

scottish justice matters

Volume 5 | Number 2 | November 2017

ISSN 2052-7950



WOMEN AND JUSTICE ARE WE MAKING PROGRESS?

WOMEN'S CENTRES:

a new approach from The Robertson Trust

Fiona Jamieson

OVER the last 18 months, The Robertson Trust has been working with Centrestage Communities (www.centrestagecommunities.org.uk), an arts-based third sector organisation, to develop a women's centre led by the community in Cumnock, East Ayrshire.

Heart and Soul, which opened in July 2017, has been created by a community of twenty local women, some of whom have first-hand experience of the justice system. Based on an ethos of kindness and compassion, the centre aims to provide a positive space where all women can come together and socialise, thus providing support and companionship to those experiencing tough times.

It is intentionally unlike any community or women's centre we have come across in the UK and is the first of two to be created in our Women's Centre programme, which has also received funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. This aims to test the impact this approach can have on negative outcomes experienced by women, including offending behaviour, and also the impact on wider community engagement, support and cohesion.

Background

In 2012, the Commission on Women Offenders in Scotland report made a number of recommendations for improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system (see elsewhere in this issue) including the creation of local community justice centres to provide interventions and support.

At the time, The Robertson Trust had been supporting organisations in criminal justice for almost seven years, both through our open grants programme and our development work (recently renamed Innovation and Learning). We work in partnership with organisations to build understanding of what works and why when trying to address challenging social problems, with the aim of informing policy and practice.



Heart and Soul women's centre in Cumnock

While we welcomed this recommendation from the Commission, our learning had highlighted the benefits of focusing on early intervention approaches. We felt there was value in exploring if, and how, more holistic Women's Centres could be established, designed by local women for all local women, not just those in the criminal justice system. Women's Centres that were predominantly about, as Centrestage Communities put it, "fun, food and folk", which could, in turn, potentially provide a form of early intervention for those at risk of negative outcomes while decreasing the likelihood of further stigmatising those with convictions.

Our research involved visits to Women's Centres across the UK. We found that best practice Centres tended to:

- ❖ be led by the community and in particular, by local women
- ❖ offer gender-specific services that build on strengths and aspirations while also responding to needs
- ❖ provide opportunities to come together to build positive social networks and participate in activities in a safe, non-stigmatised environment
- ❖ be located within communities with a defined boundary to enable a sense of community ownership

Our second centre is planned for Renfrewshire, where Active Communities (www.activecommunities.co.uk) has been identified as the intermediary organisation and a Development Worker has recently been appointed.

Challenges and Learning

We are also interested in using this programme to explore how collaborative practice can assist agencies to better meet their own outcomes.

The development of the Centre comes from a starting point that is unusual; designed for women in the community by women in the community, building on strengths, interests and companionship. These are the key components of the programme and it proved challenging in the development of Heart and Soul to get the balance right between providing leadership, structure and vision, while allowing leadership and vision of the centre to emerge from local women.

From a funders' perspective, we have learned about the importance of building relationships with local statutory and third sector organisations to ensure there is an appetite, capacity and need. We have also learned that while it has been important to be approachable and informed enough to discuss everything, it is equally important to let go of the process and trust, in our case, our Development Worker, Valerie, to inspire local women to create a shared vision of what the Centre should be.

The learning from the development phase has been captured in an evaluation by the University of Strathclyde (available on our website) and it may well be that documentation around the opportunities and challenges in developing a project of this nature is one of the programme's biggest contributions.

In the meantime, we look forward to seeing the centres in Cumnock and Renfrewshire progress, and will be sharing regular updates throughout the programme across all of our digital channels.

Fiona Jamieson is Programme Manager, Innovation and Learning, Robertson Trust.