

**Submission by Circle, 18 West Pilton Park, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH4 4EJ**

**Title Circle: Providing a Scottish Perspective on Supporting Children and Families Affected by Imprisonment**

**1. An overview of the Circle organisation**

Circle is a charity that provides holistic, community-based support to marginalised children and families. Formerly part of a national, voluntary organisation called the Family Services Unit which started its work in 1947, Circle works independently to improve opportunities for disadvantaged families. There are various teams working with children at risk of experiencing neglect, physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse; children and families affected by parental substance misuse and working with families affected by imprisonment. It is the last grouping which is of particular interest when considering the children of incarcerated parents. The author of this submission is project manager of the Families Affected by (parental) Imprisonment team which has been developed since 2007.

**2. The 'Families Affected by (parental) Imprisonment' (FABI) project**

In 2007 research was undertaken into the women's prison population at HMP & YOI Cornton Vale which at that time was Scotland's only female prison. Previous research into female offenders identified them as an exceptionally vulnerable group, characterised by substance misuse, poor physical and mental health, deprivation, and victimisation (Loucks 1998; HM Inspectorates of Prisons and Social Work 1998; Corston 2007). It was found that female offenders commonly rely on prostitution and the drug trade as a means of survival and require a tremendous range of support to overcome the numerous issues in their daily lives. Circle was aware through its work in the community with substance misusing parents that women could end up in prison for trivial offences including non-payment of fines. Even a short period in prison could result in homes being lost and children being accommodated.

Findings from the report from Circle, *What Life After Prison? Voices of Women of Cornton Vale* (Cavanagh et al. 2007), identified a need for more structured throughcare for this vulnerable group.

The Robertson Trust agreed to fund Circle. Circle began delivering a pilot throughcare service in August 2008 for women who had children and were being released from Cornton Vale in the next four weeks. The pilot involved one worker being based in the prison one day per week to engage with the women, take referrals and then provide direct support to approximately 10 families outside in the community.

Also, referrals were made to three different geographical areas in the central belt of Scotland where Circle support workers were already based in substance misuse projects. They agreed to accept referrals from the prison and undertook suitable training.

The pilot was successful, the project has grown and the criteria changed. Circle works with women (and men from September 2009) who are generally on sentences of less than four years. Circle is unusual in that we work with prisoners on remand. Research reveals that short-term prisoners have the highest level of social need and the highest rates of reconviction (Maguire and Raynor 2006; Lewis et al. 2007). Research also reveals that remand prisoners are often a forgotten group; there is no requirement to put a sentence plan in place for their time in prison or for when they leave (Social Exclusion Unit 2002). In short, Circle aims to help prisoners who have children and who have little or no access to support.

The key outcomes for Circle are linked directly to most of the Scottish Prison Service's nine Offender Outcomes. These include:

- Sustained or improved physical and mental well-being including reduced or stabilised substance misuse (Scottish Prison Service Offender Outcomes 1 and 2);
- Maintained or improved relationships with families, peers and the community (Offender Outcome 5);
- Increased ability to access and sustain community support, for example personal development, financial advice, education, employability, and addiction services (Offender Outcome 6);
- Ability to access and sustain suitable accommodation (Offender Outcome 7); and
- Reduction in offending behaviour.

In 2009 there was a Scottish Government Equal Opportunities Committee inquiry undertaken. Circle was asked to provide evidence and an ex-prisoner, supported by Circle, eloquently spoke about the inequalities faced by women in prison. She reflected that, in addition to her period of imprisonment for a first offence, had she been without the support of Circle she feels she would have lost her house and her child. As a result of the inquiry early in 2010 and again in 2011 funding was given to each of Scotland's eight Criminal Justice Authorities (CJAs) to support women involved in the criminal justice system.

Circle now provides support in five of the eight CJAs and a Circle team was specifically formed committed to developing family and child-focused criminal justice interventions and, in the longer term, aims to develop alternatives to custody and prosecution for parents and their children.

### **3 Evaluation**

Circle's work is subject to constant external evaluation and regular reports are provided to funders. The submission will continue by sharing information from the reports.

Regarding work with females in prison 64 women have been interviewed. The latest research for the April 2011 report focused on 25 women who have been interviewed at least three times over the past two years.

Regarding the newer work with fathers in prison in the review of the first year 46 men signed up to work with Circle.

The Annual Report for 2010 to April 2011 shows that with regard to the FABI team 138 families received support. The figure broke down to Circle supporting 108 parents, 112 kinship carers and 258 children. The average length of support was 8 months.

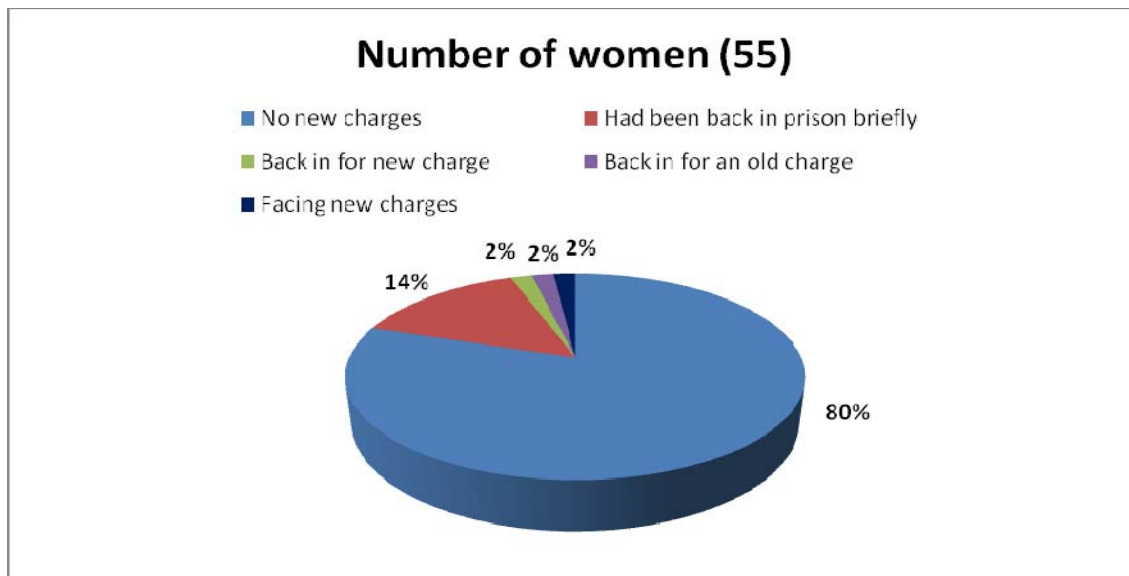
#### **3 (i) Engagement and rates of return to prison**

Based on a previous study of voluntary throughcare in Scotland, just 8% of people engaged after release from prison (MacRae et al. 2006). In comparison, of the 69 women from Cornton Vale who signed up to the Circle service since its inception and have left prison, 55 (80%) continued to engage. Based on the interviews with the clients the high rate of engagement is attributed to both the contact clients have with workers before they leave prison, but also the relationship between the worker and client, which is built on mutual trust and respect. Other research emphasises how crucial this is as a basis for effective interventions (McNeil 2009; McNeil et al. 2005).

Research revealed that Circle workers try hard to meet clients' needs, to fit around their lives and to overcome practical barriers to engagement, for example by making home visits, working in the home with the whole family and taking clients to new appointments in order to help engagement with other services. This willingness to reach out to clients clearly has a positive impact.

Figure 1 shows that 16% of the sample returned to prison within the past two and a half years for a new charge. 14% of the whole sample (in other words, 88% of those who returned to custody) returned to prison for a less serious offence. All the women who have been back in prison had been in prison a number of times before. According to the most recent national statistics, 34% of women who have left prison return within two years (Scottish Government 2010). Circle therefore appears to have had a positive impact on reducing the number of women returning to prison. Of particular note is that no women returned to prison in the first year, and none of the women under 21 years of age have returned to prison at all.

Figure 1 presents the statistics for the full sample on the rate of return to prison.



### 3(ii) Work with families

Where families have broken down Circle helps them maintain links with their children and families, and in some cases also tries to ascertain basic information about the parents' rights in relation to their children. The clients report multiple and complex needs that require a multi-agency approach. Circle provides support with ongoing criminal justice related issues, housing, accessing appropriate medical care, addiction issues, historical and current abuse, domestic violence, poverty, benefits, debt, poor educational attainment, poor literacy skills, parenting deficits, stigma, discrimination and low self esteem. Circle has good contacts both in the prison and in the community with other services.

### 3 (iii) Contact with children

In one sample of 21 females the women described feeling powerless and frustrated at the lack of information and hoped that Circle workers could help them find out about their children. Thirty-nine children in this sample were affected by parental imprisonment, and research highlights that these children are often 'forgotten' (Marshall 2008). The women generally have limited contact, and only 10 have had visits from their children whilst in prison. Two women, who have children with disabilities, had not seen them for a year, as both said that using public transport was particularly difficult.

Transport to prisons remains an issue for family contact, as identified in past research (Higgenbotham 2007). Six other women reported that their ex-partners do not allow the children to visit. Four women were only entitled to supervised access, although they hope that this would one day change if they continued to remain stable.

One woman who has since left prison spoke about the many Children's Hearings she has attended. She greatly appreciated the support Circle has offered her in helping to prove that she has moved on in her life. She said that no one had made it clear to her that she was legally allowed unsupervised access and was astounded to learn this from the Circle worker. These cases highlight the lack of information these women receive. Five women from this sample said that, without the support from Circle, they would be 'completely in the dark.'

Analysis of the files showed clearly that Circle workers often have to do a lot of background work to establish key contacts in social work services to help the clients ascertain basic information about their cases which is worrying. One partner interviewed in the community has been getting substantial support from Circle to attend Hearings and negotiate contact with his children. He described how he felt that, even though he had been clean from drugs for a year and was 'doing everything he could', social work services were unwilling to listen. He said that having the Circle worker helped him remain focused and calm towards the adversity he felt and helped him continue to show that he is doing the best he can.

Many clients receive extensive support both to attend hearings and reviews and to establish better contact with their children. Circle help the clients take their children for family days out. Both the children and their partners said this was particularly helpful because it helped them 'de-stress'. All family members interviewed for research purposes discussed how having the worker support them helped them to feel less isolated. For example, one man who has full care of their four children while his partner was in prison said that, without the worker, he wasn't sure if he would have any adult contact from week to week. Two of the children have learning disabilities, and he described how having practical support to get the weekly shopping may seem small but was incredibly important and useful to him. Overall, evaluation shows clearly that there are many benefits to working with the whole family. Specifically, this helps Circle to establish a fuller picture of the offender's lives and including the family can often have a positive impact on desistance from offending, as shown in other research (Savolainen 2009). Another important advantage is that it offers support to the families themselves: the cases in the evaluation show that many families who needed help had not had it before their contact with Circle.

### **3 (iv) Worry about the family**

Parents in prison were worried about the family members looking after their children because they were aware that families were finding the situation stressful. As a result, they were relieved that Circle workers were supporting them. One woman's 16-year old daughter is looking after her 9-year old son. She described how she had tried to get help in place for her family prior to going to prison but couldn't find or didn't know which organisations to access – a situation not uncommon for sibling carers (Family Rights Group 2011). Circle provided ongoing intensive support to the daughter as she has been struggling. The mother in prison said that, without the support Circle has put in place, she would find the situation almost unbearable.

In all of the cases the women remained frustrated and stressed by the thought of their families coping alone but said that having Circle involved meant someone was on the outside giving help where otherwise none existed.

### **3 (v) Conclusion of the evaluations**

Circle helps clients identify and build on their strengths. Circle is a 'solution-focused' service, which means that it focuses on the present and the future and helps clients formulate their own goals. Research shows benefits in working with the whole family, both for the men and women in prison and for the families themselves. An important aspect of this service is that it helps parents and children maintain contact re-enforces the positive identity of being a 'parent'. All of the clients say their children are their main motivation to move towards a better future.

In conclusion the evaluation builds on past reports to show that Circle is a service that prisoners and their families continue to want to engage with, and that there are significant benefits to working with the whole family. Ideally the service should be rolled out to other parts of Scotland. It has been able to secure both a high engagement rate following release from prison and a low return to prison rate, which denotes a harder measure of its success as well as benefits to 'soft' outcomes such as self-esteem and hope. Circle's success is largely based on the relationships which are established between the clients and the workers. The evaluation shows that Circle works well as a project for those leaving prison but also suggests that it could be useful for those serving community sentences or even used as a diversion from prosecution.

### **4 Author's Summary**

Children were not directly interviewed by evaluators but feedback from the children, their parents, carers and schools was sought internally. Children who were struggling to cope benefitted greatly and some of the comments they have provided on child-friendly feedback sheets is very encouraging. One professional wrote Circle is 'making sure children are not missing out on their childhood'. One child wrote 'my worker has always been there whenever I've needed her, always there to help'. A child responded to the question 'can you tell us about one thing that we could do better?' by writing 'there's nothing that you could do as (the worker) is already perfect'. There was not one negative statement made about the staff which provides evidence Circle staff are doing all they can to put children in the best possible position in what is a difficult and complex situation.

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## Annex

### Five recommendations

- 1) To encourage the Convention of the Rights of the Child to be further integrated into UK legislation
- 2) To develop an improved strategy to accommodate contact between parents and children affected by parental incarceration.
- 3) To develop an improved strategy to support carers of children affected by parental incarceration
- 4) To develop an improved strategy to provide the courts with options with regard to parents whose incarceration will affect their children
- 5) To develop an improved strategy to support children in nursery and school who are affected by parental incarceration.