



Lancashire
Constabulary

police and communities together

REPORT TO: STRATEGIC SCRUTINY MEETING

DATE: Monday 23 December 2013

AGENDA ITEM: 5d Tackling Crime and Re-offending

SUBJECT: Operation Avert – Diverting Women Offenders

Background

A woman's journey through the CJS, and her needs and experiences throughout the process, may be significantly different to those of the majority of male offenders. Although women and men may share many similar characteristics, the impact of a conviction/sentence on a woman may be very different to the impact on a man. It is also essential to bear in mind that:

- There has been a slight increase in the proportion of women sentenced at all courts over the five year period from 20% in 2006 to 23% in 2009 and 2010.
- Women generally commit less serious offences than men do and most pose no risk of serious harm to the public.
- A lower proportion of all women sentenced, in comparison to sentenced males, received a community sentence (10% women and 16% men) – MOJ 2011.
- Since 2003 women have consistently received a higher average custodial sentence length than men for criminal damage (23.7 months compared to 17.6 months for men) – MOJ 2011.
- Most women serve short sentences for non-violent crime.
- Women have multiple and complex needs which require a women centred holistic approach if their offending behaviour is to be reduced (Corston, 2007).
- A higher proportion of female prisoners reported having lived alone with dependent children prior to imprisonment (14% of women compared to 1% of men) which has implications for the care of the child whilst the mother is in custody.

Business Case

Aside from the impact on individuals and families, the business case for engaging with women in the CJS is also considerable.

- The cost per prison place in 2010 was £39,719 male and £56,415 female
- The approximate cost for an offender on a Community Order (not differentiated by gender) is £2,800.

- The estimated projected cost of providing a woman with standalone holistic community based services through a Women's Community Centre averages £1,360 per annum.

Concept

This is a concept taken from the hospital triage model, whereby a quick assessment of needs is undertaken to ensure individuals are referred to the appropriate interventions. The work is undertaken using a partnership approach, in this case with Lancashire Constabulary, Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, Lancashire Probation Trust and Lancashire Women's Centres.

Purpose

The aim of the project is to divert women, where possible, from appearing at court and into a positive intervention via a formal criminal justice disposal aimed at meeting female specific needs earlier and preventing further re-offending. It is proposed to pilot the scheme in East Lancashire (Greenbank custody suite), due to the service provision available at that locality.

Triage provides a new option of early diversion for women involved in criminality at the lower level (i.e. depending on offence type, risk, impact on the victim etc.). The level and intensity of interventions should be commensurate with a) the offence committed and b) the risk identified.

Women can be assessed to ensure that they are dealt with in a problem-solving manner (by statutory or voluntary agencies) which maximises the opportunity to effectively meet needs earlier, divert from progression through the Criminal Justice System and ultimately to prevent re-offending.

Benefits

By identifying needs and intervening at a much earlier stage in the process, it is hoped that some of the outcomes will include:

- reduced re-offending;
- reduced drug/alcohol dependency;
- improved mental health;
- keeping families together and thereby reducing the number of children in care as a result of female imprisonment;
- minimising progression through, and experience of, the Criminal justice System

In addition there will be:

- increased use of Restorative Justice and Conditional Caution for offences that are currently charged;
- Reduced demand on the Criminal Justice System;
- Reduced Criminal Justice System costs.

How will it work?

The proposal is that the AVERT project will be used in custody suites for all female offenders.

The conditional caution will be utilised to facilitate the third sector specialist women's service completing a gender specific assessment based on the reducing reoffending pathways, including victims of sexual assault, abuse or domestic abuse and women involved in sex work. The assessment will identify needs and interventions needed.

All female offenders, whether eligible for the scheme or not will be given a voluntary referral to the Women's centre for a needs assessment to try and address the offending triggers and identify suitable interventions.

Should a woman be progressed through to court, the assessment will be made available to court and probation, and if a custodial sentence is given, the report will be sent through to the appropriate prison.

It was considered initially that the project should include female youths and those in transition, but after taking advise from Child Action North West and Criminal Justice Services it is not appropriate to do so at this stage as it is felt that the female should be treated as a youth first, where it is applicable, and also there are no conditional cautions available for youths at this stage. In the future it is hoped that the lessons learnt from this project can be used to influence the Youth triage in a more gender specific way for male, female and transgender offenders.

Performance measurement tools have been established to monitor the numbers going through the project, cost benefit analysis, interventions and impact, plus a cohort has been set up on IDIOM to monitor reoffending rates of the females referred to the project.

The case worker from the Women's Centre at Blackburn has already been working in the custody suite at Greenbank to inform the custody staff about the project, the specific issues around Women's needs and offending and to build relationships prior to the commencement of the project. This is to ensure buy-in from the custody staff and a clear understanding from the outset of the reasons for the project and the aims and objectives.

Process maps are attached to demonstrate the referral process, the RJ process and the Performance Management Framework for the project.

The steering group will continue to meet for several months until the project is fully embedded and to QA the referral s and decisions made.

Month One Update

The pilot has been running for one month at Greenbank. There have been 10 women referred through to the women's centre to date. This number sounds low, but if put into context, the number of conditional cautions on average each month across the board for Eastern Division is 10. The number of referrals out through each month by the flagship project of this type in Hull is 8.

Greenbank administered 8 conditional cautions to women during the first month, 4 of these were Avert. All 8 should have been Avert and processes have been tightened in the custody office to ensure 100% compliance moving forward. Whilst the criminal justice outcome for these missed 4 is irretrievable, the Women's Centre will still try to capture the women concerned to offer voluntary referrals.

Of these 4 all have engaged with the women's centre and all have not offended since the referral. There have been 6 further voluntary referrals made. The engagement rates for these are hit and miss.

In order to increase engagement and to provide an earlier intervention at crisis point, and a quality intervention, a bid has been made to the Proceeds Of Crime Act ARIS fund, (which is designed to give money to community projects and assist with community based asset working to reduce crime and disorder), to assist provision from the Women's Centre to have a worker full time based in the custody office. Research from other schemes has shown that this is the most effective and impactful way to get maximum engagement for all referrals. This also allows capacity to follow up on voluntary referrals in an outreach capacity, all of which will lead on to the desired outcome of reducing reoffending.

An interesting case study from the start of the scheme is a referral made for a woman named Iris. Iris is well known to local police, getting arrested on average three times a week mostly for drink related public order offences. She is also processed through the CJ system and has never been offered any sort of intervention before.

Iris was given an AVERT conditional Caution in the first week of the pilot. She has already completed two of the three mandatory engagement sessions. The assessment of her identified issues around social isolation and severe to moderate mental health issues which have never been picked up in a custody setting, and probably never would. Her son is in custody, her husband lost his job and has been arrested for theft since; she has no network of support.

From the first assessment when her mental health index assessment was rated as high, to her second, the same assessment had reduced to moderate simply through support and intervention. Moreover, she has not offended or been arrested in the three weeks since her referral, which is significant for her, for the police and for the wider community and social purse.

Next Steps

Having met as a steering group since the commencement of the project it is clear that there are huge benefits to be gained from the project, but that provision is the key to success. Lancashire's Women's Centre is currently only able to provide 8 hours per week coverage in the custody suite. If we compare this to other projects such as the Hull and Greater Manchester project, they delivered full time case workers in the custody suites. It is believed as a partnership that this presence is vital to offer quality, early intervention to all women passing through custody, as it makes the scheme almost independent from the police in terms of offer as well as delivery, and it allows greater capture of opportunities and increased capture and follow-up of voluntary referrals.

The pilot is still in its infancy but it has had a good start and will continue to flourish if provision can be obtained. The recent £30k commitment from the PCC will support this work. The project will be run for 6 months commencing 11th November 2013 with an evaluation at the completion in May 2014.