

Beyond Youth Custody is a national Big Lottery funded programme which examines and promotes best practice in the resettlement of young people and young adults leaving custody. The programme aims to establish an evidence base of effective practice by combining what is already known about what works to reduce the reoffending of young people with an analysis of the impact of a range of approaches. BYC brings together Nacro, the crime reduction charity, with three research and evaluation partners, ARCS (UK), and Salford and Bedfordshire universities.

Resettlement of girls and young women

With females comprising less than 5% of young people in custody, most knowledge about effective resettlement and reducing reoffending comes from work with young men. Young women's pathways into offending, the impact of custody upon them, their resettlement needs and their reoffending patterns differ from those of young men. Resettlement practice and interventions with this group therefore need to address particular vulnerabilities, engage with the role of relationships and empower girls and young women make positive choices.

Developing a gender-sensitive approach

On 20 January, Beyond Youth Custody held a policy roundtable to bring together key stakeholders, policy makers and practitioners to consider the findings of Beyond Youth Custody's research into the resettlement of girls and young women. The meeting - chaired by Jacob Tas, Nacro Chief Executive - heard from the authors of the research, Professor Neal Hazel and Dr Tim Bateman, and leading contributions from Baroness Jean Corston, author of 'The Corston Report', Nick Hardwick CBE, Chief Inspector of Prisons, Andy Smith, Assistant Chief Inspector of Probation and Alaina Tolhurst of the Youth Justice Board. This briefing outlines key themes from discussions.

1. 'Girls and Young Women' – a distinct approach

- The age range for Beyond Youth Custody includes girls under 18, and young women up to the age of 25. Framing discussions for this group, there is interplay between age and gender which captures issues to do with maturity, transitions to adulthood and statutory responsibilities. It transcends the interface between Youth Offending Teams, probation, Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) and other agencies.
- In a criminal justice context, approaches often termed 'gender-neutral' are heavily weighted towards, and can equate to a system 'designed for men'. While some universal *principles* in the resettlement of young people can be applied to young females (e.g. ensuring continuity between custody and community), they must be considered in a gender-specific way.
- However, girls and young women are not a homogenous group. There are nuances related to age, maturity, ethnicity, motherhood, past experience, trauma etc. that interact to contribute to distinct and multiple needs of this group. Custody is often a poor response to the needs of girls and young women.

2. Girls and young women in custody

- The small numbers of girls and young women in custody are a symptom of the success of diverting them away from custody. This provides an opportunity for clear oversight and accountability of the agencies involved in supporting each individual girl and young woman, with the small numbers in custody seen as a chance to offer a tailored and enhanced approach.
- However, an unintended consequence has been that girls and young women are held much further away from home, posing challenges for resettlement. In addition, young women are no longer held in Young Offender Institutions meaning that for the small numbers who transfer into adult prisons, the transition is much more significant.
- This highlights the need for expertise and good practice in the resettlement of girls and young women to be shared between agencies and individuals around the country. It also raises questions about effective ways of commissioning gender-sensitive services for this group.

3. Securing safe accommodation

- Arranging for somewhere safe for girls and young women to stay when they are released from custody is crucial to effective resettlement. Housing is key to making other types of support successful. Not just the four walls a young woman stays in, but the people they share it with, the people around it, and the environment they are placed in.
- Having somewhere stable and safe to stay can empower girls and young women, giving them opportunities to foster relationships, possibly with their children, and also to get away from negative relationships.

4. Co-ordination and accountability of services

- There is a plethora of agencies and individuals involved in supporting girls and young women. Sometimes there are competing responsibilities at work and lines of responsibility and accountability can be blurred.
- An on-going point of contact and support for young women would ensure support is continuous. Appropriate individuals and agencies should be afforded the levers and oversight to ensure that appropriate support is in place through the gate and in exit planning.
- There is a clear need for statutory help to be in place. The voluntary sector has a key complementary role to play to ensure a flexible and responsive approach. It is crucial to be able to tailor services to individual needs. Sometimes small interventions have the potential to make a real difference, for example being able to commission practical things such as hair dressing, clothes and driving lessons.

5. Developing trust in relationships

- Individual and personal relationships are crucial for this group and young women need the time and opportunity to foster and improve existing relationships. The role of women as mothers needs to be given special consideration and how facilities and expertise of staff working in the secure estate can be utilised.
- Girls and young women should have one consistent individual and advocate that they can build a relationship with in custody that carries through into the community. Sometimes it is only when trusted relationships are developed, that the benefit from other resettlement interventions such as education or employment can be realised.

6. Gender-sensitive outcomes

- There is a need to ensure that we have appropriate, meaningful and gender-specific outcome measures in place. Consideration should be given to the balance between hard outcomes on re-offending, and softer outcomes that are associated with empowering women.
- Shifting the focus of outcomes will have a knock-on impact and change the way that services for this group are designed and delivered. For example taking in consideration the extent to which accommodation is safe, secure and permanent, rather than just whether a bed has been secured for the first night.
- The rigid link between education and employment could be a danger. Education is, and should be seen as a tool for empowerment and social development. Measuring success should therefore take into account factors other than just gaining employment for example parenting and healthy relationships.

7. The future landscape

- It remains important to ensure that the recruitment and training of staff who work with girls and young women takes into account a gender-sensitive approach. Practitioners working with this group should be trained to take into account the specific needs of girls and young women when delivering services, assessing likelihood of reoffending and risk of harm.
- One of the factors that should be taken into account when considering future plans for securely holding girls and young women is how a gender-sensitive approach can ensure that outcomes achieved, for example in education, under current arrangements can be improved by new arrangements.
- In going forward, it will be crucial that commissioning arrangements under CRCs and reforms under Transforming Rehabilitation are monitored to assess the impact that they have on services for young women. Arrangements for commissioning services for young women under CRCs will be more complex so must be assessed to ensure a gender sensitive approach is being adopted.
- Similarly, effectiveness of interventions and resettlement approaches for girls need to be monitored and properly evaluated to ensure that practice can be improved and learning shared between agencies.
- Consideration is needed for how to develop an effective model of service delivery for the decreasing number of girls and young women leaving custody. The small number offers an opportunity for developing specialist services, whilst competing with the viability of commissioning and delivering these services at a local level.

Beyond Youth Custody is continuously undertaking research into the effective resettlement of young people leaving custody, sharing best practice in this area and contributing to debates in policy. All research reports and resources are available on our website, www.beyondyouthcustody.net

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