

Women's Resource Centre January 2008

The impact of commissioning and procurement on the women's voluntary and community sector



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Introduction

This briefing discusses the impact on the women's voluntary and community sector (VCS) of the current trend towards commissioning services. A special focus on the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) shows how commissioning can, and often does, fail women and children due to the lack of consideration given to the different needs of women and children and the gender-neutral approach to the commissioning process.

The women's voluntary sector contains a huge amount of expertise and deals with cross-cutting issues such as domestic and sexual violence, education, training, and employment, immigration issues, health and social care, housing and so on. The sector reaches out to some of the most vulnerable and socially excluded women in society and in spite of under-investment by central government, still manages to achieve financial and social benefits that far exceed its income.

Effective commissioning should mean utilising the existing expertise and user-led service practice that the women's sector holds in abundance. This is increasingly relevant in light of the Government's response to the Corston Report ^[1], which supports Baroness Corston's recommendations for local 'women's centre' provision to avoid custodial sentences and cut rates of re-offending.

If the Government is committed to promoting a diverse selection of service providers that cater to a variety of complex needs, the sustainability of the women's VCS is vital. An intelligent commissioning model needs to be adopted in all areas of the public sector, whereby 'added-value' is incorporated into procurement, which is defined as providing more than just financial gains.

WRC advocates an intelligent commissioning model that promotes diverse voluntary sector involvement in public service delivery, and sets out steps by which commissioners can do this.

Whilst aimed mainly at commissioners, this briefing will also be useful to women's voluntary and community organisations that are considering how they will engage in the commissioning and procurement agenda.

Many thanks to the following organisations for sharing their expertise and inputting into this briefing: Creative and Support Trust (CAST), THRESHOLD Women's Mental Health Initiative, Together Women Programme (TWP), Hibiscus Female Prisoners Welfare Project, ARP Women's Alcohol Centre and Women in Prison.

[1] Ministry of Justice (2007) The Government's response to the report by Baroness Corston of a Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System. Ministry of Justice: London

Commissioning and procurement practices should not exclude the specialist women's VCS – they are key stakeholders in service delivery. They are experts in their various fields, dealing with cross-cutting issues that affect 'hard-to-reach' women. Effective commissioning that meets the needs of women is impossible without the engagement of the women's VCS.

The women's VCS already caters for women's long and short-term complex needs by providing safe, women-only spaces and services, which are underpinned by an understanding of gender discrimination and power imbalances that may have contributed to service-users experiences. An holistic approach aims to meet women's multiple needs, often with a focus on empowerment and independence. This extremely effective approach needs to be harnessed by NOMS and other commissioning bodies.

This can only be achieved if women's organisations are sustainable. The increased pressures of competitive funding in an environment where many organisations feel they still have to justify their women-only status needs to be allayed. Commissioners need a greater understanding of the benefits of women-only organisations, especially when serving the needs of the most marginalised and socially excluded women [2].

The funding environment in which the women's VCS operates has, in the last five years, undergone significant changes, the most important being the shift from grant giving to commissioning. Formerly, the majority of third sector funding would have come from grant aid. The flexibility this brought enabled organisations to apply for funding based on the needs of their service-users but this is increasingly being phased out in favour of commissioning services, whereby, typically, it is the funder (in most cases the local authority) that specifies the need to be met.

Engaging the women's VCS in the commissioning process will have manifold returns in terms of wider financial and social benefits. Our recent economic impact pilot study [3] found that women's organisations are value for money, and represent an impressive return on funding/investment (up to 385% in our case studies), and is saving the state potentially millions of pounds through its intervention and prevention work. Without women's organisations, more women would be attending public services with acute problems which could have been prevented.

Even though many women's organisations work with a lack of capacity due to a lack of funding (they receive 1.2% of central government funding despite making up 7% of the entire voluntary sector) [4], commissioning processes should engage with the women's sector because:

- 1) They are experts in providing services to 'hard-to-reach' women and are led by the needs of their service users.
- 2) They provide economic and social benefits that far outweigh the 'cost' of funding their organisations.
- 3) Women-only services provide a safe environment that acknowledges the emotional needs of women. They are also spaces where service-users' experiences are understood in a context of gender discrimination and power imbalances that enable violence against women and inequality to exist. They often offer an holistic approach, which includes the health, social and educational needs of women.

[2] Women's Resource Centre (2007) Why women-only? The value and benefits of 'by women, for women' services. Women's Resource Centre: London.

[3] Women's Resource Centre (2006) The economic and social impact of the women's voluntary and community sector: a pilot study. Women's Resource Centre: London.

[4] Mocroft, I. and Zimmeck, M. (2004) Central Government Funding of Voluntary and Community Organisations 1982/83 to 2002/02, Home Office Research. Development and Statistics Directorate: London

The voluntary sector and public service delivery: Review of current findings and research

● The shift from grant giving to commissioning

The nature of the VCS is changing rapidly with many organisations concerned about their future sustainability within the commissioning and procurement environment. Grants represented 52% of government funding to charities in 2001/02, but only 38% in 2004/05. Contracts, on the other hand, increased from 48% in 2001/02 to 62% in 2004/05 [5].

Government funding for the voluntary sector has only risen by 1.5% since 2001 and 37% of government funding is going to charities with incomes over £10 million. Contracts have increased by 62%.

79% of voluntary organisations said they did not believe the tendering process was fair or transparent when they bid against in-house providers. 40% of charities did not bid for contracts because of the bureaucracy involved [6]. This is worrying when local authorities, such as Waltham Forest, have shifted their entire open grants programme to commissioning services [7].

A further disincentive for voluntary sector involvement is that only 12% of them get full cost recovery for the public services they deliver. The financial and bureaucratic costs of engaging in public service delivery mean that 64% of charities who do not currently deliver public services would not consider doing so in the next twelve months.

● Local government

Local authorities are a key source of funding for the voluntary and community sector. For example, WRC research into funding for domestic violence refuges in London showed that, on average, they receive 68% of their total funding from local authorities, such as Supporting People contracts. This over-reliance on local authorities places the voluntary sector in a vulnerable position because of the lack of diverse funding sources. Therefore, local government plays a crucial role in the security and sustainability of the voluntary sector.

There also appears to be a gap between the government's aims to promote quality of services and added-value within the commissioning process and the realities of tight budgets for local authorities that undermine these aims. The three percent efficiency savings that all local authorities must implement over the next three years [8] means that commissioning at a regional and sub-regional level (rather than locally) is more likely because of the reduced managing and administration costs.

Furthermore, it was understood that local authorities and commissioners had little understanding of how the voluntary sector works, and that commissioners were becoming more prescriptive in their tenders by seeking to place larger and larger contracts, thus precluding smaller, local VCS involvement. These are the views held by 10% of BASSAC's membership [9], consisting of their largest membership organisations. These findings add to the evidence that smaller voluntary organisations are currently losing out in the commissioning process.

[5] National Council of Voluntary Organisations (2007) UK Voluntary Sector Workforce Almanac. NCVO: London

[6] NAVCA (2007) Frontline Hopscotch: VCS engagement in delivering change for young people: a jump start or a step back? NAVCA: London

[7] <http://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/commissioning-programme-2007-2010.pdf>

[8] As announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007

[9] BASSAC is a membership organisation that represents and supports a national network of multi-purpose organisations that provide services, community development support and host smaller community initiatives.

● Threats to voluntary sector's 'added-value'

One of the major added-values of voluntary organisations is their ability to plug gaps in mainstream service provision by reaching out to the most marginalised and socially excluded. They are able to do this because of their perceived separation from the state. Their independence is crucial to their added-value in service delivery. However, only 26% of organisations delivering public services felt they were free to make decisions without pressure to conform to their funders' wishes ^[10], 69% said local groups were afraid to campaign in case their funding was affected, and 59% said that local bodies were not demonstrating that they understand independence ^[11].

● Two tiered VCS

The National Association for Probation Officers (NAPO) fears that regional contracts will squeeze out smaller providers, including charities ^[12]. This has been born out in WRC's experience, with our membership organisations losing out to bigger organisations for contracts, or more often, not even putting in a bid for a contract because of limited capacity or inability to provide mixed services.

AMICUS claims that "voluntary organisations are losing an increasing number of public service contracts to cheaper private sector bidders" ^[13].

[10] Charity Commission (2007) Stand and Deliver: the future for charities delivering public services. Charity Commission: London

[11] Compact Voice (2007) Stronger independence, Stronger relationships, Better outcomes. NCVO: London

[12] NAPO, Third Sector magazine (11 April, 2007)

[13] AMICUS, Third Sector magazine (31 January, 2007)

The women's voluntary and community sector

The women's VCS make up a small, but distinct proportion of the voluntary sector. It faces all of the issues outlined above, although their funding problems are even more acute because of the perceived lack of need for women-only services, which is driven by gender-neutral policies and the belief that equality between women and men has been achieved.

WRC's research shows that the women's VCS is experiencing cuts in funding for preventative services for women and girls. The women's sector only receives 1.2% of central government funding despite making up 7% of the voluntary sector. Current funding trends are favouring generic organisations that run women's projects and bypassing women's organisations. Consequently, their risks of closure are heightened. Closures are occurring rapidly ^[14].

Reasons for this are:

- 1) Limited capacity because of lack of funding.
- 2) Stretched resources mean the delivery of front-line services takes precedence over engagement with local authorities, national consultations and community engagement – all of which could increase the voice of the women's sector and make them less likely to be ignored in local funding streams.
- 3) Many women's organisations have to justify their women-only status. There is limited understanding by local authorities and commissioners of the 'added-value' of women's organisations and what makes them different from generic organisations that seem to be offering the same service. Women-only services provide a safe, single sex environment, an approach that seeks to acknowledge the emotional needs of women users, an understanding of women's discrimination and power imbalances that places them in contexts that are more likely to be violent and/or oppressive, and offers an holistic approach which includes the health, social and educational needs of women.
- 4) The trend towards funding generic organisations for women's services, bringing services in-house, and the cuts in public sector funding is resulting in closures of women's organisations.
- 5) The women's VCS cannot compete on an equal playing field when bidding for tenders because of the reasons outlined above.
- 6) Many women's organisations do not deliver public services. Rather they provide what could be called 'discretionary' public services (e.g. refuges) that are nevertheless life-saving and which cater to the emotional and complex needs of women.

[14] Camden Women's Health Bus closed in February 2006, London YWCA closed in December 2005, Maternity Alliance closed in autumn 2005, Women and Medical Practice closed in April 2004, Women's Counselling Service in Hounslow closed in March 2006, Women's Health closed in March 2006, 24 years after it was set up. The number of women-only rape crisis centres has more than halved in the last 10 years. There were 68 in 1984, and now there are 32. Of these none have stable, statutory funding.

WRC knows of 15 women's organisations that are currently running down reserves to stay open and research found that 38% of women's organisations had to end a position, project or service due to funding. Many more are facing the threat of closure.

How commissioning can go wrong:

Case study: Domestic violence services, mainstream service provision and the women's VCS

Recent WRC research into the funding of women's refuges in London ^[15], found that, on average, refuges receive over half their annual income from local authority Supporting People contracts. It also found that 'super providers' were emerging, holding contracts in multiple boroughs. Over the past three years, at least seven women's refuges have been taken over by larger organisations. Another five refuges were considering merging or being taken over.

Changes to grant aid in the last few years has meant that refuges' main source of funding is from the Supporting People Programme. This has reconfigured services, which are now determined wholly by the criteria of Supporting People. For example, many refuges that offered a children's worker now struggle to fund the service because it is not part of the Supporting People programme. Cases such as this reveal that the added-value of refuges, which previously resided in their ability to provide an holistic service to women and their children as well as their experience of effective campaigning and informed policy work, is now under threat. As well as this, some refuge providers have not had incremental funding increases, which effectively means a loss of funding in real terms. These shifts in funding practices pose a considerable threat to the sustainability and diversity of the refuge sector.

There are big disparities in budgets across the London boroughs so refuge provision is varied. Despite the government's hopes for a system that takes 'value for money' into account rather than solely being based on lowest cost, in reality, it is likely that only the refuges that are skilled at negotiating better contracts will be commissioned. There is also concern expressed that the number of commissioners who truly understand domestic violence and the needs of women and their children is limited. Contracting women's organisations, which might cost more in the short-run, would prove to be economical in the long-run if this 'added value' was taken into account more by commissioners.

There is also the issue of devolvement of power from central to local government level. Only since October 2007 has local government had the chance to implement specific targets related to sexual violence and so, up until recently, there has been no incentive to fund a decent violence against women sector. Women's organisations do now have an opportunity to influence which National Indicator targets their LSP will take forward in their Local Area Agreement (LAA), but this is a complicated process, dependent on women's organisations having the capacity to lobby and make links with their LSP ^[16].

[15] Women's Resource Centre (2007) Funding to London Women's Refuges: Report to London Councils. WRC: London

[16] For more information go to www.rapecrisis.org.uk or see WRC's briefing on the subject:

WRC, NAVCA, Rape Crisis (England and Wales) (2007) Briefing for Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIOs) on the 'Crisis in Rape Crisis' and sexual violence policy drivers. Women's Resource Centre: London

How commissioning can go wrong:

Case Study: NOMS, women offenders and the VCS

The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) was set up in 2004 as a way of bringing competition into offender services by commissioning services from the private, voluntary and public sectors. NOMS should tap into the women's VCS as rich source of expertise for their service delivery aims for women offenders.

It is estimated that over 900 organisations are delivering services in prisons and a further 600 providing services to offenders in the community. Although many of these provide services for women and men, very few are delivering services specifically for women.

However, the 30,000 organisations that make up the women's VCS in the UK provide a gamut of services that while not perhaps catering *specifically* for women offenders, still work with thousands of women labelled as 'at-risk'. The women's VCS is extremely important and relevant in terms of meeting the cross-cutting needs of many female ex/offenders. These 'complex' issues include:

- **domestic violence** (at least 50% report being victims of childhood abuse or domestic violence) [17].
- **sexual assault and abuse** (in one survey of women using Women in Prison's services in HMP Holloway, 36% disclosed experience of sexual abuse in childhood and 45% said they had experienced physical abuse) [18].
- **drug and alcohol dependency** (66% of sentenced women in prison say they were either drug dependent or drinking to hazardous levels before custody) [19].
- **mental illness** (70% of sentenced women prisoners suffer from two or more mental health 'disorders' and 37% had previously attempted suicide) [20].
- **housing** (in the most recent Home Office resettlement survey, 38% of women prisoners questioned said they were expecting to be homeless on release, and 31% who were in owned or rented property before custody lost it while they were in prison) [21].
- **immigration** (foreign national female prisoners make up 19% of the total women's prison population who have different needs around issues such as language, family links, dependent children and immigration which often leads to isolation, depression and confusion) [22].

Women's organisations work with women on all of these issues and their high levels of expertise and long history of good practice should be utilised within NOMS commissioning. However, many women's organisations find that they are rejected, largely because they are dismissed as niche service providers because they are unable to meet the needs of men.

[17] www.womeninprison.org.uk

[18] http://www.womeninprison.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=37&Itemid=46

[19] Home Office (2004) Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System. Home Office: London

[20] Social Exclusion Unit (2002) Reducing Re-Offending by Ex-Prisoners. Cabinet Office: London

[21] Home Office (2005) Resettlement outcomes on release from prison in 2003. Home Office: London

[22] Corston, J. (2007) The Corston Report. Home Office: London

CAST (Creative and Support Trust) applied twice for NOMS funding and were rejected both times. Emma Aynsley, Director of CAST states:

"[We] tried hard to engage at the start, but it became clear that it was taking up a lot of time (several meetings a month at times) and then that the whole process had stalled. I became quite cynical about the whole thing... NOMS is huge, and has had a huge amount of money spent on it, and on telling the third sector that we need to get ready for commissioning. The money would have been better spent by the third sector on delivering actual services. I feel quite strongly that (and this applies to statutory funding generally but in particular to NOMS) that it is not our capacity that needs building (as is so often suggested) but our funding. If they spent half the money on funding groups like ours, as they have on publicity and bureaucracy, there would be far fewer people in jail."

Threshold were also rejected for NOMS funding in the summer of 2006, despite having 18 years experience working with complex mental health issues, including bi-polar disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder. The grant would have gone towards a one-to-one counselling group for women offenders with a crèche facility running alongside. As things now stand, Threshold, like many other women's organisations with long-running expertise in their chosen fields, are facing imminent closure. Their freephone info-line, which provided confidential information and emotional support to women, their carers and workers, had to be cut back to just one day a week for three hours because of a lack of funding. This was despite the high level of demand for their services.

Pippa Judd, Clinical Manager states her reasons as to why she thinks they were overlooked:

"No counselling projects have got the money locally. They are looking for Sussex wide providers and social enterprises that can manage much of the work in a way that smaller organisations don't have the capacity to achieve."

Women in Prison (WIP) was one women's organisation that did manage to receive funding but Cathy Stancer, ex-Director has written that:

"...the experience of receiving funding from the Offenders' Learning and Skills Unit was problematic. There did not seem to be a person responsible for liaising with us about our funding, which was year on year, making it difficult to plan ahead. We did not receive a decision about 2004/5 funding until two months into the financial year, a potentially disastrous situation for a small organisation. There was no specific funding stream for voluntary sector work or about how to apply." [23]

Commissioning is failing women's organisations that are seen as niche service providers and unable to fulfil large contracts because of their size, limited funding and capacity. While the 'Partnership in Public Services' report [24] and the Audit Commission [25] have expressed a wish to retain a diverse network of providers, on the ground it would appear that commissioners feel it is easier to contract out to larger consortium bids or larger generic organisations that have no long-running experience of working with women.

[23] Women in Prison consultation response to The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in The National Offender Management Service (2005)

[24] Office of the Third Sector (2006) Partnership in Public Services: An action plan for third sector involvement. Cabinet Office: London

[25] Audit Commission (2007) Hearts and minds: commissioning from the voluntary sector. Audit Commission: London

The two main issues raised in these case studies are:

- 1) Firstly, the future sustainability of the women's VCS depends on funding as well as capacity-building support, which will enable them to carry on delivering their services, as well as compete on an equal footing with other organisations for contracts, and
- 2) Secondly, that commissioning practices for women must advocate specialist 'women-only' services and existing local women's voluntary sector services.

The engagement of the local women's VCS is vital to the implementation of the Corston Report in community service provision. There is no need to reinvent the wheel; the high levels of expertise in meeting women's complex needs (including domestic violence, sexual abuse, substance misuse, housing, education, children's services etc.) is there to be utilised if NOMS chooses to tap into it.

NOMS grants 2007/8

The trend in contracts being awarded to generic organisations rather than to specialist women's organisations is reflected in NOMS funding grants 2007/8. For example Caldmore Area Housing Association received £94,457 over a period of three years for a floating support and parenting skills -project for women, particularly those with mental health difficulties. £61,168 was awarded to Norfolk Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (Norfolk ACRO) for a project aimed at women offenders, with a focus on BME women.

Whilst the needs of women are being considered in these instances, it does not make sense that established women's voluntary and community organisations (and the safe, women-only spaces they provide) are being overlooked in favour of larger and/or generic organisations.

Hibiscus is one of the exceptions, being a small, specialist organisation working with Foreign National and British based Black and Minority Ethnic women in prison. NOMS is currently funding two of their projects. This type of specialist commissioning needs to be replicated in all NOMS regions because it taps into existing expertise and relationships that have already been built.

Working specifically with women is not ordinarily within the remit of generic organisations, and there is often little attachment to catering to the needs of women on a long-term basis. If contracts change or budgets tighten, women's 'add-on' projects are at risk of being disbanded because they are not core to the organisation. Women's Alcohol Centre, which is part of the larger organisation, ARP, found that this happened to them, and it was only after fierce lobbying and a written report that set out the arguments for the need of a women-only drug and alcohol service, that they were saved.

How commissioning can work: **The Together Women Programme (TWP)**

The Together Women Programme was set up in response to the needs of women ex-offenders, the percentage of which has soared by 126% over the past decade, and whose needs are marginalised because of their minority status as part of the wider prison population. Women in prison make up just over 4000 (6%) of the total prison population. Their needs have never been a priority within a system designed for men, and by men. The urgency of the situation has been highlighted by women's organisations such as Women in Prison, who campaign for reform of a system which has seen 70 women commit suicide in prison in the last ten years.

Four centres are now up and running in Leeds, Bradford, Doncaster and Liverpool, and although they have distinctive features, they share the aim of providing a holistic support centre for women ex-offenders, or those at risk from offending. The contract to provide services in the Yorkshire and Humber region was won by a consortium, headed by Foundation Housing. Doncaster Women's Centre, Developing Initiatives Supporting Communities (DISC) (education and training), Touchstone (mental health), Shelter and YWCA make up the main delivery partners in the consortium.

Having local women's organisations involved in service delivery is extremely important, because while a mix of generic voluntary organisations and specialist women's organisations bring a healthy and diverse mix of skills to the table, the expertise of women-only and women-led organisations in particular is invaluable in making sure that women's complex needs are understood and met. The danger of having only medium and big sized organisations represented has been acknowledged with the consortium making links with smaller organisations such as Keighley Asian Womens Organisation in Bradford. Whilst it is important to recognise that many women's organisations may not have the capacity to deliver services wholesale, their size should not determine their involvement in service delivery. The 'added-value' that is brought along with their inclusion far outweighs concerns about their limited capacity. And it is only with this involvement that their capacity will improve.

Indeed, the tendering process was extremely complicated and required a great deal of detailed information and reporting that would have excluded many smaller organisations from bidding ^[26]. Only five out of a hundred organisations that expressed an interest in bidding were able to pull together a bid in time. The tendering process in the pre-award phase needs to be remedied in light of this to ensure a clear and manageable process to attract a diverse provider base.

Rokaiya Khan, Operational Manager of the consortium at Foundation Housing believes that having a range of specialist service providers is integral to the success of the project, because catering for women's complex needs cannot be done by a one-size-fits-all provider. Women's housing, mental health, physical health, education and training needs all need to be met, and it is essential that women's organisations are included in the service-provider mix. They provide safe, women-only spaces, are led by women, and have long-running expertise in helping marginalised women.

Whilst the NOMS commissioning framework would need to drastically change if Baroness Corston's recommendations to replace women's prisons with smaller, custodial units were to happen, this project provides a good, working template to follow.

At the moment, NOMS requires 75% of their service delivery within the project to be focused on ex-offenders and 25% for women 'at-risk' of offending. This leaves a gap for women's organisations that do not necessarily have the experience of working with offenders to be involved in service delivery because

[26] Acevo (2007) Beating Re-offending: the third sector solution. ACEVO: London

their clientele mainly comprises 'at-risk' women anyway. However, this figure needs to become more flexible to reflect need at a grass roots level.

Women's centres and holistic solutions to complex needs should not just be confined to offenders, when thousands of women would benefit from this kind of service delivery. The funding implications would be more complicated with sources probably having to come from a variety of funders (e.g. PCTs) that reflects the cross-section of agency involvement in women's lives.

Women's organisations are invaluable to the success of women centres like TWP. Their limited capacity at the current time will be alleviated in the long-term by their involvement in partnership working for larger contracts. Their expertise should be actively sought and their analysis of women's discrimination seen in the context of their long-running experience and commitment.

Yet despite the early successes of TWP, we have heard anecdotal evidence that the project is facing hostility from various local bodies, including probation officers, who believe that the allocation of resources is unfairly biased towards women. This suggests that the arguments for 'women-only' services need to be more readily addressed and reiterated by NOMS. Levels of misunderstanding and perceptions of unfairness need to be proactively tackled, in line with the stipulations of the Gender Equality Duty.

An evaluation of the Together Women Programme outcomes will be undertaken when the programme ends in 2009.

Meeting the needs of women offenders: Implementing the Corston Report

The Corston Report provided an opportunity to highlight the marginalised and inappropriate treatment of women in the British prison system. The Government's response to it is promising in terms of the acceptance of most of the recommendations. Consequently, the following action points have been developed by the Government:

- 1) The NOMS Equality and Diversity Action Plan will set out how the requirements of the Gender Equality Duty are to be met and mechanisms for monitoring compliance within NOMS.
- 2) A NOMS National Service Framework for Women will be developed in April 2008, which will set out the policy for commissioning services for women and will contain specific action for commissioners to ensure that locally commissioned services address the identified needs of women.
- 3) A revised guide will be published to replace the National Probation Service's 'Good practice on delivering effective services for women offenders in the community' in April 2008. This will be a practical guide to ensure necessary changes are made to improve interventions and services for women in the community.
- 4) A cross-departmental project will examine the extent and nature of current women's centre provision and will develop proposals for building existing services and support which can be accessed for women offenders. The project will explore the benefits of women's centres in meeting a range of government objectives including health, education and training, housing, finance etc.

We support these moves for the inclusion of gender in effective commissioning practices for women offenders, ex-offenders and women at risk of offending.

We recommend that:

- Women-only service provision needs to be highlighted in the revised guide on good practice in commissioning. This includes understanding why 'women-only' can be more effective than generic service providers in meeting the complex needs of women offenders.
- Effective monitoring of the extent of women-only service provision should be undertaken by NOMS to track how involved the women's voluntary sector is in service delivery.
- Government support into existing services should take into account existing women's sector research e.g. WRC's 'why women?' report.
- The government should acknowledge the women's VCS specifically in its plans to implement community service provision in line with the Corston report recommendations. As a major stakeholder and source of expertise on the needs of local women, their engagement in service delivery should be actively sought.

What is intelligent commissioning? ^[27]

The Audit Commission defines intelligent commissioning as an effective strategy whereby commissioners:

- Maintain a detailed understanding of what services their users need and involve local voluntary organisations in identifying them.
- Develop a good understanding of the market, knowing who can supply particular services at an affordable price.
- Run an effective procurement process, balancing the need for short-term efficiency gains with longer-term market development objectives. This includes providing a choice of grants or contracts, developing a sound basis for determining price, having a transparent and efficient process prior to awarding the contract or grant and an effective management of the working relationship after the grant or contract has been awarded.

The Commission recommends that local bodies should engage local voluntary organisations in service planning and designing commissioning processes that will encourage diverse providers and improve how they measure value for money in public services.

Central government can play a supporting role by developing training and tools for commissioning and procurement, advise local bodies on data collection to measure the impact of commissioning on the local voluntary sector, and communicate the aims of capacity-building initiatives effectively.

This model does not single out the voluntary sector for special treatment but the good practice advocated in commissioning and procurement will benefit the commissioning of services from all sectors.

The Audit Commission report also states that the differences in definition of 'added-value' by commissioners and the voluntary sector need to be resolved. Commissioners tend to see it as benefits in financial terms, whereas the voluntary sector views it as the wider economic and social benefits of a service. This is obviously harder to measure but these two need not be mutually exclusive. The report states that a broader view of 'added-value' requires consideration of outputs and outcomes as well as inputs. A unit cost approach often puts smaller organisations at a disadvantage and so satisfaction surveys to measure user-focused criteria should be set alongside considerations of cost effectiveness.

The intelligent commissioning model would help ensure a more diverse provider base by incorporating the wider economic and social benefits of a particular service into the procurement process, rather than solely being based on financial leverage. The women's voluntary and community sector have a good evidence base to explain they added-value in terms of providing women-only space, focusing on empowerment and independence, having a high level of service-user involvement, having an integrated 'one-stop shop' of services, employing a needs based approach and the ability to reach 'hard-to-reach' women.

[27] Audit Commission (2007) Hearts and Minds: commissioning from the voluntary sector. Public Services National Report. Audit Commission: London

Recommendations and outcomes

Objective	Outcome	Action/s for local and central Government and commissioners:	Measure of success
<p>Ensure all commissioning and procurement practices do not exclude the women's VCS that have the expertise to deliver services.</p> <p>Ensure secure and sustainable funding for the women's VCS.</p>	<p>Compact compliance.</p> <p>More informed and responsive commissioning.</p> <p>Breaking down barriers to women's sector involvement in bidding for tenders.</p> <p>Greater women's sector participation in local engagement, decision-making and service delivery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Commitment to ensure continuation of grants programmes (as opposed to shifting funding to commissioning programmes). ● Maintain and develop grant schemes to build the sustainability of the women's voluntary and community groups and to increase their capacity and ability to bid for contracts on an equal footing with other organisations. ● The reality of unequal gender relations and an understanding of women's needs and experiences should be included in training packages for all commissioners. Women's sector expertise should be used for this training. ● Undertake regular audits to identify how many contracts are awarded to the women's VCS, and how much these contracts are worth. This should be disaggregated to identify women's organisations working with different groups of women. ● Local authority funding and commissioning should be geared towards improving the capacity (e.g. staffing) of current services and preventing the risk of reduction or closure of services (e.g. further losses of outreach services). ● All boroughs need to commit to annual inflationary increases of contracts as a minimum standard. 	<p>Diverse service provider base.</p>

Objective	Outcome	Action/s for local and central Government and commissioners:	Measure of success
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Commitment to services delivered by specialist and smaller voluntary sector organisations (such as those led by women, for women) to ensure a diverse provider base. ● Commissioning contracts need to specify the need to serve women as a distinct group within an environment that has been proved works i.e. a safe, women-only space that acknowledges the emotional, complex needs of women users. ● Evidence has shown that procurement guidance has been insufficient as the majority of public bodies still do not take equality into account in their commissioning and procurement processes. We want to see this remedied with a statutory obligation on public sector procurement to place anti-discrimination measures at its heart. ● There needs to be an explicit recognition of the role of the women's VCS in preventative services (such as women's health organisations, sexual violence counselling and domestic violence advocacy) by government, funders and commissioners. ● Apply an intelligent commissioning model (as identified by the Audit Commission) to all public service delivery models. 	

Objective	Outcome	Action/s for local and central Government and commissioners:	Measure of success
<p>Ensure that voluntary organisations not wishing to deliver public services and still be able to continue with their work.</p>	<p>Better informed commissioning and needs-assessments in local areas.</p> <p>Funding priorities are determined on sound evidence and local knowledge.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maintain or develop grant schemes to engage with the women's voluntary sector. ● Undertake regular funding audits to identify how much funding is provided to the women's VCS and who is applying for funding. This data should be disaggregated by gender and other equalities strand. 	<p>Increased visibility and recognition of the women's VCS and its role in addressing systematic discrimination against women, as well as its role in preventative services and overall service provision.</p> <p>Proportionate funding for the women's VCS.</p> <p>Well resourced and sustainable services, which meet the (often hidden) needs of women.</p>
<p>To implement the recommendations put forward in the Corston</p>	<p>Increased knowledge and understanding of women's complex needs by commissioners.</p> <p>Women ex/offenders will receive an holistic and more effective level of care and support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Women-only service provision needs to be highlighted in the revised guide on good practice in commissioning. This includes understanding why 'women-only' can be more effective than generic service providers in meeting the complex needs of women offenders. ● Effective monitoring of the extent of women-only service provision should be undertaken by NOMS to track how involved the women's voluntary sector is in service delivery. 	<p>Women-only services will be an integral component of the service provider mix.</p> <p>Re-offending rates for women lowered.</p> <p>Less women receiving custodial sentences.</p>

Objective	Outcome	Action/s for local and central Government and commissioners:	Measure of success
	Better informed commissioning through engagement with the women's VCS.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Government support into existing services should take into account existing women's sector research e.g. WRC's 'why women?' report. ● The government should acknowledge the women's VCS in its plans to implement community service provision in line with the Corston report. As a major stakeholder and source of expertise on the needs of women, their engagement in service delivery should be actively sought. 	Long-term health, social care and criminal justice costs lowered.
Objective	Outcome	Action/s for women's sector organisations:	Measure of success
<p>Engage with the public service delivery agenda on your own terms.</p> <p>Engage with local commissioning bodies at the earliest needs-assessment stages.</p> <p>To have a good understanding of how to influence funding decisions and compete for contracts.</p>	<p>More decision-making power at local level, leading to increased visibility of the women's VCS and prioritising women's needs at a local level.</p> <p>Increased sources of funding for women's organisations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Engage with local decision-making forums such as Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and lobby for relevant National Indicators (for more on this see WRC briefing on this at www.wrc.org.uk) ● If the LSP chooses not to include the National Indicator you have lobbied for, despite the evidence you have presented, you could request a Gender Impact Assessment (under the Gender Equality Duty) of the decision as it will clearly affect women. See the sexual violence briefing recently produced by WRC, NAVCA and Rape Crisis (England and Wales) for more information and examples of other tools to use (www.wrc.org.uk) 	<p>Higher percentage of women-only organisations winning public service</p> <p>An independent and thriving-women's sector.</p>

Objective	Outcome	Action/s for women's sector organisations:	Measure of success
	Better evidence base for the entire women's VCS.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Keep abreast of local commissioning and procurement plans and ensure your involvement by making local links. ● Collate accurate and long-term data to use as evidence in bids, needs-assessment consultations etc. 	

This briefing has been written with input from:

Creative and Support Trust (CAST) who offer a holistic service of education, training and employment advice to women offenders, women at risk of offending and women with mental health or substance misuse problems.

THRESHOLD Women's Mental Health Initiative provided a counselling service for women experiencing mental health difficulties presenting with a range of issues including: childhood abuse, adult abuse - sexual, emotional and violent, parenting difficulties, addiction, eating disorders, self injury etc. They targeted women on low incomes and from socially deprived backgrounds. They are about to be taken over because of funding shortages.

Together Women Programme (TWP) is a women-only, safe and confidential environment to explore issues and gain skills that enable ex-offenders, or those at risk of offending, to take control of their lives. The TWP offers support and counselling for a range of issues including children and families, emotional issues, mental and physical health, finance, benefit and debt and education, training and employment.

Hibiscus Female Prisoners Welfare Project provides a practical, impartial and supportive service specifically for the special needs of Foreign National and British based Black and Minority Ethnic women in prison. They make sure women can understand and exercise their rights within the Criminal Justice System, access services upon their release, and maintain and develop relationships with their child

This briefing includes case studies from the following organisations:

ARP Women's Alcohol Centre who offer advice, information and support to women in London who have alcohol-related problems. They offer a unique service to women including child protection, mental health and domestic violence issues. Many of the women who access the services would not be willing to attend a mixed gender service.

Women in Prison is a charity working with women at risk of going to prison, in prison and after release to promote their resettlement, personal development, education and training. They educate the public and policy makers about women in the criminal justice system and promote alternatives to custody.

About the Women's Resource Centre

The Women's Resource Centre (WRC) is a charity which supports women's organisations to be more effective and sustainable. We provide training, information, resources and one-to-one support on a range of organisational development issues. We also lobby decision makers on behalf of the women's not-for-profit sector for improved representation and funding.

Our members work in a wide range of fields including violence against women, employment, education, rights and equality, the criminal justice system and the environment. They deliver services to and campaign on behalf of some of the most marginalised communities of women. There are over ten thousand people working or volunteering for our members who support almost half a million individuals each year.

Contact us

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Generating, promoting and sustaining voluntary action that improves the status of women.
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