

Women's Breakout: Service Standards and Quality Assurance

Assessing the quality of services provided in the voluntary and community sector for vulnerable women with complex needs.



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'Quality is about learning what you are doing well and striving to do it better. It also means discovering what you need to change to make sure you meet your users' needs.

A quality assurance system is a formal management system that you can use to strengthen your organisation. It is intended to raise standards of work and help you to do everything consistently.'

(Your guide to quality assurance)

Introduction

Women's Community Services provide gender specific interventions that are available through community-based, voluntary sector organisations. These organisations take into account the reality of experiences for women and how these experiences can lead to inequitable outcomes for women compared to men; and design services accordingly. They are not organisations that offer the same approach for men and women in gender specific groups.

Women's Community Services deliver services for vulnerable women to a very high standard and with impressive results. It is because of the shared understanding of the importance of quality among these organisations that we are able to offer a model of best practice. These standards have been designed to ensure that providers of services for vulnerable women deliver high bar services and are able to evidence the impact of their interventions. Women's Community Services providers are working exceptionally hard to meet the needs of the women that use their services and it is important that consideration is given to the time and resources involved in working towards the standards and assessing compliance. Quality standards need to measure the right thing, and they also need to benefit the service user and not only the commissioner; and should not unnecessarily divert resources from service delivery.

These standards have been considered and refined by an Expert Reference Group, but we are keen to make them relevant and appropriate to a wider range of service providers and welcome feedback.

What works with women?

Evidence from research

These standards have been built on the best knowledge and wisdom available in research and practice, and frame and describe a high bar service that will support women with complex vulnerabilities to improve their lives and the lives of their families.

While Women's Community Services providers encompass a wide spectrum of vulnerability in the lives of women that will include women who have offended, the evidence of what works with

women draws heavily on research with women who have offended as more generic, current research is not available. However, we are confident of the applicability of the body of research to women with complex vulnerabilities and support needs.

In July 2015 the Ministry of Justice published 'Effective Interventions for Women Offenders: A Rapid Evidence Assessment'. Evidence from this assessment suggests that the following reduces women's offending:

- (i) substance abuse treatment, in particular in-custody or hierarchical therapeutic community programmes that apply a cognitive-behavioural intervention focusing on skill development;
- (ii) a gender-responsive cognitive-behavioural programme that emphasises existing strengths and competencies, as well as skills acquisition;
- (iii) community opioid maintenance, which may reduce offending rates while the women are in treatment;
- (iv) booster programmes that assist in maintaining treatment effects through community follow-up, which appear to contribute to improved outcomes;
- (v) gender-responsive approaches, which show promise relative to gender-neutral programmes

Gelsthorpe, L had previously reviewed the evidence from a range of sources on the effectiveness of criminal justice interventions with women offenders and this was published in the Transnational Criminology Manual (vol.3, 2010) 'What works with Women Offenders'. Gelsthorpe considers the different pathways into crime for women as opposed to men, the characteristics of their lives and life experiences, the complexity of needs and the consistent failure of statutory services to meet those needs, and the importance of broadly-based, supportive, individually tailored solutions to support pathways out of crime.

The messages from research considered in this paper include:

- most women prefer to learn in collaborative, rather than competitive, settings.
- women-only environments facilitate growth and development
- there is a need to work with women in non-authoritarian co-operative settings, where women are empowered to engage in social and personal change.
- alongside structured behavioural interventions case-specific factors should also be addressed.
- gendered pathways
- the use of relational theory
- strengths-based approaches
- the use of positive psychology and use of the 'good lives model'
- there is a need for such interventions to be sensitive to 'trauma'.

Overlaying this research with an examination of what works on the ground, Gelsthorpe offered nine lessons of what is likely to work for women:

1. Be women-only to foster safety and 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 what is known about the effective learning styles with women;

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 capacity and flexibility to allow women to return for 'top ups' 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 offender-related programmes, since personal care 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.

Better outcomes for Women Offenders

In September 2015, the National Offender Management Service published '**Better Outcomes for Women Offenders**'. This document sets out the commissioning principles for women offenders, and 'will help to ensure that resources are targeted on areas that are most likely to make a difference to women's lives, both with regard to reducing re-offending and to helping women live safer, more fulfilling lives in the community. They will support NOMS Commissioning Intentions in the provision of services for women offenders.'

The document sets out seven priority targets for support and intervention:

- (i) Substance misuse
Stabilise and address individual need, in particular address Class A drug use, binge and chronic drinking.
- (ii) Mental Health
Expedite access to services that address mental health need, in particular anxiety and depression, personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and trauma.
- (iii) Emotion management
Help women to build skills to control impulsive behaviour and destructive emotions
- (iv) A pro-social identity
Be positive towards, about, and around women, and encourage them to help and be positive towards others.
- (v) Being in control of daily life and having goals
Motivate women to believe that they belong and fit in to mainstream society, where they can work to achieve their goals.
- (vi) Improve family contact
Help women to build healthy and supportive family relationships, especially with their children
- (vii) Resettle and build social capital
Help women to find somewhere safe to live, to learn how to manage their money, access education, and improve their employability.

What do expert practitioners tell us?

Crucially important in working with women is that she is involved in developing her own personal development plan and interventions and responses are specifically built around what the woman says she needs.

It is also important to understand that the nature of this work and the chaotic lives of many of the women who are in these services means that the process of working with a woman is not linear. She will need the time to go forward and backwards, to succeed and to fail, and to come back for support as and when she needs it. In most instances, this requires intensive front loading of an intervention that tapers down over the first six months but is still available over the course of one to two years.

There is a core ambition which is to empower and support the woman to believe that she can change and then work with her so that she can bring personal change into her life. Central to this core ambition is

- a safe place and space;
- a high quality relationship with a trusted worker; and
- a common sense approach to sorting out her most pressing needs; and
- the generation of possibilities and hope.

What do women say?

In 2013 Women's Breakout delivered a project 'Experts by Experience' that captured the voices of 100 women who had been impacted by the Criminal Justice System and had received services from our member organisations. A wide range of good practices were described by the participants in this study and the key aspects, or best practices, identified by the women were that they should be supportive, generative, encouraging engagement and actually helping the women who access them.

They wanted:

Women Only Spaces

Safe, women only spaces where women could both feel and be safe; and in which they were free to express themselves and reveal their needs without judgement, ridicule or threat. This aspect of acceptance, community and welcome was incredibly important for the women of this study.

I did get some help in Hackney, but there is more out there now for women only. Not that I mind mixed groups, but I do find there are more women's groups where you can talk more openly and you feel safer. I think they've only just come about recently.

That is very important. You are not going to be judged, you are not going to be patronised. You are going to be directed or helped.

I went in there [prison] fit as a fiddle. I was really independent and outgoing. Now I don't want to go out. I know that sounds weird because I have to. If I didn't have to come here I wouldn't go out of the house.

Trust and Acceptance

Women perceived that trust, or being trusted, was in short supply in the criminal justice system for women; and that there was an expectation that they would fail, relapse and reoffend.

Once they find out you've got a criminal record they don't want to know. They all think you are going to reoffend.

They won't trust you. They should give you a chance.

They don't trust me so ... so why should I put trust in them?

Trust in their recovery/desistance enabled them to engage with the services and allowed them to progress and rebuild successful lives. Acceptance and non-judgemental support created an open and generative environment in which they could grow and regain themselves.

They are women that understand women. They don't judge you at all ... you can be yourself

Not to be judged for your past. If I've made mistakes, we all grow up at some point. I'm 22 now. I made mistakes when I was 16 and 18.

She doesn't judge you. I met her when I had lapsed. I met her about starting to volunteer. She asked me to start in a couple of weeks, but I was taking heroin again. I told her I had lapsed and that I would give her a ring when I had sorted myself out.....She thanked me for being so honest. I felt about that big having to say I had lapsed. She was really nice. She rang me to see how I was. That support allowed me to sort myself out. Now I'm doing good ...

Understanding

Understanding played a big part in whether or not women felt accepted by the services that they engaged with. Many felt that they and their experiences had not been understood but in Women Centres there were people who understood their histories, their experiences, their vulnerabilities and needs.

Consistency

Services and key workers need to be consistent and not change at regular intervals. The development of a trusting and open relationship with a single professional can be key to a woman's journey of progress.

They keep changing. You go one week and see an officer, you go the next week and see another one.

I was thrown backwards and forwards like a ball. It was so uncomfortable for me. I was crying and repeating myself.

I think for women who have experienced domestic violence and rape, they ought to have some sort of marking system on your file, so that you don't have to keep repeating it over and over again.

Practical Aid

Although advice and guidance was important it was not always sufficient. At times practical help, support and services are needed.

Confidence Building

Building confidence and enabling women to rebuild their social networks in a pro-social and generative way was seen as important.

We sit here, all of us, and we never think 'What has she done?' We feel like we are a family. Outside this place we meet. We have coffee or we have a drink. I have a dinner party sometimes in my house and we get together to have a nice meal. We come to film club, we love film club here.

I went back to school. My mum said I wouldn't make anything of myself, but she went to my graduation three years ago when I got my master's degree. That was thank God to [name of Women's Centre]

I was working with the Homeless in [charitable organisation], and thank God, they were my saviours. I was on the floor. I was homeless and alone ... they helped me get back.

Groups that make you feel better about yourself, and that help you to speak up for yourself, to get back your confidence and your self-esteem. Just make you feel like a proper human being and that you're worth something.

Somebody to talk with and laugh with. To be open about my problems. If you want to talk to someone about family problems, husband problems, we can talk about everything here. They tell you to be strong. Power to women. This is something I never knew before.

Trauma informed services

It is widely accepted that the majority of women who have been impacted by the criminal justice system will have suffered from some form of trauma. Dr Stephanie Covington specialises in the development and implementation of gender-responsive and trauma-informed services in both the public and private sectors and she refers to six domains in developing trauma-informed services:

1. Five core values – for service users and for staff (safety, choice, trustworthiness, collaboration, and empowerment)
2. Formal service policies – reflecting services that have been designed for women
3. Trauma screening, assessment, service planning and trauma specific services
4. Administrative support for programme wide trauma informed services
5. Staff trauma training and education
6. Human resources practices (hiring and performance review)

A Health and Social Care perspective

The Care Quality Commission is the independent regulator of health and social care in England. In inspecting services they ask five questions that we have also addressed in these service standards:

- Are they safe?
- Are they effective?
- Are they caring?
- Are they responsive to people's needs?
- Are they well led?

The College Centre for Quality Improvement (CCQI) aims to raise the standard of care that people with mental health needs receive by helping providers, users and commissioners of services assess and increase the quality of care they provide. They have developed the concept of 'enabling environments' where participants feel safe enough to develop relationships and to share experiences and ideas with others; places where everyone can get involved in helping to decide on matters that affect them. There are ten Standards for 'Enabling Environments' outlining the core values of a healthy psychosocial environment with criteria demonstrating how the values can be achieved in practice. These are:

1. Belonging
The nature and quality of relationships are of primary importance
2. Boundaries
There are expectations of behaviour and processes to maintain and review them
3. Communication
It is recognised that people communicate in different ways
4. Development
There are opportunities to be spontaneous and try new things
5. Involvement
Everyone shares responsibility for the environment
6. Safety
Support is available for everyone
7. Structure
Engagement and purposeful activity is actively encouraged
8. Empowerment
Power and authority are open to discussion
9. Leadership
Leadership takes responsibility for the environment being enabling
10. Openness
External relationships are sought and valued

Quality objectives

Women's Community Services providers will

- Deliver excellent services in order to help vulnerable women to bring change to their lives.
- Establish effective tools for assessing impact and value for money and use this to continually improve the service.
- Support the retention of excellent staff.

Service Standards

The service delivered by Women's Community Services providers should be built around the following framework of service standards:

The environment and culture

- The service is delivered in an environment based on safety, respect, and dignity.
- In most cases the service is delivered in a women only environment
- The service provider understands that gender makes a difference.
- The ethos of the organisation is women-centred, and women control the decision making processes that directly support the service delivery.
- The service environment provides a warm and welcoming message.
- Buildings used should be accessible and welcoming for all women wherever possible.

Service provision

- Services are gender-specific, holistic, and flexible; addressing all relevant aspects of a woman's life, to ensure that the impact of a wide range of underlying issues that cause distress, including offending behaviour, are addressed.
- The service will ensure that service users feel physically safe and emotionally supported.
- Services promote empowerment, choice and self-determination, improving women's economic/social conditions by developing their resilience and capacity to be self-sufficient.
- The service is built around a central feature of the importance of understanding relationships and evidences a strong focus on staff and service user relationship development.
- Services provide a consistent key worker approach with the aim of establishing a comprehensive understanding of the service user's situation, encouraging trust and facilitating coordinated access to relevant services.
- The service will work with each individual to assess her situation, looking at the areas in her life which she might like to change, and they will then develop a support plan with her which will consider a wide range of issues including, if relevant to her:
 - (i) Attitudes, thinking and behaviour
 - (ii) Accommodation
 - (iii) Drugs and alcohol
 - (iv) Children and families
 - (v) Health
 - (vi) Education, training and employment
 - (vii) Finance, benefits and debt
 - (viii) Abuse
 - (ix) Street work and prostitution
- A therapeutic assessment will form part of every woman's offer where identified as a need.
- The service prioritises and supports skill building in the woman
- The service is provided on the basis of informed consent and therefore has clear and accessible pathways both into and out of the service.
- The service works proactively to ensure that a non-discriminatory service is equally accessible to all eligible women.
- The service provides women with on-going opportunities for support, even after funded programmes have finished as part of the holistic women centred approach.

Human Resources

- The organisation has clear and relevant recruitment, induction and training policies.
- The service will employ suitably experienced or qualified, competent, well supported staff and recruit them in a safe and considered way.
- A process for evaluating workers in terms of competencies, experience and ethos must be in place in the organisation.
- The organisation maintains a training log to evidence regular training needs reviews and attendance at refresher courses as appropriate.
- Members of staff delivering the service will have received appropriate training, and will have regular supervision sessions.

- Where appropriate, members of staff will receive clinical supervision.

Monitoring for impact and value

- The organisation has implemented monitoring, measurement and analysis to ensure improvement processes and is committed to continually improve the effectiveness of the service.
- The organisation will adopt a case management approach where appropriate, ensuring effective recording practice and appropriate staff support from intake to case closure
- The organisation will have robust data capture systems in order to report regularly on impact and value for money.
- Organisations will undertake audits, including process audits on samples of cases from time to time to ensure service delivery standards are maintained, and also safeguarding practices.
- All aspects of casework and case files meet legal requirements.

Enhancement of social capital

- Recovery capital - the organisation can demonstrate that they encourage support from parents and family, partners, friends and neighbours; and also support the individual's engagement with, commitment to and participation in the community and its values.
- The organisation offers opportunities to integrate women into community activities, opportunities and networks
- Organisations will develop strong partnerships with other service providers and joint working arrangements with statutory and community based organisations.
- Opportunities for women in contact with the Criminal Justice System to mix with women who have not been in contact with the Criminal Justice System are actively sought.

Using the contribution of experts by experience

- The service will be women-centred and will maximise their choice and control
- Service providers will be informed by the women they are working with in design, delivery, outcomes and evaluation.
- The service will value the strengths, abilities and potential for change and recovery of the women in the service.

Governance

- The service is based within a sustainable organisation with a clear strategy for maintaining its activities.
- The service is placed within a robust framework with clear lines of accountability between all staff and between the senior management and governing body.
- The Board of the organisation monitors appropriate data to measure the performance and outcomes of the service, and ensures that corrective action is taken where necessary.
- The Board of the organisation takes responsibility for ensuring that the service meets its contractual requirements.
- The Board of the organisation receives regular information to ensure that a non-discriminatory service is being offered to all eligible clients

Assessment Process

These standards are an assessment that relates to the quality of service that is offered and delivered to vulnerable women with complex needs, and the way in which that service is managed. They are not a complete organisational assessment.

The standards are designed to be used as a self-assessment, but good practice would encourage you to establish an assessment team that includes the involvement of an external assessor, for example from a peer organisation, and an 'expert by experience'. If you wish, and if workload allows at the time, Women's Breakout can also join your assessment team.

There are seven areas of assessment:

- The environment and culture
- Service provision
- Human Resources
- Monitoring for impact and value
- Enhancement of social capital
- Using the contribution of experts by experience
- Governance

The assessment should be carried out by the assessment team, and a report should be written on strengths and areas for improvement as a positive and asset based approach. Following the assessment, the team should agree the standard achieved as one of the following:

1. Fully compliant
2. Fully compliant in **(insert number)**/7 areas of the standard and working towards full compliance with a plan in place to achieve compliance
3. Fully compliant in **(insert number)** /7 areas of the standard.

You should then send a copy of your assessment to Women's Breakout and once we have received this you may promote your assessment and use for example in applications for funding. Please be aware that Women's Breakout may conduct a visit to discuss your assessment with you.

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