

CRIME AND JUSTICE

EVALUATION OF SIXTEEN WOMEN'S COMMUNITY JUSTICE SERVICES IN SCOTLAND

Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS)

In 2013-15, the Scottish Government provided time-limited funding to 16 projects across Scotland to establish new and develop existing community services for women who offend. This national evaluation examined how these services were implemented and to what extent they contributed towards positive outcomes for women (associated with reduced reoffending).

Main Findings

- WCJSs were developed to be appropriate to the local context and therefore services across Scotland took many different forms, beyond the notion of a 'women's centre' as recommended by the Commission on Women Offenders.
- While WCJSs worked with women across multiple stages of the criminal justice system, services mostly supported and/or supervised women serving community sentences.
- Multi-disciplinary professionals co-located or linked with WCJSs enabled women to access practical support for multiple issues in one place. This required commitment and flexibility from services and organisations to be open to new ways of working.
- This holistic approach offered a genuinely enhanced service as an alternative to traditional approaches to the supervision of women. This meant that practitioners worked with women as individuals with strengths, needs, and aspirations, rather than focusing on them simply as 'offenders'.
- WCJSs prioritised support that helped women achieve stability in their lives, promoted their readiness to change (e.g. by developing confidence and problem-solving skills), and addressed immediate practical needs (e.g.

finance, housing); these include factors that are known to contribute to desistance.

- Women tended to make most progress in short-term outcomes, including problem solving, engagement with services, housing, willingness to work on problems, mental health, and substance misuse (within an average five-month period).
- Less progress was observed in addressing other (longer-term) outcomes, including purposeful and rewarding activities (e.g. ways to spend spare time, work, volunteering or training), family relationships, and changing pro-criminal views (albeit held by a small proportion of women).
- The research suggests that future initiatives might usefully consider developing provision for women that includes more purposeful or rewarding activities at an earlier stage and forging links in their community; helping women to cope with the placement of children into care and support to regain and/or maintain custody (where appropriate); as well as continuing to develop diversion and throughcare services.
- Overall, the findings provide a strong rationale for the continued development of WCJSs that adopt holistic, gender-responsive, and flexible practices to address the underlying drivers of women's offending behaviour.

Introduction

Women's Community Justice Services (WCJSs) provide a holistic approach to addressing the often complex issues that underlie the offending behaviour of women involved in the criminal justice system. As previous studies suggest, unless these issues are addressed, it is unlikely that community sanctions or supervision alone will reduce reoffending.¹

In 2013-15, the Scottish Government provided time-limited funding for 16 projects proposed by criminal justice partners across Scotland to develop community services for women. The variety of approaches was driven by existing service provision, local context, and the extent to which services could be sustained locally beyond the funding period.

¹ Burgess, C., Malloch, M. and McIvor, G. (2011) [*Women in Focus: an evaluation*](#). Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research.

There were three models of service delivery: women's centres (3), CJSW workers or women's teams (6), and 'community hubs' (3). Four standalone projects were also undertaken, which included a registered mental health nurse to work with women in existing services across three local authorities, a diversion ('early intervention') pilot, a court-based service to inform remand decisions, and a scoping project for one region to establish a women's service.

Methodology

The national evaluation examined how services were implemented and to what extent they contributed towards positive outcomes for women. Findings were drawn from two phases of fieldwork with practitioners and women, secondary documents, and quantitative data for 1,778 women who were in the WCJSs between April and December 2014. This included outcomes data for 406 women.

Developing women's community justice services

Reconfiguring or establishing new services was not a quick process; most projects experienced delays in recruiting staff and setting up new premises. Critical elements for successfully developing services included establishing effective partnerships (e.g. with health, welfare, private and the public sector), employing the 'right staff' (with the necessary skills, attributes and experience), and creating an environment in which there was commitment and flexibility to trial new ways of working.

Centres and teams worked well in urban areas because of their concentrated populations, whilst delivering multi-disciplinary support from hubs was appropriate in areas with dispersed populations. Across all WCJS models, flexibility to do individual outreach was important, particularly in rural areas, at the early stages of a woman's involvement, or for women who experienced difficulties engaging.

Characteristics of women in services

The average age of women in WCJSs was 34 years (ranging from 16 to 68 years), and the majority were White British. Half of all women were mothers to children under 16 years. One third of these women lived with their children, while another third had access to their children in the care of others. Combined, they were mothers to almost 1,600 children.

Most women had 'medium' to 'very high' LS/CMI scores (which measure risk and need) and were likely to have previous convictions.

Women often entered WCJSs with multiple and complex needs. The most common issues women presented with were poor mental/emotional health, lack of purposeful or rewarding activities, substance misuse, difficulty in solving everyday problems, and unstable or unsupportive family/social relationships. There was also an indication of high rates of trauma or abuse, where measured.

Women did not often present with physical or sexual health needs (though these may only become known over time), or hold views or attitudes that supported offending behaviour.

The role of women's community justice services in the Scottish Criminal Justice System

While WCJSs worked with women across multiple stages of the criminal justice system, services mostly supported and/or supervised women serving community sentences.

Overall, 68% of women attended WCJSs on a statutory basis, of whom 87% were serving a Community Payback Order (CPO). For these women, most WCJSs supervised the requirements of the order such as unpaid work and/or offending-focused group work. Other women engaged voluntarily (32%), although they may have had an order supervised out-with the WCJS.²

A small proportion of women in WCJSs were receiving support either pre or post-release from prison, or on diversion. Few WCJSs undertook preventative work.

Holistic support for women

WCJSs provided or coordinated practical and emotional support to women on a one-to-one basis, in group work and/or drop-in sessions. Support was underpinned by trusting relationships between women and their worker(s). Women worked with their key worker to prioritise support tailored to their needs and circumstances.

Women most typically received support to stabilise their lives, link into appropriate services, and address practical issues (e.g. secure stable housing, stabilise or reduce substance misuse, develop skills to solve everyday problems, and build confidence and positive mental health).

The co-location or links with multi-disciplinary professionals in many WCJSs enabled women to access practical support for multiple issues in one place. Workers in multi-disciplinary women's teams or centres felt they were better equipped and had greater flexibility to respond to women's complex needs at the right time compared to working with women infrequently and/or without multi-disciplinary support previously. This response worked best when WCJSs had formal arrangements with partner agencies (e.g. to make direct referrals, access expertise, and share client information) rather than relying on informal networks.

Other features of WCJSs that women and/or practitioners commonly identified as being important were:

² Excludes women for whom nature of engagement was unknown.

- Women-only premises located near women's communities, and based outside CJSW premises where possible
- An informal, safe environment, that enables women to build supportive relationships and connect with workers and other women in a way that many had not experienced in previous services or through supervision alone
- Practitioners with qualities valued by women, such as being willing to listen, non-judgemental, optimistic about women's potential for change, and available for emotional support
- Practical help to overcome barriers to accessing services often experienced by women with complex needs (e.g. flexible appointments and follow-up in contrast to mainstream services where individuals may be 'taken off the books' after a series of missed appointments).
- Sequenced support, which prioritises stability, readiness to change and immediate needs, before progressing to longer term outcomes
- A distinct women's 'team' or worker
- An 'open door' for women to return for further help if they need reassurance or a 'safety net' on exit
- A relational, strengths-based approach to working with women that treats women as individuals first rather than 'offenders'.

Outcomes for women

Outcomes reported here were observed during a limited timeframe (an average of five months); long-term changes will take more time to materialise. Progress was assessed for 406 women against 14 outcomes, which included short-, medium- and long-term outcomes linked to desistance.

Overall, the majority of women experienced improvements in at least one outcome (83%) and on average made progress in four of the 14 measures. WCJSs were most effective in areas that help stabilise women's lives and promote their readiness to change (e.g. problem solving and engagement); factors that are critical for making progress elsewhere. Women tended to make most progress in short-term outcomes, including problem solving, engagement with services, willingness to work on problems, emotional and mental health, housing and substance misuse.

Women attributed this positive change in their lives to a combination of factors. Progress tended to occur when women were stable (e.g. in safe and secure housing, had stabilised substance misuse), felt motivated to change, felt supported or encouraged by workers or a person they trusted, and had opportunities or access to support at the appropriate time. This underlines the importance of properly sequenced holistic support and the often-described 'softer' outcomes that support women to make and sustain changes in their lives.

Less progress was shown in addressing other (longer-term) outcomes, including women having purposeful and rewarding activities (e.g. ways to spend their time, or in work, volunteering or training); stable and/or positive family relationships; and

consistent views that offending is unacceptable (albeit that such views were held by a small proportion of women). WCJSs were less likely to address some of these needs directly within short timescales. Women's progress was not always linear and some women experienced setbacks or no change.

These findings highlight the importance of having realistic expectations for individuals with complex needs and recognising the gradual and long-term nature of change for some women. The role of broader social structures or other factors in the community out-with the control of WCJSs (e.g. stigma and employment opportunities) also influence women's progress.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the extended provision of community services supported women to make observable progress towards outcomes associated with desistance during the limited timeframes in which WCJSs were evaluated. WCJSs were most effective in helping women to stabilise their lives, promote their confidence and motivation to change, and address their immediate practical and emotional needs.

The holistic approach of WCJSs offered a genuinely enhanced service alternative to traditional CJSW supervision for women. This was made possible by practitioners working with women as individuals with strengths, needs, and aspirations, rather than focusing on women as 'offenders'.

A key role of WCJSs was supporting women to engage with other (mainstream) services. This was achieved by both multidisciplinary working (e.g. co-located professionals, direct referrals), and helping women to improve their self-esteem, communication and self-presentation skills, to enable them to access services independently. This in turn can benefit external agencies (e.g. more efficient referrals and improved attendance at appointments).

The evaluation identified potential gaps in service provision that may be considered in future initiatives. These gaps include developing more purposeful or rewarding activities (at an earlier stage) and forging women's links in the community (i.e. social capital), helping women to cope with the loss of children (into care) and support them in regaining or maintaining custody (where appropriate), and continuing to develop diversion and (voluntary) throughcare services.

Practitioners' main aspirations for the future of WCJSs included an ongoing aim to build the services' reputation and credibility with sentencers, evidence their effectiveness on long-term outcomes, and ensure sustainability. Findings also indicated the WCJSs' limited capacity (particularly in small or single-worker services) given the unpredictable and the resource-intensive needs of their clients and flexible service delivery. It may be necessary to consider the potential for developing national standards to ensure women receive a consistent quality of service wherever they live in Scotland.

Overall, the findings provide a strong rationale to continue the WCJS approach, not as a single prescribed 'model', but rather as locally defined services that adopt

holistic, gender-responsive, and flexible practices. The findings add to the growing evidence that such approaches can effect positive change in areas of women's lives that are known to support desistance.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

- are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- are available via an alternative route <specify or delete this text>
- may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact Tamsyn.wilson@scotland.gsi.gov.uk for further information.
- cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



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