



Evaluation of the Pilot at the Willow Project
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

May 2010

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Willow Project was developed as part of the Partnerships for Access to Health (PATH) project within Edinburgh Community Health and Care Partnership. The PATH project was part of the Scottish Government's Multiple and Complex Need Initiative being carried forward by NHS Lothian and NHS Highland. The Willow project was based in Edinburgh and worked with women at risk of or involved in offending and women involved in the sex industry. Funding came from various sources including the PATH project, the Edinburgh Community Safety Partnership, Community Food & Health and the Fairer Scotland Fund.

1.2 Lothian & Borders Community Justice Authority's Women Offender Planning and Development Manager oversaw a pilot project at Willow from December 2009 until the end of March 2010. The pilot involved developing the existing service, accommodating women's attendance on statutory supervision alongside those attending on a voluntary basis. Additional resources to support the pilot came from the City of Edinburgh Council Criminal Justice Social Work services.

1.3 The pilot project involved both health and criminal justice professionals working in partnership. It set out to cover a broad range of needs such as physical, mental and sexual health, literacy, abuse, nutrition, cooking skills, raising levels of confidence and self-esteem. The Project is based around groupwork, although each woman is assigned a key worker to have time to focus on individual needs and support. The women attending on a voluntary basis are offered the same range of programmes as those attending on a statutory order except that those attending on a statutory basis must

attend the adapted Connections Programme, which is a course set up to look at women's offending-related needs.¹

2. THE EVALUATION

2.1 The evaluation of the project set out to ascertain the benefits of the work with female offenders in the community. This included collecting the views of the women and staff working within the project as well as those of outside agencies and local authority staff that have been referring women. Qualitative interviews were carried out with twelve women, and an analysis of thirteen files took place. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with 13 staff. A survey was also administered to agencies that referred women to the project, generating eleven responses.

3. SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK FROM STAFF

- Both internal and externally-based staff felt that the Willow Project fulfilled a gap for women offenders in the community.
- Staff and clients felt that having a 'women only' space was important. The space created felt safe and allowed the women to build meaningful friendships and mutual support.
- Willow encouraged women to identify and build on their strengths. Many criminal justice workers viewed this as useful and something that could be used more in the wider arena of interventions in criminal justice.
- Willow gave women the opportunity and support to connect with relevant services.
- All those interviewed felt that the women engaging with the project had improved and become more stable in their lives as a result of the Project.
- Interviewees felt that the model of the Project, which combines a criminal justice approach with a focus on health, should be adopted in community programmes in the future.
- Staff reported that systems for sharing information within Willow are robust, and referral agencies appreciated the regular updates given on their client's progress.

¹ This programme was already established and delivered by Aberdeen Criminal Justice Social Work. It has been adapted for this project to include up to date research and to fit the overall structure of the pilot.

Executive Summary of the Evaluation of the Pilot at the Willow Project

- Both health and criminal justice workers felt that working together had proved invaluable and was a partnership worth sustaining and developing.
- All those interviewed and most of who completed the survey felt that this service was not only needed but should become an alternative to custody. All said that they would refer more women to the service if it were available, and a waiting list was in operation at the time of the evaluation.

4. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE WOMEN

- At the beginning of the Women Offenders Pilot, 39 women were referred to the project, of whom 26 (67%) were on a voluntary basis and 13 (33%) were to attend on a statutory basis.
- Fifteen women who had been attending the program on a voluntary basis and four women who were attending on a statutory order ended engagement soon after starting the project. By the end of the pilot, four women were still attending on a statutory basis and nine women were attending on a voluntary basis.
- Generally the women had chaotic lives, in particular mental health and/or addiction issues. Staff acted proactively to support the women to attend. However, staff capacity did not always allow for hands-on follow up, and this appeared to impact adversely on attendance levels.
- All the women had a background of offending. Some had been sentenced for relatively minor offences such as shoplifting, but others had committed serious offences such as assault. The service was able to work well with women of all levels of risk of reoffending and of harm to others and themselves.
- All the women needed support with complex and difficult issues.

5. WHAT DID THE WOMEN ACHIEVE BY ENGAGING WITH THIS PILOT?

- Women were helped to deal with their substance misuse. Specifically four of the five women with an addiction to heroin are now stable on methadone, and two are on their lowest dosage for years. Five women with an alcohol problem are currently alcohol-free, and one woman was supported to attend alcohol counselling service and to get a prescription for Antabuse. All of the women felt that addressing their underlying needs made a great impact in their ability to control their drug and alcohol issues.

Executive Summary of the Evaluation of the Pilot at the Willow Project

- One woman who was anorexic and a prolific self-harmer said this was the first time in many years that she has not self-harmed and was eating much better.
- Four women reported being in an abusive relationship. One said that her increased confidence and self-esteem from the Project helped her realise her self-worth, and as a result left her abusive partner. She did not think she would have been able to do this without the support from staff and clients at Willow.
- Willow supported all the women to attend the nurse onsite, and many were diagnosed with health problems they did not know about.
- Women who reported having mental health problems felt that the project understood and supported them in dealing with this, particularly in relation to coping with trauma and past abuse.
- Three women had problems with their literacy and were attending the reading and writing group as part of the project, which they felt was helping them.
- The women were linked to relevant agencies and took part each week in relevant activities. All the women felt that they would continue to work with these and to keep doing the activities they had started such as going to the gym or visiting the museum or library. Doing these things made them feel much less isolated.
- All the women have grown in confidence and self-esteem as a result of attending Willow and reported feeling more positive about their future.
- Only one woman reported offending since attending the Pilot. Some of the women had been prolific low-level offenders, yet all reported that engagement with Willow had resulted in their longest period without offending.
- The women credit their progress to the mutual support they have gained from one another and from the staff.
- The women felt that they had built good relationships with the workers based on mutual trust and respect. The service being 'women only' made it easier for them to be open and honest in the groupwork setting.
- For many, this was the first time in a long time they had been helped to realise their strengths and to build on them.
- The women felt supported to attend the project and in particular highlighted that getting bus passes or transport into the service made a big difference to their attendance levels. Staff working within the service felt more could have been done to help the women with this.

6. MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- Staff capacity should be reviewed and more funding put in place to ensure an adequate number of workers are available, particularly to ensure that ‘one to one’ support for the women is in place and that staff are not overstretched. Staff appreciated the operational management cover provided throughout the pilot but recognised that a more stable management structure would need to be in place in the future.
- The adapted Connections Programme should be offered to all attendees.
- The Community Links Centre as a venue should be reviewed and relationships between those working within the Centre and Willow Project workers should be improved. Community Links Centre staff should undergo the training offered on women offenders and gender-specific responses, as this may break down some of the perceptions of resistance.
- In light of the need identified, a phased approach to women coming onto the project might be worthwhile to deal with the numbers likely to want to attend in the future.
- Clients should be supported more proactively to attend, moreover staff capacity specifically should be considered in relation to this.
- The partnership working between health and criminal justice is an example of good practice for other services and highlights the importance of this partnership in the future.
- Based on all the interviews, the Willow Project’s funding should be extended and the service developed as an alternative to custody.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 The Willow Project worked with women attending both on a voluntary basis and as part of a statutory order. As well as helping the women onsite to deal with their issues, they also linked with agencies and support in the community. All of the women felt that the staff at Willow went out of their way to help them, and the women clearly made substantial progress in the relatively short space of time in which the pilot ran. Although it is too early to say whether the Project will have an impact on the women’s offending over a longer term, the interviews suggest that the women feel that engaging with the Project has made them feel more stable and less likely to offend. Overall the Project has fulfilled its key aims to reduce offending, improve the women’s health, well-

Executive Summary of the Evaluation of the Pilot at the Willow Project

being and safety and improve access to services. Moreover, it has adhered to the underlying core principle of providing a safe environment where the women were heard and respected.

7.2 Although the numbers were small and the period of evaluation short, Willow appeared to be making an impact. In sum not only did the women, project workers and external agencies identify Willow as fulfilling a gap in provision, but they also felt it could offer a viable alternative to prison. All believed that the Project had an impact on the women, and they could see a difference in the individuals since the beginning of their engagement. They felt that this type of intervention was invaluable in helping these women move on to a better future.

This is supposed to be a punishment but it has been the best thing that has ever happened to me. This is the only time I get to think about me, to take that breathing space that up to now I have never had.

(Woman interviewed attending as part of a statutory order)