

218 Project Roundtable

Thursday 21st November 2013

In April 2012 the Commission on Women Offenders, chaired by Dame Eilish Angiolini DBE QC, published the findings of its Inquiry into Women and the Criminal Justice System.

In light of this report, the SWC discussed the availability of local services for women in contact with the justice system as part of the 2012 roadshow programme. A copy of the report can be found on the SWC website.

As part of its work around women and the criminal justice system, the SWC arranged a roundtable event with women from the 218 project in Glasgow.

This is a Turning Point Scotland and Glasgow Addiction Service initiative that takes a person centred approach in dealing with the issues that women offenders face.

The programme of work at 218 is designed to address issues with substance use, physical and mental health and other social needs including housing and childcare.

During this roundtable, women discussed the level and availability of services and support when they were in contact with the criminal justice system, such as legal help, information whilst in prison and assistance afterwards.

THE LEGAL PROCESS

Women are considered to be sentenced more harshly than men. More often than not they are punished for petty crimes such as non-payment of a TV licence, non payment of fines, shoplifting etc.

The 218 project has workers in Glasgow Sheriff Court to support women through the legal process. There are however no other services to assist women. More support is required for those who find themselves in unfamiliar and vulnerable positions.

“I couldn't take in what was happening to me. I didn't really want to. I just kept looking at the sentence I was given and thinking that I wanted to die.”

Sentencing and sentencing conditions can vary from court to court. Bigger courts, such as Glasgow, often give bail. In areas such as Paisley, however, this is not the case and *“the sheriffs tend to be a bit harder on women.”*

CUSTODY AND PRISON

Women who are imprisoned can either be sent to Cornton Vale, the dedicated women's prison in Scotland, or women's units in Greenock, Saughton, Edinburgh, or Polmont. Polmont only takes prisoners who have been found guilty and are awaiting sentence.

The Scottish Prison Service is in the process of creating a new, purpose-built women's unit at Greenock. Cornton Vale will also be replaced. Women who have been in the current unit at Greenock prison commented on the way in which they were treated by officers.

“You get so much more respect in a prison that has both men and women in it than you do in Cornton Vale. The officers are a lot more human towards you and the Governor comes round once a week to make sure everyone is doing ok.”

Women who enter prison for the first time are given very little **information and support**. Phoenix Futures, an organisation which provides alcohol and drug intervention programmes across Scottish prisons, will ask prisoners if they wish to attend a Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meeting.

“They ask you if you're suicidal and that's about it.”

Most new prisoners have to ask others to *“show them the ropes”*. Women who are sent to HMP Greenock, however, are assigned a Prison Officer straight away, who they can approach with any questions.

Women serving sentences in prison in Scotland typically get one **visit** per week. Prisoners on remand are entitled to more than this as they have not yet been sentenced.

“The visiting areas aren’t great. You feel as if the officers are always looking at your visitors, especially the kids. You’re not really allowed physical contact either which is very hard.”

The prisons which women can be put into are difficult to reach. Cornton Vale is considered the least accessible for friends and family who wish to visit. If visitors are late, regardless of the reasons why, e.g. public transport issues or caring responsibilities, then they are not allowed entry into the prison.

“There should be some sort of arrangement for transport to Cornton Vale - a bus that leaves from Buchanan Bus Station or something like that. They do this for some of the men’s prisons. Why don’t we get the same?”

Access to **healthcare** can be very difficult. Prisoners are given a ‘green sheet’ and told to tick the boxes that relate to their medication requirements. A nurse comes in daily, however securing an appointment with a doctor is *“almost impossible.”*

“I had a fit in my cell and bumped my head. I asked to see a doctor but all I got was a tube of cream and told to ‘get on with it’. A friend fell out of the top bunk and sprained her ankle and it was five weeks before she was able to see a doctor about it.”

Women who require access to contraception for hormonal reasons are not always provided with the medication they need whilst serving their sentence. This tends to be offered towards the end of a prison term in preparation for liberation.

Mental health services are only offered to long-term prisoners (LTP’s). This is despite the fact that a large amount of the prison population suffer from significant psychiatric issues.

“Most of the women in there shouldn’t be in prison. They should be in a hospital being treated for mental health issues. They shouldn’t be locked up.”

Women with drug and or alcohol dependencies are given little support or rehabilitation. Those who enter prison on remand and who are on a methadone programme are taken off of it by medical staff. They are only put back on the programme if they are sentenced.

“The doctor doesn’t care if you’ve been on the programme for years, you’re just taken off it with hardly any help. So many women in this situation are really vulnerable, they’re hallucinating and shaking. It’s no wonder there are drug problems in the prisons.”

AFTER RELEASE

Women require more support and assistance when **leaving prison**. A resettlement service, which would give women help with housing, welfare benefits, information about paying bills, cooking etc would be welcomed. Resettlement would also be beneficial for help with behaviour, such as learning how to live without drugs. These women often have to make choices not to associate with people they would have taken drugs with in the past.

"I am trying to get this kind of service set up. We need something that's going to help women learn to live again."

When leaving prison, women are given a travel pass which allows them to use public transport to get back home. Belongings are returned to prisoners in a plastic bag, with the name of the prison stamped all over it.

"It's really obvious if you're getting on a train or a bus carrying a big clear prison bag. It doesn't make you feel very good when folk are staring at you because of it."

Housing is a significant issue. It can be difficult to get a council house, as housing list entitlement is taken away when women go into prison. The so-called 'bedroom tax' is a *"real worry"*, particularly for those who may be put into vulnerable situations as a result of being unable to pay.

"It's hard enough getting somewhere to live, never mind the additional worry of this bedroom tax. I know of women who will go up the road with a guy they don't know, knowing the risks, because at least they will have a roof over their head that night."

218 PROJECT

The 218 project deals primarily with women aged 18 and over who have live involvement with the criminal justice system, a range of complex needs such as addiction, poor mental or physical health and trauma issues. 218 is there to help women break the cycle of offending which results in the 'revolving door' syndrome that characterises many of their relationships with prison.

The service has a 12 bed residential unit and a day service programme which provides a range of compulsory and optional group work sessions and one to one support. Access is also available to a clinic which deals with mental and physical health issues, a dietician, chiropodist, dentist, doctors and nurses. Regular progress reviews are also carried out by the group of community workers who oversee each individual.

The 218 project is part of Turning Point Scotland.

Many find out about the service through workers in court. 218 operates a waiting list and the limited spaces can mean women waiting up to six months for a referral. More funding for more places would be welcomed.

Women can also present at the Glasgow Drug Crisis Centre (GDCC), another Turning Point Scotland service. They also, however, only have limited spaces and work on a basis of priority and need.

“We’re talking about women in life or death situations here. The work 218 does is so beneficial, it’s a shame it’s so restricted by funding.”

Women who use the service benefit greatly from the support and assistance they receive.

“It’s so good having folk there just to listen to me. Coming here has given me options I never would have had previously. It’s opened doors for me.”

Staff are highly praised, particularly with regards to the commitment they show to going *“the extra mile”*. They contact women to ensure they are ok, particularly if they are feeling anxious or scared about being on their own. This is seen to make *“such a difference”* to the confidence and mental health of service users.

Women noted how much their self awareness and self worth improved since they accessed the day or residential services.

“When I first went into resi (residential) my head was down and I wouldn’t speak up. The support I have received in here has really increased my confidence.”

WHAT MORE COULD BE DONE TO TACKLE RE-OFFENDING?

- More services throughout Scotland like 218. Women offenders come from various parts of the country. It is unfair that those who do not live in Glasgow are not given the same access to support as those who do.
- More services within local communities which provide support and guidance for women who leave prison. This would be especially beneficial for those whose behaviours before they were sentenced - such as drug and alcohol use - are no longer relevant.
- Women would appreciate the establishment of support networks throughout the country.

“At the moment they’re not always available. Without that thing you’re in real danger of being put back into a vulnerable situation.”

The SWC has undertaken work around women in the criminal justice system and its impact over the last two years.

- Links to roadshow reports from a variety of areas throughout Scotland are available here: http://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/activities/roadshow_reports
These outline in greater detail services available to support women who come in contact with the criminal justice system, at various levels, throughout Scotland.
- Responses to various consultations around women in the criminal justice system can be found here: http://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/publications/consultation_responses
- Further information about the work of the 218 project can be found here: <http://www.turningpointscotland.com/what-we-do/criminal-justice/218-service/>



The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy.

This is achieved in a number of different ways - through roadshow, round table, conference and celebratory events. Following each event a report is compiled and issued to women who attend and relevant policy and decision makers.

The SWC uses the views of women to respond to Scottish and UK Government consultation papers.

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