

Justice Committee

Female Offenders: throughcare in addressing reoffending

Written submission from East Lothian Council

1. What support do you provide for women released from a custodial sentence (e.g. in relation to housing, benefits, employment, education, addiction and mental health problems)?

At this time we employ a part time social work assistant who deals with all people sentenced to short terms of custody who have no statutory involvement with the CJSW service. This is a voluntary service. All women will be written to and they are prioritised for visits – at the visit their needs will be assessed and they will be supported to access information and help about housing, benefits etc. If appropriate there will be focus on addictions and attempts will be made to proactively signpost to services within the community. They will be offered on going contact on release with the aim of helping them to engage with the services.

2. How does the above support differ from that provided for other women living in your local authority area (i.e. how are services tailored to the particular needs of women released from a custodial sentence)?

The services offered are universal but the support to access the service is not universal. The services to which the women are directed are not always used to dealing with women released from custody.

3. How does the support offered to women released from a custodial sentence differ depending upon whether a woman was serving a long-term or short-term sentence (the Justice Committee has been advised that only those prisoners sentenced to four or more years are covered by mandatory throughcare requirements)?

A woman who is sentenced to more than 4 years would be dealt with much more systematically as intervention is mandatory and there will be ongoing contact from the beginning of her sentence to establish her needs and the risks involved in her situation. Her family will also be visited if possible. There will be multi agency involvement if necessary and prior to release there will be reports in most cases which deal with the housing situation, risks to the woman, alcohol/drugs issues, child protection, community reaction, plans for the future. On her release she will be expected to meet regularly with a CJSW worker and the above issues would be monitored and worked upon with the woman.

4. Are there any areas where you have identified gaps or weaknesses in the support provided to women released from a custodial sentence? What plans do you have to address such gaps or weaknesses?

At this time there is no specialist service to deal with the problems that women encounter which lead to offending. Such a service would address them in a manner which acknowledges the differences between male and female offending patterns eg

the method of engaging women offenders needs to be more proactive, it appears to be more helpful to women to engage them at an earlier stage in their offending, there is a need for more emphasis on “welfare” issues – health, budgeting etc. At the present time we spot purchase from Edinburgh and will offer places on the Willow Project.

5. What impact will any planned budget cuts have on the support provided to women released from a custodial sentence?

Budget cuts may have the very practical result of preventing access to the Willow Project. The cuts will also indirectly have the effect of reducing the time to spend with women, if such cuts affect recruitment.

6. How and when do you liaise with prison establishments in relation to the support needs of female prisoners who may be expected to move into your local authority area upon release? Are you confident that you have systems in place to ensure that all such women are identified?

For women who are imprisoned for longer than 4 years I am confident that ELC has the systems in place and women are seen as appropriate. However for those sentenced to a shorter period, the picture is much more complicated. Women may go into custody for different reasons – non payment of fines, after not guilty pleas, from different areas and may be sentenced without CJSW being aware of the fact. Sometimes it is possible for a woman to be released very shortly after sentence and before CJSW is aware. The reality of a part time worker means that parts of the week are not covered and there are delays although a letter goes out to each person offering a voluntary through care service on the day of sentence. All of the above mean that we have recognised that there may be problems in speedily ensuring that all women in prison are identified and are in ongoing discussion with Phoenix to ensure improved communication about women with whom they are working. We are also re-looking the systems by which we ensure we have accurate figures for the number of women in custody.

7. What additional support do you provide for women released from a custodial sentence where they have children?

For women with children we will liaise with Children’s Services and inform them routinely to check for child protection issues. We would seek to work in partnership with the Children’s Services where a woman is incarcerated and encourage women to engage with that service.

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