

Time for Change: An Evaluation of an Intensive Support Service for Young Women at High Risk of Secure Care or Custody

A Report for Up-2-Us

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This briefing presents key findings of research which evaluated the Time for Change Young Women's Project, a community-based intensive support service for young women and girls aged 14 to 17 years at high risk of being drawn into secure care and custodial detention.

The Full Report on which this Briefing is based can be accessed on www.sccjr.ac.uk

The Time for Change Project

The Time for Change Young Women's Project (TfC) provides dedicated and gender-specific services for vulnerable girls and young women aged 15 to 17 years at referral (18 only if exceptionally vulnerable) who are at high risk of secure care or custody, and for whom other mainstream options have proved unsuitable. TfC was established by Up-2-Us in May 2010 for those who were chaotic and extremely vulnerable in transition from secure accommodation and prison. It was set up in response to concerns regarding the very limited service provision for girls and young women who either offend or are at risk of offending in Scotland (Burman and

Batchelor 2009), and against a backdrop of an increasing female prison population (McIvor and Burman 2011).

A key change to Scottish youth justice policy and practice which also serves as important background context for TfC has been the implementation of the 'whole system approach' to dealing with under 18 year olds who offend (Scottish Government 2011). This is founded on the principles of early intervention and is designed to seek opportunities to engage young people more productively in education, skills and positive activity, by putting in place a more streamlined and consistent response that works across all systems and agencies to achieve better outcomes. The principles of early, and effective intervention that is timely,

supportive and appropriate, and the linking of risk taking behaviour to the expression of unmet need, together with the aim of the prevention of custody and secure accommodation, were encapsulated in the development of TfC.

The stated aims of TfC are to: provide dedicated intensive, relationship-based, support of young women and girls in order to minimise the escalation their offending and /or involvement with the youth and adult criminal justice systems; to assist them resolve current or past conflicts or trauma, familial difficulties and emotional issues associated with their offending behaviours, and to: enhance their positive social relationships, interests and access to suitable education, in line with research findings on resilience and desistance and with an asset-focused, strengths-based approaches to practice.

The TfC service is delivered on an outreach basis and includes elements of practical support, partnership, one to one focused work and a 24 hour on-call help-line. TfC also has access to facilities for residential placements, through the Up-2-Us parent organisation resource team which provides respite to vulnerable young people in times of crisis. TfC key workers respond to all calls for service provision, with managerial support, via a duty on-call system. TfC also offers consultation and advice to other agencies.

The Evaluation

The evaluation of TfC utilised a mixed method approach, and included data from semi-structured interviews with: TfC key workers and manager (n=6), criminal justice social workers, children's and families social workers, and other stakeholders (n=12), and with young

women service users (n=14). It also included analysis of case file information and the TfC data-base which records information on referral source, reasons for referral, key presenting issues (e.g. health, addiction), familial circumstances, legal status, history of anti-social or offending behaviour, and current accommodation, as well as any history of statutory involvement.

The evaluation sought the views and experiences of TfC staff, stakeholders and service users, in order to:

- gain understanding of the complexities of the client group, both in regard to levels of need and risk, and the practice challenges encountered by TfC;
- obtain feedback from service users and stakeholders on key elements of the TfC service and its collaboration with other agencies, including the model of service delivery and principal practice approaches;
- examine the impact of TfC on the young women using the service, and;
- ascertain how the work of TfC and its model of service delivery could be improved

Research-Informed Practice

TfC explicitly adopts a gender-specific approach in its holistic service provision which recognises and addresses the multiple problems (physical, emotional, mental and sexual health, self-esteem/self-worth, substance abuse, victimisation and trauma) that frequently characterise young women's lives. The TfC ethos incorporates insights derived

from the systems perspective (Bloom et al 2003; Covington 2003), in recognition that the lives of offending young women are embedded in a complex social reality, encompassing their relationships, their personal history, and intricate social, structural and contextual factors, which cannot be ignored (Zaplin 2008:84). The TfC service is relationship-based (Mearns and Thorne 2007) and delivered primarily on a one-to-one basis. It utilises a strengths-based model of planning and practice, which addresses young women's challenges and strengths, and aims to facilitate or enhance young women's ability to self-advocate within a supportive environment. Practice is also trauma-informed (Covington 2003) and includes therapeutic interventions aimed at individual young women, with a focus on self-esteem, a positive self-concept as a female, and the development of pro-social skills.

Referral Processes

TfC has a broad catchment area in the west of Scotland, and accepts referrals from statutory and non-statutory sources. Young women engage with TfC on a voluntary basis. Although TfC set out with the aim of preventing girls and young women from being sent to secure accommodation or prison, it soon became clear that an increasing number of referrals were either already placed within secure care and therefore requiring support upon discharge, or were already being held in custody either via remand or direct sentence. Following ongoing concern about the imprisonment of women on repeated short term sentences and the lack of support on release, TfC commenced a professional working relationship with HMP Cornton Vale, a

female prison, and the Good Shepherd Centre, a secure unit which, at the time of TfC's inception, was dedicated to girls.

TfC is developing good professional relationships with potential referrers. Awareness of TfC has grown and interview data from stakeholders highlights the overall development of positive working relationships with TfC, with a strong recognition of the need for the services offered. Interviews with stakeholders also clearly show that the purpose of TfC is both well understood, and appreciated.

From May 2010 to March 2011, TfC received a total of 44 referrals from statutory criminal justice, youth justice and children and families social work services within local authority areas, health agencies, and voluntary sector organisations working directly with a young woman or her family/carers. Most referrals emanate from HMP Cornton Vale (n=16), and the Good Shepherd (n=8) mainly seeking support with transitions into the community, including accommodation. Of the community-based referrals, most came from South Ayrshire (n=5), Renfrewshire (n=4) and North and East Ayrshire (n=3 respectively). Three quarters (n=33) of those referred to TfC are aged 16-18 years.

Interviews with stakeholders found that the referral process is considered was quick and responsive, although some differences exist across local authority areas in terms of ease of access to information on referrals and TfC staff report occasional difficulties surrounding the sharing of historical and background information, such as social enquiry reports and Children's Hearing

information, and in accessing appropriate mental health or learning disability assessment and provision for young women.

Young women imprisoned at the point of referral essentially refer themselves; although it is important to note that TfC workers offer encouragement to prison-based young women to engage with TfC. Where there is a self-referral from prison, gaining background information can be particularly difficult, as young women are often hazy about details, with limited understanding of the reasons for their arrest, the nature of current and/or pending charges, or potential sentencing outcomes.

The ability to make referrals to TfC is generally welcomed by statutory social workers, some of whom indicate that their role is increasingly one of case management, leaving them limited time to spend directly with individual young women. They welcome the additional in-depth information that TfC workers provide and their insights into young women's needs and general progress. It was generally felt that good relationships were in place and that TfC workers could undertake tasks that social workers had probably identified but did not have time to address, providing them with an opportunity to focus on issues more directly related to offending or order compliance/completion. The respite care was also considered very valuable by social workers who recognise the need for 'time out' for young women in times of crisis.

Communication and information-sharing processes between TfC and other services and agencies are considered to be working well. Following referral, three-

way meetings are held between the TfC key worker, the young woman and social/agency worker to conduct an assessment and develop/review the individual support plan. Communication processes were seen to be working well with good information sharing in place, especially at the initial stages of a young woman's engagement with TfC. However some interviews with referrers revealed a desire for increased agency involvement, such as routine attendance at a formalised review meeting, with a number noting that they would prefer greater communication of the progress in the work being undertaken with young women and their response to it. The scheduling of children and families social work review meetings, in particular, can be problematic because of the number of people likely to be involved, and the frequency of such meetings. In order to try to address the desire for more inclusive review meetings, TfC has advocated the use of smaller, planning meetings.

The Young Women Service Users

Data from the TfC data base provides some information on accommodation, educational/employment status, contact with youth/adult justice, and familial and social background. But in many cases this information is sketchy or missing, prohibiting any detailed analysis.

Over half of those referred (n=24) were either in prison (remand or under direct sentence) or accommodated within secure care at the time of referral. Six were living at home with family; two were living with a friend or other relative; six were in local authority accommodation,

and; six were in temporary accommodation.

Almost two fifths were previously accommodated by the local authority (inc. foster care, residential care, and supported accommodation). Whilst most (n=35) reported having some contact with family members, in most cases this was sporadic and infrequent. Around three quarters of referrals come from lone mother families.

All but one were either subject to compulsory social work intervention or involved in criminal proceedings, or were under sentence at the point of referral. Thirty nine had an allocated social worker, but with wide variations in levels and frequency of social work contact.

Most have histories of police involvement, arrest, conviction and/or involvement with the Children's Hearings System on offence grounds (as well as welfare grounds). In 21 of the 44 referrals, offending was a key reason for referral. Whilst a small number were charged with violence, including murder, attempted murder and serious assault, most were involved in more minor offending: breaches of the peace; vandalism; malicious mischief; criminal damage; making threatening telephone calls; and; a range of road traffic offences, including drunk driving; having no insurance and/or driving licence; leaving the scene of an accident, and; being a passenger in a stolen car.

Few young women referred appear to have undergone any formal standardised risk assessment; the lack of formalised risk data is surprising, given that many of the young women referred have been

justice-involved for some considerable time.

While most young women are referred on the basis of their offending behaviour, vulnerability factors are also noted: severe isolation; homelessness and housing difficulties; mental health issues; self-harming; negative peer or familial associations; childhood trauma, loss or attachment difficulties. Many had been exposed to considerable familial conflict, and/or physical and emotional neglect or sexual abuse at points during their childhood.

Twenty seven of the 44 referrals went on to become involved with TfC for three months or more; a small number (6) were not taken on as cases, either because the referrer was simply seeking advice from TfC, or the young woman concerned did not meet the eligibility criteria in that she came from outside the TfC catchment area (and so were referred on to Barnardos or Includem). Of those 11 remaining, the young women concerned were already connected with local agencies, and so met with TfC workers for two to three sessions only, primarily because they were in crisis or had pressing emotional needs. A small number (3) of this latter group were subsequently re-referred to TfC, for similar reasons, although on each occasion contact was again limited to two or three sessions.

Working with Girls and Young Women

The programme offered by TfC is designed to meet the needs of individual young women. A key worker is allocated, and will work in partnership with each young woman, to ensure her views are

taken account of in the development and fulfilment of her own support plan. This encourages responsibility for engagement, rather than the imposition of a care plan which has been designed 'for' rather than 'by' young women.

Individual support plans are subject to internal monitoring and review at intervals of initially one month then at regular intervals thereafter. This tends to be an informal process between the TfC key worker and young woman, but where other agencies are involved, their views are also solicited, and the TfC plan is linked in with other plans in place. Support plans may include: support to develop new coping strategies and to make informed choices; support to develop new pro-social relationships, or mend severed relationships; facilitate improvements to physical and mental health; enhance practical living skills; assist in introduction to new social experiences; linking young women into other appropriate services and activities in order to address social exclusion; address reasons for young women's offending behaviour, and; assist in the development of plans for education, training and employability.

A high frequency of contact with young women is maintained; this is linked to stage of involvement, needs, and perceived risks, but is usually at least twice weekly. Contact meetings are approx. two hours duration, often longer, and can include relationship building activities, and one-on-one therapeutic support. This can also include recreational pursuits to assist young women to develop greater self confidence, and encouragement to participate in structured activities.

The value of the TfC service lies in its flexibility, and ability to respond to the diverse (and multiple) problems encountered by young women in their daily lives. Much of the support provided is practical in nature: assisting in budgeting, applications for housing or financial assistance, securing appointments with doctors and dentists, contacting social services and other agencies where difficulties could be encountered making contact, or when the young women were just not confident enough to do this themselves. Workers also get involved with families, making contact, relaying information, attending relevant meetings and providing support for young women when meeting with their families.

The gender-specific nature of TfC is an important aspect of the way in which intensive support is interpreted, delivered and received. Operating from within a gender-sensitive paradigm, the emotional support provided to young women is seen by TfC workers as a key part of their role. The provision of emotional support is also held in high regard by referrers as, often, it is time-consuming and ongoing nature of this kind of support which is difficult for social workers and other service providers to provide.

The physical location of young women is very important in the design and delivery of support that can be provided, as well as the nature of contact. As part of their case-load, key workers may be simultaneously supporting young women in prison, in the community and in secure care; this necessitates flexibility in response.

Interview data with young women evidenced that TfC workers are

considered reliable, consistent, accessible and easy to talk to. Young women are appreciative of the advice and advocacy in relation to practical matters, such as legal and housing issues and the emotional support and assistance offered. All were aware of the distinctive roles of social worker and TfC worker, and the experience of working with TfC was perceived as very different to the type of practice and provision offered by statutory social work services.

Young women's engagement with TfC is not always easy, or productive, despite sustained efforts to build relationships and rapport. In a small number of cases, individuals remain doggedly resistant to engagement with TfC (or indeed any other support service), missing appointments, being uncommunicative, and/or refusing to participate in any meaningful way.

Key workers reports differences in terms of working with older (those aged between 16 and 18 years) and younger girls engaged with TfC. The 'older' group tend to have experienced more (and often significant) involvement with the statutory care and/or justice system, including periods of imprisonment. They are less likely to be involved within children's services; more likely to be exposed to adult criminal justice services; more likely to have addiction problems (mainly alcohol), and; more likely to be involved in risky lifestyles. The older group also tend to have more limited sources of support, and require a higher level of worker contact and support in order to maintain their safety.

TfC staff report that younger girls are more difficult to build relationships with and more resistant to meaningful

engagement, which resounds with literature on working with girls (Alder 1998; Baines and Alder 1996; Batchelor and Burman 2004). Many of the younger girls are on compulsory orders, and are more likely to have several agencies involved in their care plan. As well as this being a likely factor accounting for engagement difficulties, it also raises concerns about unnecessary duplication of support. Therefore, there is need to ensure that young women are not overwhelmed by number of practitioners involved within their lives, but to ensure that TfC is selected as an appropriate means of support where key criteria are met.

Impact

Whilst a detailed analysis of outcomes was never a specific objective of this evaluation, some largely textual information on the impact of TfC on the everyday lives of young women engaging with TfC is available, although there are important caveats to this. It is important to emphasise that the evaluation has been undertaken over a short period of time, and the complex psychological, familial and social difficulties experienced by this group may be deeply entrenched. Many of the young women have experienced a raft of prior statutory and voluntary interventions in their lives, which have not resulted in sustained positive change. Some have had difficult and distrustful relationships with professionals, and are resistant to working with agencies. Yet for many there is evidence of positive progress in some areas. This includes: increasing recognition and acknowledgement of the risks posed by their drinking and drug use; increases in help-seeking behaviour in relation to substance abuse; a growing

ability to identify/avoid risky situations likely to lead to arrest; progress in repairing family relationships, and; the acquisition and use of practical living skills, often accomplished in conjunction with the achievement of more stable living arrangements.

The practical support provided by TfC in helping young women to plan, to budget, to obtain accommodation, and to shop is highly valued by social workers and other referrers. Also, the role of TfC workers in supporting young women to access a range of services was viewed by social workers as very important, both in terms of addressing social exclusion and also achieving compliance with court orders.

The impact of interventions such as TfC require time to demonstrate longer term impact in relation to reductions in reoffending/reconviction, increases in compliance with orders and ultimately reductions in the number of young women being imprisoned or sent to secure care. Whilst these findings are at best tentative, there was a reduction in the rate of offending recorded; just seven of the young women incurred a new charge, and an eighth was arrested twice but not charged on either occasion.

Because of the multiplicity of need in these justice-involved young women's lives, taken together with the relatively short time frame of the evaluation, no young women had been supported to move on from TfC, so it is not possible to provide meaningful information about the processes or experiences of exiting from the service. Nonetheless it is anticipated that this is highly likely to prove a very difficult and challenging process for both young women and their key workers.

The findings of this evaluation provide support for the benefits of TfC, despite some of the uncertainties currently experienced due to short-term funding arrangements and the challenges of working with this group. Incarcerated young women and those at high risk of detention in prison or secure accommodation, remain a group in great need of appropriate resource provision, both from welfare provision and penal policy and practice.

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