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WOMEN AND JUSTICE ARE WE MAKING PROGRESS?



THE GLASGOW WOMEN'S SUPPORTED BAIL SERVICE

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THE Glasgow Women's Supported Bail Service, a joint venture by Turning Point Scotland and Aberlour, was established in January 2016 with funding from Glasgow criminal justice social work services. Using our experience of supporting women with an involvement in the justice system and their children, we employ a partnership approach to provide and encourage alternatives to remand in custody in favour of community options that are designed to address the underlying causes of women's offending, whilst maintaining family relationships and engagement with support services in the community. There is no other similar service in Scotland.

Our service

The service offers support on a 1:1 and assertive outreach basis. The programme is a mix of addressing relevant issues such as cycle of change, victim empathy, drug and alcohol issues. Programmes are developed working with children affected by parental substance misuse, complex family support needs and trauma recovery. There is also support to build on and develop family and parenting skills. Housing is an extremely important and we work with women to prevent them being remanded in custody and assist with housing. We have extended the partnership approach to YPeople to offer temporary furnished flats (<http://www.ypeople.org.uk/>). Women with children are supported by our Aberlour worker and we work closely with Children and Families Social workers and attend Children Panels and schools and meet with teachers if required. Our worker has knowledge of children's services and links the family to services available in the local area.

Co-located within criminal justice social work offices, our three members of staff work with some of the most socially excluded, deprived and vulnerable women in Glasgow.

Supported bail offers intensive support to women, not only to reduce the need for remand but ultimately to reduce future reoffending. Community based options are a more appropriate way to deal with the issues and provide the stability of maintaining a tenancy and contact with children. Loss of a home and access to children only serves to make the situation worse on mental health and increases the risk of substance misuse and further offending.

The Commission on Women Offenders (2012) found that only 30% of women held on custodial remand go on to receive a custodial sentence and that disposals to divert women from prosecution and remand could be used more fully and should also be more women specific.

Our Bail Service is women specific and takes into account trauma and supports children. We are not used as part of a supervision requirement nor is our service imposed by a Sheriff directly from the bench: however, defence agents will reference our team and explain the support we offer when a Sheriff is considering bail as an option. A Sheriff may have more confidence in giving bail if she feels that the women will be supported to appointments and supported for reports.

Support is provided to attend appointments in the community and comply with any conditions attached to bail or an order. Staff also attend the Sheriff Court every week to speak to the women appearing there and to encourage them to engage with the service. This blend of outreach and partnership approach across a range of different agencies is helping to reach women that previously may not have had the opportunity to engage with services and receive the intensive support required to avoid remand and reduce their reoffending. We refer on to trauma service in Glasgow when women feel ready and we can see them daily if necessary.

The women we work with

The majority of our service users are over 25 and we engage with around 27 women per month.

Our referral criteria stipulate that service users must be on bail or a Structured Deferred Sentence. There are high numbers of service users reporting alcohol (45%), mental health (42%) and drug issues (39%). We would argue that alcohol and drug issues are a social issue and mental health is a health issue and women should not be locked up for this but instead cared for in the community. We also see significant numbers of women reporting issues with accommodation/housing and social functioning, as well being at risk of violence.

The majority of our discharges from the service are planned (78%): outcomes have been met and bail has been successful. After a court disposal has been given we continue to work with the woman until there is an established relationship with her criminal justice social worker and the woman and the worker agree to the discharge. If the woman is released without a Community Payback Order we would continue to work with her until services are in place and the woman is comfortable with the discharge. The remaining discharges are due to lack of contact. However, we make home visits and attempt to stick with the women giving them various opportunities to engage. We ensure that the women have some form of support by linking them in to local addiction services prior to closure. Should a woman receive a custodial sentence we stay in contact for a period and introduce the woman to Shine mentors for support on liberation.

Why we are needed

We feel we have a unique partnership service that is offered to women and children. Ellen's story shows the complexity and vulnerability of the women in our service and how having a complex life with mental health problems and very little support can result in criminal justice involvement. By offering intensive support to women when they are on bail assisting them to attend appointments and sticking with them to build a trusting relationship allows them to comply with court instructions. Furthermore it allows women to be given a community disposal and opportunities to change in the community with our assistance and to keep positive relationships with their children.

Kirstin Abercrombie is the Service Manager of the Glasgow Women's Supported Bail Service and is employed by Turning Point Scotland.

More on the project from:

www.turningpointscotland.com/glasgow-womens-supported-bail-service/

and

www.aberlour.org.uk/services/supported-bail-service/

Commission on Women Offenders (2012) Final Report of the Commission on Women Offenders Scottish Government.

ELLEN'S STORY

ELLEN is a 24 year-old woman who was referred to us in February 2017 by the court social work team after she was placed on a Bail Order. The reason for referral was to support Ellen to address a range of almost intractable psychosocial problems that were increasingly putting her at risk of being remanded in prison due to impulsive behaviours. It was established that Ellen had a history of social work involvement and had spent time in residential care. She had three children that she hoped could be returned to her care.

On referral Ellen was homeless and was displaying signs of trauma and distress. Ellen was initially very difficult to engage as she had significant trust issues with supports and services. We gathered information on how Ellen filled her day, known haunts and any appointments. The approach proved vital in forming a positive, trusting relationship with Ellen as it gave her a sense that the service cared and genuinely wanted to help her. Ellen's feelings of trust with the service slowly built up over a period of two to three months. During this time we remained in regular contact with Ellen's care manager and any other services involved with her support needs as part of information sharing and contributing towards the wider care plan.

Through liaising with other agencies and supporting Ellen she was placed in a supported accommodation unit for women who have children or are having supervised contact with their children. Unfortunately, this placement broke down fairly quickly as Ellen struggled to adhere to the requirements of the service resulting in Ellen becoming homeless. She then moved in with her mother and younger sibling. This also broke down as the home was overcrowded and family relationships became fraught and arguments were common place. Ellen voiced her sense of helplessness and hopelessness which increased her vulnerability and risk of prison custody due to her behaviour becoming more erratic. Ellen agreed to being referred to the YPeople accommodation service. Both services understood the complexity of her case and how this need required a quick response.

Ellen recently moved into the allocated flat and support is continuing, focusing on Ellen's impulsive behaviours, anger management and integrating Ellen into her local community. At the time of writing Ellen remains on bail. She has been provided with practical and psychological support since being referred to the service, but has significant unresolved trauma, resulting in disproportionate levels of distress for her. The service has been consistent with Ellen in terms of responses, assessment and care planning; this approach has reassured her and encouraged effective engagement with the service which allows for continued purpose and focus of support.