



Women Offender Pilot at the Willow Project: Report of the Evaluation

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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. Eight women attended the Project in the beginning as part of a statutory order. By the end of the pilot, four of these women were still attending, all four of whom were interviewed. Twenty-four women attended the Project on a voluntary basis, nine of whom continued to attend by the end of the pilot, and eight of whom were interviewed. For the evaluation, qualitative interviews were conducted with twelve women, and case file analysis were carried out for thirteen women. Throughout the project the women had the opportunity to provide feedback on modules, so this has also been included in the report. 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.²

3. STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

3.1 This report briefly summarises the literature regarding the current situation in Scotland in relation to women offenders as well as the distinctive needs of women offenders. It then describes the findings of the evaluation, outlining:

- the Willow Project's core principles, aims and focus of the evaluation;
- attendance levels;
- background information of participants;
- the identification of needs and progress;
- the evaluation of the Connections Programme;
- what women found most and least useful about the project;
- an evaluation and discussion of the impact of the project and whether the project fulfilled its aims and core principles;

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.

² We would like to thank Kirsty Pate, Women Offender Planning and Development Manager for Lothian Borders Community Justice Authority, and Kate Denyer, the Willow Project Co-ordinator. Both Kirsty and Kate have been incredibly supportive and helpful throughout the evaluation in helping set up interviews and accessing information and other services.

- the findings from interviews and focus groups with staff from Willow; and
- the findings from the survey administered to outside agencies that referred women to the project.

Next, the report makes recommendations based on the results. It then concludes by emphasising the main points and assessment of the viability, questioning whether the pilot should be extended and also whether it could be a model used as an alternative to custody for women offenders.

4. WOMEN OFFENDERS IN SCOTLAND

4.1 The population of women prisoners has increased disproportionately in recent years. While the male population increased by 29% since 1999-00, the female population has nearly doubled in that time (Scottish Government, 2009a). Scotland is now imprisoning more women than ever before. This appears to be part of a misplaced 'welfare' agenda, as research suggests that women are often being sent to prison not to be punished but rather to be cared for (Barry & McIvor, 2009; Tombs, 2006; Social Work Services and Prisons Inspectorate, 1998).

4.2 Based on the average daily population of women in prison in 2008-2009, 74% leave prison without statutory support in place, as they are serving short sentences (Scottish Government, 2009a). Short-term prisoners have been shown time and again to have the highest level of social need and the highest rates of reconviction, and women prisoners more than any other group receive such sentences (Maguire & Raynor, 2006; Lewis et al., 2007; Social Work Services and Prisons Inspectorate, 1998). Short-term prisoners face a wide range of issues, forming a "recalcitrant problem for the agencies involved" (Crow, 2006: 15). These problems often relate to the fact that very little effective work can be done with them in prison over such a short period of time, and contacting them after release can be exceptionally difficult.

The distinctive needs of female offenders

4.3 Since the 1990s, in contrast to previous years, much work has been undertaken to identify the issues women offenders face. The first wave of reports in Scotland focusing on women offenders was prompted by a series of suicides in Cornton Vale, Scotland's main prison for women offenders. One of the first of these, *Women*

Offenders: A Safer Way, concluded that 'the backgrounds of women in prison are characterised by experiences of abuse, drug misuse, poor educational attainment, poverty, psychological distress and self-harm' (Social Work Services and Prisons Inspectorate, 1998: 13). These issues often overlap, and many women offenders have chaotic lives that make compliance with community penalties difficult (Barry & McIvor, 2009). However, as Baroness Corston (2007) advised, community sentences need to be more flexible to meet the needs presented by this particularly vulnerable group.

4.4 Male offenders will also face such needs. However the research shows clearly that a higher proportion of female offenders experience these needs and often at a higher intensity than male offenders. Research at Cornton Vale, for example, found that women in prison not only suffered from tremendous social deprivation as well as physical and mental health problems, but also that they experienced a multiplicity of such needs (Loucks, 1998; Social Work Services and Prisons Inspectorate, 1998). Female offenders were more likely to have been victims of past or current abuse, to be in poverty, to have substance misuse problems, and to commit offences related to these circumstances. Imprisoning these women had particularly dramatic consequences. For example, women in prison were more likely to lose housing and to lose custody of children. Rates of suicide also increased dramatically for women placed in custody (*ibid.*).

4.5 Also distinctive for female offenders is the higher likelihood of childcare responsibilities. The implications of childcare responsibilities are particularly notable for women. When a father goes to prison, any children usually remain with the mother. When a mother goes to prison, children remain in the family home in only 5-17% of cases (Gardiner, 2009; Social Work Services and Prisons Inspectorate, 1998). Children of women in prison are more to face a number of placements during their mother's imprisonment (Gabel and Johnston, 1995; Seymour and Hairston, 1998; Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System, 2003), and children put into care frequently remain there for some time after their original carer's release from custody (Wolfe, 1999). Probably because of this, problematic behaviour among children is more common when the mother rather than the father is imprisoned (Richards and McWilliams, 1996). Non-custodial options are therefore particularly important for female offenders where possible.

5. WILLOW: AIMS, CORE PRINCIPLES AND EVALUATION

5.1 The Willow Project provides an innovative and focused approach in working with women offenders to address their needs and deal with the practicalities that have to be addressed. The project aims to address women's offending and related needs in order to:

- Reduce offending behaviour;
- Improve women's health, wellbeing and safety; and
- Improve women's access to services.

5.2 The Core principles underpinning Willow's work are to:

- Ensure gender equality;
- Encourage the women to make responsible and meaningful choices;
- Provide a supportive, safe and respectful environment; and
- Build and maintain community relationships.

These are based on national and international research regarding how to work effectively with women offenders (National Development Champions Group on Working with Women Offenders, 2007). Part of the evaluation was to ascertain how well the aims and core principles have been adhered to and achieved.

5.3 The Willow Project existed for eight months prior to the pilot under evaluation. However, those attending had done so on a voluntary basis only, and the focus had mainly been on helping women to be healthy and to look after themselves, for example through healthy eating. The pilot marked the beginning of a more established partnership between staff in criminal justice and health. At this point, for the first time, the project was being used as part of a statutory order for women on probation as well as those still attending on a voluntary basis.

5.4 One of the main changes as a result of the pilot was the introduction of a structured programme including criminal justice interventions such as assertiveness techniques as well as continuing to address health inequalities. The programme set out to cover a broad range of needs such as physical, mental and sexual health, literacy, coping with abuse, nutrition, cooking skills, and raising levels of confidence and self-

esteem. This included the use of new and innovative ideas. For example, Willow used art therapy as an element of the groupwork - an approach highlighted as being particularly useful in encouraging the engagement of people with mental health needs (Corston, 2007). The evaluation set out to capture perceptions of the overall programme from clients and from internal and external staff and whether, within the short period of time in which the pilot took place, women felt their needs were being addressed.

5.5 A mandatory part of the statutory order for women attending was to complete the Connections Programme. This Programme aims to help women address underlying problems and examine their offending behaviour. The four women interviewed who took part were asked specifically about this aspect of the pilot, and an analysis was conducted of their feedback forms for the specific modules. The Connections Programme is discussed in a separate section along with perspectives from staff.

5.6 The Willow project as a whole emphasises the importance of the relationships between the workers and the women. This approach follows strong evidence that such relationships are crucial in helping offenders desist from offending (Rumgay, 2004; McNeil et al., 2005). The pilot project at Willow provided training for staff to raise awareness of the specific needs women present. Managers set out to support their staff to build relationships that highlight the women's strengths as well as addressing their needs; part of the evaluation assessed how well this has been achieved.

5.7 A poor history of self-support and reliance on welfare benefits is particularly notable amongst women compared to men (Scottish Government, 2009b). Following evidence of good practice from agencies such as the Asha Centre in England, Willow is working with the relevant agencies to find ways to help women to attend the service and overcome practical barriers such as transport (Rumgay, 2004). Part of the evaluation assessed how supported the women felt in overcoming barriers to their attendance and whether staff believed more could have been done.

6. BACKGROUND OF REFERRALS AND ATTENDANCE

6.1 At the beginning of the Women Offender Pilot, thirty-nine women were referred to the project. Twenty-six of these (67%) attended on a voluntary basis, while thirteen

(33%) were referred on a statutory basis. Referrals were invited from criminal justice in West Lothian, East Lothian, Mid Lothian and City of Edinburgh Council. Referrals were made to the pilot from East Lothian, Mid Lothian and City of Edinburgh Councils. Two women started the programme on a statutory basis but continue to attend on a voluntary basis. Specifically, one woman was still using drugs and had presented challenging and difficult behaviour. The other woman changed to attendance on a voluntary basis because she missed too much of the programme following an abortion, which the project helped her to deal with.

6.2 During the evaluation, only thirteen women (33%) regularly attended the programme: nine on a voluntary basis, and four on a statutory basis. Of the remaining twenty-six women, fifteen no longer attend the programme (eleven self-referred and four statutory). Eleven women did not start the programme at all (six self-referred and four statutory).

Reasons for ending engagement

6.3 The main reasons for the fifteen women giving up the programme were varied. Four simply stopped engaging with both Willow and the referral agency, with no reasons or insights on why this was the case. Two women decided not to return due to past history with other women in the group. Seven gave up the project because of the level of chaos in their lives relating to drug misuse, mental health issues, personal circumstances and a lack of stability in housing. In these particular cases, workers felt that the women would require more support and preparation before they could engage with this project. In two cases, women stopped attending due to personal circumstances. Specifically, one woman decided to postpone attendance until after her trial, while the other was admitted to a psychiatric hospital.

6.4 One woman attended irregularly mainly due to childcare issues that eventually stopped her from attending altogether. This highlights that an ideal project working with women who have children would provide or include provision for childcare facilities. For example, the Asha Centre in England provides onsite childcare facilities - a factor highlighted in helping women to attend (Rumgay, 2004). Not many of the women raised this as an issue, but the importance of relationships to women, especially with their

children as highlighted throughout the literature on female offenders, means that projects such as Willow need to consider their support on these issues thoroughly.

Reasons for not commencing work with Willow

6.5 Eleven women did not start attending Willow for many reasons. Like those who started but then stopped engaging, these women also had chaotic lives, with many problems such as severe mental health, anxiety, chronic drug misuse or poor physical health. One was sent to prison before she could attend. This evidence, combined with the evidence of the reasons why women stopped attending, suggests that women need to have some stability in their lives in order to attend as well as substantial support to maintain their attendance.

7. BACKGROUNDS OF THE WOMEN

7.1 The average age of the nine women who self-referred and were currently attending the project was 38 years old. Seven had children, but only four of these had children under the age of 16, and only three women still had their children living with them. Four women's children lived either with family members or were in care, two had full access to their children, and one had supervised access. Another woman did not have any contact with her child, though access was being agreed.

7.2 With regard to the women attending on a statutory basis, only four (31%) of the thirteen who started the project still attended Willow, with an average age of 30 years. Two of the four women had children under the age of eighteen, with one having access to her children and the other having no contact.

7.3 The women attending this project both voluntarily and on a statutory order had similar problems such as psychotic illness; depression; cognitive impairment; obsessive compulsive disorder; self-harm; contemplated suicide; anxiety; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), bulimia and anorexia as well as Hepatitis C, diabetes, and arthritis. Importantly, one woman did not present any signs of mental or physical health problems, so much of the content of the courses were arguably not as relevant to her as they were to the other women. Most of the women had a lower level of educational attainment and had often left school at a very early age. Two of the women had never worked or had

not been employed in the last twenty years. However, the one woman who had no health problems was at college studying for a qualification in social care.

8. INTERVIEWS AND FILE ANALYSIS

8.1 Twelve women were interviewed as part of the evaluation, while information was collected and analysed from thirteen files.

Backgrounds of offending

8.2 Although only four women interviewed were attending the programme as part of a statutory order, all of the women had an offending background. Figure 1 summarises the latest offence the women had been charged with based on information given at interviews.

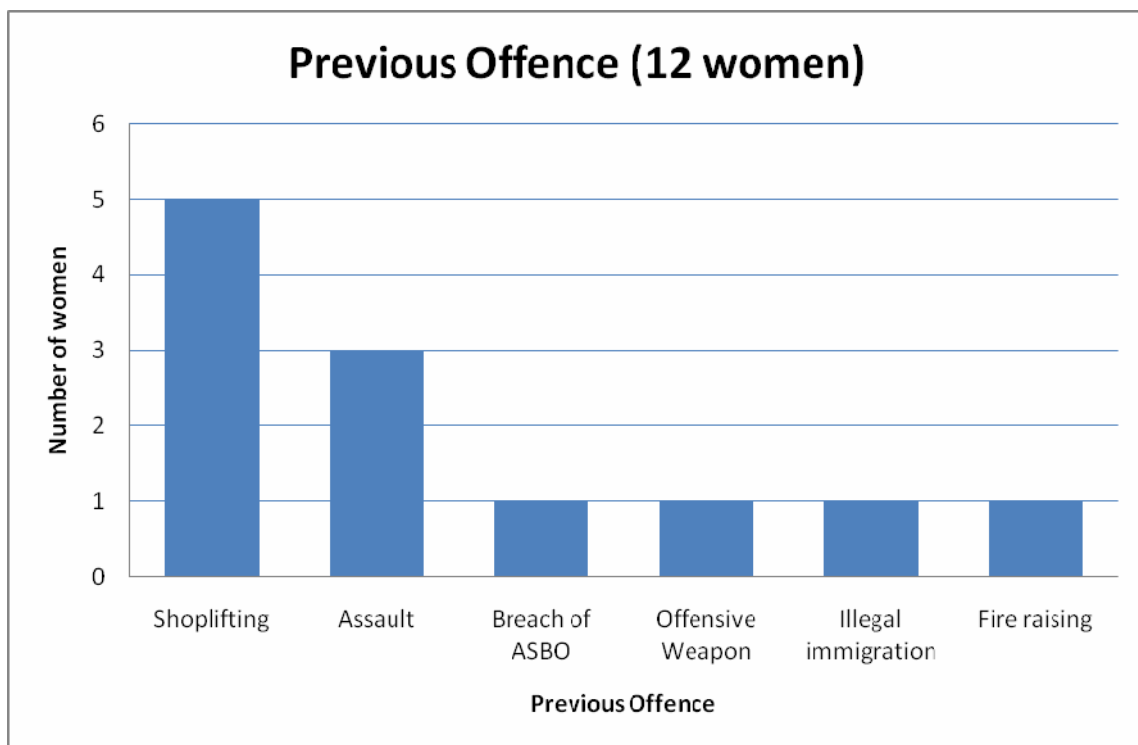


Figure 1

8.3 Three of the women who had been sentenced for shoplifting had been stealing to get money for their heroin use, and one woman had stolen alcohol. Three older women who had committed assault said they did so under the influence of alcohol. The woman sentenced with carrying an offensive weapon said she had been arguing with her partner

and was carrying it for self-defence. All of the women had received community sentences before, and seven women said that they had been to prison in the past. None of the seven who had been in custody felt that prison was a 'useful' punishment, as all had been given short sentences and did not feel that they were able to do anything to address their offending in the time. They felt that a project like Willow would be a much more appropriate disposal. All but one woman had started offending in their late twenties and could be classified as 'adult onset' offenders. Since the time of interviews, one woman has been sent to prison for an old offence, despite the fact that she had been engaging well with the project.

8.4 According to the case files, five of the nine women who attended voluntarily were classified as being at low risk of reoffending, one at medium risk and three at high risk. For those attending as part of a statutory order, one was assessed at moderate risk of reoffending and three at high risk. This suggests that the women attending as part of a statutory order were at a higher risk of reoffending compared to those attending voluntarily.

8.5 Concerning the risk of harm to others, seven of the nine women attending voluntarily were assessed as low risk, one as moderate risk and another as high risk. In comparison, all those attending as part of a statutory order were classified as posing a moderate risk of harm. The women attending as part of a statutory order were therefore generally assessed as posing a greater risk of harm to others.

8.6 In relation to the risk of self-harm, two women were rated as low risk, five as moderate and the other two women as high risk. For those attending as part of a statutory order, the risk of self-harm was classified as none for one woman, low for two and moderate to high risk for another. Therefore, unlike the other assessments of risk, the group of women on a statutory order posed a lower assessed risk of self-harm than those attending voluntarily.

8.7 Controlling for the smaller numbers of women attending on a mandatory basis, those attending as part of a statutory order are at a slightly higher risk of reoffending and of being harmful to others than those attending voluntarily. However, those attending voluntarily are at higher risk of self-harming than the other group of women.

Main issues and current status

8.8 Figure 2 presents the main issues that the women identified as something they needed help with. The figure shows clearly that most of these needs related to substance misuse, evenly divided between alcohol and other drugs.

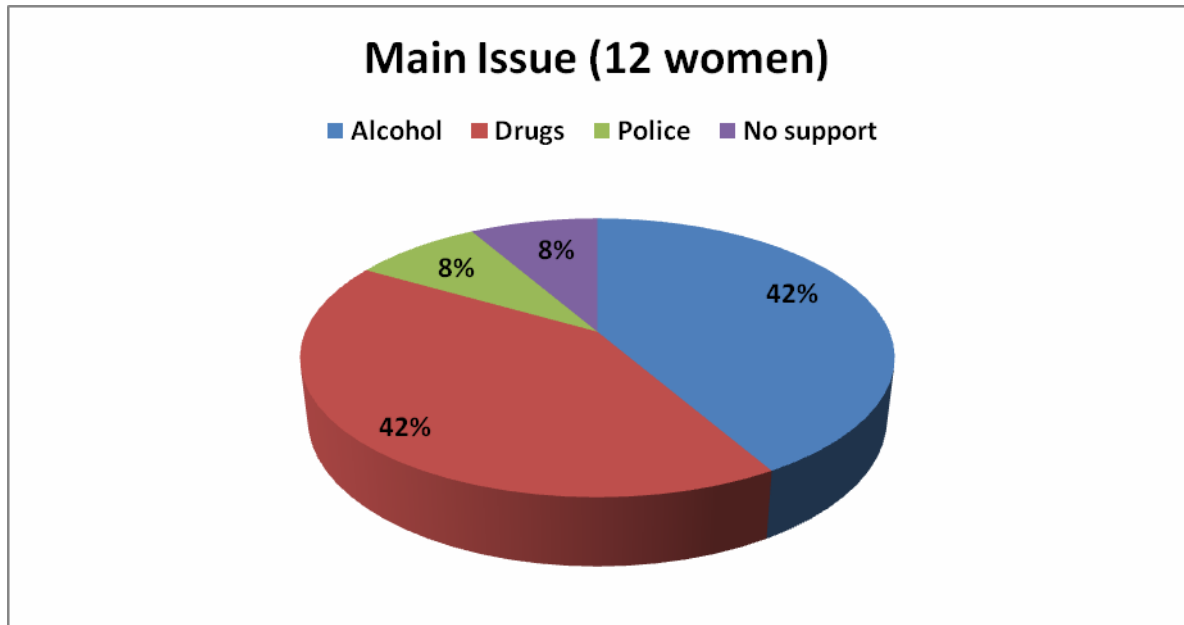


Figure 2

8.9 Five women in the interviews reported being addicted to heroin. One woman said she had been addicted to Valium as well as heroin, and the other five women were dealing with an addiction to alcohol. In all ten interviews, women said that heroin, Valium or alcohol were used as a form of self-medication to deal with histories and current abuse, which supports research on a national and international basis (Malloch, 2004; Covington, 1999; Loucks, 1998). According to the case files, six women were recorded as having an issue with drugs, one of whom was not interviewed. The files therefore corroborate the findings of the interviews.

8.10 The interviews asked the women about their progress with their issues at this stage. One woman said she continued to take heroin, but the other four were stable on their methadone and keen to be drug-free, and all were reducing their intake over time. One woman had stopped taking Valium as well as heroin. She felt strongly that, of all the drugs she had taken in the past, Valium was the most dangerous. She explained

that it made her feel invincible and was a key reason why she had the confidence to begin shoplifting. The analysis of the files also showed that the women hoped to continue to reduce their drug misuse.

I want to be alert and be able to hear what the women are saying and interact. I asked the doctor to bring my methadone down and for the first time in years I am feeling more awake and I have a reason to be awake.

(Woman interviewed attending voluntarily)

8.11 Five women said that they had an issue with alcohol in both the interviews and in their files. All of these women said that their parents had been alcoholics, and one woman said that everyone in her current life has an addiction to alcohol. In relation to their progress at Willow, all five had stopped drinking and one woman was taking Antabuse.³ One woman was attending an alcohol counselling group which Willow had supported her to attend. All interviewed said that finding things to do that did not involve alcohol had been difficult, and the Willow Project helped them find activities in their local community. Being around other women in the same situation helped them provide support and encouragement for one another in maintaining their abstinence from alcohol.

8.12 One woman interviewed had been given an Antisocial Behaviour Order (ASBO) at age 17; now age 19, she was attending the project as part of a probation order because she had breached her curfew. The curfew meant that she had to be in her house by 10pm in weekdays and 7pm during the weekend. She felt as though some police officers kept a 'special eye' on her activities and felt labelled and targeted by them. Some evidence supports this idea that those previously known to the police are sometimes targeted and labelled by them (McAra & McVie, 2005; Reiner, 1999). The woman said that the part of the project that most helped her was the Connections Programme, as she learned to 'step back' from the situation when she felt that the police were challenging or picking on her.

³ Antabuse is a blocker prescribed to deal with alcohol misuse.

8.13 Evidence of the difficulties in getting support for ‘known’ offenders came from project staff as well. Part of the pilot involved the women being given the opportunity to attend the Venture Trust, which involved a weekend away to do team-building exercises. The project staff said that trying to get this woman on the course had been incredibly difficult due to the restrictions of her curfew. In support of the woman’s feelings in relation to the police, staff felt that the police were not very co-operative and placed many restrictions on her that they felt were unnecessary.

8.14 One woman attending the project on a voluntary basis did not have any addiction issues and had only one offence. She had come to Scotland to flee from a war-torn country and did not have the appropriate documentation. She had to leave two grown children behind and currently has limited contact with them. She remains illegal in Scotland and therefore has no right to support or financial help from the Government and is at risk of being deported. She felt that the support offered by Willow was invaluable as it gave her the chance to learn English, to meet women from Scotland and make contact with professionals who could help her like the nurse and psychologist.

Other issues reported

8.15 Other than the ‘main issue’ women reported, Figure 3 presents the other problems the women spoke about in their interviews.

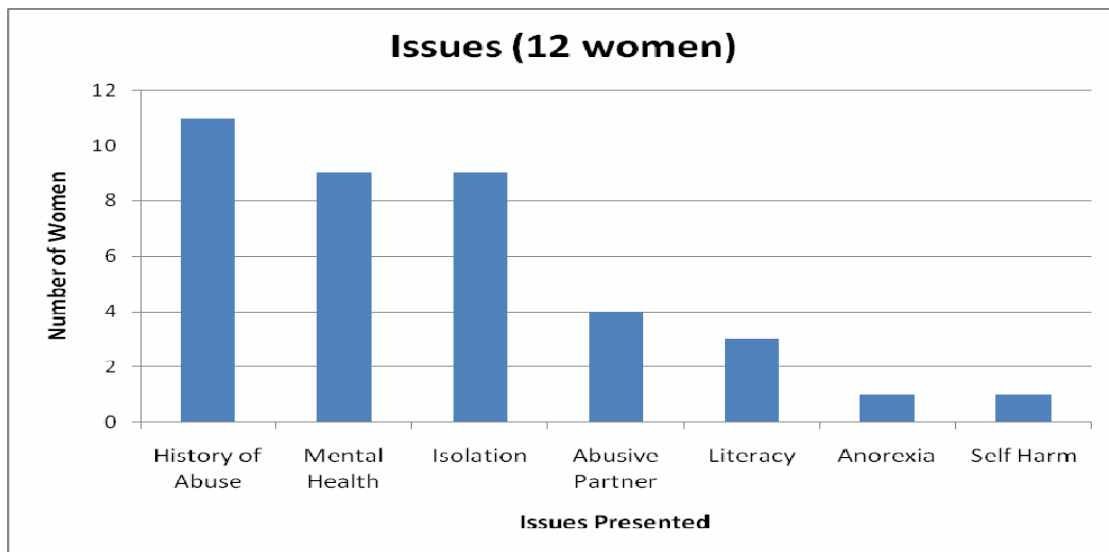


Figure 3

The next sections discuss these issues in more detail.

Abuse

8.16 Like previous research on women offenders, the interviews and files showed that the majority of women had a history of abuse (Loucks, 1998). The backgrounds of abuse the women experienced often involved male family members, and many of the women said that this is the first time they had felt comfortable to talk about it in front of others. One woman, who had an offence of fire-raising, said that she still could not talk about it but appreciated that she was not compelled to do so. All the women who had histories of previous abuse said that it helped that the project was 'women only', and one woman who did not have any issues with past or current abuse said that, as someone who was part of the group, she could understand the benefits of it being 'women only' for the other women.

8.17 Four women were currently in an abusive relationship. Since the time of interview, one woman gained the courage and confidence to split up with her partner, which she said had a lot to do with the support from the project workers and the other women. All the women in abusive relationships said that, whilst they were in the project their partners would try to call them and wait for them outside of the building, but having the rule of Willow being 'women only' protected them from having to deal with their partner coming in.

8.18 One woman explained that she was the sole carer for her partner and her mother, both of whom abused her verbally and physically. In the beginning of her participation in the project, her partner would call her constantly. However, she had grown in confidence since the beginning and began to turn her phone off whilst she was at the project, and building these barriers seemed to work effectively. All four women said that, in their lives at this time, Willow is one of the few places they feel safe. Ten women with long histories of abuse said that attending the project gave them 'breathing space', both physically and mentally, to think about their needs and focus on what they needed to do. All of the women said that having the opportunity to build confidence and friendships helped them to gain strength to start to look at their situations differently.

Mental health

8.19 Nine women reported having problems with their mental health. Specifically, seven women suffered from depression, one woman had alcohol-induced psychosis and one woman took panic attacks and suffered from anxiety. All of the women who reported having mental health issues felt that contact with the Willow Project workers and meeting other women with similar problems really helped. Many also spoke about their mental health issues being linked to past abuse. The woman who had panic attacks had found it difficult to attend the project in the beginning, as she finds it hard to leave her house and use public transport. A member of Willow staff helped her by going with her on the bus, helping her to make the first few journeys and building confidence so that she could do it herself. At the interview, this had been the first time the woman had made the journey on her own, and she felt proud that she had done it. The woman with alcohol-induced psychosis said that having her key worker to speak to made a massive difference and that just having someone who understood was invaluable.

Isolation

8.20 Nine women interviewed and twelve women's files highlighted their feelings of isolation. All four women who had abusive partners said it was easy to become isolated because essentially their partners did not trust them to meet up with others. For four women, their depression and mental health needs meant that they often stayed in their homes, while for another the language barrier was the main reason for feeling isolated. Participants said that attending the Willow Project gave them a reason to get out of the house and made them realise that meeting new people was not as difficult or as daunting as they had thought.

8.21 The women felt that meeting new people they were comfortable with was important. Many felt that Willow had helped them build confidence and inspired them to do more and to get out of the house more often. The analysis of the thirteen files showed that five women felt that they had no real support in their lives, so the friendships they built at Willow could therefore be crucial. Many interviewed said they would continue to meet up with the women they had met on the project and felt that they had made lifelong friends, which previously had not been an option.

Literacy

8.22 Three women interviewed said they had issues with their literacy skills, and analysis of the thirteen files showed that eight women in total had problems in this area. All were attending the Reading and Writing Group within the Willow Project. One woman interviewed said that she really enjoyed the class and felt that it was giving her the confidence perhaps to proceed to a more intensive course. One woman attending said she felt that the class was too difficult and did not enjoy it, as she has poor memory recall due mainly to her history of drug misuse. Another woman wanted the class to have more structure and possibly to have the option for it to lead to a qualification. One woman, who did not have literacy problems but attended the class as an option, felt that more could be done in the class. For example, she suggested that the class could use a peer support model so that it could be more interactive, believing that the women as a group would get more out of it.

Anorexia and self-harm

8.23 Analysis of the thirteen files showed that seven women had a history of self-harm and five women continue to self-harm. However, only one was willing to discuss her issues with self-harm in the interviews. She suffered from anorexia and had attempted suicide before. She said that coming to the project had helped her a lot; she said she had laughed for the first time in two years and ate her food in front of the other women, which was an important step for her. She explained that it was vital that the project was kept for women only as it was the only place she felt comfortable. She had attended other projects but said that, as a young woman, she found it difficult to connect with older women. The fact that the Willow Project engages women of all ages helped, and she also felt that having a young support worker was good. She remains a regular attendee at the project and sees it as something that is helping her build confidence and recognise and build strengths.

9. THE ADAPTED CONNECTIONS PROGRAMME

9.1 The Connections Programme was set up originally in Aberdeen and has been adapted for use with women who were attending Willow as a mandatory part of their probation order.⁴ The Programme ran from 10am to 12pm twice a week over the three

⁴ 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.

months of the pilot. The Programme recognises that women's offending is different to men, as any programme aimed at reducing women's offending should take account of gender differences such as experiences of abuse and trauma (see for example Sheehan, Mclvor and Trotter, 2007). The Connections Programme builds on national and international research relevant to women offenders but also treats the women as individuals with their own specific set of needs.

9.2 From the outset, Connections has a very detailed theoretical framework that informs each of thirteen modules. The modules build on one another to provide an opportunity to develop, reinforce and test skills learned. Behaviour diaries are also used to help the women to record their behaviours and self-monitor their progress. The programme helps the women to examine their moral reasoning, and build confidence and skills to deal with situations appropriately. It also builds on the positives identified from the beginning of the course and in particular helps women to identify and build resilience. Building resilience in relation to women and their process of desistance can be extremely beneficial (Rumgay, 2004b).

9.3 Women offenders often feel that they have little control over their lives; therefore the Programme incorporates enough flexibility to allow the women to make meaningful choices about its format. For example, the women offered suggestions for speakers or outside agencies that they wanted to be invited in to Willow to provide information. As well as being a programme for women on a criminal justice order, Willow encouraged the women to take care of themselves.

9.4 Another aspect of the adapted Connections Programme was about the women identifying influences that are negative in their lives, looking to the future and making clear plans and connections outwith the project. Many of the women find it difficult to cope and in particular often feel judged and therefore the programme had a focus on supporting the women to build capacity to be able to deal with unfamiliar situations. The programme was modified to include exercises that helped the women to build confidence and see themselves in a more positive light. Women were supported to identify and build on their strengths and understand that they had to overcome their barriers particularly in how they saw themselves and be confident in their own identities

in order to achieve and succeed in their goals. Those who delivered the project used pro-social modelling, with the relationships between the workers and the women and between the women in the group regarded as central.

Evaluation of the Connections Programme

9.5 During the Connections Programme, 50 feedback forms were collected from five women, and in each of the sessions the responses and comments were exceptionally positive. Women spoke specifically about enjoying the group, feeling safe and comfortable sharing their experiences with others who had similar backgrounds and truly understood what they have been through. All those interviewed said that the group gave them an opportunity to reflect on what they needed to do to improve their future and was a 'breathing space' from the chaos of their lives.

I enjoyed the day and I enjoyed doing the flipchart and standing up and talking to the group. I felt good and in control.

(Evaluation form from woman attending Connections Programme)

9.6 All of the women attending the Connections Programme enjoyed it and felt it was the best element of the project. One aspect of the Programme is for women draw up a list of their strengths and have others add to this. For many, this was the first time they had someone say something positive about them for a long time. Many struggled to see themselves in a good way, so this part of the project was extremely enlightening and empowering. The women also appreciated the opportunity to look at how they coped with problems and better ways they could deal with issues in their lives.

I enjoy the company of the people in the group and never had any reason to feel unsafe, which is a good thing for me.

(Evaluation Feedback form from woman on Connections Group)

9.7 As noted above, the Connections Programme is mandatory for those on a statutory order, and workers tried hard to support women to attend the project and fulfill the conditions of their orders. One woman from the Connections group spoke in the interview about how the workers came to her house one day when she did not turn up at the project or answer her phone. She said that she was annoyed at the time but could see now that they cared. This made her think that the workers on this project were different from others.

9.8 The women interviewed who were attending Willow voluntarily and therefore were not part of the Connections Programme said that they would have liked to have had the opportunity to attend. Further, the Connections Programme coincided with the art therapy sessions, so those in Connections missed out on this. The women felt that, in future, all attendees of Willow should have the same opportunity to take part in the same programmes, particularly so that the group is not split up.

9.9 The workers interviewed were satisfied with the Connections Programme. They believed it was appropriate for the women and retained sufficient flexibility to be responsive to their needs. They also felt that, in hindsight, the Connections Programme should be for everyone, as all of the women have an offending background and would have found the content useful. They also said that having all the women take part in the Programme would have kept the group together; staff reflected that splitting the group created a divide that had taken time to repair.

10. MOST AND LEAST USEFUL ASPECTS OF THE PILOT

Positive elements

10.1 Willow collected feedback from the women using feedback forms throughout their contact with Willow, which formed part of the analysis of the case files. From this analysis, all of the women clearly enjoyed the program. Their comments included: *“I enjoyed the company of the other girls”*; *“it was good, I enjoyed the Willow group”*; *“it’s good to be together with others”*; and *“this keeps me busy and out of trouble.”* Generally the women emphasised that the best element of the project was having the chance to be with other women who had experienced similar problems. They valued sharing, helping one another, and having the support of the workers. Women also liked that they met

with the project workers on their own before beginning the project, which eased some of the fears they had before starting.

Do not judge each other.
Do not glamorise offending.
Respect each other.
Listen to each other – don't interrupt.
***Confidentiality – not mentioning people's
names outside.***

(Sample of the 'Willow Rules and

Relationships

10.2 Although the women enjoyed the groupwork, they highlighted that it was equally important to have a key worker. The women felt that their key worker was the person with whom they built the strongest relationship, and they were able to get one-to-one support for any problems they faced. The women reported that all of the workers went out of their way to help them. They also felt that they built relationships on mutual trust and respect, which other research has highlighted as being crucial to helping women to desist from offending (McNeil et al., 2005). One younger women felt that it was important that the worker allocated was younger too, as she said that it made it easier for her to be open and honest about how she felt. Recent research highlights age as being a potential factor in relation to responsivity (Batchelor & Burman, 2009; Nugent & Loucks 2010). However, another young woman said that the age of the worker did not matter as long as they were 'up front' and able to do their job. Perhaps significantly, however, this second woman had no addictions issues and did not present the same level of vulnerability as the other young woman.

Structure and location

10.3 The women appreciated the structures in place at Willow and felt that group rules were important, for example that women had to be in the project by a certain time. The group rules were one of the main ways in which the women had an opportunity to make meaningful choices and offered an important opportunity for the women to set their own agenda within Willow.

10.4 All of the women felt that the location of the project was fine for them and they appreciated that staff were realistic and helpful in providing them with bus passes or transport if needed.

Programme options

10.5 All of the women interviewed felt that the Willow Project was extremely useful and liked the variety of elements to the project such as art therapy, cooking and the reading and writing group. Many of the women said that the art and music classes were fun and relaxing. The art therapist who attends the project felt that this mode of communication and expression could be used more to look at past and future behaviour.

10.6 However, the interviews with the women suggested that they may not fully grasp the therapeutic element of the project. Art therapy is supposed to be used to help the women to deal with feelings and emotions, and one of the key points is that the women themselves decide what they want to draw; one woman interviewed felt that the art class should have more structure and that they should be told what to do, which highlights the lack of understanding about art therapy. Many of the women said that they used the class as a way of relaxing and did not appear to view it as a serious or challenging part of the Project. The women's perceptions do not necessarily reflect the reality of any progress they may be making, so the potential benefit of art therapy is worth exploring in more detail (Nugent & Loucks, 2009, Matarasso & Chell, 1998, Ruskin, 2006).

10.7 Almost everyone highlighted the cooking and nutrition aspect of the project as incredibly important, and the evaluation forms returned and interviews reflected how much the women enjoyed it. The Cooking and Nutrition component of the programme helps the women to think about the importance of cooking healthy and nutritious food in a cost-effective way, which most women had not realised was possible.

Community links

10.8 A large part of the project focuses on linking women into the support they need. For example, some women received help with access to the Homeless Options Team working within the Community Links Centre. Every week, one afternoon is dedicated to taking the women outside of Willow for an activity, which was an important means of linking the women to ways of building support and social capital. For example, the

workers took women to the gym and gave them passes to continue attending. The majority of women said that they would go back and do this either on their own or with another woman.

Health care

10.9 All but one of the women who did not want to had been supported to attend the nurse on site and to attend the sexual health clinic available as part of the project. The women explained that they generally do not think about their own health and would not normally visit the doctor for a check-up. Interestingly, five of the women learned that they had conditions that needed attention such as high cholesterol or diabetes. Many of the women felt that in the past, because of their alcoholism or drug misuse, health professionals dismissed them. Establishing this contact made them realise that they had to look after themselves but equally that not all doctors and nurses would look down on them.

I am learning to take care of myself and found out that I was a diabetic. I had been dizzy in the past and just thought it was normal but it's not.

(Woman attending as part of statutory order)

Venture Trust

10.10 Eleven of the women interviewed took part in an activity organised in partnership with the Venture Trust, which involved a weekend away to do team-building exercises. Before participating, each woman received a professional-style camera to take pictures to record their lives. All the women interviewed felt proud that they were being trusted to have a camera which was so expensive and felt that this was a measure of how much respect they were being given. Most of the women explained that they had not been away from their homes for years so in some ways regarded this exercise as a holiday, and the opportunity meant a lot to them. One woman however said that she had been bullied whilst away, which tainted her enjoyment of it, and the other women interviewed were equally annoyed about the bullying. Although all of the women regarded this incident as unfortunate, overall the Venture Trust element of the project had been something to look forward to and an opportunity that they would not normally have.

10.11 The interviews showed that not only did many of the women enjoy the pilot at Willow but they felt passionate about it, pointing out that very little is available for women like them where they can go and feel safe.

Suggestions for change

10.12 In general the women suggested no improvements other than ensuring Willow's continuation, and six women interviewed said that they wanted the Women Offender project to include an additional day per week. Of those who made suggestions about the project's content, two women felt that the reading and writing classes could have more structure and offer more intense support. Another felt that the art classes should have more focus, though again this may indicate a lack of understanding of art therapy. As noted previously, one woman had a limited offending background and no addiction issues or past or current abuse in her life. This woman said she enjoyed the courses overall but often felt that she was an observer of the intervention rather than a recipient. The purpose and target audience for the project could therefore usefully be revisited.

10.13 Although the majority of women did not have robust support networks in their lives, some of their case files mentioned support from friends and family members. Attendance from family members at the final award ceremony for participation in Willow may therefore provide an additional support for the women. One of the women, for example, said that she would have liked to have her mother there to see her receive her certificate.

My mum has been here for all the bad stuff so it would be good if she could see me get something which is good.

(Interview with women attending as part of a statutory order)

Input from families would need to be managed carefully, however, as many of the women had abusive partners, and in two cases the case files identified some family members as unsupportive in general.

11. IMPACT OF THE PROJECT

11.1 Women reported in their case files that their aspirations were that they would like to be free of their dependencies, meet new people, and build confidence and self-esteem. Other women said that they would like to go to the gym, gain computing skills, do a college course, get their children back and maybe go to work one day.

11.2 All of the women reported in the interviews that the project had indeed made an impact in how they felt about themselves. In particular they realised the importance of looking after themselves and of thinking of their needs as well as those of others. They felt that they had grown in confidence and self-esteem. One woman said that she had left her abusive partner as, through the support of the project, she recognised that she was worth more than that. The women seemed to feel that the mutual support for one another as well as the support of the workers was crucial. Women who took part and attended the 'Reaching In, Reaching Out' element of the project said that they had not been aware that so much was available for free in their local community. Overall many of these women previously felt isolated and alone; Willow helped them see that they did not need to feel like this and that support was available in the community.

Did the Project fulfill its aims?

11.3 To recap, Willow's Women Offender project aims to address women's offending and related needs in order to:

- Reduce offending behaviour;
- Improve women's health, wellbeing and safety; and
- Improve women's access to services.

This section looks at Willow's progress on each of these aims in turn.

Reducing offending behaviour

11.4 Although this evaluation cannot state at this early stage whether the project has had a long-term impact on the women's offending behaviour, only one of the women interviewed said that she had offended since engaging with the project. Women reported that their drug and alcohol misuse had stabilised since engaging with Willow. Even for the woman who had reoffended (police assault) said, like the other women, that this had been her most stable period for a number of years. The women grew in

confidence and self-esteem and had more articulate hopes for the future, which other research shows has an impact on desistance from offending (Maruna, 2005).

11.5 The women had also increased their levels of social capital, and many said that they saw a different version of themselves which was more positive and hopeful about moving away from offending than ever before. The shift in their own personal identity is important in the process of desistance (Giordano et al., 2006). The evaluation therefore gives some indications that the Women Offender Project at Willow was able to help women reduce their offending behaviour.

Improve women's health, well-being and safety

11.6 All but one the women who did not want to had attended the nurse and sexual health clinic and were either diagnosed with problems they did not know about before or were reassured that they were in full health, which was also appreciated. For example, one woman who had worked as a streetworker feared that she was HIV+. She was scared of getting tested, but finally did so with the support of the project and was very relieved to find that it was negative. She felt that, without that support, she would never have been tested.

11.7 Part of the project is about responding to the women's needs and being flexible. For example, due to the level of abuse the women had experienced, someone from an agency dealing with domestic abuse was invited in to speak with them. Many said that attending the project gave them 'breathing space' to think clearly about their lives and reflect on what they needed to do. Although the evaluation cannot yet show whether this will have a lasting impact for the women, one woman left her abusive partner as a result.

11.8 One woman who suffered from anorexia and self-harmed said that since attending the project she had been eating much better and had not self-harmed. The other women attending and staff at the project said that she looked much better now than when she first came to the project. The nutritionist was able to help the women to see the importance of eating healthily, and all the women said they had taken this on board. All of the women who attended the 'Survive and Thrive' course, which was about coping with trauma and dealing with anxiety and stress, said this was incredibly useful.

One woman who suffered from panic attacks said that the techniques used to de-escalate the panic were very effective.

11.9 The women reported in their files and interviews that they now realise that they need to deal with issues in their past but also plan for the future. The women reported having modest hopes for the future, normally stating that they would like to have more contact with their children, have their own accommodation, and be drug- or alcohol-free and possibly working. The case files noted one woman's desire to be capable of looking after herself.

Improve women's access to services

11.10 A large part of the programme was about helping women connect with the services they need and activities they enjoy. Depending on their needs, Willow actively supported women to make contact with a range of agencies such as housing, alcohol and drug services and counselling and health professionals. Women were also supported to attend the gym and taken for walks and days out in order to build self-esteem, confidence and social capital. Overall, this aspect of the project has clear results, with all of the women believing that they would continue to engage with these services and activities and build on the strengths they had attained.

Did the Project achieve the Core Principles?

11.11 To recap, the Core principles underpinning Willow's work are to:

- Ensure gender equality;
- Encourage the women to make responsible and meaningful choices;
- Provide a supportive, safe and respectful environment; and
- Build and maintain community relationships.

Again, this section looks at the Project's work towards each of these principles in turn.

Ensure gender equality

11.12 The Women Offender Project was built on the idea that women's offending and pathways into offending are different to men's and therefore require a different response. The Connections Programme in particular is designed on the basis of national and international research on women offenders and therefore ensures gender equality by

being specific to women. Moreover, the project was built on the idea that having a project which is for 'women only' works best and, based on the feedback for this research, this seems to be the case.

Encourage the women to make responsible and meaningful choices

11.13 Throughout the pilot, from the setting up of rules to the content and input from the women, the women have been invited to make responsible and meaningful choices at every possible opportunity. All of the women interviewed felt 'heard' and that they were given a stakeholder's role in their own punishment and treatment.

Provide a supportive, safe and respectful environment

11.14 The women reported feeling safe, supported and respected, much of which related to the project being for women only, and workers' attitudes, particularly in the way they handled situations when they arose. Project workers played a key role in helping the women feel comfortable by building strong relationships and helped the women to discuss private and difficult matters. Both staff and clients identified the groupwork structure as important in building relationships and friendships between the women. However, they believed that one-to-one support was also crucial.

Build and maintain community relationships

11.15 As noted above, Willow staff not only encouraged the women but supported them to connect to services outside of the project. All of the women felt that they would maintain these links and continue to build on them.

12. FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEWS WITH STAFF

12.1 Eleven staff who were part of the project both as core staff and sessional workers were involved in focus groups and interviews, and two social workers who had referred clients were interviewed. The following is a summary of the key points that staff raised as being areas of good practice and areas that needed improvement for the future.

Areas of good practice

Structure, clarity and a sense of purpose

12.2 The Pilot was based on providing clients with a structured plan of work from week to week and with key persons accountable as to how things are managed. Staff

believed the women responded well to the structure, as it gave many a sense of purpose and was important in providing something solid for the women in view of the chaos in their lives. As well as maintaining a schedule, the women agreed that they had to be at the project no later than 10.15am. If the women missed sessions, they had the chance to 'catch up sessions' on other days of the week. Both staff and clients received positively the more formal structure introduced as part of the pilot because it provided clarity about exactly what was expected in relation to core content, roles and responsibilities.

'All women' space

12.3 Although the project has invited male workers to deliver certain aspects of the project, staff felt that maintaining an 'all women' space was important to the women who attended. To meet this need the building has been used so that men or strangers are not able to access the groupwork rooms, 'chill out' space or one-to-one room unless they have been invited. Staff pointed out that this project is not anti-men but that being gender-responsive means this is the best way of working with women offenders. As noted previously in this report, many of the women have past and current histories of abuse from men, and Willow provided a space free from this threat. Some of the women had abusive partners who waited for them outside the project, and the 'women only' rule ensured that at least the time within the project was solely for the woman to be on her own and deal with her own needs.

12.4 Women who had attended probation group programmes before reported to staff, and in the interviews, that having the group as 'women only' allowed them to open up to an extent they had not in past. They felt less vulnerable in this environment than when men had been in the group too. Having a 'women only' space ultimately allowed them the freedom to recognise how similar their lives were and therefore support one another to see how they could change this and move on.

Safe environment

12.5 All staff believed that providing a safe space was important, and a large part of this was about the project being for women only. In line with this ethos of safety as paramount, all new members of staff and any new women attending were introduced to the group to ensure that everyone felt comfortable. Staff also spoke to any new client on

their own to introduce the programme and schedule fully, which they felt was important to ease any nerves or tension. The women interviewed said that having this extra time with the worker alone did help. As far as is possible, staff tried to make the women feel at ease because the time in Willow is the only opportunity some women get to be and to feel safe.

Helping women build friendship and support

12.6 The groupwork structure enabled the women to make friends, establish support and in some ways adopt a peer support and mentoring role for one another. Many of the women had similar backgrounds of abuse and offending, so staff said the shared experience and ways of dealing with this provided learning and gave the women a sense of empowerment. Lunch times were regarded as a good space for women to establish links in a more informal way, and many staff felt that the act of eating together and looking after themselves was probably the only time in the day these women had such an opportunity.

Including the women in decision-making and allowing them to be heard

12.7 The Project had a full planning meeting once a month, which involved the project staff and women coming together to discuss what they would like to see happen for the future. One of the women chaired each meeting on a rotational basis. The women were also encouraged to put together their own 'group rules', which are hung up on the wall of the main groupwork room. Staff saw this process as being very empowering, with the ethos behind it similar to a therapeutic community as it gave the women an opportunity to make meaningful choices and feel part of the running of 'their' project.

Connecting the women to the services and support they need

12.8 All staff felt that having the nurse onsite and a visiting dentist to provide a service for the women within the Project was invaluable. As noted in the interviews, many of the women had not had their health checked in years, so Willow helped them sort problems they had previously simply endured. Part of the pilot was about helping women connect to services and support in their local community, which the staff also viewed as vital. Overall, workers felt that having Willow as a hub for signposting and building social capital was a key area of good practice.

Helping women to identify and build on strengths

12.9 All the staff working in criminal justice said that they felt in their normal work that all too often they focus on the weaknesses and 'barriers' clients have to overcome. The Willow Project, in contrast, struck a balance between doing this and helping women to identify and build strengths.

Building confidence and self-esteem

12.10 As well as helping the women to look after themselves in relation to their health and outlook for the future, Willow also tried to help women see what they can access in their community for free. For example, staff took a group of women to the Royal Museum of Scotland. Previously the women only saw this as the street where the court was, and that museums were only for the upper classes; now many of the women said they would go there again themselves.

Using innovative techniques

12.11 The pilot attempted to use less widely known techniques such as art therapy and cooking. The benefits of the arts, particularly for people with mental health issues, is increasing in prominence, more recently recognised in Baroness Corston's review of the needs of female offenders (Corston Report, 2007). Baroness Corston recommended the use of innovative and creative solutions for work with the most vulnerable offenders; the arts can be a way of doing this (e.g. Nugent & Loucks, 2009) and was indeed the case in the current evaluation.

Supporting women at court

12.12 Staff used women's participation in the programme as evidence of them engaging with a service that was helping them to move on in the community. In one case, the court took engagement with the project as evidence that a deferred sentence was appropriate. Overall staff felt that this project could be a viable alternative both to prison and to custodial remands.

Dealing with crisis

12.13 Many of the women with an offending background live chaotic lives (Barry & McIvor, 2009). All of the women interviewed spoke about having demands placed on them by other people, which often mean that their own needs are overlooked. Staff

reported that they provided daily crisis management for some of the women, and it was important that this was dealt with expediently and appropriately.

Challenging behaviour

12.14 Staff said that they worked in a number of ways with the women to see how they can change their behaviour. As noted above, attending the Connections Programme is compulsory for those attending the project as part of a statutory order. A key aspect of the Willow Project is about the women taking care of themselves and beginning to look at their needs rather than responding to others. The workers had to deal with challenging behaviour from women on a number of occasions. Staff reported feeling that it was crucial to deal with such situations in a dignified way and remove the women from the group as quickly as possible. Two women had conflicts with each other in the past, so staff introduced a restorative aspect to help the women deal with their anger towards each other, which they believed worked incredibly well. Overall staff felt they were able to deal with issues when they arose positively and that the ideal would be to receive ongoing training in this area.

Staff information-sharing

12.15 Since the beginning of the pilot, managers implemented a system so that staff meet at the end of their day to share information. This system is particularly useful where any incidents or reasons for concern have arisen. All staff felt that this was an area of good practice that could be implemented to other areas of their work.

Multidisciplinary and true partnership working

12.16 All staff working on the project reflected that this was the first time that they knew of health professionals and criminal justice working together directly locally. All the staff felt that, now this partnership has been established, the links are clear and obvious, and they hoped that the relationships forged would be longer-lasting than the life of the project.

Breaking down barriers and assumptions

12.17 Many of the women reported feeling 'let down' by authorities and professionals in the past. The workers at Willow felt this project helped to build bridges and challenge assumptions made about social work staff and health professionals. For example, many

of the women said that in the past the doctor had 'written them off' because of their drug misuse. Going to the nurse as part of the health assessment made them realise that professionals exist who are willing to take time and give them a chance.

A service that social workers value

12.18 The Manager and Coordinator at Willow worked hard in the beginning to make social work services aware of the Project. At present there is a waiting list for women to attend, which highlights the need for this kind of service. Two social workers who use the service said that having this option for women was crucial and should be available for the future. All eleven respondents from external agencies who returned the survey echoed the need for this service (discussed in Section 13 below).

This Service is the blueprint for the future and something long needed.

(Interview with social worker who has referred women to the Project)

The ethos and model

12.19 All staff felt that the ethos of the project, which is about having a 'women only' space and focuses on addressing needs and building strengths, is the ideal way to work with women. Interviewees felt that the model of the project, which is about having a 'hands on' approach in addressing behaviour and in helping women look after themselves, should be adopted in community programmes in the future. Overall the field of criminal justice working with health was regarded as a mutually beneficial partnership for the women, professionals and communities in the long term.

Areas for improvement

Too much too soon

12.20 The pilot took place for only three months, so the time for full and proper planning was not available. Although the Willow Project had existed before the Women Offender pilot, no structured timetable was in place prior to the introduction of the pilot, and referrals were not at the same levels. Staff reflected that they had to work hard to get the Project up and running and to get referrals to the level they wanted. For example,

staff quickly drafted processes such as safety protocols and policies, which was not an easy task considering the multi-disciplinary aspect of the Project. Moreover, the time scales made problems difficult to rectify if a certain aspect of the Project did not go to plan. For example, the provision of transport using volunteer drivers from SACRO never materialised as SACRO was unable to commit to this with the result that the Project could not offer this support.

Not enough time for paperwork

12.21 The project has a full schedule of programmes for the women over two days, and the staff engage with the women throughout this time. This meant that staff had to work overtime to ensure that the paperwork to inform social work staff of those on statutory orders was up to date and that all the women's file notes were in order. The Coordinator of the project in particular often worked very late to make sure that paperwork was accurate. In addition, although not a major concern, a small number of staff felt that the paperwork could be less cumbersome and would need to be revised for the future.

12.22 Similarly, all staff felt that the timescales for the Project and the demanding schedule in place meant that having time for anything such as one-to-one sessions with clients or between staff was difficult. Many felt that they were trying to 'grab time' with colleagues, which they did not believe was not sufficient.

Accommodation and in-house services

12.23 For more practical subjects such as the cooking and arts projects, the Community Links Centre was not fully able to accommodate the number of women who have been referred to the project. Further, staff generally felt that the services working within the Community Links Centre were not appropriate for their clients. Other than the alcohol counselling service and housing options team, all the services Willow used had been brought in by the project itself. The perception was that some staff from SACRO were resistant to the Project, which Willow staff felt may be due to how quickly the project was set up within the Community Links Centre and took over space within the building. Project staff believed that some working within the building did not understand why the service had to be 'women only' and did not take up training about this when it was offered. Some Project staff consequently perceived the level of co-operation from some staff at the Centre to be disappointing. Importantly, this evaluation only reports

perceptions of staff at Willow and did not seek views from SACRO. This is clearly an issue for further exploration if the Project were to continue in its current location.

Women helped in a more proactive way

12.24 Women received help to attend the Project mainly through provision of bus passes. The original proposal was that women would be collected from their homes by volunteer drivers from SACRO if they were not comfortable to take the bus, but this did not happen. Workers within the Project transported women on a few occasions, but this meant extra strain on staff and is not sustainable. In future, managers believed the service should strive to recruit volunteer drivers, as getting into the project was a struggle for many women.

Possibly too structured

12.25 Some workers felt that they had not yet reached a balance between structure and flexibility. For example, staff felt that more structured time should be built in for women to have one-to-one sessions with their workers as well as to have time for more 'breathing space' and 'time out.' Women who are not willing to attend the programmes on offer no longer have the option to sit and relax. A small number of staff felt that having a place for the women to 'chill out' was important and should not have been stopped.⁵ At present, if women are fifteen minutes late to the programme then they are not allowed to attend the session, but one or two staff felt they could be more flexible with this. Overall, however, the women interviewed felt that there was enough flexibility within the Project and had decided that it should remain this way.

Accessibility of the Connections Programme

12.26 In hindsight staff felt, like the women, that the Connections Programme should be for all clients, particularly as all those attending had a history of offending behaviour. Workers acknowledged that the division of statutory and non-statutory clients had created a split between the group, although this was no longer an issue after the first few weeks.

⁵ The use of the space in this way had been stopped as some women attending voluntarily did not want to attend the programmes in place. The preferred option for them became using the 'chill out' zone, and some staff questioned the value of this.

Lack of team working

12.27 The Project is made up of core staff as well as many sessional workers. Since the Project takes place over two days, some staff never met or spoke with others at all over the life of the project. In the very beginning, all staff came together for an 'away day', which offered an opportunity for everyone to get to grips with the core principles of the project and to feel part of a team. However, since this time there has been no occasion for all staff to come together. Everyone felt that more time for the full team to meet should be factored in to share information face to face and to grasp more fully the work that was happening or should happen in the future.

12.28 All interviewed said that, until now, they had generally worked only in their own field, so the Project was breaking down cultural and professional barriers. Although staff viewed this as an ongoing area of improvement, everyone was happy that this was happening and believed there should be more crossover between criminal justice and health.

Ongoing training

12.29 For the purposes of the Pilot, staff felt comfortable about the level of training provided at the 'away day'. However, managers felt that future training should be ongoing for all staff, particularly as issues arose throughout the project highlighting areas of need such as how to deal with conflict effectively. Moreover, project management were acutely aware of the importance of ongoing training for staff in general when they work with vulnerable and challenging groups such as female offenders.

Lack of resources in the community

12.30 Staff were frustrated that methadone prescriptions were not able to be put in place and this was a hindrance for engaging some women. Staff felt that one woman specifically had returned to offending because of the inability to help her get a methadone prescription.

Not knowing about the future of the project

12.31 The women and staff all felt passionate about the Project, and not knowing whether it would continue was difficult for both to manage. Staff felt that time had not been given to have sufficient exit strategies put in place for the women attending.

Overall, staff had worked hard to build a programme that was about providing clarity and structure, and not knowing about the future threw this into chaos.

12.32 Staff identified barriers to working with women offenders, in particular a lack of acceptance that women were different and required a specific approach. All staff showed an incredible level of commitment, for example they sometimes came into work even when they were on annual leave. The Manager summed up the level of passion for the Project, saying *“There are barriers, but these are not insurmountable and we will get over them.”* All believed that the Project had an impact on the women, and staff said they could see a difference in the women since the beginning. They felt that this type of intervention was invaluable in helping these women move on from their pasts and progress to a better future.

13. SURVEY OF EXTERNAL AGENCIES

13.1 One of the aims of the evaluation of the Willow Project was to obtain feedback from the workers who referred clients. In order to do this, a questionnaire was administered, collated and analysed from respondents who had referred women to the Project.

13.2 Twenty workers referred women to this Project, eleven of whom (55%) replied to the questionnaire. From these responses, seven workers said they heard about the Project from workers at the Willow and four from workers within their own service. All felt that the Project sounded innovative and would be something from which their clients would benefit. Two workers specifically said that it was the only option they knew of specifically for female offenders. However, one worker said they did not know much about the Project.

13.3 The questionnaire asked workers to choose which statements best described their clients during the course. Four workers felt that their clients had grown in confidence and self-esteem and that the women were much calmer and happier. Three said that their client was less troubled; three believed that their client was no different, and one said the client was currently more troubled, but gave no additional comments about this. In addition, one worker mentioned other characteristics such as an improved sense of self and quality of life. The workers who responded seemed to be very aware

of their client's progress. Interviews with Project staff highlighted that this is because they sent progress reports to the referral agencies about the work taking place. For example, referral workers commented that, with this Project, *"the women had the opportunity to socialise with other women who have similar problems and to be involved in a variety of activities which they have previously not had the confidence to try"*. They also said that the women have the opportunity to *"explore their interests, develop skills, potentially improve their health and build positive social networks"*.

13.4 The main issues the referral workers thought these women needed at the point of referral reflected the findings from both case file analysis and the information in the interviews. Their understanding of what assistance the women received in the Project was equally reflected.

13.5 Workers were asked what they thought about the location of Willow. Although the majority (9, or 82%) felt that it was a good location, one worker replied that it was not the right place. The worker explained that, in their client's specific case, another woman was attending the group with whom she had a past history. Another worker mentioned her uncertainty about the location of the project regarding the fact that her client is unlikely to travel to anywhere by herself due to a lack of confidence; indeed, this woman never attended.

13.6 All the workers said they felt fully informed regarding their client's progress and were able to report on their client's attendance. Specifically, they knew that two women were not attending and that all the other women were attending irregularly. The workers gave a variety of responses to a question concerning whether their client's attendance had been better or worse at Willow and the main reasons for this. One worker said that the client's attendance was the same because, in spite of the woman's motivation to attend, *"she generally finds it difficult to manage the appointments"*. Another worker said that the design of the Willow Project *"is well thought out and correctly pitched"* and meets the woman's needs. Three other workers mentioned the non-applicability of this question regarding their clients because they (the clients) had not attended, with one woman asking not to be referred as she had problems with travelling alone.

13.7 In relation to which parts of the Project the women enjoyed and found useful, the workers mentioned the social activities and personal development, cooking, nutrition and healthy eating as the sessions their clients most enjoyed. The 'Survive and Thrive' aspect of the Project and general emotional support were also mentioned as sessions their clients regularly attended. In spite of these activities not always being enjoyable for the clients, the workers referred to them as useful for the women.

13.8 Another key question was to establish if referral agencies believed that the Project had achieved its aims, namely to help women examine their experiences, relationships and behaviour. Four workers said that the aims had only partially been met, while another two said the Project had slightly achieved its aims because the women missed many group sessions. In contrast, another worker said that the aims were fully reached because the client felt safe in the Willow environment and because it is a *"therapeutic experience presented and maintained in a very accessible and client-centred way."* One worker said that it was too early to say if the main aims had been met, and two others said they could not say as their client had not attended.

13.9 Response to the question about the most useful aspect of the Willow service included that it was gender-specific as it was a women only service. Workers also reflected that it provided a safe environment and a range of activities and groups that focused on diverse areas of need. They commented that the Project was accessible, provided much needed support and was flexible and responsive to the women's needs. Workers also pointed out that support from peer interaction was beneficial as well as the opportunity to meet with other women and the possibility of having their own *"space away from the things that are going on at home while also providing a structured programme"*.

13.10 With regard to the least useful aspect, responses included the threat of funding being withdrawn and a higher risk of relapse because of the differing stages of rehabilitation that each woman is facing. A solution offered for this was individual assessments to check for suitability for the group and to explore any potential risk for other people attending. It was also mentioned that the "trauma group" could be renamed as the "building confidence group" to be more self-explanatory. A further aspect raised was the additional help that these women require and therefore the need for "key

workers who could help to accompany the women to the group". Another suggestion was the possibility of having half days to get the women used to being in the group so they would feel *"less pressure and have more time to get used to the idea"* of attending the Willow group.

13.11 All the workers said they would refer more women to this service if it were available; six agreed that this kind of project should be used as an alternative to custody in future, but the other five indicated that they were unsure. The workers who mentioned that Willow should be an alternative to custody gave further comments and appeared to be passionate in their belief about this.

The women that end up in custody have little or no social supports within the community, the support provided through the Willow Project introduces additional agencies with whom the women might continue to engage after Probation and could help to prevent further offending.

(Comment from a Social Worker who has referred women)

13.12 The workers feel that the pilot is effective for women who have behavioural problems because it is structured and gives them support. Ten of the eleven workers stated it would be extremely valuable to extend this project beyond the current time frame.

14. RECOMMENDATIONS

- This project is not only something that the women found useful but is a needed service that does not otherwise exist for women in the community. At the time of the evaluation, the Project had a waiting list of women wanting to start the project pending funding for its continuation. External agencies felt the Project was something that should be a 'blueprint for the future'. It is therefore not only filling a gap in current need but is something that should be continued.
- The links between Criminal Justice and Health should continue, particularly as the crossover is obvious, and the partnership working provides an example to other projects.

Women Offender Pilot at the Willow Project

- The model of work that focuses on need, building strengths and linking women into outside agencies was said to work well both by the women and staff.
- This project is suited to women with an offending background who have needs which require support to be addressed and is capable of working with those who are very vulnerable. However, women attending need to have some stability in their lives and are able to cope with the level of commitment required by the project. The Connections Programme should be offered to all attendees.
- Women reported that they would like the reading and writing group to have more structure and possibly could contain an element of peer support. Art therapy could also be used in a more robust way and women supported to use this more effectively.
- Although the location was good for most of the women, the Community Links Centre did not provide the ideal venue for delivery of certain types of courses.
- Relations with staff working within the Community Links Centre need to be explored more fully. The interviews suggest that some staff in both projects would benefit from better working relationships and that SACRO staff would benefit from the training offered on working with women offenders.
- The 'women only' aspect of the project should continue. Both women and project workers felt this was a key reason why the women felt safe, respected and supported to open up about their problems.
- The Project would benefit from more robust structures in place to help women attend, in particular that volunteer drivers are available. Although only two women stopped attending because of childcare issues, this is another area that requires attention.
- If the Project is to continue, or if this model is to be adopted by other community projects, staff resources must be increased. The management and structure of staff would need to be reviewed, as many appeared overstretched to fulfil the demands of the service.
- Time should be allocated to staff to ensure that all the paperwork accompanying their work is up to date. Alternatively administrative support would usefully be employed for this aspect of the Project.
- The number of workers and women attending should be balanced so that the women don't feel as though they are being 'policed'.

- The Project should continue to build links with other services and to help women build social capital and support.
- The Project could consider using volunteers to work with the women in future, although this would need to be carefully managed and supported.
- Staff should have ongoing training in working with women and in dealing with crises.
- In view of the needs identified, a phased approach to women coming onto the project may be worthwhile to deal with the numbers likely to want to attend.
- Based on interviews with staff, the women and external agencies, the Willow Project could usefully be used as an alternative to custody.

15. CONCLUSION

15.1 The typical participant in this Project is economically and socially deprived, diagnosed with mental and physical health problems, has dependent children and lives a chaotic lifestyle in which her needs are not addressed. These women are characterised by unstable housing, low incomes, loneliness, isolation, substance misuse and domestic abuse. Their histories include diverse health, physical and psychological problems linked not only with their addictions but also with a history of trauma and domestic abuse (Scottish Government, 2009b; Barry & McIvor, 2009; Woodward, 2003; Social Work Services and Prisons Inspectorate, 1998). The majority of women attending the pilot had a history of non-violent crimes related to drug offences, crimes of dishonesty, bail offences and breach of peace.

15.2 Only 29% of women referred at the beginning of the project were continuing to attend the pilot. The main reasons for absences were related to chaotic lives, mental health issues and past history with other women in the group. This finding would suggest that clients or prospective clients require substantial support and would benefit from at least some level of stability in their lives to meet the commitment necessary for this Project. Women liked that project workers met with them on their own before they began the course to discuss the structure and to ease any initial fears, which appeared to be a very useful approach.

15.3 Although the women's attendance was sometimes irregular, the feedback from them and from the workers was very positive. These conclusions are based on women

reporting that they felt more confident, happy and that this programme allowed them to be “*busy and out of trouble*”. In the same vein, the external agencies and workers who referred the women and those working within Willow recorded that they had seen a positive change in the women as a result of their engagement with the pilot project at Willow. Although it is too early to say whether this Project will have an impact on the women’s offending, the interviews with the women and feedback from their workers showed clearly that they now saw themselves and their futures in a much better light, which is an important part of the desistance process (McNeil et al., 2005).

15.4 The women attending on a voluntary basis were rated at lower risk of reoffending than those attending on a statutory basis. However, those attending on a voluntary basis were classified as being at a higher risk of self-harm, and overall no differences were evident between the groups regarding the needs they presented. Both the women and the Project workers felt that, in future, the Connections Programme on offending behaviour should be available for all clients and not just for those attending as part of a statutory order.

15.5 From the twelve women interviewed, only one woman had no substance misuse issues or history of abuse, and in general she felt that most of the course was not relevant to her. Although she felt she had benefited from the project, specifically in how to step back and not react in certain situations, her lower levels of need and vulnerability suggest that the Project could have a more targeted approach in future.

15.6 The Project tried hard to help women attend by providing bus passes or transport where needed, which all interviewed highlighted as an area of best practice. The level of support in providing transport could not be sustained, so the plan of using volunteer drivers could helpfully be pursued. Although only two women stopped attending as a result of childcare issues, this too should be an area of support to explore for the future.

15.7 The Project has fulfilled its aims in relation to helping women to improve their health, well-being and safety. The benefits of having a partnership approach between criminal justice and health was identified as one of the main strengths of the project and mutually beneficial for all. Services such as the onsite nurse and access to support for sexual health in particular were extremely beneficial as many of the women had failed to

do this in the past. The Project also helped women to access services in the community. Many of the women believed they would continue to build these links and had grown in confidence as a result of this.

15.8 The Core Principles of the Project appear to have been achieved. Both workers and clients referred positively of the safety of the environment, of involving the women and respecting their input in the making of decisions, and in providing gender equality. One of the most poignant findings is that women felt that one of the key reasons for the environment feeling safe was that it was for 'women only.' Many of the women continue to live in abusive relationships, so the Project was one of the only ways in which they were able to have a 'breathing space' away from the chaos of their lives to think of their needs for change. External agencies who returned the survey and those interviewed felt that they would refer more women to the service if it were available, emphasising the tremendous value in their view of extending this project.

15.9 In sum, the analysis of the workers' and women's opinions clarifies the importance and impact this kind of project can have on the women's lives. Most of the workers from external agencies and all working within the Project felt that the Project could be used as an alternative to custody for women, highlighting the positive results on the women's behaviour. Based on the input from the women, the staff at Willow and those referring from external agencies, the pilot at Willow offers a viable alternative to custody which provides a model of practice applicable beyond Edinburgh.

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)

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