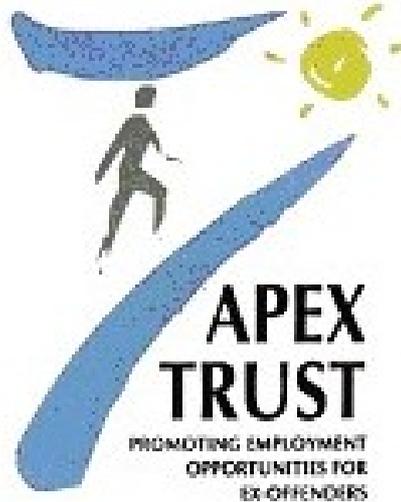# An evaluation of the 'ACT 4 Women' project run by Apex Trust from a stakeholder's perspective

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1. Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking Kim Hughes, Project Manager at Apex Trust for being so accommodating and supportive during the course of the research project. I would also like to thank Carol Blinston, Elvira Fairhurst, Hannah Norman- Williams and Lynne Cain for the welcome you gave me into Apex and providing a further source of support during my time on the project.

Additionally I would like to thank Claudette Graham and the Interchange charity for providing me with the opportunity to carry out this project. As well as my academic supervisor Louise Hardwick for your assistance throughout the year, providing me with much valued advice and encouragement.

I would like to end by particularly thanking all the participants who gave up their time to be involved with the project and aid my research findings. Without your participation the research project would not have been possible and I am truly grateful.

2. Executive Summary

Executive Summary

The purpose of this study was to provide an evaluation of Apex Trusts 'ACT 4 Women' project. The project provides an employment, training and education (ETE) service along with guidance and advocacy services for women ex-offenders residing in the Merseyside area. Based in St. Helens, the service employs five paid workers and eight volunteers and is currently funded by a three year Big Lottery programme, ending in 2017. The evaluation aimed to examine the services provided by the 'ACT 4 Women' project, citing its benefits for service users, strengths and weaknesses and to make recommendations for improvement.

The methodology consisted of six semi-structured interviews with two service users, two peer mentors and two partner agencies in order to gain a broad image of the service from a range of stakeholders. A thematic analysis was undertaken to examine key themes from the raw data and topics of interest.

The evaluations main findings conclude:

- *Common Findings from all stakeholders:* The service provides employment, education and training (ETE) benefits for the women, which contributes to their reduced re-offending. The service additionally creates personal benefits for the women through offering support, and building confidence. Finally, it was identified that to improve the project, Apex Trust should expand their services in order to reach and help more women.

- *Findings specifically from partner organisations*: The service the 'ACT 4 Women' project offers is unique, with there being no other employment advice organisation offering an individual, women-only service in the area. Apex Trust is also praised for regularly updating partner organisations, which is highly valued. Finally, the services on-site support for the Women's Isis Centre is found to be extremely beneficial and could be improved through attending the centre for more than one day a week.

2. Executive Summary

- *Findings specifically from service users and peer mentors:* The peer mentor programme offered by the project is very successful, benefiting the individual in terms of learning new skills and gaining experience, as well as allowing service users to give something back to the project. Finally, it was found that there was a desire for the projects marketing to be improved, for women to know exactly what the project is and the services it offers.

From these findings the student researcher identified three recommendations for the improvement of the 'ACT 4 Women' project:

- To continue providing the project, as there is a clear need for the service in the Merseyside area.

- To expand its services and in particular visit the Women's Isis Centre more than one day a week.

- To improve the marketing of the project, allowing other women in need of help to recognise the service that is available to them.

Research Title: An evaluation of the 'ACT 4 Women' project run by Apex Trust from a stakeholder's perspective'.

This evaluation has been produced in partnership with the charitable organisation Interchange. Interchange seeks to link local voluntary organisations with students in higher education from the University of Liverpool, providing social research and work-based projects. Apex Trust first worked with Interchange three years ago where a similar evaluation of the 'ACT 4 Women' project was undertaken, by a previous University of Liverpool student. This report contributed to a successful Big Lottery Bid for Apex Trust and a further three years of funding from the Big Lottery in order for the project to continue.

Project Aims:

- To provide an evaluation of the 'ACT 4 Women' project provided by Apex Trust.

- To gain evidence of why the women use its services, analysing how beneficial it is for them.

- To examine the strengths and weaknesses of the project making recommendations for improvement.

Project Objectives:

- To carry out six qualitative semi-structured interviews with: two service users, two peer mentors and two partner organisation. Questions will relate to the services provided by Apex Trust's 'ACT 4 Women' project.

3. Introduction

- To carry out a thematic analysis of the raw data collected in order to identify themes and points of interest from the data collected.

- To present findings from the analysis in a report and make recommendations that emerge from this.

The initial chapter of the report introduces the organisation Apex Trust and its history, purpose and partner agencies. It will then turn attention to the Corston Report (2007), a highly influential document highlighting issues relevant to women offenders and Apex Trust. It makes an array of recommendations in order to improve services for women who are at risk of offending or re-offending and in relation to Apex Trust, the services they provide fulfil some of the report's recommendations, and these are examined later on in the report. The middle sections consider the methodology used for the evaluation and the ethical considerations that these entailed. The report concludes with the evaluation findings and discussion, with recommendations that have been taken from these and concluding comments.

Apex Trust

Founded in 1965 by retired Barrister Neville Vincent, the Trust initially began piloting two programmes based in two London Borough prisons. These identified a specific need for a service that provided for 'white collar' offenders and sex offenders. After the programmes success, Apex Trust expanded its services for all offenders, with the inclusion of those under the supervision of the Probation Service. Currently residing in the Merseyside area, Apex Trust has been working to provide opportunities for unemployed people with a criminal record since 1996 (Apex Trust Website).
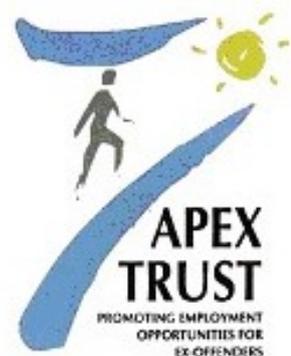
Apex Trust is a local charitable organisation that supports ex-offender's secure employment, training, education (ETE) and voluntary work. They provide information, advice and guidance through a one to one service, aiming to support clients in achieving their goals. Forty-two percent of their service users reside in Liverpool, which is a local authority containing the highest number of areas among the most deprived in England. Also, ninety percent of the people Apex Trust helps have multiple problems with complex needs arising from poverty, traumatic life events (abuse, violence, ill-health and bereavement), mental health problems, drug and alcohol related needs and lack of support networks. These problems intersect with and compound a history of poor educational attainment, lack of basic skills (including 'life-skills' such as managing money, self-care and social relationships) and an inability to change patterns of behaviour that result in anti-social and criminal behaviour. One of the key by-products of their work is to reduce re-offending and to achieve better integration of their service users into society.

The Trust's 'ACT 4 Women' project began in July 2014 as a three year Big Lottery funded programme, being a continuation of a previous four year programme funded by the Big Lottery- Reaching communities, and with additional funders including:

John Moores Foundation, The Quadrant Group, The Noel Buxton Trust, Trusthouse Charitable Trust, Archer Trust, Woodward Charitable Trust, PH Holt Foundation, Allen Lane Foundation and Garfield Weston. The project provides a service specifically for women ex-offenders residing in the Merseyside area, offering support around the writing of CV's, completing application forms for employment and educational courses, and disclosures of convictions for employers. Additionally the project aims to guide clients into the appropriate opportunities suited to them. The programme is provided on an outreach basis, working alongside and receiving referrals from many services based in the Merseyside area such as: the National Probation Service, Community Rehabilitation Company, Job centres, Addaction and the Tomorrow's Women Wirral, as well as accepting self-referrals. Many of the women referred from these services can be dealing with an array of problems such as debt, drug and alcohol addictions, problems with mental health and domestic abuse. Subsequently the 'ACT 4 Women' project seeks to provide valuable life skills, learning, advice and advocacy support for these women who are struggling to adapt to life after their criminal conviction. The projects team is made up of 5 paid workers and 8 volunteers with a registered office based in St. Helens. The project also offers recruitment for women ex-offenders to become voluntary peer mentors for service users, allowing the mentors to develop new skills and gain qualifications (Information drawn from Apex's Trust's grey literature).

3. The Organisation

Partner Organisations background information:

The probation service provides supervision for offenders that are either serving a community sentence or have recently been released from prison and are on license or parole. The trust works alongside their Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC), working to provide programmes to change offending behavior and therefore reduce re-offending.

The job centre works to find employment for those that are unemployed in the United Kingdom and provides allowances for those actively seeking to find employment.

Addaction is one of the UK's leading charities specialising in mental health and drug and alcohol abuse. They support adults and young people to make the necessary steps to improving their lives.

Tomorrows Women Wirral (TWW) is a charitable organisation based in the Wirral, Merseyside working with and supporting women to improve their lives and reduce re-offending.

4. The Corston Report

The Corston Report

Commissioned by the Home Office in 2007 Baroness Jean Corston carried out *'A Review of Women with particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System'* (Corston, 2007). The report made an array of recommendations in relation to this, setting the foundations for an improved system when dealing with women offenders. Baroness Corston emphasised the differences between men and women and the vulnerabilities they face, recognising the three main 'vulnerabilities' among women in prison and at risk of offending as: domestic circumstances, personal circumstances and socio-economic factors.

Domestic Circumstances

Domestic Abuse: Corston identified 46% of female offenders in prison had suffered a history of domestic violence (Corston, 2007). The National Offender Management Service highlighted a need for advocacy services within the community for women who have suffered domestic violence (NOMS, 2015), emphasising women only environments as vital in order for women to feel safe and secure.

Childcare: The Prison Reform Trust (2013) estimated that in 2010 more than 17,240 mothers were separated from their children by imprisonment. Corston highlighted *"strong links between acquisitive crimes and women's needs to provide for children"* (Corston, 2007: 18), emphasising childcare as clear vulnerability and pathway toward offending.

Personal Circumstances

Mental Illness: "*Women in prison are five times more likely to have a mental health concern than women in the general population*" (Fawcett Society, 2015). Corston recognised mental health as being a likely factor for many women's offending, with little being done in terms of support or healthcare within the community (Corston, 2007).

Substance Misuse: Substance misuse disproportionately takes place among women as *"around 70% of women coming into custody require clinical detoxification compared with 50% of men"* (Corston, 2007: 19). Women's substance misuse is most likely to already be a large problem before an offence has taken place, therefore suggesting this substance abuse to be a contribution and/or catalyst toward many women's offending.

Socio- economic Factors

Poverty: Poverty can be a major contributing factor for women's offending, with many turning to crime in order to support themselves and their dependants. Additionally, after receiving a criminal conviction women can become increasingly more vulnerable to poverty through possible financial instability and housing disruption (Ministry of Justice, 2009).

Employment: A lack of employment is what can turn many women toward the vulnerabilities mentioned above, creating a downward spiral of instability. Once convicted by the criminal justice system it can become even harder for the individual to secure employment through having to disclose their offence on employment applications and from often lacking the confidence to apply.

As a result of this, Corston concluded that *"women have been marginalised within a system largely designed by men for men for far too long"* (Corston, 2007: 2) and in order to deter women from offending and thus entering the criminal justice system these vulnerabilities must be addressed. Therefore Corston recommended a distinct set of approaches to be put in place for men and women in order to challenge their differing vulnerabilities and gain equal outcomes. Corston emphasised the need for a "*holistic, women- centred, integrated approach'* (Corston, 2007: 89), particularly with an extension of support for women in the community, which is specifically tailored to deter women from offending and re-offending in the future.

4. The Corston Report

After The Corston Report

In 2013 the House of Commons Justice Committee published a report examining the progress that had been made surrounding women in the criminal justice system since Baroness Corston's recommendations. The report recognised the need for men and women to be dealt with differently in order to address the differing vulnerabilities they face. Consequently the government's acceptance of Corston's recommendation for the implementation of women's centres in the community is specified, with financial support having been provided for the development of over 30 projects since then. These centres were found to be extremely successful enabling them to *"build relationships with women to support them through relapse and crisis that can extend long beyond the time that they are in contact with the criminal justice system"* (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2013: 29). However, the report noted that since the formation of the Coalition government in 2010 there was a failure to prioritise female offending against other issues. Consequently it concluded with the recommendation that a larger focus needs to be placed upon women and girls involved in the criminal justice system, with recognition still needing to be made of the vulnerabilities many of them face (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2013).

Methodology

The methodology of the research project entails the use of action research, where research is carried out allowing for action, such as change or improvement, and reflection to be achieved simultaneously (Dick, 2002 cited in Costello, 2003). The research project will therefore make recommendations for the 'ACT 4 Women' project in order to create action and improve its services. Subsequently, choosing the correct type of methodology for the project is vital in order to gain the correct type of research findings suitable for the evaluation. "*If you use the right sort of methods for your particular type of research, then you should be able to convince other people that your conclusions have some validity, and that the new knowledge you have created is soundly based*" (Walliman, 2011: 7). The student researcher thoroughly evaluated the range of research methods available to her in order to find methods best appropriate for the research project.

Data Collection

The methodology for the evaluation involved a qualitative data collection, consisting of six semi-structured interviews collected between January and February of 2016, as were the terms set out by the learning agreement. The student researcher chose to use semi-structured interviews as her method of research as it is an inductive approach, allowing for concepts and themes to emerge out of the interviews (Bryman, 2012). The student researcher chose only to use semi-structured interviews as her method as it was a small-scale study with time constraints for data collection. Six interviews were conducted with respondents who were part of 3 different stakeholder groups, including: service users, peer mentors and partner organisations. This allowed for a broad perspective of the service to be covered as respondents could express opinions based on differing experiences they have had with Apex Trust. The advantage of this method is that it allows for flexibility within the interviews whilst still having a structure to follow. For example, if respondents do not

5. Methodology

give very detailed answers, probing questions can be used to gain further information. Also, semi-structured interviews allow for the discussion of new topics that may be brought up, which the student researcher may not have considered (Walliman, 2011).

Questions asked in the interviews were open-ended, which as opposed to closed questions are flexible, not simply providing a possible set of answers for respondents to choose from. These open-ended questions allows for *"unusual responses to be derived. Replies that the survey researcher may not have contemplated… are possible"* and *"they are useful for exploring new areas or ones in which the researcher has limited knowledge"* (Bryman, 2012: 247). Each interview lasted between five to fifteen minutes and was recorded using a Dictaphone, being transcribed onto a word document afterwards. This enabled the student researcher to fully interact with the respondents, focusing on the answers she was receiving rather than trying to quickly write them down. Additionally *"it allows [for a] more thorough examination of what people say"* (Bryman, 2012: 482), through having an exact account of what was said during each interview.

Although the use of semi-structured interviews was the most appropriate method to use for the project, it does have its limitations. Firstly, with a less strict structure participants could go off track and discuss topics that have no relevance to the research aims. Also, the process of semi-structured interviews is very time consuming; not only having to complete six detailed interviews, but also manually transcribing each of these can take a lot of time.

Data Analysis:

A thematic analysis was used for this section of the research. This is a process regularly used when analysing qualitative data, enabling you to *"use the data you have collected to refine the themes, look for links within the data, identify typologies and look for similarities and differences within and between cases"* (Matthews and Ross, 2010: 372*).*

5. Methodology

This was carried out through a process called 'coding'. Coding is simply a *"process whereby data are broken down into component parts"* (Bryman, 2012: 710). This enables the data to be categorised into the differing themes devised by the researcher. The student researcher carried this process out by initially colour coding each theme identified within the data and then going through and highlighting areas of the transcripts that related to that certain theme, repeating this process for every topic identified.

The student researcher then undertook a process called 'charting data' where she simply charted what had been coded into a table. The table contained each theme that had been identified in the analysis and examples of them from the data that had been found during the coding process. The advantage of sorting the themes and coded data into a charted table is that is helps you to *"focus on these in more detail because you can bring together the range of data that relates to a particular theme"* (Matthews and Ross, 2010: 374). In addition, the table clearly laid out what themes were more prevalent for each stakeholder interviewed. This allowed for clear distinctions to be made and helped to identify the following sub-headings for the report: common findings amongst all stakeholders and findings unique to stakeholders, which included findings specific to partner organisations and to service users and peer mentors together.

5. Methodology

Ethical Considerations

"It is essential to ensure that the integrity of the research process and ethical behaviour become second nature to all researchers" (Reardon, 2006:21).

Throughout the research process the student researcher made sure all of the relevant ethical procedures had been considered. Firstly, all raw data collected, including interview recordings and transcripts were kept strictly confidential, with only the researcher having access to them. These were also part of the terms of the consent form, which she and each respondent signed. Additionally, the student researcher signed a further confidentiality form as part of Apex Trusts policy.

Also, it was important to keep all interview respondents anonymous. Anonymity refers to the not knowing or not revealing the respondents personal information (David and Sutton, 2004). Consequently, each respondent was assigned an identifier name, such as 'Service user A' in order for their identity to remain anonymous. In addition, as were the terms of the consent form, the partner organisation respondents gave permission for the name of their organisation to be identified in the report.

As the service users and peer mentors interviewed have histories of offending it was important to be aware of the specific sensitivities relating to these groups of people. Therefore the prepared questions for the interviews were specifically tailored to not ask any questions linked to service user vulnerabilities, such as surrounding the topics of respondents offending history, substance misuse or mental health, with the questions strictly focusing on the respondent's experiences with Apex Trust. Also, these sensitivities were considered when sampling respondents to interview, in order to make sure no vulnerable women were to participate, which could cause further ethical problems.

Introduction to Findings

This chapter will present the main findings drawn from the raw data taken in the study. The process of collecting this data involved the completion of six semi-structured interviews with Apex Trusts service users, peer mentors and partner organisations. Consequently, as differing stakeholders were involved with the data collection process the student researcher will begin by presenting the common findings found among all the stakeholders involved, moving on to present findings that are unique to partner organisations and to both service users and peer mentors. Common themes will be presented from these findings, along with example quotes taken from the interviews. A discussion of these themes will take place throughout the chapter. Within these discussions, a particular reference will be made to Baroness Corston's report (2007), where this study's findings shall be related to the three particular vulnerabilities women were identified as facing in the report. Also Corcoran's (2011) '*After Corston, the rehabilitation revolution?*' article shall be referred to. Finally, a previous evaluation of the 'ACT 4 Women' project produced three years ago will be drawn upon in order to identify continuity between findings.

Common Findings

The common findings presented apply to all the stakeholders interviewed. Three themes were identified throughout interviews with service users, peer mentors and partner organisations. These themes will be presented here, along with examples and a discussion provided for each.

The Key themes identified are:

1. Employment, Training and Education (ETE) Benefits for Women

2. Personal Benefits for Women

3. Expansion

6. Findings and Discussion

1. Employment, Training and Education (ETE) Benefits for Women:

A majority of the respondents expressed how the 'ACT 4 Women' project creates new ETE opportunities for its service users. In order to provide these benefits for the women Apex Trust offers a range of services such as: job finding assistance, guidance in CV writing, guidance in disclosures of criminal convictions to employers and assistance in finding training and education courses. It can be said that many ex-offender women can become stuck within a cycle of offending with no way of getting out. Through providing these services for the women, which can subsequently lead to these ETE benefits, it reduces the chance of these women re-offending in the future as they now have new opportunities to pursue. For example:

Peer mentor A: *"they've put me back into education which has been a complete shock to my system, and they've just guided me and they've made me feel as though I'm not finished and there is openings for new beginnings"*

Service user A: *"I'll be honest with you the first week that I got out of prison I was mortified, I wanted to go back"*

Discussion:

The 'ACT 4 Women' project is primarily focused upon helping to secure ex-offender women employment, training, education (ETE) and voluntary work, providing these women with opportunities many had thought were no longer possible. It is clear through respondent feedback that the service is successful in helping to provide these opportunities for the women and thus meet women's socio-economic vulnerabilities identified by the Corston Report (2007). Within this, poverty and unemployment are key, making many women vulnerable to offending. Through providing employment and education opportunities for

6. Findings and Discussion

ex-offender women, Apex Trust are lessening this vulnerability and thus are reducing many women's risk of re-offending in the future. Corston recommended that *"life skills should be given a much higher priority within the education, training and employment pathway"* (Corston, 2007: 8), which is a recommendation fulfilled by Apex Trust.

2. Personal Benefits for Women:

Most of the respondents expressed how much support the service provides for its service users and peer mentors, being very 'friendly' and 'personable' and providing a 'listening ear' for its users. As well as primarily helping its service users to find employment, training and/or education, the one to one sessions the Apex Trust team provide for its service users offers support through advice and guidance, along with the opportunity to make referrals to other partner organisations that specialise in areas such as: mental health and substance misuse. Additionally, it was found that this support Apex Trust provides aids the growth of women's confidence, with the majority of the respondents commenting on this. For example:

Service user A: *"So it's just the fact that when I speak to them… they listen and they get back to me dya know what I mean? So it's just, I know that they're there"*

Volunteer A: *"without Apex I'd still be sitting in a room without confidence thinking that I was worthless"*

Volunteer B: *"when I first came here I was quite quiet in terms of I'd kind of lost my personality a little bit along the way because I was just so beaten down by everything. But they've picked me up and put me back on my feet"*

Discussion:

Along with providing advice for securing employment and/ or educational opportunities, the 'ACT 4 Women' project also provides an advocacy service for it users. Employees provide a

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'listening ear', addressing any personal problems individuals may be facing and thus any personal circumstances, which identified by Corston (2007) are a particular vulnerability for women. These one-on-one appointments have proved to be essential for the respondents, with many acknowledging how 'personal' the service is and that they always *'know that they're there'*. The service gives its users on-going support even after employment or education has been secured and they no longer need their immediate services. Respondents commented on how beneficial this is for them with the majority interviewed believing they would not be in the same position they are now if they had not received support from Apex Trust, in a socio-economic and personal capacity. Similarly, the services on-going support was specified as a key theme in an evaluation of the service three years ago, where the projects *'friendly advice and guidance'* was highlighted as a clear attribute of the service (Hughes, 2013). This support has been identified as a vital factor for improving service user's confidence and self-worth, which respondents added is often knocked once a criminal conviction has been received.

3. Expansion:

Most of the respondents highlighted a desire for the 'ACT 4 Women' project to expand its services. Apex Trust is currently based in St. Helens providing its project to the Merseyside area. Also, the project is on-site one day at week at the Women's Isis Centre. A commonality among all stakeholders was for these services to grow, in order to supply help for more women. For example:

Women's Isis Centre respondent: *"it'd be good if we could have them for more than two days a week"*

Volunteer A: *"I wish they were bigger, more vast and I wish the world was full of these people that make you feel the way Apex does"*

6. Findings and Discussion

Discussion:

The desire for the services expansion highlights a clear demand. The Women's Isis Centre's need for the project is highlighted as *'the books are always full'* therefore being a fully utilized service. In addition, service users and volunteers have clearly experienced the positive outcomes of the project, therefore expressing a desire for it to help more people like themselves.

Findings Unique to Stakeholders

Particular themes were found to be unique to the partner organisations interviewed and between both the service users and peer mentors interviewed. Subsequently, findings unique to these two groups shall be presented, along with examples and a discussion provided for each.

Partner Organisations

Themes identified:

1. A Unique Service

2. On-site Support

1. A Unique Service:

Both the probation service and the Women's Isis Centre highlighted the uniqueness of the 'ACT 4 Women' project. Around the Merseyside area there are few, if any, organisations that provide employment advice specifically for women. Also, a clear uniqueness to the

6. Findings and Discussion

project highlighted by the partner organisations is its communication. Both partner organisations spoke positively about Apex Trust's communication with them, through regularly keeping in contact and providing updates on the progress of their service users. Additionally, both partner organisations commented on the individuality of the 'ACT 4 Women' project, praising how personal the service is through providing in depth one-to-one sessions with all its service users, allowing for their individual needs and desires to be expressed and worked towards. For example:

Probation Service*: "One of the really good things about them is that they keep you in the loop which isn't like some of the other agencies that we use. I've got confidence in if they've got anything to report back they will"*

Probation Service*: "there extremely accommodating in terms of the individual needs for the woman and I think that I always have confidence that when I do refer in… the woman will be catered for, for her needs and not just… a sort of generic service"*

Discussion:

The uniqueness of the level of care provided by Apex Trust highlights its value for the partner organisations using its service. Both respondents clearly appreciate the level of communication Apex Trust has with them, allowing the organisations to keep up to date with service user's progress and for both services to be on the same wavelength in terms of the women's support. This provides for a secure and trusted relationship between Apex Trust and its partner organisations. Additionally, the individual service Apex Trust provides is highly valued by its partner organisations, clearly highlighting the uniqueness of the service to tend to each woman's individual needs. Both partner organisations expressed the difficulty they would face in finding a similar service if Apex Trust were no longer there. Therefore the individuality of Apex Trust's service accommodates the many vulnerabilities women can face, as identified by the Corston Report (2007). This enables the support the

service provides to be tailored to each woman's individual needs. It can be said that this kind of service is uncommon among many other projects in place to support women ex-offenders in Merseyside, therefore highlighting the uniqueness of the 'ACT 4 Women' project.

2. On-site Support:

The 'ACT 4 Women' project is based in the Women's Isis Centre once a week. This centre, based in Liverpool, provides a women-only space for offenders to serve their custodial sentences. Also, the centre provides rehabilitative support through referral programmes, such as Apex Trust, being based at the centre. Through speaking to the Women's Isis Centre's respondent it was clear how necessary and supportive it is for Apex Trust to provide the project on-site at the centre, allowing for the service to remain 'women only' and for all the services provided to be in one place. For example the respondent commented:

"some women, especially the women that we deal with might have a lot of domestic violence, so like a woman only provision which obviously we've got here, you know having Apex on site to deliver that I think is essential"

Discussion:

Through providing the 'ACT 4 Women' project directly at the Women's Isis Centre it allows for the environment to remain women-only. It was under Corston's (2007) recommendation to provide *"women-only programmes and interventions and supervision for women"* (Corston, 2007: 67) within the community in order to provide a safe and secure place for vulnerable women. When analysing progress made after Corston's recommendations,

Corcoran (2011) found these women-only centres to highly benefit ex-offender women through "*meet[ing] their immediate needs such as social services, welfare advice, registration with health services, emergency accommodation, mental health and substance misuse support… show[ing] that women tend to respond very positively to interventions*" (Corcoran, 2011: 27). This highlights the success of such centres, making the on-site support Apex trust provides at the Women's Isis Centre vital. If Apex's services were no longer available to the centre any other similar services in the area would all be external to the site, therefore removing the 'women-only' element of the service and thus the safety and security of that female environment.

Service Users and Peer Mentors:

Themes identified that were unique to these stakeholders:

1. Peer Mentor Programme

2. Marketing

1. Peer Mentor Programme:

A unique aspect of Apex Trust's 'ACT 4 Women' project is that it provides previous service users with the opportunity to become peer mentors for the project. These women receive special training and personal development support, enabling them to work alongside the Trust's professional staff to deliver the service. Both the peer mentors interviewed spoke highly of this programme and both service users expressed a desire to become a part of it. Respondents identified a range of benefits that becoming a peer mentor provides for them, such as: improving their CV, providing new experiences and improving their self-worth. In addition, as well as benefiting the individual, respondents specified their desire to give something back to Apex Trust and to help other women as they have been helped. For example:

Peer mentor A: *"I'm quite proud of me self that they've taken me to a situation to where I've had to do talks… to know that you were helping people and they got really good feedback from it"*

Service User A: *"Once I've got my self on my feet I'd love to work with them voluntary… I really wanna give something back to these"*

Discussion:

The peer mentor programme provided by the 'ACT 4 Women' project is clearly a highly valued programme, with many service users taking up the opportunity. A particular benefit for becoming a peer mentor is the accredited status of the scheme, allowing volunteers to gain valuable qualifications and thus making them more attractive for future employers. Additionally, becoming a peer mentor further helps to build individuals confidence through putting them in positions which they may never have had to face before, such as giving talks about their experiences with Apex trust to other ex-offender women. It was also clear how much service users wanted to give back to the service, highlighting their thanks and loyalty to Apex Trust. Similarly the 2013 evaluation of Apex Trust commented on the positivity of the peer-mentoring scheme for service users and volunteers (Hughes, 2013), emphasising the endured success of the programme.

2. Marketing:

The 'ACT 4 Women' project primarily works through referrals from other partner organisations, such as the Probation Service. Although the project does accept self-referrals from women, both a service user and peer mentor commented on how little, if at all, they knew about Apex Trust before being referred to them by other organisations. Subsequently, they commented on the little marketing Apex Trust has in place, making it difficult initially for them to know what Apex trust was and the service that it provides. For example:

Service user A: *"I've never heard of Apex, I've heard of other charities and stuff, but I've never heard of Apex"*

Peer mentor A: *"so I just sort of considered [the Apex employee] to be a probation officer, I didn't know Apex was a place completely separate"*

Discussion:

It is clear that little was known about Apex Trust and its services to its users, with them only gaining knowledge of it after referrals from partner organisations. Consequently, perhaps further marketing and advertisement is needed in order to make other women in need of support aware of the help Apex Trust can provide.

Recommendations

Based on the findings made the student researcher has concluded the following recommendations for the improvement of Apex Trusts 'ACT 4 Women' project:

1. To continue providing the 'ACT 4 Women' project

Through interviews with all three stakeholders it is clear how essential the service is for women ex-offenders in the Merseyside area. Subsequently the student researcher thoroughly recommends that the service remain at Apex Trust, continuing to push women to achieve their goals and improve the quality of their lives.

2. To expand the services of the project

A common finding amongst all stakeholders was the desire for the service to expand in order for it to cater for a larger number of women. In particular, there is a clear need for the 'ACT 4 Women' project to provide its services for more than one day a week at the Women's Isis Centre. The student researcher recommends the service to be available at the centre for a second day, if future funding allows it to be possible.

3. To improve marketing of the service

Service users and peer mentors referred to how little they knew about Apex Trust before referral and of their unknowingness of the service being an independent charitable organisation. Consequently, it is recommended that the project is more broadly marketed in order for Apex Trust to be known and recognised across Merseyside.

7. Conclusion

Concluding Comments

The aim of this report was to provide an evaluation of Apex Trust's 'ACT 4 Women' project, analysing the projects strengths and weaknesses and to find evidence for why women use the service and how it benefits them. Through fulfilling these aims it can be seen that the 'ACT 4 Women' project fundamentally benefits the women that use its service. Not only helping to providing employment, training and education (ETE) opportunities, but additionally providing opportunities for volunteering, advocacy support and advice and guidance for personal problems women may be facing. It can be said that the project is a vital asset for women ex-offenders in Merseyside and for its partner organisations, highlighting the unique service provided by Apex Trust. Consequently, the 'ACT 4 Women' project is successful in providing for the needs and vulnerabilities recognised by Baroness Corston (2007) as being particularly prominent among women. With this is mind, Apex Trust and the 'ACT 4 Women' project greatly fulfils the recommendations made by Corston for a "holistic, women- centred, integrated approach' (Corston, 2007: 89), allowing for a women-only project based specifically around the woman's needs.

8. Appendix

Appendices: Page No:

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2. Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Service Users and Volunteers:

1. How did you first become involved with Apex Trust?

2. When Joining Apex Trust where there particular things that you felt they might be able to support you with? Where these fulfilled? - If so, How?

3. Upon reflection did the service help you with things that you didn't expect them to help you with? How?

4. What has your involvement with Apex Trust been?

5. What do you value most about the services provided by Apex Trust? Why?

6. What services provided by Apex Trust do you think could be improved? Why?

7. Have you been involved with any other similar services? If so, how did the services provided there, differ to those offered by Apex Trust?

8. Has Apex Trust impacted upon your life? Why?

9. Imagine Apex Trust hadn't been here, do you think you would be in the same place now as you are currently?

10. Is there one story or scenario that really highlights your experience with Apex Trust that you would like to share?

11. Is there anything else you would like to add to the interview?

2. Interview Questions

Partner Organisations:

1. What services do you provide and how does Apex Trust fit into those?

2. How does Apex Trust fit into the range of provision in this area for women?

3. If Apex Trust were no longer available to you, how would it impact you and what would you do instead?

4. What are the strengths of Apex trust?

5. What are the weaknesses of Apex Trust?

6. How many women involved with your services use Apex Trust?

7. Are there any areas of Apex Trust's services that you think could be improved?

8. Have you ever had any problems with Apex Trust and its services?

9. What makes Apex Trust unique?

10. Is there one story or scenario that really highlights your experience with Apex Trust that you would like to share?

11. Is there anything else you would like to add to the interview?