who present with vulnerabilities and are in contact with, or at risk of becoming involved in, the Criminal Justice System. A dynamic and robust national umbrella organisation, Women's Breakout holds a unique position in providing a collective voice for the women who are working to support this cohort of women - using their collective knowledge and experiences to bring strategic change in respect of women impacted by the Criminal Justice System.
- 2 Working closely with its membership of 57 organisations, Women's Breakout aims to prevent women from entering a cycle of offending behaviour and involvement with criminal justice, including prison; and aims to ensure effective support is available to vulnerable women in the community. The causes of offending are multifaceted and a holistic response is a prerequisite for success in reducing offending but also in enabling women to lead successful lives more broadly. This will include reuniting families, reducing substance abuse, securing accommodation, facilitating training and employment, and accessing mental health treatment.

Summary: a gender specific approach is needed

- 3 Our member organisations are Women's Community Services Providers and they have been at the heart of addressing the complex issues that women offenders face following the publication of the Corston report in 2007. The organisations offer a women-only environment, receiving referrals of women demonstrating varying levels of risk and need. They have extensive track records in providing services to women who present with vulnerabilities and complex needs, and they use a proven successful model to provide services to women offenders across England and Wales.
- 4 These organisations bring a unique approach to supporting women with complex and multiple problems. They aim to provide women with holistic and empathetic support, in a women only environment, in order that they will be enabled to make better life choices. By putting women at the centre of support services and by understanding the complex and related nature of issues affecting their lives, projects are able to effectively deal with the underlying reasons for offending behaviour. By working with many statutory and voluntary organisations they can provide a broad range of support services to women, to help them address all of their needs through a 'one stop shop' that is focussed on empowering women to make positive choices and break patterns of offending.
- 5 Women attending the centres can benefit from a service tailored to the needs they display that takes full account of all of the issues and pressures that the woman faces; and they work with her to address and resolve her challenges and support her onto a positive path.
- 6 Women's Breakout welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to this inquiry and we are pleased to see that the questions to be addressed recognise that women have different circumstances to men, and that this requires different interventions. The model described above is a core model for supporting women, and is important to be adopted for any of the pathways, including support into employment. It is important to note that following the transfer of ownership of probation services to the private sector (known as TR), there is a very low financial offer for the provision of services to women across every Community Rehabilitation

Company(CRC) and this model of service delivery is under threat; and the ability of Women's Community Service Providers to support women to a high quality model is being diminished.

Specific questions

- 7 The following extracts are from individual centres to illustrate the type of support available:
- 8 How are prisoners helped to find employment; is support available both pre and post-release?**
- 9 Women on release from Prison can be referred into Chepstow House and we provide one to one support that involves creating action plans to develop skills for women to find employment. We have dedicated tutors who deliver specific skill sets to help women develop and move forward with their lives. We provide a service post-release.
- 10 In HMP Holloway, Hibiscus in part of the Trough the Gate project (TTG) of the London Women Consortium. This project focuses on the resettlement needs of inmates twelve weeks before their release. Several organisations work together on supporting women pre- and post-release. Under this scheme, prisoners have their resettlement needs assessed at entry level by NOVUS and Hibiscus will re-assess them 12 weeks and then 1 week before their release. Both NOVUS and Hibiscus refer women who need support to the organisation mandated for supporting women with employment, training and education within the Through the Gate project: Working Chance. A Working Chance worker will see the women inside the prison on a one-to-one basis and also invites them to collective workshops on disclosure, CV writing, job interviews.
- 11 Our organisation works specifically with foreign nationals and BMER women. We have observed that foreign national prisoners who are considered for deportation are not provided with support for finding employment in the country of their passport where they will be deported to. Besides, organisations working on disclosure issues like Working Chance or Unlock are unable to provide information on such issues for countries outside the UK.
- 12 As part of our Welfare and Advocacy in Prisons project in HMP Peterborough we organise groups and provide information to foreign nationals on available options in their country of origin. The main concern of prisoners who are being removed or deported is an emergency accommodation on arrival and prognosis of employment.
- 13 For those who face deportation as a result of a criminal conviction and are awaiting conclusion of their cases in detention centres, our international resettlement team provides a case management service to facilitate their reconnection within their communities in their country of origin. Through providing resettlement related support and practical assistance we aim to ensure the smoothest possible transition for our clients returning to their home countries. Often this could mean providing help with finding accommodation, assistance in getting identification and passports back, helping with internal travel, liaison with families and providing resettlement grants to aid small business start-up.

- 14** Our community resettlement team will work with women after their release. Their services are tailored to the needs of foreign nationals and include training in essential skills (English, IT) to access employment in the UK; Jobcentre interview, training, workshops. In the community we see a considerable number of women who cannot access work because they don't have NINOs. Our work consists in applying for NINo or UTR numbers if they want to become self-employed, the latter is often a better choice for some of our client groups as they find difficult to be employed because of their nationality/ethnicity (e.g. Roma women). It seems these issues are not tackled in prison, perhaps there is not enough time or maybe is not within the radar of those carrying out assessments. We follow different routes to help women find work: job centre, referral to other agencies, CV writing, training, contacts with big hotels, online applications etc
- 15** As part of TWP's support planning process, needs around employment are addressed prior to them being released from custody. However, it is evident that employment is often not the main priority identified by women whilst serving a custodial sentence. In HMP New Hall, the population can present with chaotic / complex issues and so more immediate needs are addressed in the first instance including accommodation and family matters. Therefore our input on this pathway remains minimal and often includes the preparation of CV's and group work around Disclosure Advice and Interviewing skills. As we have a dedicated Education Department and specific organisations (as detailed below) that concentrate on employment, the service Together Women provides is purely in place to enhance what is already available.
- 16** Within HMP Askham Grange, TWP manage a social enterprise where we are paid a minimal fee from local businesses' to provide support that includes; database cleansing, management of social media including Twitter, book keeping, mail shots and other admin based duties. This offers the women an opportunity to up skill but also maintain their existing skills with the use of modern technology. We have support from local business mentors and often the partnerships formed through this project create employment opportunities on release.
- 17** In our community centres we host a number of groups and courses which help customers to become job ready and ultimately find employment. Our courses include; IT for beginners, CV writing and ESOL. Job centre plus also attend on a weekly basis to support women with their job searches whilst offering advice and guidance on issues relating to the employment market. We support our customers to access volunteering opportunities, apprenticeships and work placements and we have a number of partnerships in place with local businesses who are often willing to offer work experience to our customers once it is deemed appropriate.
- 18** One25 offers holistic needs-led support to women trapped in or vulnerable to street sex work, pre and post-release from prison, which encompasses housing support and support around accessing education and employment where appropriate. The women One25 supports have very complex needs and experience ongoing complex trauma. At present there is very little therapeutic input available in custody and therefore very little opportunity for women to address the underlying issues behind their drug use, especially during short term custodial sentences. Where education and employment programmes continue to be the priority within the prison regime, the cycle of drug use and offending will likely continue, as the needs of this group of women are not being met within custody. Until the basic needs of street sex working

women are met in the community (such as ensuring safety and accommodation), any support around education or employment received in prison can rarely be utilised.

19 Do the employment and education programs available in prisons prepare prisoners for formal employment?

20 In 2013 Women's Breakout undertook some work with 100 women who had been in the criminal justice system and they cited the issue of training not preparing them for jobs outside of prison:

'There were three core issues raised around education, training and employment: The first was concerned with a lack of courses provided by services for women. The second noted that even if there were courses available to women then these rarely had any real world value or professional standing. The third related to poor, outdated or even misleading information – especially about barring and disclosure issues – which negatively impacted on women's chances of gaining employment.'

21 In Styal, I believe that some of the employment programs do prepare them and some women can access work during their sentences through ROTL (release on temporary license) with local employers. Also, working in the Clink at Styal prepares women for release as the customers are the general public. Styal do quite a lot of vocational education programmes (gardening, hairdressing etc) that help to prepare women for release as they then have skills that they can use potentially on a self-employed basis. It is difficult for women on short sentences as they are not in custody for long enough to benefit from this support.

22 The vast majority of women supported by One25 who are also involved in the Criminal Justice System are active in addiction and have highly chaotic lives in the community. As such, sometimes the programs available to women in prison around employment and education may not be currently as relevant to their current circumstances and the challenges they face on release, where relapse and return to offending is very common.

23 Available employment and education programmes vary from prison to prison, the support is not consistent and some prisons have wide range of available workshops and courses while others have limited opportunities. In HMP Holloway there is a successful fashion workshop ran by the London College of Fashion, however it is the only scheme that provides women with the equivalent of an apprenticeship in the 'outside'. External organisations like for example Working Chance runs workshops inside the prison: they bring in employers to do practise interviews with the women, they advice on employment opportunities. This does prepare the women but spaces are limited so not all women get the chance to attend. More workshops like these should be available to all women who wish to attend not just a selective few.

24 Women who meet the criteria for the TTG project receive the support described in the previous point. We would welcome this support to be provided across the prison population not only for women with less than 12 weeks till their release date. We find that many women on remand are released from the courts on their sentencing hearing day as they would have served their sentence by that time. Additionally, women who are on immigration detention while in prison

do not qualify for support on the TTG project as there is assumption that they will be deported however in our experience a number of these women is released into the community in the UK. These groups of women have limited education and employment opportunities while in prison.

- 25 In HMP New Hall, the following is available to residents, those that are highlighted specifically prepare residents for employment on release in that specific area.

Entry skills – Maths and English
Functional skills level 1 + 2 – Maths and English
Employability skills including CV and job search
Ready steady work – Employment preparation
Business Admin
Contact Centre – Call Centre work
Health and Safety
Kitchen preparation
NVQ Catering
Burrista training – coffee shop
Industrial cleaning
IT – Entry skills up to level 2
Hairdressing – up to NVQ level 2
Max Spielman Academy

- 26 Regardless of sentence length, each woman completes an induction program and is assessed by our National Careers Service. This ensures every woman in custody has access to some form of education / employment provision.

27 **What support do offenders receive to help them find suitable accommodation on leaving prison?**

- 28 Resettlement officer meets with them within 5 days of going into custody and establishes their housing needs. If the woman identifies as homeless, they will complete a homeless application to the relevant local authority 56 days prior to release and liaise with offender manager.

- 29 As Chepstow House is managed by a housing association we have good links in terms of accommodation and as holistic support is offered we are able to provide support to explore options available if not through Brighter Futures. We also have emergency provision available for those being released from prison who are homeless.

- 30 Women who meet the criteria for the Through the Gate support by London Women Consortium have their resettlement needs assessed at entry level; 12 weeks before release; 1 week before release. They are referred to a specialised agency that is mandated under this project to support them with housing issues prior to their release.

- 31 However, many prisoners are homeless upon release. The women who meet the criteria for 48 intensive support upon release will have their TTG worker trying to secure them some emergency accommodation. Accommodation is the main concern for many women. If they have no-where to go on release the TTG worker has to contact night shelters, hostels. These also do not accept everyone i.e. some only accept if a woman is from their catchment area, some would only accept women after 7pm as it is uncertain that there will be available

space. Many women get released in the morning so it is distressing to wait until 7pm to see if a bed space is available. Some women have a friend they will contact on release and ask whether they could stay there for a night. Sadly, there are still women that end up homeless on the street or back in HMP Holloway.

- 32** In our experience the support to find accommodation before release doesn't seem to be meeting need. Women from EU countries are usually in a better position because they have other relatives or acquaintances in London which can provide accommodation even if it is only on temporary basis. However, these are not ideal solutions as women may have to move from place to place until they resolve a number of other problems: e.g. NINOs, opening bank accounts, getting work. This works against stability and ability to comply with a number of other obligations: probation, immigration appointments, etc
- 33** A number of foreign nationals may be released from prison into the community with no access to public funds. Others are asylum seekers and can only access accommodation through NASS: if their application is processed before their release date they may have housing but are 'dispersed' far away from their support networks. We have observed that women who are asylum seekers often leave prison without a NASS accommodation already in place which means that they are either in temporary accommodation (usually acquaintances) and they can easily become homeless until their application is processed.
- 34** On entry into custody, each woman completes a Basic Custody Screening Part 1 and 2 which identifies accommodation needs, which then generates referrals to appropriate agencies. The Through the Gate provider is responsible for accessing and sourcing appropriate accommodation for women prior to release and where necessary, emergency accommodation is sourced by way of a homeless application upon release into the community. This is usually in the form of a Bed and Breakfast or Hostel. Supported Housing providers access the prison regularly and specific services are available for early release and bail purposes through Stonham BASS, a national organisation.
- 35** Capacity issues with staffing and the increasing demand for housing means that additional charities such as TWP often need to support co-commissioned services in supporting women with their housing needs. Face to face and telephone assessments are facilitated through the women centre and bond schemes are sourced through our community partnerships. Preventative work is also completed that avoids rent arrears occurring and payment schemes are arranged to better prepare women for release.
- 36** **What are the impacts of factors such as homelessness and unemployment on the propensity to re-offend?**
- 37** Accommodation in particular, has a huge impact. If women do not have accommodation they can end up being drawn back into associating with the same people that may have had an influence on their offending previously.
- 38** These are key factors that will lead women to offend or be led into situations that will cause harm to them. Often in Women's Services those women we support are homeless and this will mean that they are far from being able to access employment as there will be a multitude of complex issues that will come with this factor.

- 39** We wouldn't want to comment on the propensity to re-offend as we don't have data on this but we can say that of the women we work with in the community only one re-offended. However, it is very clear to us that homelessness and unemployment place women in a very vulnerable situation and often they have to resort to unsuitable/abusive relationships to survive
- 40** Evidence suggests that homelessness is the single biggest contributor to re-offending on release from custody. Through providing gender specific interventions to women who have long term entrenched involvement in the criminal justice system, we have learned what is effective in reducing re-offending. Safe, appropriate accommodation is key in the resettlement and rehabilitation of prisoners as without this many are forced to return and depend on associates, negative peers or abusive partners and family members. Although temporary accommodation is a better option than homelessness, it can have a negative impact on stability and often this can lead to bad decision making, negative influences through co-habitants and then ultimately the cycle of re-offending returning.
- 41** For women in custody, employment is rarely identified as a priority upon release as they are often the main carer in the family setting and therefore take on the primary role. Although finance and debt can be a contributor to offending, this is often as a result of limited budgeting skills and not a lack of employment. However, it is evident that employment is linked to an increase in self-esteem, confidence and the promotion of positive peer influences and so in the long term, it will reduce the likelihood of re-offending.
- 42** Finding suitable homeless accommodation on release for women returning to the Bristol area has become increasingly difficult. Being released from prison or having a history of street sex work no longer necessarily give you higher priority, and very often there is no bed space available on the day that a woman is released from prison. Lack of accommodation often means women return to drug use and chaos making essential appointments (such as picking up methadone prescriptions or engaging with probation) extremely difficult.
- 43** **What recommendations should be made to improve support for ex-offenders?**
- 44** Women should be identified as a distinct cohort– they have different needs and require different interventions to men, and the effectiveness of interventions on women should be shown compared to men.
- 45** Gender specific services that are needs responsive, including outreach delivery models should be continued and extended. More holistic support is needed initially to stabilise women who have offended before working on employability skills. Women's Centres are best placed to do this.
- 46** A support network ready to step in when the women asks for it is required.
- 47** A safe place to live should be a priority for women leaving prison together with some guarantee of minimum income. They should be able to maintain their housing benefit for longer during custody as this would avoid women losing their homes whilst in prison. We would welcome more women's hostels that would provide at least a six-week safe accommodation with more support and counselling services.

- 48 Improved access to accommodation in alternative areas with the priority status linked to local connection being reviewed.
- 49 More access to information for offenders while they are inside the prison and better access to classes to reflect on their past, accept it and be able to disclose to potential employers.
- 50 Better education and training opportunities, accessible to women with children
- 51 Intense through the gate support, with the same provider in custody and in the community to promote consistency.
- 52 Improved access to mental health provision in the community where barriers such as dual diagnosis are reduced.
- 53 The MARAC process should be reviewed as it currently eliminates those who have not received contact from an abuser or reported an incident in the last 12 months; this makes it difficult for those who have served a custodial sentence for longer than 12 months to access this provision.

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