Implementing services for women offenders and those ‘at risk’ of offending: action research with Together Women

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Summary

Together Women began operating between late 2006 and early 2007 at five centres in the North West and Yorkshire & Humberside National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Regions. The project was set up to address the needs of women who had offended to reduce their re-offending, and the needs of women described as being ‘at risk’ of offending to prevent them becoming involved in crime. Together Women was also expected to lead to women being diverted from prosecution and custody. Although the exact range of support varies a little between the five centres, according to local demand and local partnerships, it includes training on issues such as parenting, managing mental health, life skills, thinking skills and addressing offending behaviour. Each centre arranges for service providers to hold surgeries covering a range of issues (such as accessing benefits or housing) but also functions as a drop-in centre where women can access activities such as reading groups and complementary therapies. Where suitable provision exists, Together Women attempts to tap into it; where there is a gap in provision, it commissions another provider or delivers it in-house. In this way Together Women seeks to link up and extend local services without duplicating them. A key element of the Together Women approach is that the level and range of services a woman receives are determined by an assessment of need. The resulting support plan is intended to be holistic. Involving service users in the design and review of such plans is expected to be empowering which is seen as an important step in getting women to take control of their lives.

The stated objectives of Together Women are to reduce re-offending and to divert women ‘at risk’ of offending from becoming offenders. Secondary aims are to divert women offenders from prosecution and custody.

The current research study, conducted between April and December 2007, used an action research design. This meant the researchers maintained regular contact with both project teams throughout the study, provided brief written feedback to the project managers and the funding authority on a monthly basis throughout the fieldwork phase, and delivered an interim report after the first six months. The feedback and reports highlighted obstacles to be addressed by the projects and noted progress made since an issue was first highlighted. They also described how the research was progressing.

In terms of methodology, the research involved four interrelated strands.

- Observation of Together Women in action and scrutiny of local reports and briefing papers.
- Interviews about implementation and their initial views about the value of Together Women were conducted with 40 of those working for Together Women, those referring to and receiving referrals from the project, sentencers, and other local stakeholders.
Forty-three (randomly selected) service users were interviewed after their first contact about referral routes, followed by a second round of interviews (N=26), at least three months later, to obtain views on how useful support from Together Women had been. A data audit based on 50 cases from one of the two areas was carried out to assess whether its database was capable of providing detailed information about factors such as referrals, service users’ needs and risks, assessment, attendance/compliance, outputs and outcomes.

This report discusses the findings generated from these strands and presents them within three key areas.

1. **How does contact with Together Women lead to change?**

   Most work with offenders is premised on the understanding that crime is the outcome of an interaction between situational factors (such as being unemployed) and personal factors (such as having pro-criminal attitudes) which increase the risk of offending. To be effective, it follows that an intervention must focus on criminogenic needs – i.e. those which research has shown to be directly related to offending. This understanding has informed at least some of the thinking behind Together Women. However, Together Women includes work on other (non-criminogenic) needs. While this may still be justified in a programme with an explicit aim of reducing re-offending, it is important to spell out precisely how working with non-criminogenic needs will support this objective in a ‘model of change’. The alternative is for Together Women to be re-imagined as a broad ranging support programme for any severely socially excluded woman, where crime prevention and reduction remain objectives, but are not primary objectives in most cases.

2. **The value of Together Women: early perspectives from stakeholders and service users**

   Together Women was seen by local stakeholders as filling an important gap in provision, although gaps remained in the supply of suitable accommodation, access to counselling and mental health outreach services.

   Most respondents believed women had at least some different needs to men, whether they were offenders or at risk, and all 40 stakeholders and staff believed that women responded to a different approach to men. Separate ‘women-only’ provision was regarded as vital because so many women were viewed as vulnerable and unassertive, often because of a history of abuse but also because of current or very recent domestic violence. This element was strongly valued by service users. They also reported that Together Women was different from other services they had experienced in that Together Women staff seemed genuinely interested in them as individuals rather than just providing assistance because they are obliged to do so. For example, they saw the phone calls staff made to encourage attendance in this light.
Probation staff reported some reluctance, particularly among younger staff, to refer to Together Women. Some younger female probation officers were said to lack an appreciation of the need for woman-only centres and some male officers were said to resent the idea. These attitudes need to be examined more closely in a later evaluation but indicate an important – and unexpected – training need.

Many of those service users interviewed at the outset saw themselves as not deserving help or even attention. They took each day at a time, describing the way they used drink, for example, as a way of blotting out their problems. The idea that they might change their lives was clearly viewed as so unrealistic, it had simply not occurred to some. Most of those interviewed after several months of contact with Together Women described feeling more optimistic and some were able to cite specific examples of the way they had, with help, been able to take charge of their problems and begun to plan for the future. However, there were others, particularly those with substance abuse problems, who were clearly taking two steps forward and one step back.

While a number of stakeholders and staff acknowledged that there might be advantages to making Together Women enforceable, all but three concluded that this would be unhelpful and, ultimately, ineffective. It was considered to be unhelpful because it would create ambiguity in the relationship between the key worker and service user. It was also suggested that while enforcement might lead to attendance, it was seen as unlikely to inspire genuine compliance as it robbed service users of choice. This was also at odds with the underlying ethos that Together Women should be empowering.

Finally, it is worth reporting that considerable anxiety was expressed by staff and stakeholders about what would happen when central funding for Together Women ended.

3. Monitoring interventions and change

Until a clear and explicit model of change is developed, it is not possible to fully prescribe what should be assessed, what processes should be looked for, and what outcomes might be expected when identifying the impact of the projects. The following comments about evaluating the project in the future should be regarded as preliminary and tentative for that reason.

It is now usual to assess the impact an intervention has in relation to those referred and then, within that, to compare its apparent impact with those who did not start, those who started but did not complete and those who completed the intervention. Ideally, these results are compared with those of a control group who were not referred to the intervention which is created either by random allocation or by post-hoc matching. In addition, the most comprehensive records held by any project are on service users who
maintain contact but who may not be typical of people referred to the service. Obtaining outcome information in other cases is likely to be highly problematic, time-consuming and expensive. This is a factor any subsequent process and outcome feasibility study will need to address.

Because the action research was not commissioned until the projects were under way, assessment procedures and tools were already in place and a database had been designed in one of the two project areas to record initial assessments, work completed and some elements of change. The project is currently over-reliant on key workers’ unvalidated judgements of change. This effectively means that those tasked with assisting women to change assess the impact of their own work. More objective measures have been identified to assess need and impact, but the feasibility of replacing existing measures with these alternatives remains to be assessed. The evaluators and those involved in Together Women concluded that, to obtain a comprehensive and accurate picture of impact, it was important to measure incremental improvements (e.g. from chaotic to managed drug use) rather than absolute success (e.g. abstinence) alone.

Any outcome study would assess the degree to which Together Women is associated with reductions in the offending of those referred to it as current offenders. No practical systematic way has been identified of assessing Together Women’s impact in terms of preventing offending among the at risk group. This is because there is no counterfactual which can be measured for any of the women without criminal records (i.e. it is not possible to predict how many would have gone on to offend in the absence of Together Women). Under these circumstances, no further effort should be expended on this. Claims about the preventive value of Together Women for women who have never offended may still be reasonable, but these should be based on evidence that the project had reduced re-offending among women with some official history of offending behaviour.

Together Women staff were able to identify cases in which diversion from custody happened, but interviews with legal advisors and sentencers suggested that this was rare and that Together Women was regarded as an almost exclusively low tariff option. It is obviously essential that any further study examines this; however, local data derived from court reports will not identify all cases where diversion actually occurred, while centrally held data on sentencing are known to contain inaccuracies at the individual court level.
Conclusion

This report suggests that approximately a year after Together Women was funded, issues remain about making the model of change more explicit, the best ways of securing service user engagement, persuading the courts to use Together Women in place of custody despite it being welcomed for lower tariff cases, assessing need, and recording and measuring change. However, it is equally important to note some important achievements. Together Women has been swiftly and efficiently implemented. Its’ staff are enthusiastic, committed and well-managed. It has been welcomed by other local agencies and sentencers who see it as filling an important gap. Perhaps most importantly, the service users who have sustained contact value the assistance provided directly by Together Women and the access it provides to other local services, and consider that it has been beneficial.
1. Introduction

The Women’s Offending Reduction Programme Action Plan (WORP) set out a multi-agency vision for combating the onset of offending by women and reducing their re-offending. In 2005 the Government committed £9.15m over four years to operationalising elements of the plan through the Together Women Programme, more commonly referred to simply as Together Women.\(^1\) Together Women began operating between late 2006 and early 2007 from five centres in the North West and Yorkshire & Humberside National Offender Management Service (NOMS) regions. It was set up to address the needs of female offenders to prevent re-offending; to address the needs of those women at risk of offending; and to divert both groups from prosecution and custody. As the first large-scale government-funded exercise of this sort in England and Wales, it is important to document how the project works (process) and how far it has been effective (outcome). For this reason Together Women was classified as a ‘demonstration project’ by NOMS. Recognising that some of their most recently published evaluations of ‘what works’ with (male) offenders have been unable to reach firm conclusions about impact because detailed process and outcome data were not always recorded routinely, Offender Management & Sentencing, Analytical Services (OMSAS) commissioned an action research project as a precursor to further evaluation. This was intended to provide real-time feedback on the set-up and initial delivery of Together Women; to assess the extent and quality of current data collection and identify improvements which might be made; and to gather (qualitative) indicators of their initial experiences of Together Women from service users and other stakeholders.

What is Together Women?

Together Women builds on best practice developed by other smaller-scale initiatives such as the 218 Centre in Scotland and the Calderdale and Asha Centres in England and Wales. Key features of these projects and Together Women include the fact that they offer a tailored response to individual needs rather than being a ‘one-size fits all’ programme. This means that Together Women must offer a very broad range of activities and take referrals from, and make referrals to, a wide range of agencies. Although the options available vary a little between the five Together Women centres, according to local demand and local partnerships, services include training on issues such as parenting, managing mental health, life skills, thinking skills and offending behaviour. Each centre arranges for service providers to hold surgeries covering a range of issues (such as accessing benefits or housing) but also functions as a drop-in centre, where women can access activities such as reading groups and complementary therapies.

\(^1\) Although Together Women was referred to as a programme in initial project documentation, it was always referred to simply as Together Women by those actively involved in the project. This reflects the fact that Together Women had few of the features commonly associated with programmes for offenders. For example, there was no manual; the nature, order, duration and intensity of interventions were not set according to predetermined levels of risk or need; and expected levels of progress were not prescribed.
Together Women is open to women who have not previously offended, women who have offended in the past and women who are currently involved in the Criminal Justice System. Depending on an initial assessment, which is regularly reviewed, each service user may be offered mentoring; general support (ranging from talking issues through with a project key worker to being accompanied to an appointment with another agency); a self-esteem course; support in tackling domestic violence; debt advice; support into training and employment; and counselling. Service users may also be referred on to partner agencies such as drugs and mental health services. How long Together Women works with an individual woman depends on the range and level of needs identified. This may change after the initial assessment as women often disclose more needs as their relationship with their key worker develops.

Service users work with Together Women key workers to identify their most urgent and important needs. Thus, resulting support plans reflect their own prioritisation of the problems they face. This empowerment of service users is an explicit element of Together Women’s strategy for encouraging women to take control and responsibility for their own lives. This is particularly important for female offenders who are often disempowered by their experiences of sexual abuse and violence (see, for example, Hollin and Palmer, 2006a), although this is generally regarded as a responsivity issue (Hollin and Palmer, 2006b), which should affect the way help is delivered, rather than a need in itself.
2. Methodology

Action research is a reflexive research process in which the consequences of implementing different elements of a plan inform the next stage of implementation. Like reflexive practice it empowers practitioners to take part in formulating solutions rather than having ready-made solutions imposed from outside. This increases the likelihood of such solutions being implemented. Action research differs from reflexive practice in that the information on what is working and how it is working is collected by professional evaluators who, being independent of the implementing organisations, can provide impartial advice on progress (see Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988).

The action research described in this report took place between April and December 2007. It had three principal aims.

- To ensure that Together Women implementation was informed by existing research information on best practice.
- To ensure that Together Women project managers were advised on what sorts of process and outcome data Together Women staff should collect to service any eventual process and outcomes.
- To provide some initial qualitative feedback on the experience of Together Women.

Four interrelated strands of research were conducted. First, the first 50 cases entered on a database Yorkshire and Humberside had commissioned was audited. This assessed whether the database was capable of providing detailed information about referrals, service users’ needs and risks, assessment, attendance/non-compliance, outputs (e.g. referrals to a counselling service) and outcomes (e.g. improvements in mental health or reductions in drug use).

Second, local reports and briefing papers were collated, the research team met with project managers and observed Together Women in action both at stakeholder meetings and on ordinary working days.

Third, samples of Together Women staff, those referring to the project and receiving referrals, sentencers and other local stakeholders were interviewed (individually or in groups) in order to identify any problems with implementation and to assess initial views of the value of Together Women. The 40 participants included senior probation staff, police officers, lay magistrates, court legal advisors, local government officials, employment specialists, voluntary sector agency managers and workers and Together Women managers and workers.

Finally, 43 service users were interviewed in order to understand their routes into Together Women and their previous experience of other helping and criminal justice agencies.² Five interviews of each type conducted were pilots but, as minimal revisions were made to interview schedules, these interviews were included in the final sample.
of the women from each area were chosen at random from those at risk, the remainder were known offenders. These interviews took place between late June and early July 2007. In the last two months of fieldwork (November and December 2007), any service users who had previously agreed to be interviewed were invited for a second interview to explore their views after several months in contact with Together Women or after losing contact. The researchers were only able to re-interview 12 of the original 43 service users. None of those who remained in contact with Together Women refused. Those who either refused or failed to reply had ceased contact with Together Women. A further 14 interviews were sought and achieved with service users who had been in contact with Together Women for some time, but who had not been interviewed previously to obtain a larger sample of views on the experience of being supported by Together Women. In interpreting the comments made during the follow-up interview round it is important to remember that those who sustain contact with any intervention voluntarily are likely to be those with the most positive views and the results of second round service user interviews should be read with this in mind.

The study took the form of action research, where the researchers were in regular contact with both project teams in person, by telephone and by email throughout the study. A formal feedback mechanism involved the research team providing brief written reports on a monthly basis to both project areas and the funding authority throughout the fieldwork phase. Each subsequent monthly report reviewed how much progress had been made in relation to earlier comments to ensure that action was being taken in relation to the issues highlighted. An interim report was provided to the project areas and the funding authority after the first six months and a full final report was provided at the end of the project. This report is an edited version of the last of these.

Confidentiality and ethical issues
To preserve participant anonymity, information regarding which organisation stakeholders belonged to has been withheld. This was necessary as sometimes only one individual from an organisation was involved in Together Women. As a further safeguard, the project area from which both stakeholders and service users came has not been identified. Pseudonyms have been used in individual case studies and comments made in second round interviews are identified as ‘Interview 2’ in the interview identifier code.

Data analysis
To assess the quality of the database, the data extract was imported into SPSS and subjected to a series of validity checks which involved looking for inconsistencies, duplication and missing information (see section on Data Recording).

The interviews were structured around a number of themes and their content was analysed according to those themes (represented by the subheadings used in the section on ‘The value of Together Women: early perspectives from stakeholders and service users’). In
order to provide speedy feedback as the research progressed, while opinions were fully transcribed, factual information and repetitive comments were summarised. The lack of full transcription and the closed nature of some of the questions asked in interview, meant that it was not appropriate to analyse the interview results using tools such as NVivo or Q*Nudist. Instead, the results of the interviews were collated thematically and then read and reread by one researcher. The resulting report was then checked by the other members of the team to ensure that it was an accurate representation of the views expressed.3

3 The analysis complied with Cabinet Office guidance (see Spencer et al., 2003).
3. Findings

How does contact with Together Women lead to change?

The two main aims of Together Women are to reduce re-offending and to divert women ‘at risk’ of offending from offending lifestyles. Diverting women from prosecution and custody are secondary objectives.

Analysis of the documentation provided by the Home Office and the projects locally, together with stakeholder interviews, described Together Women as seeking to encourage personal change in women and to bring about wider changes in their lifestyles, with a view to preventing them offending and re-offending. The dominant model of change within Criminal Justice System work is the risk-needs model, and staff described this as informing at least some of the thinking behind Together Women. However, there is considerable value in making this more explicit as this determines what should be assessed, what processes should be expected and what outcomes anticipated.

The risk-needs connection

Criminal behaviour may be conceptualised as the outcome of an interaction between certain situational and personal factors (criminogenic needs) which increase the likelihood (risk) of a crime. The idea of a criminogenic need has been clarified by Andrews and Bonta (1994, p.176):

‘Many offenders, especially high-risk offenders, have a variety of needs. They need places to live and work and/or they need to stop taking drugs. Some have poor self-esteem, chronic headaches or cavities in their teeth. These are all “needs”. The need principle draws our attention to the distinction between criminogenic and noncriminogenic needs. Criminogenic needs are a subset of an offender’s risk level. They are the dynamic attributes of an offender that, when changed, are associated with changes in the probability of recidivism.’

A conceptual distinction can be drawn between static and dynamic risk factors. Static risk factors are aspects of an individual’s history that cannot change, such as criminal history or childhood abuse, while dynamic factors, such as alcohol use or employment, are susceptible to change. Following the model, some static and some dynamic factors will be criminogenic, others will not (i.e., noncriminogenic).

In order to bring about changes in offending, programmes must address the relevant criminogenic needs (i.e., the appropriate dynamic risk factors). The distinction between criminogenic and noncriminogenic needs is an important one: criminogenic needs are a subset of an offender’s risk level; they are dynamic attributes of an offender that are associated with the likelihood of offending (see Andrews, 1989; Andrews & Bonta, 1994, 1995, 1998; Bonta, 1996). Noncriminogenic needs are also dynamic but they are not associated with the probability of offending.
If the aim of a programme is to reduce the risk of (re)-offending, it follows that it should focus on the offending-related needs. While noncriminogenic needs may be addressed, it cannot be anticipated that such services will impact on offending.

It is also critically important that services are delivered in a manner that will engage offenders: this match between programme style and the characteristics of participants in the programme is called ‘responsivity’ (Antonowicz & Ross, 1994). Thus, to maximise responsivity, the design of services should be sensitive, for example, to the offender’s gender and culture. Increasing responsivity will minimise attrition from the programme and maximise the potential of the programme to impact on offending.  

4 See Hollin and Palmer (2006b) for a recent, detailed discussion of responsivity.

Evidence on the criminogenic needs of women

The formal assessment of criminogenic need (and hence level of risk of offending) may be achieved in various ways, typically through interview or by the use of structured risk assessment measures. With regard to gender differences, Blanchette (2002) suggests that there may be two classes of criminogenic need: (1) criminogenic needs mutual to men and women; and (2) women-specific criminogenic needs. Of course, even when men and women appear to have similar needs, the ways these intersect with offending may still differ.

Recent reviews (Hedderman, 2004a; Hollin & Palmer, 2006a) have suggested the following with respect to a range of criminogenic needs.

- An extensive changing criminal history is not a general characteristic of women offenders in the way it is for male offenders. It follows that risk of re-offending accelerates more quickly for men than for women.
- Limited educational attainment, unemployment, a lack of settled accommodation and financial difficulties (including poverty), peer offending, and drug and alcohol abuse are criminogenic needs for both men and women.
- It is likely for both men and women that family factors and relationships are strongly associated with offending. Strong positive family ties can act as a protective factor. When women are sent to prison this works against the development of a strong parent-child relationship and is likely to adversely affect the woman’s sense of self-worth and even her mental health. While the exact nature and aetiology of the relationship is less than clear, women offenders are highly likely to have experienced high levels of physical and sexual abuse within close relationships as children and as adults.
- There is a weight of evidence to suggest that women offenders, particularly incarcerated ones, display a range of needs with respect to both their mental and physical health. Whether this is a criminogenic need is a moot point, it is certainly a common presenting factor.
In a study conducted within English prisons, Clark and Howden-Windell (2000) assessed the needs of groups of reconvicted and non-reconvicted women prisoners. They reported that the predictors of recidivism for the women offenders included criminal history, drug-related offending, educational attainment, drug abuse, disrupted family life, and attitude and behaviour whilst in prison. The reviews by Hedderman (2004a) and Hollin and Palmer (2006a) also report that surveys of women offenders typically highlight needs that include dealing with issues of trauma and abuse often related to childhood and adulthood personal victimisation, self-esteem and assertiveness, medical care, mental health, parenting and child care, and relationships. It is clear from this research that many women offenders experience physical and sexual abuse, drug use, parenthood and mental health problems.

The complexity of the issues involved has meant that research struggles to show that experiences such as abuse have any substantial predictive power with regard to offending and are truly criminogenic in their own right. However, it is possible that adverse experiences, such as childhood abuse, may interact with other areas of criminogenic need. It may be that a history of abuse in itself is not a powerful dynamic risk factor for offending in adult life, but if the abuse interacts with other psychological and social processes then the risk of offending increases. Thus, the conceptual issue with regard to women offenders lies in the question of how adverse life events interact with each other and how, in turn, this interaction relates to offending.

The value of Together Women: early perspectives from stakeholders and service users

The interviews described below were conducted with stakeholders and service users during the first six to twelve months of each project’s lifetime, and thus the findings do not reflect a definitive or current view of Together Women. They should be regarded as raising issues which future research might profitably explore. They are also intended to assist Together Women managers and those in other areas considering developing similar initiatives to implement and deliver the best possible service.

Women’s offending and the need for women-only provision

It is now generally accepted that we know more about ‘what works’ for male than for women offenders, mainly because most of the research evidence is derived from studies of young males (Loucks et al., 2006), and that gender specific interventions must be developed which take account of women’s need to feel safe, their need to feel empowered, and their different learning styles (e.g. Bloom and Covington, 1998).

All Together Women staff and all but one of the stakeholders interviewed saw women as having at least some different needs to men whether they were offenders or at risk of offending. Substance abuse, accommodation, education and employment and poverty were needs they shared with men. Additional needs included childcare, mental health (which was
seen as more prevalent and taking a different form than mental health needs presented by male offenders), current or recent experience of domestic violence, a history of emotional, sexual and physical abuse, loneliness and poor self-esteem. These views accorded closely with previous research on women’s needs. All stakeholders and staff interviewed believed that women required a different approach and that such provision needed to take place in a women-only environment, particularly because so many women had a history of abuse and were often current victims. This view was endorsed by the women themselves. One explained:

‘Yes, I was raped by my ex-partner. It was domestic violence and rape and I find it easier to be able to walk in here because I know there are no men around.’
(Interview 2. SU.1.3.O.14)

Women’s offending was perceived to be differently motivated to men’s, as the following excerpt illustrates:

‘Most women don’t want to offend. If you go to men, they’ll go, “Because I want to”. … it’s a lot more to do with them, you know, kicking out against the system and being rebellious but hardly any women that are coming through here that feel like that. … All of them are doing it for another reason – it’s not an internal drive or a rebellious streak, or anything like that, and I think it’s just finding out what that issue is, and stopping the issue. You don’t have to stop them, because if you help the issue, they stop themselves...’ (STF.2.2.01.)

This view was also expressed by service users, who described how their poverty, addictions and chaotic lifestyles led to offending. None of the women offenders interviewed described their offending with anything less than regret and a desire to put their lives in order.

The factor most commonly identified by stakeholders and staff as distinguishing female offenders was that most lacked feelings of self-worth. This may not seem the most serious issue faced by service users when so many were also dealing with substance abuse, homelessness, poverty and violence, but it was the factor respondents saw as most inhibiting change, because it stopped women believing change was possible or seeking advice and help in relation to their other needs.

Interviews with service users supported this view. Many of the service users interviewed explained that they had come to Together Women believing they could not change and that they were not worth helping. The importance of empowering women to promote desistence has been recognised by feminists (e.g. Bloom and Covington, 1998) and noted in recent work from a social work perspective (see, for example, Pollack, 2004). However, the way a lack of self-esteem inhibits reform may not be fully understood by those developing offending behaviour programmes who have recognised it as a responsivity issue but not as a need in itself.
Supporting women ‘at risk’ of offending as well as those who have offended

An important feature of Together Women is that it addresses the needs of female offenders and those who are deemed to be ‘at risk’. The former were generally considered to be those referred to the project because of a recent offence. The latter was formally defined in both project areas as having two or more needs but this did not have to include anti-social thinking and it was clear that no two respondents shared a view about what exactly constituted ‘at risk’. For some stakeholders and staff it was women with a past history of offending, for others it was anyone with any social need. Also, staff in both areas noted that a single but significant need, such as serious drug use, could lead to Together Women involvement. However, they also noted that very few of those referred had only one need and those that did were simply referred on to a relevant single-issue agency. Interviews with service users also indicated that having only one need was unusual.

Box 3.1: How does Together Women help those who have not previously offended?

‘Kelly’ is 37 years old. She heard about Together Women from someone working in the prison in which her partner is serving his sentence. Her only local contacts are his family. She has two children: a teenage son who lives with his father in a different town, and a girl who is still a toddler. She is in the process of establishing a new home in the area and raising her daughter alone so is not currently employed or in any education or training. She had been receiving one-to-one support from a Together Women key worker and was due to start counselling later in the week her follow-up interview was conducted. When asked about the value of Together Women she explained:

‘It’s kept me sane. I would’ve lost my mind, I think, over the last six/seven months if I hadn’t had them; I would’ve slowly ended up sitting in the corner and… It’s through the support and the other aspects. As I said, I know I’m going to end up sounding like some sad and lonely female but, if it hadn’t of been here, I would literally have been in my house on my own for six day a week with my baby, and that would’ve been it. Seriously, that would’ve been it.’

The practice of providing services for women generally rather than female offenders exclusively has been found to be more effective than offender-only projects in accessing mainstream resources (see, for example, Rumgay, 2004a, 2004b). An obvious concern, but expressed by only one stakeholder, is that in such an arrangement the service provided to offenders becomes diluted and ineffective because centres are catering for such a range of women, with the majority being at very little risk of offending. This can be avoided by creating individual care plans based on careful assessments of need rather than providing a generic range of services to all clients or groups of clients. However, to achieve this requires assessment tools and processes which are capable of distinguishing levels of need with a high degree of accuracy. The fact that Together Women does not use validated scales, particularly of risk, is therefore a source of concern.
Should attendance at Together Women be enforceable for female offenders and would this increase diversion from custody?

Central Government has actively sought to persuade sentencers to use, as part of a community sentence, those programmes and interventions which have been through a joint prison/probation accreditation process (see, for example, Home Office, 2004). As a result, while the probation service, prison service and other agencies are referring to Together Women, none of the four legal advisors interviewed from magistrates’ courts in the project areas considered Together Women to be an alternative to custody, except in very exceptional circumstances. They suggested that sentencers would be reluctant to use an intervention which is less structured than an accredited programme and more tailored to the individual, particularly if it is not enforceable. Given the role of legal advisors as gatekeepers to the training magistrates receive, and their role as sentencing advisors, this may limit the extent to which Together Women can reduce the use of custodial sentences.

Interestingly, sentencers themselves appeared much more willing to use a referral to Together Women instead of, or alongside, a community sentence. However, they too thought it unlikely that Together Women would operate as an alternative to custody. In line with the views expressed by sendencers in earlier studies (see, for example, Hough et al., 2003), the sentencers interviewed in this study argued that custody was a sentence of last resort. In this context, no matter how stringently a community sentence is enforced, it is not an alternative to custody. That said, Together Women staff in both areas described occasions when sentencers cited the existence of Together Women as the reason for not sentencing a woman to custody. This apparent contradiction is an issue to which any outcome evaluation will need to return.

None of the six magistrates interviewed favoured making attendance at Together Women enforceable because they believed women who failed to attend rarely did so wilfully, but through a lack of confidence and organisation. The presence of Together Women workers in court was viewed as a more effective way of getting women to attend because it gave them a chance to ‘sell’ the idea to potential service users as well as giving Together Women an opportunity to improve the take-up of Together Women services by sentencers through enabling them to contribute to same day ‘specific sentence court reports’. Such an arrangement was thought to be particularly appropriate for community justice centres where sentencers are expected to consider more innovative responses as part of adopting a problem-solving approach to reducing re-offending (see DCA, 2006). In fact, Together Women representatives attended court in four of the five magistrates’ courts/community justice centres by the time the research ended (December 2007). At the remaining court, sentencers interviewed were keen to see such a development, however, their legal advisor did not feel this would be achievable in the immediate future because of the amount of other change with which that court was coping.

5 Specific sentence reports are intended only for cases in which a low-level community sentence is being considered such as those involving first-time offenders and non-serious offences. Thus, this development is unlikely to increase diversion from custody.
Other measures which Together Women staff and service users described as effective in securing attendance and compliance were going to a woman's home or hostel, explaining the services available (especially counselling, help with benefit claims, debt advice), building up a relationship before bringing the woman to the centre and supporting her in her initial appointments with other agencies. A number of service users described their experience of being phoned regularly by Together Women workers, explaining that was one of the elements which set Together Women apart from other services and had led to their engagement with it.

Three other stakeholders supported the idea of making some elements of Together Women compulsory, arguing that it would get women through the door. However, the remainder, including the police and probation officers interviewed, expressed doubts, arguing that it could lead to inconsistent breach practices which would, in turn, damage Together Women's reputation among service users. Enforcement was also seen as disempowering and therefore at odds with the idea that Together Women works by unequivocally putting the service users' interests first. It was also noted that while enforcement might lead to attendance, it was unlikely to inspire genuine compliance (see Hedderman, 2003). One stakeholder summed this up by explaining:

‘I think it’s a two-headed coin, isn’t it, really? The advantages are obviously that people have to attend and there’s a sanction if they don’t. The downside is that then you’re working with an unwilling client who isn’t motivated to achieve what you are trying to get them towards, which builds in more likelihood of failure, doesn’t it?’

‘I’m not against requiring people to attend programmes and do work but I don’t know whether, within the context of what [Together Women] have got at the moment, how they’re set up – I mean, would it mean a big change in the way they work? I get the feeling it would, it would be a different climate and culture, maybe, if people had to attend, because then you’re getting to do reports about them…about how they are failing and not engaging. So it would be an entirely different sort of practitioner/client relationship. And what level of training do you need to manage offenders under court orders? Because, then, you are becoming a probation officer, aren’t you?’ (SH.1.3.02)

Can Together Women help any woman?
Some criminal justice practitioners expressed doubts about whether Together Women could help women who were heavily involved in a criminal lifestyle, especially when this was associated with heavy drug use. However, most commented that change remained possible in such cases if the individual genuinely wished to change and had the confidence to believe she could.

Only a few, extreme examples were cited by staff when asked about women they had been unable to work with. These were assessed as presenting a high risk of violence towards other service users or having severe and untreated alcohol and drug-abuse problems.
Female offenders’ views on whether Together Women would stop them re-offending?

Most of those referred to Together Women as offenders, who were interviewed shortly after their first contact, were very optimistic about their chances of avoiding further offending. While this may have been justified, the views of those who were still in contact with Together Women after several months were canvassed to see whether they were equally certain of success. The results showed a very mixed picture. Some described progress, some were “taking two steps forward and one step back” and others, particularly those with substance-abuse problems, clearly found every day a struggle both with their addictions but also with associated difficulties such as being evicted for being drunk, mounting debt, losing custody of their children and so on. If anything, those who had made least obvious progress were the most grateful for Together Women. It was the one place they could turn after other agencies, family and friends had given up on them.

Box 3.2: Progress following involvement with Together Women

The following three case studies were chosen to illustrate the different degrees of progress those re-interviewed saw themselves as making.

No easy fixes

‘Marie’ is 47 years old and comes from a background of neglect and disadvantage. She had her first child at 19, has five other daughters, the youngest of whom is 11, and two grandsons. She is in contact with her children, but only sees them occasionally. She is hoping this will improve once she is re-housed, but her alcoholism has led to difficulties in her relationship with them. Marie is not employed or in any kind of training or education, and has a history of low-level offending, mainly public order offences, related to her alcoholism.

At the first interview she was optimistic about being able to tackle her drinking having been helped into hostel accommodation. By the time of the second interview she had returned to her chaotic lifestyle and unstable living arrangements, and was drinking again. She had been ‘thrown out’ of the homeless hostel because of this, as the drink caused her to become verbally aggressive. She explained that while a domestic violence project she had accessed through Together Women taught her how to handle her relationship and her partner’s violence towards her in a better way, it had not stopped. There was a short period that she did not come to Together Women as she was ashamed of the bruises on her face. She was persuaded by a friend she had made through Together Women to return and has been attending regularly ever since. Apart from that break, she had been coming to Together Women since it opened, and had been meeting with [key worker] for a period before the centre opened. She now attends three days per week.

Making progress

‘Pam’ is a 42-year-old alcoholic with grown-up children. At the time of the referral she was in an abusive relationship. Her offending was violent and she had committed public order offences associated with her heavy drinking.
She felt Together Women had delivered the assistance promised at the outset and, with their help, she was heading towards a more settled situation:

‘…what they were on the first interview is what I’m getting now…my life is totally different. I am still an alcoholic even though I haven’t had a drink because that’s what we are but I would have been at home, pissed, I wasn’t drunk I was totally out of it. I would have still been in a relationship with him; I wouldn’t have been seeing my kids.’

A ‘happy ending’

‘Carla’ is in her mid-30s with two school-age children. She lives with them and her partner and is in part-time employment. She was referred to Together Women by her probation officer while being supervised for her only conviction – a serious assault. She returned to Together Women to be interviewed as she had not needed support for two months. Together Women helped her to get an injunction against a previous partner and she foresees making contact with the centre more frequently when he is released. She has offered to volunteer at Together Women and saw the interview as a chance to give something back for the help she had received. She was sure Together Women had made re-offending less likely:

‘Yes, because it's given me a more positive outlook on my life. I've got a happy ending and I don’t envisage that I’ll be under stress, scared, which were all the underlying factors. Especially when somebody assaulted me, because I've been assaulted all my life. I don’t feel now that I will re-offend. I don’t think I’m any danger because I’m happy and content. The kids are happy and when you’re in a happy life you don’t have problems with anything. I don’t really go out drinking so I’m not in atmospheres where there’s going to be trouble or anything. I lead a very quiet life now....I’m not in the frame of mind to offend’.

How did Together Women add to existing local service provision?

Stakeholders in both areas explained that while women could access most of the provision available for offenders in the area, and some local projects tried to work in ways which acknowledged gender differences, the only provision specifically for women tended to support them as victims. Interestingly, Together Women staff identified a number of additional pre-existing services for women offenders to whom they referred or from whom they received referrals, or both. This confirmed that they joined up existing services effectively as well as creating new links. Stakeholders and Together Women staff also pointed out that some of the existing provision (for men and women) had restrictions about who they would accept: for example, some required drug abstinence, others would only help those on bail. Criminal justice agencies were described as finding it particularly difficult to acknowledge that women could be both victims and offenders. This was a source of frustration for a number of sentencers. The fact that Together Women would help a woman’s children as well as the woman herself was also seen as an asset and, with the exception of Sure Start, unique. Thus, Together Women was judged to have linked up existing provision more effectively and to have filled a gap.
Probation staff in both areas described an initial unwillingness to refer to Together Women. In one area, some younger female probation officers were described as initially unconvinced of the need for separate services for women, ‘...appearing to interpret equal treatment with the same treatment before they are briefed on the differences in women’s offending’ (SH.1.07). In the other area, an interviewee described how they had to ‘soften’ a probation policy to assign female offenders to female probation officers, as it had met with a surprising degree of resistance from male probation officers who felt ‘slighted’ by the implication that they might not be able to work as effectively with a woman as a female officer could, or that they (as males) could not be trusted to work with women offenders. These findings may simply reflect the experiences of the small number of probation officers interviewed in this study; however, the Probation Service may wish to consider whether further guidance or training about the true meaning of gender equality should be developed. It is also worth noting that a member of the Probation Service was seconded to one centre on start-up for several months to build trust and secure probation referrals.

A number of frontline staff from other service providers noted that when Together Women began operating it was not necessary to search for potential clients to refer, as a number immediately sprang to mind. For example, one drugs worker described a client who, in addition to her drug use, was a victim of domestic violence, involved in sex work, needed help with housing and child-care, and was shy, vulnerable and experienced difficulties in making new friends. The only help she could access before Together Women was a mixed-sex group work programme which she would have found too daunting. By being able to work with her one-to-one and holistically, in a female-only setting, Together Women had filled an important gap. The fact that she could access a range of other services through Together Women was also novel and important.

Together Women had only been operating for a matter of months at the time some stakeholder interviews were conducted but lack of waiting lists for counselling services was mentioned in both areas as another important benefit. Whether waiting lists build up over time is clearly something which any future evaluation will need to examine.

For many service users, Together Women was distinctive because of the role it allowed them to play in determining their futures and because staff seemed genuinely interested in them rather than just doing their job:

‘I thought it’d be like another authority. I thought it’d be like, police, probation, Social Services kind of, you know, making these rules, setting down, I must do this, and I must do that, and it’s not been anything like that. ... I’ve often come to the Together Women’s group, I’ve been crying on my way here and I’ve been laughing on my way out, so it has, it’s been a relief for me here and I know there’s always somebody available to talk to. Always. They don’t talk down to me, they don’t tell me what to do… They’ve always gave me alternatives and [pause] they’ve lifted my spirits, you know...’. (Interview 2.SU.2.1.O.12)
The camaraderie, facilities and training opportunities were seen by service users as key contributors to a positive atmosphere.

**Multi-agency working**

Together Women was described as providing a holistic response through working closely with a range of other agencies such as drug-support services, sex-worker schemes, Citizen’s Advice, Jobcentre Plus, etc. It did not attempt to duplicate or replace existing services but to link them up and make them easily accessible. As one stakeholder (SH.2.2.04) explained: ‘what I envisaged them [Together Women] doing was providing the glue that helps things to stay together…’.

Given that many previous multi-agency projects have encountered problems in securing the co-operation of some key agencies (see for example, Liddle and Gelsthorpe, 1994; Hedderman and Williams, 2001), stakeholders and staff were asked whether any agencies appeared to be taking part under sufferance. A number noted that finding the right representatives from local health services had been slow and difficult, but this reflected the complexity of local health service arrangements rather than a lack of interest. Unusually, but encouragingly, other agencies were described as willing and enthusiastic participants.

Participants from voluntary sector agencies noted there was sometimes a degree of tension in their relationships with probation and police officers whom they saw as prioritising public protection over service users’ needs. They welcomed the co-ordinating role Together Women played – they saw Together Women as sharing their focus on the welfare of the service users. Probation, prison and police respondents also saw this intermediary role as important, noting that Together Women appeared to have a better grasp of the constraints under which criminal justice agencies operated than many other voluntary sector agencies.

Procedures for sharing information about service users were seen as generally unproblematic. Protocols had been established with Probation and Police Services in both areas and early problems were tackled swiftly. Individual members of the Probation Service needed to be reminded of these arrangements occasionally, but their concerns were both understandable and easily assuaged. These protocols focused on the sharing of information about previous offending, re-offending and risk of harm (to self or others).

The only statutory agency with which Together Women commonly worked but where a formal data-sharing agreement had not been achieved was Jobcentre Plus. Local representatives noted that this issue was being addressed at a national level because it affected Jobcentre Plus’s contacts with a range of organisations. In the meantime, information was shared with the client’s consent. This was also the way voluntary sector agencies worked with Together Women.
A number of stakeholders commented on how women with several needs had to go through separate assessment processes for every agency involved in their support, even though they had been subject to an extensive Together Women assessment. One respondent (SH.1.2.05.) suggested that given Together Women was a 'one stop shop' there was scope to agree a common assessment tool. While this idea is attractive in principle, and might work in relation to some areas of need (perhaps housing), the same respondent went on to note that her own agency found Together Women’s drug assessment too general to be used to determine a level of intervention.

Finally, some individual agencies which received a number of referrals from Together Women each month had agreed to feed back information on service users. It was regarded as unrealistically time and resource intensive by both stakeholders and Together Women staff to make arrangements for feedback on all referrals. This has implications for any outcome evaluation.

**Working for Together Women**
Staff felt well-supported by the programme managers in each centre. Some expressed anxiety about the rate at which caseloads were growing and how this might affect the way they worked. Although facilities were very good there had been incidents where no rooms were free to hold confidential interviews. Staff also expressed disquiet about the possibility that increased demand might lead to waiting lists as the immediacy of Together Women’s response was one of the things which set them apart. As noted above, this is an issue any subsequent process evaluation will need to address.

Many staff had been recruited with a relevant background (e.g. housing) and this was considered to have enabled teams to hit the ground running. The training which staff had received was regarded as appropriate and plentiful, covering issues such as domestic violence, mental health awareness, diversity and so on. This also helped with career progression which was otherwise described as a somewhat neglected area. Staff in both areas felt that there was no scope for promotion within Together Women so they anticipated that when they were ready for promotion they would be looking for jobs elsewhere, taking their expertise with them.

**Current provision outside Together Women**
Lack of suitable accommodation was mentioned most often by most participants as a critical shortage in local provision. Lack of speedy access to counselling and mental health outreach was also widespread. Stakeholders in both areas suggested that putting even more resources into initial outreach work might increase take-up rates, and that working with schools might also be worth developing to extend the project’s preventive impact. Local stakeholders and staff at two of the five Together Women centres expressed concerns about these centres being located too far from town centres to service all of the women who might be helped.
The future of Together Women
Considerable anxiety was expressed by all of the staff and most of the stakeholders from statutory agencies about what would happen when central funding for Together Women ended. Linked to this were concerns about clear measures of success not being in place at the outset, despite the fact that Together Women was badged as a national demonstration project. They expressed fears about ‘changing goalposts’ and registered a concern that:

‘...the outcome measures need to show progression, as opposed to: you had a drugs problem, and now you don’t; you went to custody, and now you don’t… if we’ve worked with somebody and we’ve managed to keep somebody out of custody for five months, and previously they were there every other month,… that’s success. So, it’s not all about numbers, I guess is what I’m saying, and it’s a lot about distance travelled.’ (SH.1.1.08)

In other words, there was a concern that, for example, moves from serious chaotic drug use to stabilised and managed using and from serious or regular offending to minor and occasional offending might be disregarded, with only total abstinence or a complete cessation of offending being treated as success.

Monitoring interventions and change
Although Together Women was intended to be a national demonstration project, no data requirements were specified centrally. In planning the implementation of Together Women, the Yorkshire and Humberside project commissioned a database to assist case management. In the absence of central advice on this issue, the collection of process and outcome information on women who were referred (or self-referred) to the project was designed to be a by-product of the management information system as it tracked women from referral to Together Women, through assignment to a key worker, assessment (including risk assessment), creating and managing a support plan, referrals to external agencies, ‘courses’ and other activities attended, further assessments and reviews of their support plan, and some follow-up information. Back-entering of data is ongoing to ensure that information on all women who have had contact with Yorkshire and Humberside Together Women is held. The North West decided to await government advice before setting up a similar database. In the meantime rudimentary tracking information was captured on Excel databases.

Data recording
In October 2007, data were downloaded from the Yorkshire and Humberside database and examined to ascertain the completeness and type of data potentially available. It was difficult to draw firm conclusions about completeness of data, as there was a certain amount of missing information. There may be a number of reasons for this, for example, specific areas of need were not always identified as a problem and thus were not recorded. Additionally, for some women not all information was obtained at the same time – with the full extent of a
woman’s areas of need being built up incrementally. Finally, missing data may simply reflect incompleteness of data collection/recording and/or entry.

A further problem related to discrepancies between identifiers for service users (termed Client ID and Referral ID) within the database, meaning that counting the number of unique cases was difficult. Given that women were often assessed on a number of occasions during their engagement with Together Women, there is a need to ensure unique identifiers are used in order to distinguish cases and track any change.

Some thought is required to overcome these issues. Building more ‘defined cells’ into the database, that allow Together Women workers to indicate during information collection/data entry where data are missing, are unavailable or where questions are not relevant (e.g. a service user does not present with a need in a particular area), would lead to greater completeness. This was under consideration by the database providers and Together Women managers at the end of the action research.

There should also be an emphasis on conducting a full assessment across all areas of need at the start of a woman’s engagement with Together Women so a clear, comprehensive picture of her characteristics and needs at this point in time can be obtained from the database. Thought should also be given to how to cope with recording further areas of need which emerge after initial assessment – and how this should be represented within the database for evaluation purposes. For example, at an initial assessment a woman may not disclose that she has experienced domestic abuse. However, a few weeks later it may emerge that she is an ongoing victim. Unless this can be recorded as a newly disclosed need, there is a risk that the project will be judged ineffective because some women’s problems appear to worsen over time whereas this is actually evidence of improved trust leading to greater disclosure.\(^6\)

These issues have a number of implications for future evaluation of Together Women. It is necessary to clearly identify the number of unique cases (service users) within the database and to be able to trust identifying data. Regarding missing data, unless cases have complete data for assessments and re-assessment it will not be possible to get a clear picture of the characteristics of the women being referred to, and attending, Together Women. Incomplete data at either/both initial assessment and re-assessment would also make any measure of change impossible, and identifying any relation to outcome variables, such as reconviction, would be seriously hampered.

Beyond the issues identified above, there is a concern about whether Together Women staff have the capacity to collect the data required for a full process and outcome evaluation in sufficient detail. The back-entering of data is a time-consuming task, and resources need to be provided to ensure that the database is being fully completed by staff in practice.

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\(^6\) See Aubrey and Hough (1997) on how increased disclosure and worsening needs can be confused in assessment instruments.
**Box 3.3: Why having complete information on all cases is so vital**

Project X secures 1,000 referrals but only achieves complete data on 700 cases; 500 of the 700 were recorded as not re-offending and 200 had re-offended. This could be interpreted as a 20% (200/1,000) reconviction rate. More reasonably it could be described as a 28% (200/700) reconviction rate.

**However,** if it was subsequently discovered that some or all of those on whom data were missing had re-offended the picture changes. In the worst case, if all of the missing 300 re-offended the reconviction rate would then be 50% (200+300/1,000).

This extreme result may seem fanciful but it is quite possible — and even likely — if the reasons data are missing are non-random. For example, if those with the most needs are the least likely to appear on official databases.

At the time fieldwork ended, there were also unresolved issues relating to the exporting of the Yorkshire and Humberside database for analysis purposes. First, because the database was designed primarily to meet management information requirements it produces information on individual cases and routine reports well. However, evaluation requires that analyses are iterative and multi-layered. For example, in examining why one centre receives many more referrals than another it is necessary to explore a range of factors including the source of referrals, the nature of the area and the characteristics of those referred. The results of those analyses dictate the next step, and so on. Ideally the evaluators would want the entire contents of the database exported into an analysable format, but the way the current system operates does not allow for the requisite iterative analysis and, even if it were to do so, exporting variables from a database to facilitate such analyses is a complex and time-consuming task. The second issue, which arises from this, is that the form, content and timing of such data exports lies in the hands of the database designers not the Together Women project or the evaluators. This may or may not lead to delays in obtaining the data or additional costs.

The decision not to set up a joint database, with pre-specified outcome measures, prior to the implementation of Together Women may create problems for an eventual outcome study. Although the North West is in the process of adopting a similar database to that of Yorkshire and Humberside, they may not hold sufficiently comprehensive information to populate this with enough data on the cases assessed before the system commences. Because of this, there are issues about how meaningful comparisons will be between the case characteristics and outcomes of Yorkshire and Humberside and North West cases.

**Assessment tools**

Although similar data concerning women’s needs are collected by the two Together Women projects, they use different assessment tools to do so. The comprehensive assessment tools in use in Yorkshire and Humberside were developed by the project, thus there are questions about their external validity. In the North West, standard (validated) tools were also
employed to assess some needs (e.g. drugs misuse and self-esteem). Where such tools were not available, service providers developed their own, often in consultation with each other. Offender Assessment System (OASys) assessments from the Prison and Probation Services were also used where available. These different approaches raise questions as to how/whether the Yorkshire and Humberside and North West assessment tools map onto each other, and how they relate to measures used locally or nationally by other services to measure needs and changes in need.

**Measuring ‘change’/outcomes on pathways**

At the time of writing, discussion is ongoing regarding suitable outcome measures for Together Women. The areas of need – or pathways – that Together Women aims to address, and suggested outcomes which the evaluators and project managers have worked together to produce, are summarised in Table 1. At least one outcome has been identified for each pathway. Issues remain, however, about the reliability of sources for these outcomes, as there is reliance on self-report by service users and/or the judgement of Together Women workers, rather than externally validated measures/scales. Possible corroborative sources that may provide more objective information have been discussed, such as NHS records, but it is unlikely that these data would be available to the Together Women projects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pathway</th>
<th>Possible outcomes to be measured</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>Abstinence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduced frequency</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>Abstinence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduced frequency</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reduced seriousness (drug class)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money management</td>
<td>Reduced debt</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment/education/training</td>
<td>Employment sustained 4 weeks</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased capacity to work (80% attendance on courses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life skills</td>
<td>Increased self-esteem / confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>Accepting support (80% attendance)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical health</td>
<td>Registered with GP/dentist</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reduced incapacity benefit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
<td>Reduction in frequency</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Move to independent living</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>Remained in settled accommodation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moved to settled accommodation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moved from unsafe to safe accommodation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homeless to accommodated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation/engagement</td>
<td>Attendance/engagement 80% of plan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Until these issues are resolved and measures agreed there can be no certainty that data to support them are contained within the database or, indeed, even being adequately collected. Measures of need, and the database, must have the capacity to measure ‘distance travelled’ or incremental improvements (e.g. stabilised drug use) over the course of contact with Together Women for each woman, rather than only recording absolute change (e.g. drug abstinence). There are also conceptual difficulties which need to be resolved in relation to some needs. For example, while the aim of interventions for the victims of domestic violence or those involved in sex work are to improve women’s safety, what constitutes an improvement varies from case to case and depends on the precise circumstances when intervention began. So, for example, in the case of domestic violence, increasing the physical security of the current home will be enough for one victim, whereas another’s safety will only be secured by moving her to another area. In the case of preventing family breakdown, removing children from the family home can be a positive outcome where a parent’s behaviour is putting them at psychological or physical risk, but returning a child from care to his/her mother on her release from prison may be the best outcome in another case.

Measuring reduction in the re-offending of offenders and offending by at risk women
There is a lack of clear criteria for determining who are ‘at risk’ women. As a result, it is unclear exactly which group of women is being targeted and what sort of outcomes are expected. Thus, it is not possible currently to monitor the suitability of referrals amongst this group or accurately assess the impact of Together Women on them. To examine impact on future offending behaviour, appropriate data need to be collected to allow for the identification of women on the Police National Computer. There is no obvious way to examine the reductive impact of Together Women on the offending behaviour of at-risk women using official records. This is because there is no counterfactual which can be measured for any of the women without criminal records (i.e. it is not possible to predict how many would have gone on to offend in the absence of Together Women). There may also be data protection issues regarding record searches for non-offenders (at least without their consent).

Measuring diversion of women from custody
Together Women is expected to reduce the number of women in custody by providing an alternative to custodial sentences for women on the brink of imprisonment. However, it will be difficult to assess this aim, as it is not possible to measure something that has not happened (i.e. not being sentenced to a custodial sentence). Moreover, interviews with sentencers suggest that Together Women is not seen as an alternative to custody. This raises questions as to whether Together Women will be able to fulfil this aim, unless there is a rapid shift in sentencers’ attitudes. However, sources that could provide some information relating to this aim have been considered. A specific reference to Together Women as an alternative to imprisonment in a Pre-Sentence Report would provide some evidence that Together Women was influencing diversion from custody, but recording this would almost certainly undercount
the extent of such influence. It may also be possible to look at sentencing trends in the courts from which Together Women receives referrals, although accurate analysis depends on the quality of the data and whether numbers of referrals are sufficient to allow reliable trends to be identified. The prospects are even poorer of assessing diversion from prosecution as changes over time may simply reflect natural fluctuations in factors such as type of offence and the previous records of those being considered for prosecution.

Assessing the impact of Together Women on those referred
It will be possible for researchers to investigate the areas’ databases to examine the number of referrals to Together Women, and patterns of contact with Together Women. However, it is now usual to assess the impact an intervention has in relation to those referred and then, within that, to compare its apparent impact with those who did not start, those who started but did not complete and those who completed the intervention. Ideally these results are compared with a control group who were not referred to the intervention. This can be achieved by random allocation or by matching participants on some key characteristics.

The most comprehensive records held by any project are on service users who maintain contact. Obtaining outcome information in other cases is problematic, time-consuming and expensive. However, without this information it will not be possible to investigate the reasons potential service users do not start or do not complete – for example, are they formally excluded, do they drop out, or does something else happen (e.g. have they moved out of the area or did they receive a custodial sentence)? These data will allow a greater understanding of who is referred to, and who engages with, Together Women, and the impact Together Women has on women who come into contact with the projects, all of which is important information for any further development of Together Women or similar projects.

Recommendations
The findings from this aspect of the research give rise to a number of recommendations for data collection for project managers, future evaluators and those managing the national demonstration project.

Project managers (working with the database designers) must:

- regularly conduct management checks to ensure that all cases are identified by a unique and unambiguous identifier and that records are complete and comprehensive;
- ensure that greater use is made of defined rather than free-text fields within the databases to ensure that the information held is suitable for evaluation as well as management purposes;

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7 The seemingly mutually exclusive ‘completer’ and ‘non-completer’ groups are actually difficult to divide in practice as it may be argued that there is an intermediate group who have completed ‘enough’ but not all the prescribed activities to secure change.
consider how to record areas of need which are not disclosed at a service user’s initial assessment but emerge at a later date, and how this information is represented within the database; and

- arrange for the databases to build in the identification and recording of ‘non-starter’, ‘non-completer’, and ‘completer’ groups along with reasons why women may ‘not start’ or ‘not complete’ Together Women.

Subsequent evaluators must:

- consider the comparability and equivalence of data collected by the two projects and the implications for an outcome evaluation;
- monitor the progress of back-entering to ensure it is completed in time for any outcome evaluation; and
- monitor the recording of appropriate data for all women to allow for collection of future offending data from the Police National Computer.

Those managing the national demonstration project centrally must:

- ensure that resources are made available to help the projects back-enter data to a high standard; and
- take the lead in making arrangements with the database designers to ensure that information from the database can be downloaded in a format that is researcher-friendly, and in agreeing how this is to be achieved.
4. Conclusions

Most programmes and interventions devised to reduce offending have been designed for and tested on male offenders, as most convicted offenders are men. Together Women is one of the few projects which takes a holistic, empowering approach to assisting women out of offending while also working with women who are not offenders but whose level of social exclusion puts them at some (unquantified) risk of offending. Other similar projects, however, tend to be more localised and less well funded. Together Women, funded by the Government, therefore offers an unusual and possibly even unique opportunity to take a fresh look at how women may be supported to avoid offending and reduce re-offending. Importantly, it also recognises that by supporting women who are mainly or exclusively responsible for childcare, it may help to break the inter-generational transmission of offending, related at least in part to inconsistent parenting and family breakdown (see McCord, 1979; Farrington et al., 1996, 2007).

It is well understood that most interventions take as much as 18 months to overcome initial teething problems (Hedderman, 2004b). It is, therefore, important to appreciate that the research on which this report is based took place during the first 12 months of operation and was designed to look for problems and ways in which Together Women might be improved. Many of the suggestions put forward for change in this report are already being acted on or are at least under active consideration. For this reason it is important to revisit many of the issues identified here in any further study. In considering how those should be taken forward it is worth focusing on the three interrelated sets of issues which this report has highlighted:

1. How does contact with Together Women lead to change?

Together Women tackles criminogenic and non-criminogenic needs. While this may easily be justified in a programme with the explicit aim of reducing re-offending, it is important to spell out how precisely working with non-criminogenic needs will support this objective as it is not usual for such needs to be addressed because they are usually considered less relevant. Alternatively, Together Women might be re-imagined as a broad-ranging support programme for any severely socially excluded woman in which preventing offending and reducing re-offending remain objectives, but not the principal ones.

Together Women is intended to bring together a range of interventions, following a comprehensive assessment which takes account of the service users' views on what they want to achieve and what issues they feel need to be tackled first. Distinguishing the completer and non-completers will be more than usually problematic as Together Women assessments seem to result in objectives and approaches to achieving them being recorded, but the scale of involvement required is not always prescribed and can be revised. While it may be argued that this reflects the way Together Women tailors the pace of change to

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8 See, for example, Palmer and Attenborough's (2004) report on such a resettlement programme and Gelsthorpe et al.'s (2007) review of other recent schemes for women in the community.
individual service users' wishes, it means that ‘completion’ can be a moving target. In the language of ‘what works’, responsivity is given precedence over programme integrity.

Until a clear and explicit model of change is developed, it is not possible to fully prescribe what should be assessed, what processes should be looked for, and what outcomes might be expected following engagement with Together Women.

2. The value of Together Women: early perspectives from stakeholders and service users

Together Women was seen by local stakeholders as filling an important gap in provision by linking up what was already available more effectively and by adding to the range of services available. Separate ‘women-only’ provision was regarded as a vital element because so many women were viewed as vulnerable and unassertive, often because of a history of abuse but also because of current or very recent domestic violence.

The fact that centres were exclusively for women was highly valued by service users who also reported that Together Women staff seemed genuinely interested in them as individuals. They contrasted this with their experiences of other agencies where staff were portrayed as providing assistance simply because they are obliged to do so.

Probation staff reported some reluctance, particularly among younger staff, to refer to Together Women. This suggests an important training need. Other agencies were described by stakeholders and Together Women staff as wholeheartedly welcoming and co-operating with the projects. Indeed, considerable anxiety was expressed by staff and stakeholders about what would happen when direct Government funding for Together Women ended.

Most of the service users interviewed after several months of contact with Together Women described feeling more optimistic about their chances of dealing with their problems. Some were able to cite specific examples of progress but others, particularly those with substance abuse issues, were clearly finding it extremely difficult to make progress.

3. Monitoring interventions and change

Data collection

Keeping comprehensive information on service users is always problematic. By involving researchers after Together Women became operational, the scope to develop a satisfactory database was limited to fine-tuning an existing management information database. Evaluation needs are different to management needs, so while this database is a reasonable resource it is not ideal for research purposes. In particular, many of the fields, particularly those covering changes in an individual’s attitudes or circumstances, record the key workers’ perception of change rather than concrete evidence of change. This means that as key workers, they are effectively being made responsible for assessing their own work. A further study should consider the implications
of this for an outcome study. It should also consider the comparability and equivalence of data collected, not only between the two projects, but between centres in the same area.

Busy and dedicated practitioners faced with helping one more client or completing a database invariably opt for the former. However, the long-term viability of projects such as Together Women relies on being able to document the assistance it has provided itself or through referrals and demonstrating a link between such assistance and a subsequent change in behaviour. The database design has taken some account of this in that certain fields are mandatory and periodic reviews may be completed. Dedicating all or part of a staff post to data entry is one way comprehensive completion has been secured in other projects.

**Outcome assessment**

The extent to which women are simply signposted to other agencies must be monitored. The process study should then consider whether these women should be considered separately in an outcome study to those who receive ‘interventions’ from Together Women. A further research study should also investigate the viability of obtaining outcome information for those referrals who do not start, or who do not ‘complete’, the interventions identified in their support plans, as inevitably the most comprehensive records concern service users who remain in contact with Together Women. Obtaining outcome information in other cases is likely to be highly problematic, time-consuming and expensive.

**Waiting lists**

Up to the end of fieldwork (December 2007), Together Women operated without waiting lists. This was noted as an advantage by stakeholders and service users, particularly in relation to accessing counselling and health services. Whether this is an inherent characteristic of the way Together Women centres manage their caseloads or will diminish as caseloads grow is something a process study should review. The implications of waiting lists, for both take-up rates and outcomes, would also need to be examined.

**Outcome study**

Many of the pathways Together Women offer to women to prevent or reduce offending, such as improving accommodation, escaping domestic violence, reducing substance abuse and moving into education or employment, are the same as those endorsed and operated by NOMS (Home Office, 2004). However, NOMS has not specified specific objective measures of change which might be used to assess success for these pathways. On most factors, the change recorded on the Together Women database reflects the key worker’s assessment of change. For a small subsample of women offenders in West Yorkshire, work is being undertaken to compare Together Women assessments with OASys scores and the probation officer’s perceptions of change to assess validity. However, the overall validity of the Together Women assessment measures is a source of concern. More work is needed in any subsequent process study to examine whether other measures might be deployed.
While the broad definition of ‘at risk’ women was welcomed by practitioners as it ensures that Together Women works with anyone assessed as needing help, the possibility that this might direct resources towards women not at risk of offending needs to be recognised. The way that ‘at risk’ has been operationalised should be recorded, along with subsequent offending levels in so far as this information is available, and other outcomes recorded.

No practical systematic way of assessing Together Women's impact in terms of preventing offending among the ‘at risk’ group has been identified. To do that would require being able to identify what would have happened to them without access to Together Women (the counterfactual). Usually this is done by reference to a group of women who display similar areas of need but who have not been referred to an intervention. No such comparison or control group can be identified or constructed. Under these circumstances, it is recommended that no further effort is expended on this. Claims about the preventive value of Together Women for women who have never offended may still be reasonable, but these would be based on evidence that the project had reduced re-offending for those referred to the project because of their known offending.

**Diversion**

Interviews with magistrates and court legal advisors indicate that Together Women’s aim of diverting women from custody is not being achieved. Feedback from Together Women staff, however, suggests that it is happening. It was also suggested that Community Justice courts were more willing to divert women from custody to Together Women than traditional magistrates’ courts. These are clearly issues that a process and outcome study must examine. Initial thoughts suggest that recommendations to refer to Together Women in court reports and subsequent sentencing decisions may be the only source of reliable, albeit indirect, information on this in individual cases, although this approach may undercount success as it relies on specific references being made. It may also be possible to look at sentencing trends by area, using data held centrally by the Ministry of Justice, but the small numbers involved may make trends hard to distinguish.

**Lessons for future action research**

Given that action research remains relatively rare in criminology generally and the UK in particular, it is worth considering whether any lessons may be learnt from the experience. While this action research worked well, it highlighted two key issues which should be borne in mind in future similar projects. First, it would have been more effective to have commenced the action research while the projects were being planned rather than after they had begun operating. Because this was not done, the best opportunity to revise and strengthen the model of change was missed. This also led to the development of local approaches to assessing need and change. The research team worked with the project areas to ensure that specific elements of the database developed by Yorkshire and Humberside, and since adopted by the North West, record evidence of change (e.g. a move from Class A to Class
B drug use) rather than staff judgements of progress (e.g. improved/worsened) alone. However, what was designed was not informed by research on assessment scales for work with offenders or for defining and measuring change. Work is still required on refining the model of change, and the associated assessments and measures of change.

Second, findings from service user interviews were repetitive. Half the number undertaken would have yielded sufficient information for an initial qualitative assessment of value. The requirement to interview some women soon after first contact and after six months was also somewhat artificial as it made assumptions about the formality, regularity and length of contact women had with their Together Women workers, which did not reflect reality. It is important to take this experience into account in commissioning any subsequent process and outcome studies. In contrast, most of the interviews with stakeholders were useful because of the range of agencies they represented, and because they served to inform and motivate rather than simply enable information collation. For example, a (senior) police interviewee had not considered previously that Together Women referrals might take place at the cautioning stage (despite this being an option from the outset) and intended to take action to ensure this happened post-interview.

**Conclusion**

This report suggests that approximately a year after Together Women was funded, issues remain about making the model of change more explicit, securing service user engagement, persuading the courts to use Together Women in place of custody despite it being welcomed for other lower tariff cases, and recording and measuring change. However, it is important to note some important achievements. Together Women has been swiftly and efficiently implemented. Its staff are enthusiastic, committed and well-managed. It has been welcomed by other local agencies and sentencers who see it as filling an important gap. Perhaps most importantly, the service users who have sustained contact with Together Women value the assistance it provides and the access it enables to other local services, and consider that it has been beneficial.
References


Implementing services for women offenders and those ‘at risk’ of offending: action research with Together Women

Together Women began operating in late 2006/early 2007 from centres in the North West and Yorkshire & Humberside. It was set up to address the needs of female offenders to prevent re-offending, the needs of women deemed at risk of offending and to divert both groups from prosecution and custody, using a tailored approach to meet individual needs. This report details an action research study undertaken to provide real-time feedback on the set-up and initial delivery of TW; to assess the extent and quality of current data collection and identify possible improvements to this; and to gather views of service users and other stakeholders regarding their initial experiences of TW. Methodology included interviews with service users, a range of TW staff, TW referrers, sentencers and other local stakeholders; an audit of cases entered onto the service user database used in Yorkshire & Humberside, and observations of TW in action. Findings cover three key areas: firstly, how and why contact with TW leads to change (via a ‘model of change’ which remains to be clarified), secondly, the early perspectives of stakeholders and service users regarding the value of TW and finally, how interventions and change should be monitored and measured. The report concluded that approximately a year since TW was set-up, issues remained about making the model of change explicit, securing wider service user engagement, persuading local courts to used TW in place of custody, and recording and measuring change. Despite these issues, however, the research found TW to have been swiftly and efficiently implemented, with enthusiastic, committed and well-managed staff. Stakeholders have welcomed it, describing it as filling an important gap in local provision, and service users who maintained contact with TW value the assistance and access it has enabled them to have to other local services.