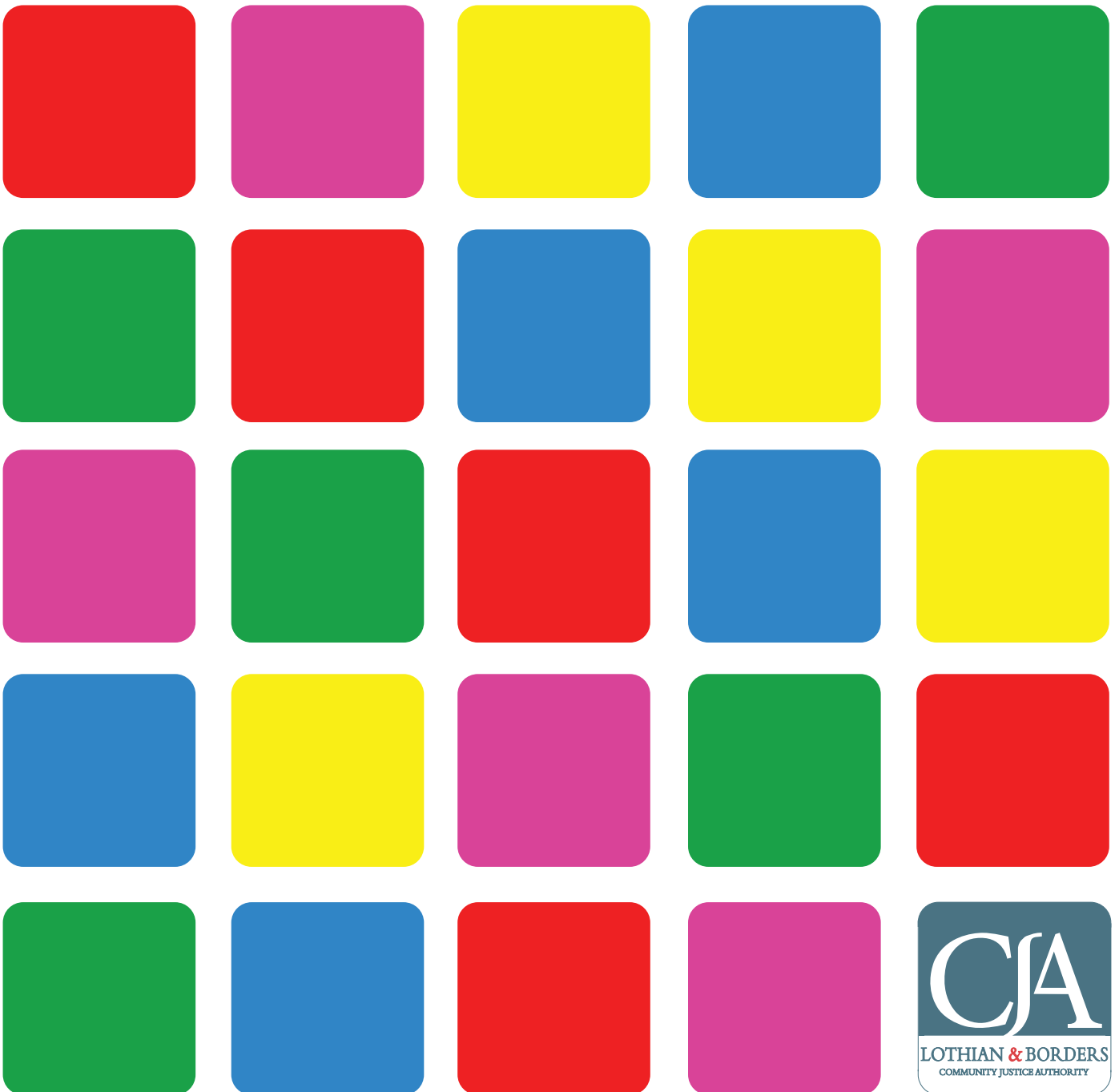


A Model and Framework for Working with Women Offenders

A multi-faceted partnership approach



This report was commissioned by Lothian & Borders Community Justice Authority Women Offenders Project Board as part of the commitment to develop gender specific services for women offenders.

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Acknowledgements. The author would like to thank Briege Nugent and Ian McLean for their assistance and support in compiling this paper. A special thanks goes to Yvonne Dalziel for all her support with this work.

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Introduction

Lothian and Borders Community Justice Authority (CJA) have recognised the need to improve services for women who offend. Developments in women offender services are a priority within the area plan and work has been ongoing in recent years to develop gender specific service provision. This includes commissioning and publishing research about the specific profile of women locally (Barry and McIvor, 2009), establishing a Women Offender Planning and Development post, developing a gender specific model of service provision and piloting this at the Willow Project¹ in Edinburgh.

This pack is produced to support the work taking place across Lothian and Borders CJA, by providing information and offering practical ways forward in planning and developing women's services. Most importantly it aims to improve knowledge in this underdeveloped area of practice and to signpost people to further reading.

The model and supporting framework proposed is based on a growing body of national and international research. In addition it reflects the authors experience in post as the Women Offender Planning and Development Manager and therefore at times relies on experience and personal learning. It draws from practice examples of gender specific services and lessons learned from evaluations of such services.

This is not a programme of intervention or a detailed literature review, but a framework with guiding principles on how to work effectively with women who offend. It is hoped this will support a range of service providers in developing strong partnerships to provide gender specific service provision.

¹ The Willow project is a health led initiative working with women at risk of or involved in offending.



The Scottish Context

Over a decade ago, a review of community disposals and the use of custody for women in Scotland² highlighted the differences in women's offending and their needs (Scottish Office, 1998). This review suggested there was a need for emphasis on community interventions to meet the needs of women who offend and a reduction in the number of women being sentenced to custody.

A multi-agency group then worked to examine issues relating to women's offending. The Report of this Ministerial Group on Women's Offending, "A Better Way" proposed specialist women offender service provision (Scottish Executive, 2002). The 'Time Out' proposal led to the establishment of the 218 Centre in Glasgow, which is a holistic service that aims to address root causes of women's offending.

In 2004 the Scottish Executive provided Aberdeen and Tayside with short-term funding to develop a programme for working with women in the criminal justice system. Aberdeen Criminal Justice Service has built on this framework to develop the Connections Programme, which they have been delivering on a group and one-to-one basis for five years.

In 2006 women offenders were deemed a priority group in the National Strategy for the Management of Offenders. An increased emphasis was later placed on equality of outcomes for women through the introduction of the gender equality duty in the Equality Act 2006 (which came into force in 2007). This requires public bodies to pro-actively promote equality of opportunity between women and men, and to consider the specific needs of women in policy and service development (the specific duties are summarised in Appendix 1). This legislation is recognition that in today's society women continue to experience discrimination and that specific attention to the needs of women are required in efforts to ensure equality.

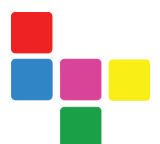
Amongst a growing body of evidence indicating that women have a differing complexity of need to those of men, the Scottish Government reported on their review of community sentences in Reforming and Revitalising (Scottish Government, 2007). In this, a mentoring/link worker pilot scheme was proposed for female offenders on statutory supervision, acknowledging the complexity of need presented by women. It was recognised that additional support is often required for women offenders and that a different approach would be required to that taken with men, to ensure equity of outcomes. This service was piloted in South West Scotland Community Justice Authority and they continue to deliver additional support to women on statutory supervision³.

In 2008 the Government's ministerial task force on health inequalities reported (in "Equally Well") that offenders do not have equal access to health and other public services, stating they need and should benefit from the same quality of service as the rest of the population. Women offenders' were deemed a vulnerable group with problems accessing services and the report noted that women offenders should have priority. It was recognised that this would require strong joint working and action between "community health partnerships and community justice authorities" (p40).

Despite political consensus in recent years that more action is needed to prevent increasing numbers of women going to custody, the work of the Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee concluded that "much more needs to be done by the Scottish Government and

² Following the death of 7 women in HM Institution Corntonvale in 30 months

³ Through partnership working between Barnardo's Scotland and Criminal Justice Social Work



other public bodies to address specific issues facing female offenders” (2009a, p5). It has been argued that progress has been limited by a lack of strategic leadership (Corston, 2007; SCCCJ; 2006) with commentators noting “a lack of direction and leadership with regards to women offender practice ... with no coherent national strategy in Scotland” (Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre, 2007, p6).

Conversely, the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) recently published a strategy relating to women in custody that recognises equal treatment for women does not equate to equal outcomes. It also highlights the need for interventions that take account of women’s experiences of victimisation (SPS; 2010).

The required trajectory in this area of work is best summarised by Baroness Corston in her extensive review of women in the criminal justice system. She reports on the improvements required in the treatment and service provision for women who offend, reporting

“the need for a distinct, radically different, visibly-led, strategic, proportionate, holistic, woman-centred, integrated approach” (Home Office, 2007).



The Distinct Needs of Women

Whilst women commit less crime, particularly less serious crime, than men (Blanchette and Brown; 2006) Scotland continues to incarcerate women at a disproportionate rate. Over a 10 year period (1997-2007) the average daily prison population increased by 19%. In the same 10-year period, the female prison population increased by 90%, over five times the growth experienced in the male prison population (Graham, 2007). Scotland is now imprisoning more women than ever before.

Although women comprise only 5% of the prison population, a recent government review of health inequalities found that women in custody have 'exceptionally high levels of health need' (Scottish Government, 2008).

It has become increasingly recognised in recent years that the needs of women who offend are distinct from those of men and require particular attention and focus, in the context of their lives as women (Blanchette and Brown, 2006; Bloom and Covington, 1998; Corston, 2007; Loucks et al; 2006; Gelsthorpe et al; 2007).

National and international research highlights the high prevalence of historical and current experiences of abuse, mental health problems, substance misuse and poverty in the lives of women offenders (Barry and McIvor, 2008; Blanchette and Brown, 2006; Cortson, 2007; Gelsthorpe et al; 2007; Scottish Office, 1998; Scottish Government, 2008; Scottish Government; 2009).

Some of these areas of need are deemed not to be criminogenic⁴. However, Gelsthorpe et al (2007) highlight that the research base in relation to women... suggests a broad base of both indirect factors (such as experiences of physical and sexual abuse which can impact on self-identity, self-esteem and confidence) and direct factors (such as financial difficulties) are relevant to women's pathways out of crime.

Kelly Hannah-Moffat (2005) argues that the narrow focus in recent years on criminogenic needs, to the exclusion of broader needs, has disadvantaged women since their needs may only be targeted if they are statistically linked to recidivism and amenable to intervention. The redefinition of traditionally viewed welfare needs may make women seem more risky and therefore subject to elevated levels of criminal justice controls. Additionally, broader needs not amendable to criminal justice 'intervention' (such as structural discrimination and poverty) are ignored or (experiences of previous abuse) seen as irrelevant.

It has become more widely accepted that to help women move away from offending and to enable them to develop the confidence and appropriate engagement skills to access and actively participate in programmes/treatment, areas perceived as non-criminogenic will require significant attention (Pearce, 2007; Blanchette and Brown, 2006). In order to develop appropriate responses we need first to understand the distinct needs of women.

Experiences of abuse – women's victimisation

Research examining the lives of women who offend, rarely fails to identify their experiences of abuse as an area of significantly high prevalence. Histories of sexual, physical and emotional abuse are well documented within this population (Acoca, 2004; Gelsthorpe et al,

⁴ changeable factors which a number of research studies (primarily involving men) have concluded are associated with re-offending e.g. anti-social attitudes, weak pro-social ties.



2007). Statistics vary, undoubtedly due to issues around reporting, with a recent Scottish prisons health review noting around 70% of women prisoners have histories of abuse (Scottish Government, 2008). Previous inspection reports of HMP and YOI Corntonvale have noted rates of abuse around 75% (McLellan, 2004) and other reviews concluded, “most women in custody have experienced ... abuse in their lives” (Scottish Consortium on Crime and Criminal Justice, 2006, p.3).

Whilst one in four women will experience domestic abuse from a partner in her lifetime (Scottish Government, 2009b), experience tells us that a significantly higher proportion of women involved in the justice system routinely experience domestic abuse. This is also born out by information about violence against women in Scotland that indicates “significant numbers of women experience repeated victimisation or patterns of abusive behaviour and more than one type of violence over the course of their lives. Factors such as poverty, age and disability may increase a woman’s vulnerability as may alcohol and substance misuse (Scottish Government, 2009b).” Women offenders often have this complexity of need, presenting with substance use problems and experiencing significant levels of poverty.

Mental health and self injury

A review of the health care needs of Scottish prisoners (Graham, 2007) reported that women have greater health problems than their male counterparts in all areas of their health. Gender differences in the incidence of psychiatric disorders, with higher rates in the female population, have been known for centuries (Kohen, 2000).

Mental health problems amongst women offenders are exceptionally high. Recent reviews report 80% of women offenders as experiencing mental health problems (McLellan, 2005; Scottish Government, 2008). Mental health problems are also far more prevalent among women in prison than in the male prison population or in the general population (Corston, 2007).

Blanchette and Brown (2006) examined numerous studies that highlight the greater prevalence of self-injury and attempted suicide (whilst in custody) in the female offender population, concluding there is evidence that self injury is predictive of future offending (in a number of studies it was found to correlate with general and violent recidivism). Corston (2007) also concluded self-harm in prison is a major problem and is more prevalent in the women’s estate.

Some argue that the rate of mental health problems and self-harming behaviour amongst this group can be somewhat explained by their experiences of victimization as can their high rates of substance misuse (Gelsthorpe et al, 2007).

Substance misuse

Most women in HMP and YOI Corntonvale have (or have had) drug problems. The rate of drug problems amongst women prisoners in Scotland has recently been reported at 98% (Scottish Government, 2008). After mental health, drug and alcohol problems were found to be the most prevailing issue in the lives of women involved in the criminal justice system across the Lothian and Borders area (Barry and McIvor, 2008).

Perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, Blanchette and Brown (2006) found that female parolees with a history of substance use were at greater risk of being returned to custody and there was also a stronger correlation with violent offending. Brown and Motiuk (2005) found that drug use was a stronger predictor for women offending than alcohol use (cited in Blanchette and Brown, 2006, p100).



The differing functions served by men and women of commencing and maintaining drug use was examined by Hollin and Palmer (2006). They propose that women are more likely to use drugs as a coping mechanism to mask feelings and emotional pain, as opposed to the thrill seeking and pleasure functions identified in young men's use of drugs (cited in Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre, 2007). This notion is supported by the work of Wormer (2010) who reports studies that correlate trauma with a later inability to cope with stress, resulting in the use of substances as an inappropriate means of coping.

Poverty

Women offenders are serially disadvantaged economically by their gender and expected roles within society and their communities (Chesney-Lind, 2004). Lack of access to income, reliance of welfare benefits and financial debts are problems long associated with women offenders (Fawcett Society, 2004; SCCCJ, 2006; Scottish Office, 1998). The social structures and economic environments within which women function are significant in any efforts to improve their economic disadvantage. "Resource scarcity and subsequent survival strategies are strong tenets of established perspectives on women's pathways into offending" (Bloom et al, 2004 cited in Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre, 2007, p16).

Women as mothers and prisoners

There are many more children with fathers in prison than mothers, but mothers in prison are more likely to have been living with their children prior to imprisonment Radosh (2004). In her extensive review, Corston (2007, p7) found that of the women in custody, most were mothers. "Some had their children with them immediately prior to custody, others had handed them to relatives or their children had been taken into care or adopted". Women prisoners are far more likely than men to be primary carers of young children and Corston argues this factor makes the prison experience significantly different for women than men.

The recent Scottish Parliaments Equal Opportunities Committee concurred that the impact of imprisonment was greater for women as they were much more likely to lose their homes and responsibility for the care of their children (2009a).

Radosh 2004 (cited in Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2004, p219) comments that the "horrifying, heartbreaking experiences that incarcerated mothers live with, and relive in prison, often overwhelm intentions for good parenting".

Wormer (2010) notes that women in prison have time to reflect on their failures as mothers and strong feeling of guilt and shame prevail. Whilst feelings of guilt have been found to correlate with lower rates of recidivism (Hosser, Windzio and Greve; 2008) feelings of shame correlated with higher rates (cited in Wormer, 2010, p238).

The shame associated with temporarily or permanently losing care of a child, has devastating effects on a women's sense of identity, particularly in our society where enduring expectations regarding gender roles, stereotypes and particular expectations of women as mothers, remain. The effects of this loss can impact immensely on a woman's immediate and long term future and any efforts to engage her to move forward towards a more positive, pro-social identity need to take account of how fragile her position regarding her sense of self, may be.

Relationships

Many have explored the significance of women's relationships as a feature in their pathways into offending and some have examined the role of relationships women have as they move away from offending (Bloom and Covington, 1998; Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2004; Corston, 2007; Dalziel, 2009).

Dalziel (2009) highlights the elevated impact of male power imbalances in society, on particularly vulnerable women whose view of themselves is often distorted by previous experiences of abuse. She discusses the negative attachments women form with dominant



and often abusive partners where the “power relationship that develops, and with it the diminution of self, leads to them (women) putting other’s needs before their own” (p29). In her study (with the exception of one woman), all had committed crimes in connection with men (e.g. taking drugs into a male partner in prison, stealing to support a man's drug addiction).

In discussing women in prison Radosh 2004 (cited in Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2004, p219) argues “women who are empowered to control their own lives and avoid men who abuse and exploit them, will be the most successful after release from prison”. A significant finding from the evaluation of the Circle Project⁵ was that the women who had moved away from offending had often ended their relationships with their partners (Nugent and Loucks, 2009).

Women’s previous experiences of poor relationships with parents have been found to have a strong correlation to their future offending (Brown and Motiuk, 2005; Leschied, 2000; Simourd and Andrew, 1994 cited in Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre, 2007, p12). Lacks of parental affection and attachment problems were significant. In her Scottish study of young women, Bachelor (2005) found that family relationship functioning and family violence were noted as significant in the violent offending of young women. In their evaluation of a number of treatment programmes with women offenders Dowden and Andrews (1999) found those targeting family process and relationships produced the greatest treatment effects.

Indeed, the magnitude of the impact of women’s past and current relationships cannot be underestimated in any efforts to engage her in meaningful change.

In summary, there are particular areas of need that are distinctly different for female offenders, by the considerably higher incidence within the population, the nature of the problem as it relates to the lives and experiences of women or due to women’s wider roles and responsibilities within society. It is not always helpful for the needs of women to be considered in comparison to those of male counterparts, as if the needs of men are the standard against which women’s should be measured. The specific needs of women require careful consideration in their own right if service providers are to be appropriately responsive to them.

⁵ Circle is a charity providing holistic, community based support to marginalised children and families; the evaluation related to a specific piece of work providing intensive support to women and their families upon release from HMP and YOI Corntonvale.



Guiding Principles

In efforts to ensure appropriate responses to the distinct needs of women offenders, services nationally and internationally have identified principles on which women-centred approaches have been developed. Those detailed below act as a baseline for service developments, and are drawn from a strong research and evidence base.

The following principles⁶ recognise the specific needs of women and emphasise the importance of individual women's rights, their responsibilities and their potential for change. They were developed in a Scottish context and reflect the core values underpinning effective interventions that will inform our work with women offenders.

1. Ensure there is gender equality in all services for women offenders

Within the legislative framework of the gender equality duty which came into force on 6th April 2007, there is a legal requirement for all public bodies to a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment on the grounds of sex b) Promote equality between men and women.

Gender inequalities continue to permeate our society and female offenders experience inequalities in a number of ways. Women's pathways into offending need to be understood if we are to identify and target criminogenic need. There is extensive research indicating that women who are involved in offending often have a history of physical and sexual abuse in childhood and into adulthood. They experience greater financial inequities, poor mental health and suicidal behaviour, substance abuse problems and low self esteem (Loucks, 1997; Scottish Office, 1998; McClellan, 2006). Service providers need to take these factors into account and acknowledge the subsequent barriers they can create in trying to respond to and work with women. Providing the same services to men and women does not result in equal outcomes for women and there therefore needs to be gender specific services. Services for women offenders can then begin to help women address the impact of these experiences, to improve self esteem and empower women to take control of their lives.

2. Women will be encouraged to make meaningful and responsible choices

Women often report feeling they have little control over their lives, including their involvement in offending. Dependence on men, substances and welfare state financial assistance often results in women experiencing limited opportunities and thus their chances to make positive choices can be reduced. In order to rectify this, women need meaningful options that will allow them to make responsible choices. These choices must make sense in terms of their past experiences, abilities and skills. Indeed, it has been argued that interventions holding women accountable for their behaviour without offering them real power to make necessary choices are inadequate and unjust (Hannah-Moffat and Shaw, 2000; Bachelor and Burman, 2004). Self sufficiency and responsibility can only be fostered where women are encouraged and supported to experience the success associated with making sound, responsible choices.

⁶ Adapted from the Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre (2007) Service Provision and Intervention Guidance, Edinburgh: National Development (Champions) Group: Working with Female Offenders. References noted within the principles are detailed in the source text at www.cjsw.ac.uk

3. Provide a supportive, safe and respectful environment

This relates to the physical and emotional environment in which we undertake work with women. A safe physical environment and mutual respect are essential whilst working with women who are so often serially victimised in their lives (Bloom and Covington, 2001). Staff involved in service delivery are important resources and their approach and role in fostering a supportive environment is vital (McNeill et al., 2005). This is particularly so given the centrality of relationships in women's lives and the increased likelihood of success in programmes where positive professional relationships are present (Totten, 2000; Covington, 2002; Durrance and Albitt cited in Bachelor and Burman, 2004).

4. Build and maintain community relationships

No one service should have the sole responsibility for providing support to women offenders. All agencies must work together and take collective responsibility to meet the needs of the individual woman offender and help her maintain and /or improve her links within the community. The responsibility for ensuring good, flexible service provision for women offenders involves a broad and creative response. Opportunities for women to be supported in activities that benefit them and others and improve their social capital are required. Women should know where they can access continued, responsive support services should they chose to.

Through a demonstrable commitment to these four principles, organisations can begin to provide gender specific services for women offenders.



Key precepts for good practice

Whilst the principles will serve as a foundation for service development, there are further tenets that can help to guide those planning, developing and delivering services.

These “nine lessons as key precepts for good practice” were developed through the work of The Fawcett Society (Gelsthorpe et al, 2007). The Fawcett Society work to close the inequality gap between women and men at work, at home and in public life. Their research, commissioned to examine provision for women offenders in the community, was an extensive piece of work. It involved literature reviews and examined twenty-four community-based services in the voluntary and statutory sector, across the United Kingdom. The report “Provision for women offenders in the community” advises that women’s needs are distinctive, but often overlooked. It details key precepts for good practice from their findings on gender specific service provision for women.

Provision should:

1. Be women-only to foster safety a sense of community and to enable staff to develop expertise in work with women
2. Integrate offenders with non-offenders so as to normalise women offenders experiences and facilitate a supportive environment for learning
3. Foster women’s empowerment so they gain sufficient self-esteem to directly engage in problem-solving themselves, and feel motivated to seek appropriate employment
4. Utilise ways of working with women which draw on what is known about their effective learning styles
5. Take a holistic and practical stance to helping women to address social problems which may be linked to their offending
6. Facilitate links with mainstream agencies, especially health, debt advice and counselling
7. Have the capacity and flexibility to allow women to return to the centre or programme for ‘top up’ or continued support and development where required
8. Ensure that women have a supportive milieu or mentor to whom they can turn when they have completed any offending-related programmes, since personal support is likely to be as important as any direct input addressing offending behaviour
9. Provide women with practical help with transport and childcare so that they can maintain their involvement in the centre or programme.

They also proffer considerations for decision makers, planners or commissioners of services (see Appendix 2).



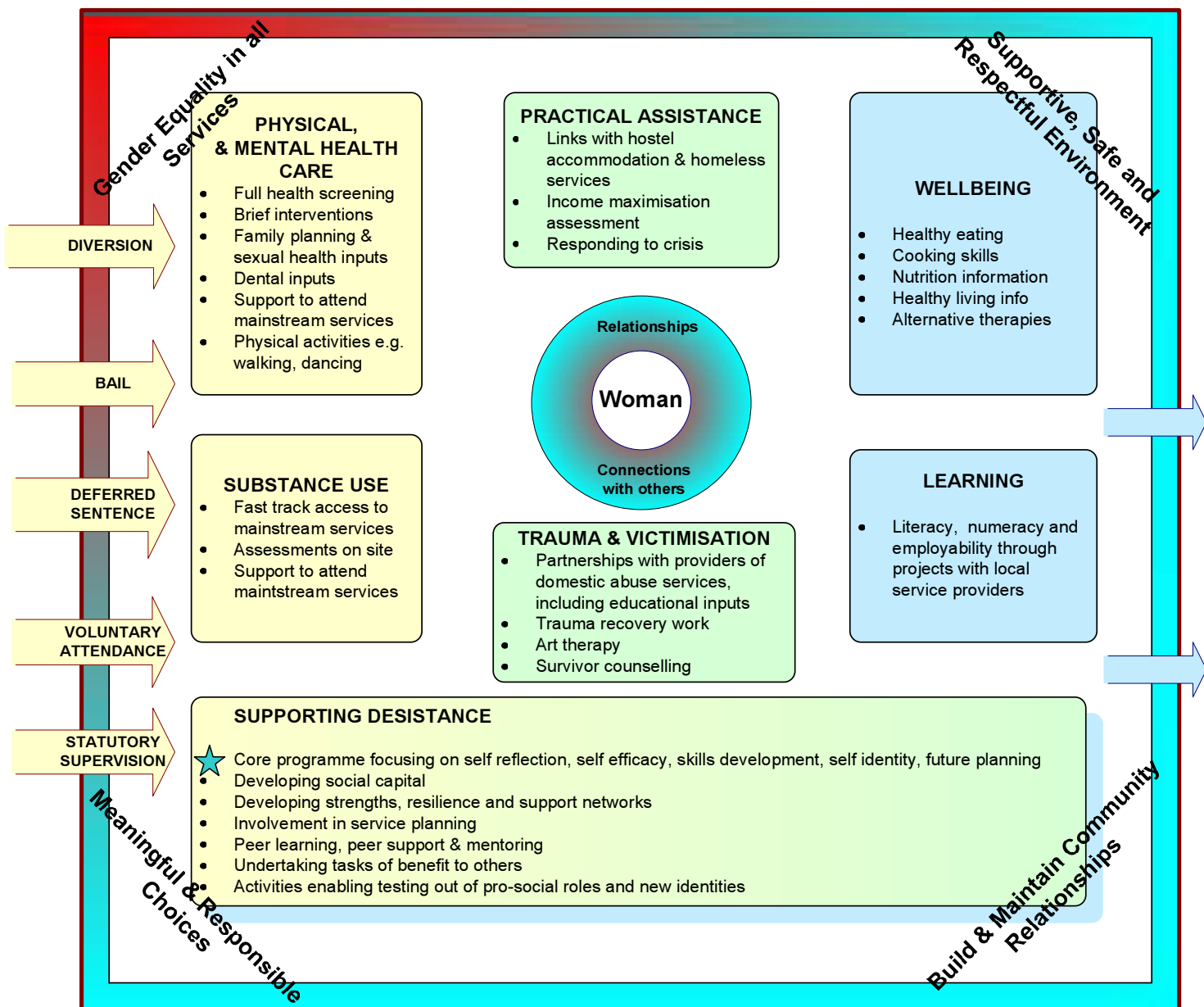
A Model Of Service Provision – A Woman-Centred Approach to Risk and Need

As detailed previously, there is complexity in the presenting need evident in the lives of women who offend. This complexity requires an analogous response that no single agency or service can provide. Building on the guiding principles, this model brings a range of services together. It requires a variety of professionals including key roles for criminal justice social work and health professionals working together, in a single location, where possible. The contribution of the third sector is also noteworthy in ensuring a broad range of skills and experience in this type of multi-agency delivery.

Women should be able to access services from any point within the criminal justice system, including those who are diverted from prosecution, on bail, during a period of court deferment and on all types of statutory supervision. Women should also be able to attend this type of service provision on a voluntary basis.



MODEL OF SERVICE PROVISION FOR WOMEN OFFENDERS A woman-centred approach to risk & need



All areas above are interconnected with some examples of ways to respond – this is not a definitive list

★ The core programme referred to here was adapted from the Aberdeen Criminal Justice Social Work Connections programme. It was amended to include up to date research and fit the overall model of intervention. Copies of the Adapted Connections programme are available to criminal justice social work directly from the Report Author:
Kirsty Pate (City of Edinburgh Council
Criminal Justice Social Work)
kirsty.pate@edinburgh.gov.uk



A Supporting Framework - Approaches and Theories Supporting the Work

The particular problems faced by women and the resulting difficulties they can experience require flexible responses to their specific needs. The manner in which we respond should reflect women's general and individual learning and communication styles. There is evidence that certain approaches can be more effective in responding to the particular needs of women.

Pro-active engagement

To fully support women to engage with services a pro-active approach is necessary. This can involve repeat contacts, including home visits, numerous contacts in custody prior to release or meeting up with women on the street, at a location safe to them. It is important to exhaust every opportunity to connect with the woman and begin to build a mutually trusting relationship where she feels the professional cares enough to persist in efforts to engage with her.

Evaluation of Circle's throughcare services to women in prison found that clients who did not engage with the service had had less contact with workers before their release. Engagement rates for clients who developed relationships with key workers whilst in custody and continued to do so after release, were exceptionally high (88%) and trust was found to be a significant factor of the women's engagement (Nugent and Loucks; 2009).

Similarly, findings from an evaluation of a pilot at the Willow Project highlighted the need for "robust structures to help women attend" (Nugent et al; 2010) reporting that women felt workers at the project "cared" and "were different from others" when they pro-actively attended her home after she failed to engage. Practical issues around child care and transport should not be barriers to attendance.

This should not detract from women's rights to choose not to engage with a service but every effort should be made by professionals to ensure the individual is making an informed decision about refusing a service and extensive efforts should be made to 'reach' women and make a connection with her.

Crises responsive

Women's lives often reflect the complexity of need they present and this can in turn result in chaos in their lives, making compliance with community punishment difficult (Barry and McIvor; 2008). Services should provide a flexible and practical response to crises. Examples of this include having capacity within a service to visit women at home who have not attended on a particular day due to unexpected difficulties arising or who may need help to attend another service immediately.

A positive review of the Adelaide House Outreach Project⁷ emphasised the projects ability to continue to engage with women during periods of crises or increased difficulty in their lives. They were described as working with the zig-zag path of desistance with a positive view taken of their 'don't panic' approach (Worrall and Gough, 2008).

Working with trauma

Trauma theory suggests that experiences of trauma, such as childhood sexual abuse, witnessing violence or being subjected to other forms of abuse, impact on adult functioning. Given the high prevalence of sexual abuse experienced in girls childhoods and into adulthood, as well as the high prevalence of other forms of violence in the lives of women,

⁷ Adelaide House Outreach Project provides accommodation and support to women following a prison sentence.



the impact of trauma needs careful consideration when engaging with women offenders. The emotional and behavioural impact of trauma can be evident in many ways. Childhood sexual abuse is known to be associated with personality problems, recurrent suicide attempts, self-destructive acts and self-injurious behaviours as well as low self-esteem, insecurity, sleeping disorders and numerous psychiatric disorders including panic attacks, depression and anxiety (Kohen, 2000).

Wormer notes that because of the “close correlation between early childhood trauma and substance abuse as a way of self-medicating and the correlation between childhood abuse and, self-mutilation and other self-destructive behaviours, long term in-depth treatment is required to alleviate problems” (Wormer, 2010, p150).

Problems and destructive coping mechanisms also impact on the way in which women form relationships and engage with professionals; they can impede intervention and inhibit the overall change process. Arguably professionals within the criminal justice system have a duty of care to ensure that women access trauma recovery services (Blanchette and Brown, 2006).

The psychological impact and subsequent difficulties arising from trauma experiences require specific attention in services for women. Understanding how trauma can impact on women’s functioning and ensuring services are accessible to women, is crucial in any efforts to be appropriately responsive.

A relational approach

Relational theory focuses on “the different ways in which men and women develop and highlights the significance of relationships and their connections with others in their development” (Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre, 2007, p12). Original writers in this field (such as Jean Miller (1976) and Carol Gilligan (1982)) argue that whilst males develop their identity in relation to the world around them, girls and women develop their sense of self through intimate relationships with others. Female identity develops in relation to connectedness in women’s relationships with others. In her study, Gilligan (1982) found differences in women’s emphasis on relationships, commitment and caring for others (Cited in Warner, 2010, p11).

The recent evaluation of the pilot at the Willow Project (Nugent et al, 2010) reported the project emphasised the importance of relationships between workers and the women attending. Relationships were described as built on mutual trust and respect. Women commented that the best element of the project was the shared experiences with other women, helping and supporting one another and supportive relationships with workers. In her evaluation of the Asha Centre⁸, Rungay (2004 cited in Gelsthorpe et al, 2007, p23) noted the most frequently mentioned factor in sustaining women’s commitment was the support of the group and the supportive contact with others. Similarly, in the evaluation of the 218 Centre Loucks et al (2006) found that external respondents, staff working at the centre and women attending the centre commented on the strength and positive nature of relationships between the women, and workers. Relationships were an important focus of and feature in, the work and it was reported that “the emphasis given to the development and quality of relationships within the Centre was significant” (p52).

⁸ The Asha Centre in West Mercia developed from women-centred work by the local probation service; it works to link women isolated by disadvantage to resources that will help them improve their social and economic potential

The importance of worker client relationships in working with all offenders is well evidenced (McNeill, 2005), as is the centrality of women's relationships with others in their development and in their lives. These combined factors require to be appropriately reflected in our approaches to working with women who offend.

Holistic intervention

Since the publication of A Safer Way in 1998, holistic service provision has been promoted as the best means through which the multiple and complex needs of women offenders could be addressed. Many subsequent reviews and research documents have examined this in more detail and argued similarly (Barry and Mclvor, 2008; Blanchette and Brown, 2006; Bloom and Covington, 1998; Gelsthorpe et al, 2007; Loucks et al, 2006; Scottish Executive, 2002).

In their literature review Maruna et al highlight the evidence that cognitive behavioural programmes (that have become commonly utilised in work with male offenders and had some positive results with this population) were found wanting in their applicability to women (Scottish Government, 2008). They point out that one and two year follow up reconviction rate studies showed no benefit to women who experienced the same programmes as men.

Studies have shown that not only do holistic relational-oriented approaches work best in terms of producing the best outcomes for women but have also been shown to relate to lower recidivism rates (Sheehan, Mclvor and Trotter, 2007). The argument for holistic service provision in response to women's complex, co-existing and overlapping needs is well made.

Strengths based approaches

The Good Lives Model takes a strengths based approach, rather than a deficit-based approach. The model assumes people are predisposed to seek certain 'primary goods' (e.g. knowledge, relatedness and community, happiness) and that people offend to secure these (either directly or indirectly). The approach identifies strengths, positive experiences and expertise of individuals so they are enabled to pursue and fulfil a conceptualised 'good life' (McNeill, 2009).

Despite the somewhat limited research evidence to support the specific good lives model, Blanchette and Brown note consensus by many researchers that strengths, resilience and protective factors should be incorporated into any model of offender rehabilitation. They go on to argue, "strengths based approaches may be optimally applicable to women" (2006, p52).

Examples of this in practice include The Willow Project assessment that takes a strengths based approach, highlighting positive information from participants about their perceptions of themselves, interests (previous and current) and abilities. The process seeks to establish women's strengths, their supports and key pro-social individuals, whilst on-going work focuses on the role of resilience. Another method that can be used to support and develop strengths includes the use of peer support. Nugent and Loucks (2010) discuss the effectiveness of peer support models that use clients past experiences to build strengths (such as the Routes Out Of Prison Project⁹).

⁹ Routes Out of Prison is a partnership between The Wise Group, SPS, APEX Scotland and Families Outside, delivering services (primarily to short term prisoners) through the use of life coaches.



Desistance – differences for women

Desistance is a process relating to “age and maturity, to social ties and bonds and to changing personal identities” (McNeill, 2009). McNeill describes how desisters gain an ability to make choices and govern their own lives, and highlights the significance of supportive people in offenders lives in helping an alternative identity be envisioned and fulfilled by the offender. Involvement in activities that benefit other people can be important in the individuals change process, in enabling them to begin to believe in and further develop an alternative self.

Although women’s particular experiences of desistance have received little attention, where gender has been examined, differences have been evident. Graham and Bowling (1995) revealed clear gender differences in processes of desistance. They found women had shorter criminal careers overall and desisted sooner than men. Social transitions such as leaving home, forming emotional and social partnerships and having children were more highly correlated to desistance for women than men. Giordano et al (2002 cited in Gelsthorpe et al, 2007, p22) found that although marital attachment and job status are factors frequently associated with male desistance, these were not found not to strongly correlate with women’s desistance. As noted previously Nugent and Loucks (2009) found that most women who desisted in their study had ended their relationship with their partners. Research carried out by Jamieson et al (1999, cited in McNeill et al., 2008, p14) found that young women in their sample were more likely to emphasise the importance of relational aspects of the process of desistance and in those who continued to offend, girls and young women were more often keen to be seen as desisters. McNeill et al comment this maybe “reflecting societal disapproval of female offending” (p14).

Other differences in women’s desistance processes are noted by Giordano et al (2002, cited in Gelsthorpe et al, 2007, p22). They propose that individuals require a minimal level of resources to draw on to support the social and thinking processes associated with desistance. They suggest that women’s marginalisation in the workplace may partially explain why work does not play a key role in their desistance processes. In their study they found women more inclined to associate changes in how they viewed themselves and finding new ‘highly crafted’ replacement selves, as key to their pathways out of offending.

In examining ‘Pathways out of female crime’ Runggay (2004) also discusses the importance of women acquiring new pro-social identities for themselves. She argues that successful desistance requires recognition of an opportunity to claim an alternative, socially approved personal identity. Women will need new, altered behaviours and routines to function in a new role and will need time to develop a “complex repertoire of subroutines that can support the identity” (p410) in a wide and somewhat daunting new range of circumstances. She also emphasises the important role of the support network in endorsing the women in her new conventional identity.

In her Scottish study of desistance in persistent young offenders, Barry (2007) noted differences in the desistance of young women. She found women stopped offending due to the influence of “actual commitments to their homes, families and relationships” whereas males “only had potential (and therefore less influential) commitments to employment and raising a family as the impetus to stopping offending” (p26). The focus on actual relationships highlighted here, concurs with the work of Mary Eaton (1993, cited in Gelsthorpe et al, 2007). She undertook a study of 34 female ex-prisoners. She concluded women need access to multiple structural pre-conditions (particularly housing, health and employment) and reciprocal relationships of mutuality where women feel they are of worth and have something to contribute. This notion of being a person of worth with something to contribute to the



benefit of others was highlighted in the aforementioned work of Barry and is also of note in the work of McNeill (2009). Barry gives particular attention to gender differences in her work. She found women's concern about their reputations, how they were perceived by others and striving for normality, was much more noticeable than amongst men. Additionally, contact with non-offending partners was also emphasised in young women's desistance processes. Barry highlights the importance of offering "legitimate opportunities for generativity"¹⁰ and responsibility-taking where (individuals) are recognised as valued members of society" (p37). She goes on to argue that the opportunity for the expenditure of capital is crucial in stopping offending.

The distinctions in women's desistance processes are notable. A greater emphasis on and differences in the role of relationships, women's self-perception and identity, as well as how they are perceived by others, appear to be areas that research has drawn out as having important differences. Further work to specifically focus on women's desistance processes would be welcomed.

Social capital

McNeill (2009) describes social capital as "the social networks and relationships within families and wider communities that can create and support opportunities for change" (p50). Bonding social capital relates to strong supportive ties between people in similar circumstances (e.g. families, close friends, neighbours). Bridging social capital involves more distant, weaker ties amongst people who are less like you but you may meet through shared interests (e.g. being part of a club/group, relations with work colleagues). These can be important in accessing "new opportunities, new identities and social mobility" (McNeill, 2009, p64). Linking social capital allows us to connect with people in dissimilar situations, enabling access to a wider range of resources, outwith our own community and spheres of interest. McNeill et al argue that without "access to linking social capital, and with it any prospect hierarchical mobility across social strata, access to power and status is likely to be even more constrained" (2008, p 64).

It is further suggested that new bonding and bridging social capital can be developed through 'generative' activities and that a focus is needed on developing opportunities for this such as volunteering, creative and other constructive activities.

McNeill et al comment that gains in social capital support desistance and therefore meaningful engagement with communities is required in order to facilitate generative activities. They also report that working with 'families of origin' is key to repair bonding social capital. Recognition is given that this will depend on "the nature of the family and its dynamics and on an assessment of its potential to support (or hinder) desistance" (2008, p 65).

The evidence reviewed previously highlights the differences in women's backgrounds, families and relationships including the prevalence of abuse experienced (often within family relationships). Therefore this approach to working with families, to develop social capital and support desistance, may require a different emphasis in work with some women. Certainly a considered approach is vital to ensure that such work takes account of women's historical experiences within their families, recognising the context of power relations and to ensure

¹⁰ Described by Barry (2007) as "the passing on of care, attention or support to future generations based on one's own experiences – a concern and commitment for others through parenting, teaching or counselling"



that it is in the individual women's interests to pursue efforts to heal and mend such relationships.

Women workers

The gender of professionals working with women offenders has been examined by a limited number of researchers. In recent years, with an emphasis on relationships between workers and offenders, work has taken place to identify key components of these relationships and identify the key skills required for professionals to engage meaningfully with offenders (McNeill, 2005). Whilst some women state no particular preference regarding the gender of a worker, other researchers have found that women "more readily engage with female workers than with male workers" (Mair and May, 1997; Wright and Kemshall, 1994 cited in Barry and McIvor, 2008, p67).

In their recent evaluation of a pilot at the Willow Project, (Nugent et al, 2010) state "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". The project had planned inputs from male workers and promoted views that, notwithstanding the women's experiences, all men routinely do not represent a negative impact on women's lives. When asked at interview, all but one woman indicated that having an all female staff (and user) group had been important. The other woman felt it wasn't important for her stating she had no history of abuse, but she felt it was important for the other women. They recommend the continuation of the 'women only' aspect of the project as both women and project workers felt this was a key reason why the women felt safe, respected and supported to speak openly about their problems. Of note, many of these women had stated they had no preference regarding the gender of the worker when they began attendance at the project. It was after a period of experiencing a women only service that the above was noted.

Matching female workers to all women in the criminal justice system may not be a reasoned or proportionate response. However, consideration may need to be given to the gender of workers where intensive, sensitive, reflective and self-analytical work is undertaken with women in exploring their past relationships and their current or future sense of identity.

Conclusions - A Partnership Approach Forward

In developing our approach to women offenders we need first to recognise the particular inequalities experienced by women in society. Gender roles, societal expectations and continued structural inequalities facing women today, impact greatly on the lives of women who are socially disadvantaged and in poverty. The distinct needs of women offenders; in particular their experiences of abuse, substance use and mental health problems are therefore complex and require sophisticated responses.

Adequate responses are likely to be multi-faceted. They will recognise the need for proactive engagement, respond to women in crises and acknowledge the centrality of relationships in women's lives. Approaches will take account of women's experiences of victimisation, differences in desistance processes and focus on their strengths whilst facilitating opportunities for women to make contributions of value to others, including involvement in shaping services.

The proposed model and supporting framework may go some way to help service providers begin to shape future services for women. But this will not be an easy task. It will require an open approach to working across organisational boundaries and a commitment to understanding the roles and functions of professions atypical in our routine work. In their evaluation of the women offender pilot at the Willow Project, Nugent et al (2010) noted

“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”.

No single agency or profession can respond adequately to the complexity of need presented. Evidence suggests that best outcomes require a fusion of agencies and professions that will require considerable commitment to achieve. A review of community based service provision for women offenders concludes

“Commissioners need to appreciate that it requires determination and detailed knowledge to ensure that appropriate provision is delivered to women”
(Gelsthorpe et al, 2007).

If we are to realise Baroness Corstons vision of a “distinct, radically different, visibly-led, strategic, proportionate, holistic, woman-centred, integrated approach” (2007), service providers will need to understand their specific contribution in strong partnerships.



Appendix 1

The Equality Act 2006 – Summary of Specific Duties

In brief, listed Scottish public authorities must:

1. **prepare and publish a gender equality scheme**, showing how it will meet its general and specific duties and setting out its gender equality objectives.
2. **consider the need to include objectives to address the causes of any gender pay gap.**
3. **gather and use information** on how the public authority's policies and practices affect gender equality in the workforce and in the delivery of services.
4. **consult stakeholders (i.e. employees, service users and others, including trade unions) and take account of relevant information** in order to determine its gender equality objectives.
5. **assess the impact of its current and proposed policies and practices** on gender equality, and to pay due regard to the results of those impact assessments.
6. **implement the actions set out in its scheme** within three years, unless it is unreasonable or impracticable to do so.
7. **report** against the scheme every year and **review** the scheme at least every three years.

In addition to the duty set out above, listed Scottish public authorities with more than 150 full-time staff must:

1. **prepare and publish an equal pay statement**, that sets out that authority's policy on equal pay between men and women;
2. **report** against the statement and **review** the statement, at least every three years.

Finally, Scottish Ministers must:

1. **set out priority areas** which Scottish Ministers have identified for the advancement of equality of opportunity between women and men;
2. **report on progress** in those priority areas, at least every three years.



Questions for Commissioners of Services

From a review of services reported in “Provision for women offenders in the community”

“These questions provide a starting point, they are not intended as an exhaustive list of questions for commissioners, rather, they serve to highlight that women’s needs must be at the forethought of provision, and not an afterthought” (Gelsthorpe et al, 2007; p55)

In particular, commissioners of services might usefully begin with these nine questions when commissioning services:

- 1) What is available within the area specifically for women (including young women, ethnic minority women, older women and other disadvantaged women)?
- 2) To what extent could existing provision for women be utilised for women offenders? Are there useful partnerships that could be forged between agencies to help address women offenders’ needs (including both intra and inter voluntary and statutory provision)?
- 3) In what ways could any barriers to working with women who offend, within existing service provision, be addressed and overcome?
- 4) Do any of the potential service providers already have a stable setting/or building which might be used as a base for women’s services?
- 5) Who, if any, are the other service users within the same building or setting? Would any of these other service users militate against the creation of a safe supportive environment for women? Or, conversely, can any of the other activities within the same setting be used to enhance the work with women (for example, Women’s Aid or counselling)?
- 6) Is there appropriate childcare provision? If not, could child-care provision be created?
- 7) Is the building/setting easily accessible and otherwise conducive to women’s needs? Could transport be provided?
- 8) Does the project initiate styles of working with service users, which are conducive to women’s learning needs?
- 9) Does the provision provide opportunities for women to be integrated within non-offending groups?



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