

RE-UNITE TEN YEAR REVIEW

TESTING A HOUSING SOLUTION

Mothers in the Criminal Justice System
the injustice, the solution, the future

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Foreword from Rt. Hon Fiona Mactaggart Chair of the Board of Commonweal Housing



Re-Unite has been Commonweal's flagship project over the course of our first ten years as an action learning charity committed to finding housing solutions to social injustice. It was the first project to pass through our entire project cycle of testing an approach, refining it and then replicating it. Commonweal is proud of the impact it has had on the lives of dozens of women, their children and wider families, and we're grateful to all those that have been part of this project over the last decade.

Front line service organisations across the country working with women in the criminal justice system wanted to adopt and adapt this

model which aimed to break the nonsensical “catch-22” of mothers not being able to secure care and custody of their children after being released from prison because they lack an appropriate family home, but at the same time are unable to access suitable family housing because they don't have custody of their children. Working with these partners and through commissioning regular external reviews and evaluations, Commonweal has learnt a great deal about how the treatment of women who offend is expensive and ineffective, and how much it harms their children.

Commonweal is a learning organisation. We know we don't know it all, and indeed sometimes we find we don't know very much at all. But that doesn't stop us asking more questions and trying to learn from all we have done. Over the last ten years, we've learnt a lot about how to work within a rapidly-changing policy environment, how to be an effective partner to front-line organisations, and how to reframe the issues in productive ways – such as emphasising the fact that the imprisonment of a mother impacts most damagingly upon her children.

This report aims to capture everything we've learnt from Re-Unite, understand our impact, and clarify how we can develop in the future. In many ways, the ten years of the Re-Unite project helped shape Commonweal into the organisation we are today, and its legacy will continue to guide our work for the next decade to come.

Executive Summary

What is this Re-Unite 10 Year Review?

Commonweal Housing is an independently funded housing based action learning charity. We exist to enable expert delivery partners test new models and new services that they believe will help to address a persistent social injustice faced by their client group where housing may be part of the solution, and where they do not have access to that housing to try out that service. We provide the homes they need along with the encouragement, space, time and support as well as rigorous independent evaluation.

Capturing and widely sharing the learning from the projects we support is central to Commonweal's objectives; enabling others to use this to shape future policy and service delivery; helping demonstrate not just the role that appropriate housing can make in addressing social injustices but specific examples of how that could and should be done.

This report summarises **our perspective on 10 years of engagement with organisation working with women in the criminal justice system** and also reflects the expert voices gathered from across the sector. Not least from those such as Prof. Loraine Gelsthorpe and colleagues from the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University and others who have undertaken independent evaluations of the project. Although Commonweal claims no special expertise in criminal justice we are an action learning charity, constantly seeking to understand and call out injustice where we see it.

This work has taught us that the system fails to recognise the extent to which it harms families and wastes public money where other, better, alternatives exist.

What is the Re-Unite project?

The Re-Unite project is a combined housing and support initiative, designed to support women leaving prison in gaining access to their children. At launch, the programme consisted of in-prison support to identify potential clients at an early stage and provide advice on housing and the reunification process; access to housing for women leaving prison, tailored to their needs; and family support to facilitate the successful reunion of the mother and children and development of the family. The goals of the Re-Unite Project are that children are kept out of the care system (where appropriate); that families can be reunited and supported in suitable, stable family housing; that mothers can lead less chaotic, healthier lives and desist from offending; and that children and young people can access sufficient support.

Piloted initially in south London from 2007-2010 the model was then replicated by Women's Centres and housing associations across the country reaching a peak in 2014 of 12 different projects across England and Wales working in and with every women's prison at the time in England. The impact of the Transforming Rehabilitation programme severely limited the ability of many Re-Unite replication partners to maintain the project in an era of reduced funding and changed government policy aims.

Lessons learnt

Through this work we have learnt how damaging mothers' imprisonment is on the whole family, and independent assessments have demonstrated that the prospects of the children of women who have been in prison have been hugely improved when they have had a stable home.

We started this journey focussing primarily on the mother and demonstrating the positive effects upon her especially around minimising recidivism and improving physical and mental wellbeing from having responsibility for her family.

Providing family housing to women through the gate did that, but through this work we have learnt how damaging mothers' imprisonment is to the whole family, and through independent assessment have demonstrated that the prospects of the children of women who have been in prison have been hugely improved when they have had a stable home.

The Re-Unite model works when available for the right women at the right point in their journey – Commonweal is proud of that. But it is a model that **picks up the pieces**. Our ten years of involvement has reaffirmed our view that **Re-Unite should be unnecessary**. Few of the mothers we worked with should have been jailed in the first place; sentencers failed to uphold existing legislation and guidance by considering the impact upon dependent children of sending a mother to prison. The experience of Re-Unite demonstrates there should be systematic use of more cost effective community sentence alternatives especially for non-violent crimes: short custodial sentences are still long enough to break up a family and potentially lose a home.

The 7 'Key Principles' of Re-Unite

It's Re-Unite if it delivers:

- **Early in-reach contact with women and pre-release liaison**
- **Through-the-gate service**
- **Individual, tailored support for women**
- **Family treated as an entity**
- **User involvement and feedback**
- **Help in finding / maintaining permanent homes**
- **Move-on support that aims for independence**

Conclusions from Independent Evaluations and Reviews¹

- Re-Unite service users themselves described their experiences of Re-Unite in ways that suggest the service was transformative e.g. taking responsibility for the care of their children led to them taking responsibility for many aspects of their lives.
- Re-Unite provides an excellent service for women leaving custody who want to rebuild their lives and be reunited with their children.
- Re-Unite offers exceptional value for money and offers an excellent social return on investment as it improves the social, psychological and financial outcomes for the women and children who use the service and works to prevent a range of costly outcomes including homelessness and children being taken in to care and recidivism.
- Re-Unite produces positive outcomes for service users in areas including housing, finance, legal, family relationships, mental and physical health and meaningful use of time.
- Re-Unite empowers women and helps them develop their confidence and self-esteem.
- Re-Unite benefits the wider community inasmuch as it helps women with complex social, emotional and health problems with a history of offending to lead productive lives and parent their children positively.

Headline outcomes

- **Over 100 mothers supported by Re-Unite projects and approximately 200 children.**
- **Around 1 in 5 of the children previously in local authority care whilst mother was in prison.**
- **Reconviction rate of less than 10% of the women supported through the project.**

1. Gelsthorpe L & Sharpe, G (2010) – The Re-Unite Project: Early Development Phase Evaluation report (Cambridge University), Gelsthorpe L & Sharpe, G (2010) - The Way Ahead: An Evaluation of the First Two Years of Re-Unite South London (Cambridge University), Gelsthorpe L & Dominey, J (2013) – Re-Unite Revisited: An Evaluation (Cambridge University), Goldsmith C & Murphy C (2016) – Re-Unite London Independent Evaluation (St Marys University), Women's Breakout (2016) – Children on the edge – Children affected by maternal imprisonment

Recommendations for further action

- A **renewed impetus of effective implementation** by the new Government of the original recommendations of Baroness Corston's 2007 report.
- Specifically expansion of and **sustained funding for women's centres** in the community as one stop shops to prevent women entering or returning to the criminal justice system and as the heart of effective community based alternatives to imprisonment for many female offenders.
- Support from social housing trade bodies such as the **Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) and the National Housing Federation (NHF) to encourage their members** to engage with local women's centres and others to identify ways they may be able to assist in providing the housing needed.
- **Local authorities to review housing allocation systems** to ensure they understand the impacts across the public sector (upon social services, education as well as the police and criminal justice system) of not providing family housing to mothers homeless as a result of imprisonment.
- **The potential impact of custodial sentences upon children** should be taken into account by magistrates and all judges when they sentence mothers or any parent with care. As part of a court report, there should be a **child impact statement** when a primary caregiver is sentenced.
- **The government should oblige judges and magistrates to consider non-custodial sentences for all offenders with primary care responsibilities**, and provide an explanation for their decision for imposing a custodial sentence.
- **The government should require Parole Boards to consider the case of any mother who has care of their very young child in prison** at the point where rules currently state that they should be separated. Parole Boards should actively consider what alternatives options may exist in order to allow the child to be parented successfully by their mother in the early years and to provide an explanation for their decision for imposing a forced separation at that time.
- **The Government should invest in low support mother and baby/open detention facilities for women** – better facilitating the maintenance of family ties and relationships with children.
- **For the operators of Approved Premises to take into consideration mothers with children** to allow for children under the age of 18 access to the property – currently no one under 18 can visit – therefore maintaining family relationships is made even harder.
- **Clear pre-release plans should be developed for imprisoned mothers approaching their release date**, in conjunction with in-reach support from social services and relevant organisations such as women's centres.

Diana's Story



In the last few years, following a string of convictions for shoplifting and GBH, Diana* had finally managed to 'get clean' of drugs and regain custody of her children. Unfortunately, after her most recent prison sentence the family faced being separated again. Her children were being cared for by family members and social services and Diana was unable to secure housing large enough to live with her sons.

Promising to commit to turning her life around, Diana was accepted onto the Re-Unite project. Initially, things didn't run smoothly; she often

failed to turn up for scheduled key work sessions and was sometimes aggressive towards her Support Worker.

"Eventually after several warnings and as a last resort we had no alternative but to serve her with a Notice to Quit," says her Support Worker. "We tried so hard to turn things around and I really did not want this to be the end of Diana's involvement with Re-Unite."

Things came to a head and Diana was asked to attend a meeting with the manager so that the seriousness of the situation and the potential consequences for her and her family could be fully explained. It was at this point that a corner was turned. Diana convinced the manager she wanted to make this work and she was given one last chance.

Diana worked extremely hard and, with support from Re-Unite, her son was enrolled in a special needs school as he was not coping in a mainstream school. Her Support Worker also facilitated access to bereavement counselling for Diana and her sons.

The boys are now both doing much better in school and have joined a local football team and Scout group. Diana rarely misses an appointment with her Support Worker or with any other professional she is working with without good reason.

"I was all over the place, as you can imagine. I still have bad days but overall I am enjoying being a good parent to my boys and providing them with a brighter future," she said.

Diana is doing so well that she was approved for move on and recently moved into a permanent home with her family in the local area.

* Names have been changed

SECTION 1: Re-Unite Mothers in the Criminal Justice System - the injustice, the solution, the future

The Re-Unite project is a combined housing and support initiative, designed to support women leaving prison in gaining access to their children. At launch, the programme consisted of in-prison support to identify potential clients at an early stage and provide advice on housing and the reunification process; access to housing for women leaving prison, tailored to their needs; and family support to facilitate the successful reunion of the mother and children and development of the family. The goals of the Re-Unite Project are that children are kept out of the care system (where appropriate); that families can be reunited and supported in suitable, stable family housing; that mothers can lead less chaotic, healthier lives and desist from offending; and that children and young people can access sufficient support.

Re-Unite service user

“ [Re-Unite] was pretty much everything. Obviously because had I been away from my daughter for so long, two years, there was going to be an issue about me having her back, whether I was capable to, whether I was in the right place to live and have the secure accommodation for me and my daughter to have her back, just setting up money, looking for work, education like for myself, just everything really. ”

Introduction

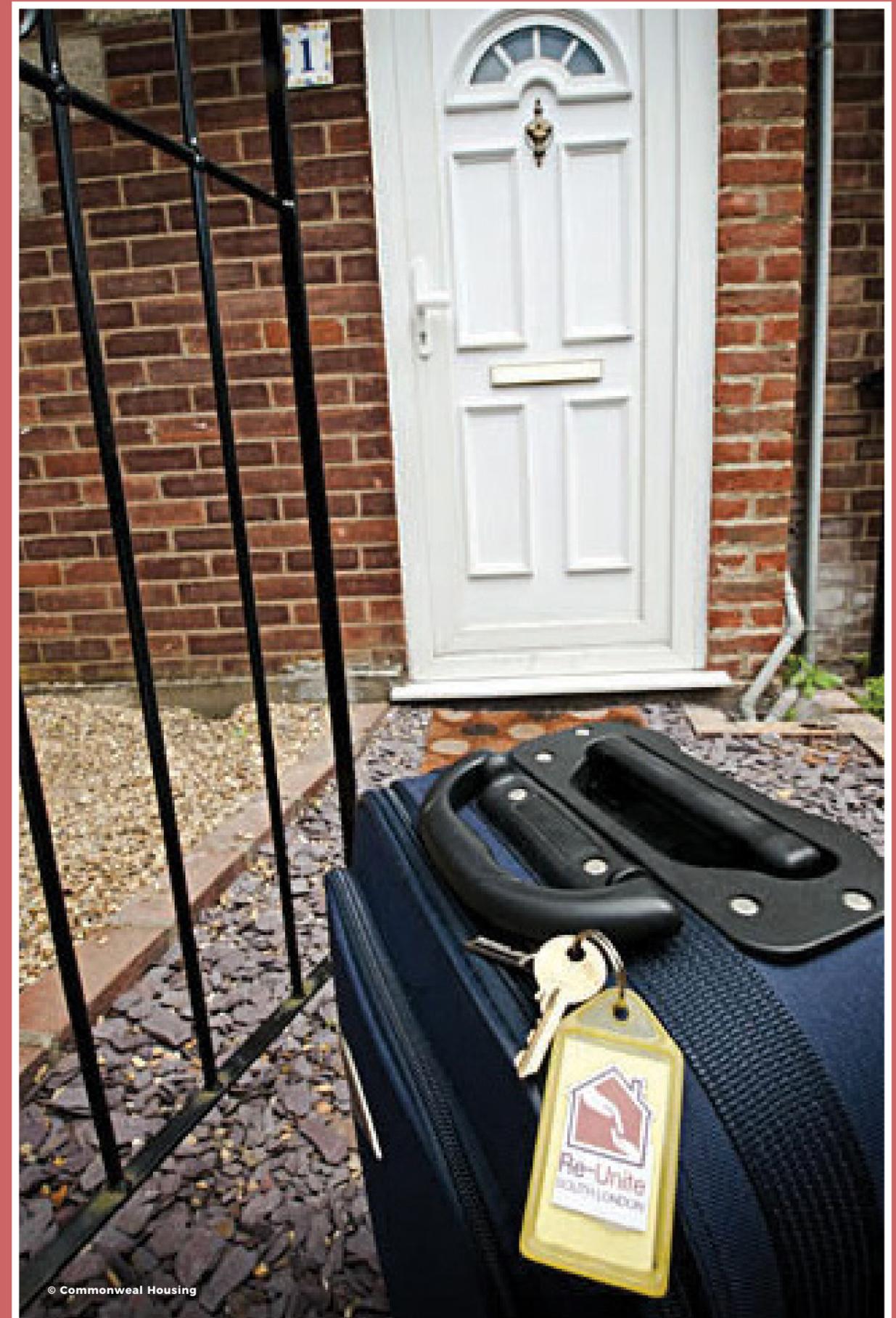
This report summarises **our perspective on 10 years of engagement with organisation working with women in the criminal justice system**. We do not claim to be experts but we have become passionate about the possibility of enabling women who have offended to live constructive lives and for their children not to suffer more as a result of mothers' imprisonment issues. We have demonstrated through the original pilot project and its subsequent replication around the country that a Re-Unite model can provide **'housing solutions to social injustice'**.

This is an evidence informed report reflecting the findings of numerous independent expert evaluations commissioned over the last 10 years. This report also reflects feedback gathered from a myriad of voices across the sector that have been engaged with or have an interest in what the Re-Unite project has sought to do.

Commonweal started Re-Unite at about the same time as **Baroness Corston** published her seminal report on women in the criminal justice system. Unfortunately many of the ideas and proposals in Corston, so broadly welcomed at the time, have not been maintained or adequately progressed. If the Corston agenda or at least the guiding principles had been adopted in full Commonweal believes the injustices faced by women and their children and the need for a Re-Unite solution would be greatly reduced.

Crucial to the success of Re-Unite has been the support and engagement of the **women's centre network**, the 'one stop shop' services supporting women in the criminal justice system specifically promoted in Baroness Corston's report. Those organisations had the skills and the ability to make Re-Unite work. The reduction in funding and therefore the number of such centres following the implementation of the Transforming Rehabilitation programme has had an adverse effect on the outcomes for women and their children in the criminal justice system.

We believe Commonweal has done its bit using our own funds to demonstrate what can (and does) work. We strongly urge Government not to use the windfall from the sale of HMP Holloway on building new women's prisons, which demonstrably have poor outcomes for all concerned, but to be more imaginative in using this cash to rebuild the women's centre networks and other community and through the gate services.



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The Re-Unite Project Development and Current Position

- The model was first established as a pilot project in south London in 2007 delivered initially in partnership with Women in Prison and Housing for Women using accommodation bought by Commonweal Housing.
- The project was subject to a number of independent external evaluations published in 2010, 2013 and 2016.
- From 2010 the Re-Unite model was replicated (adopted and adapted) by women's centres and housing associations across the country so that by 2015 12 separate schemes were operating across England and Wales with partners working in and with every women's prison in England (there are no women's prisons in Wales).
- The impacts of the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda together with ongoing austerity meant that funding for many gender specific services was restricted and notwithstanding a small element of set up funding from Commonweal, a number of Re-Unite replication partners were unable to sustain their engagement as they saw their core funding systematically reduced.
- A small number of larger women's centre continue to provide a targeted housing and support service providing a Re-Unite service for appropriate women and their families that they come across as part of their mainstream activity. Utilising a secure housing base to enable women to be reunited with their children following periods of imprisonment is now embedded within their array of services. Re-unite continues to be a key project for Housing for Women operating now across London.

Context and Project History

Background to the project

In 2007, the Labour peer Baroness Corston published her report into vulnerable women in the criminal justice system. The report called for greater appreciation of the specific needs of women including the need for supported accommodation for women leaving prison to help break the cycle of repeat offending and repeated short periods in custody, and to help them to resume family life with their children.

Many Women in the criminal justice system have experienced abuse or grew up in care, and female offenders are twice as likely as men to suffer from anxiety or depression; high rates of self-harm have been recorded. Many have problems with drugs and alcohol misuse. They are more likely than men to be imprisoned for non violent offences. Imprisoning women is expensive, costing the state £56,000 per woman per year, and ineffective, with almost 45% of all women released from custody reoffending within 12 months.

Significantly, nearly two thirds of women entering prison leave behind dependent children, and many struggle to be reunited with their children upon release. All too often, women exiting prison can't get custody of their children because they don't have a family house, and are unable to access family housing because they don't have custody of their children. Not only does this mean that ex-offenders are placed at increased risk of homelessness and re-offending, but it also keeps mothers away from their children and prevents them from reuniting as a family.

Creating the Re-Unite Project

In response to this growing injustice, Commonweal Housing, Housing for Women, and Women in Prison together launched Re-Unite South London in 2007. This first phase of Re-Unite was set up with the aim of providing accommodation and support for mothers and children who would otherwise be homeless on the woman's release from prison. It was intended to offer a solution to the problems faced by some women leaving prison who, having lost accommodation as a result of offending, are seen as intentionally homeless and not entitled to social housing. In a further twist, women who do not have the care of their children are often assessed as single people and not allocated housing suitable for a family. This lack of suitable housing then makes it impossible for a woman to regain the care of her children.

Commonweal provided the funding for the project, including for the purchase of properties, while Housing for Women managed the properties themselves. The initial phase of the project was confined to South London, and clients had to have some connection with South London in order to qualify for the scheme.² Initially, Women in Prison dealt with referrals to the project and provided individual support to the first tenants and their children, until January 2009 when Housing for Women took over the task, bringing all management and support services under one roof. Referrals to Re-Unite were declined if social services felt that re-unification with children would be inappropriate or unsafe, if the woman required more support than the project could realistically offer, or if she posed too great a risk to project staff.

Re-Unite properties were carefully chosen with a commitment to good quality, family-appropriate accommodation – away from busy roads, for example, and within reach of schools and community facilities. In addition, Re-Unite South London also offered one-bedroom flats for women who were not yet able to live with their children, offering them a stable base from which to work towards reunification.

As originally constituted, the Re-Unite project offered support and assistance to women along their journey out of prison and towards an independent life reunited with their children. Re-Unite staff worked together with prison authorities to identify potential clients, using in-reach programmes into women's prisons to meet with imprisoned mothers nearing release, assess their needs, and judge their suitability for Re-Unite accommodation. Once selected for the project, clients were provided with support moving into their Re-Unite housing, reintegrating into the community, and re-establishing a good relationship with their children. This support included regular individual meetings, group meetings with peers and community experts, and family activities such as visits to the zoo. Towards the end of their tenancies, clients were provided with extra support to help them prepare for independent living and find suitable move-on tenancies.

2. Women without an existing connection to a South London borough were accepted onto the project if they were moving to a new area to escape domestic violence.

Evaluation 2010

What is distinctive about Re-Unite is the focus on the women service users and their children, and the intensity and practical nature of the support so that there is help in moving belongings to the provided accommodation, advocacy with accommodation service providers (electricity companies and the like), help with money management or facilitated access to debt counselling, and tangible personalised advice and support. Project key workers are thus advisors, facilitators, practical supporters, and perhaps above all, mentors.

The 7 'Key Principles' of Re-Unite

It's Re-Unite if it delivers:

- **Early in-reach contact with women and pre-release liaison**
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The importance of on-going evaluation

As part of the Commonweal model, we commission in-depth rolling evaluations of all our projects, to ensure that the projects are supported in capturing knowledge and maximizing learning. Re-Unite thus started with evaluation built-in from day one.

The initial evaluation was undertaken by Prof. Loraine Gelsthorpe and colleagues from the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University.

This rolling evaluation used an action learning methodology, where findings from the evaluation are used to identify best practice and adapt project implementation accordingly. The initial evaluation report of the pilot phase of the project was published in 2010.³

In keeping with the action-learning approach, the findings of the 2010 evaluation were used to improve service delivery and adapt project implementation. Among the recommendations of the 2010 report that were subsequently adopted into the Re-Unite model were:

- Limiting the length of tenancy to one year and planning for “move on” accommodation for clients from the outset, to help women make the transition more easily from supported Re-Unite accommodation to the next stage;
- Establishing systematic recording procedures to establish service users’ training and employment aspirations and targets, as well as identifying users’ problems and progress;
- Simplifying the project organisational structure, with one organisation providing housing management, referrals, and delivery of support rather than splitting those responsibilities across multiple organisations;
- Provide “floating support” to women who do not live in a Re-Unite property but who could still benefit from Re-Unite staff support as they seek to re-establish a settled family life following release from prison;
- Greater flexibility over selection criteria for potential service users at the referral stage, de-emphasising the necessity of service users actually being re-united with their children.

Women in prison: by the numbers

As of December 2016, there were 3944 female offenders in prison in the UK - around 4% of the total prison population.

The overwhelming majority of women - 80% - serve short sentences of less than 12 months for non-violent crimes.

Adult children of imprisoned mothers are more likely to be convicted of a crime than adult children of imprisoned fathers.

17,000 children are separated from their mothers every year as a result of imprisonment, according to the Howard League for Penal Reform.

In 2015 45% of women received in to prison in England & Wales entered on remand. This amounted to just under 4,000 women and most of these did not go on to receive a custodial sentence if convicted.

Only one in 20 children are able to stay in their own home while their mother is in prison.

Around one-third of women prisoners lose their homes, and often their possessions, whilst in prison.

60% of women prisoners do not have homes to go to on release.

Just 9% of children are cared for by their fathers when their mother is imprisoned.

³. Gelsthorpe and Sharpe, 2010. The Way Ahead: An Evaluation of the First Two Years of Re-Unite South London

Moving into Replication

Following this initial evaluation, the project moved into the replication phase, inviting other organisations with relevant expertise in the sector – primarily women’s centres and housing associations – to set up new Re-Unite projects near women’s prisons around the country. Commonweal also took on new full-time staff to lead this new phase of the project. To help replication partners establish new Re-Unite projects, Commonweal provided small one-off grants as seed corn funding, so that partners could embed Re-Unite within existing service provision. The findings of the on-going evaluation were used to inform and shape the replication process, ensuring that nascent Re-Unite projects followed identified best practice – most notably the 7 Key Principles.

In due course, the original Re-Unite South London pilot project was joined by projects in Birmingham, Bradford, Brighton, Gloucestershire, Humberside, Leeds, Greater Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and two projects in north and south Wales. One key facet of the replication phase was that implementing partners were given a degree of flexibility to implement Re-Unite in their own way. Partners were provided with a scaffolding of main features that any Re-Unite project should include – such as prison in-reach, a gender-sensitive approach, etc – but were able to choose their own approach to delivery, in order to suit their own organisational capacity, their clients’ needs, and regional circumstances.

A further evaluation of the Re-Unite project was published in 2013, with a separate evaluation of Re-Unite South London conducted by St Mary’s University and published in 2016.⁴ In 2015, the Institute of Voluntary Action Research was engaged to gather reflections from project partners on the experience of working with Commonweal and the replication process, in order for Commonweal to better understand how the project had developed and continue to capture important lessons for future improvement. Commonweal seeks to learn from everything it does which is why we commission independent evaluations of all or projects.

This review is based upon the analysis and assessment of IVAR, the three project evaluations of 2010, 2013, and 2015, as well as additional interviews with key stakeholders, desk research and data analysis performed by Commonweal in 2017.

SECTION 2: Moving on from Re-Unite

In keeping with Commonweal’s mission of acting as an incubator of innovative housing solutions to social injustice, in 2014 the decision was taken to step back from the day-to-day administration of the project. Following a tender, the coordination and future development of Re-Unite was handed over to a partnership between Anawim and Women’s Breakout, two highly respected organisations bringing many years experience of supporting women in the criminal justice system. This partnership combined the expertise of a specialist service delivery organisation with a strong track record of delivering Re-Unite services (Anawim) with the contacts, regional spread, and breadth of experience of a national network (Women’s Breakout).

Unfortunately, Commonweal’s stepping back from Re-Unite did have an impact on the ability of project partners to continue delivery. Although Anawim and Women’s Breakout administered the Re-Unite network, they did not have the necessary financial resources to continue the funding arrangements that Commonweal had provided to partners upon successful replication. This reduction in funding, when combined with the ongoing impacts of the Transforming Rehabilitation policy changes, undoubtedly contributed to the fact that some Re-Unite replicators dropped out of the scheme in 2014 and 2015.

In 2016 Commonweal did provide a further one-off revenue grant to Women’s Breakout to assist them with the development of a national Social Impact Bond (SIB) model for funding of women’s centres. The model was designed to help centres embed the Re-Unite approach within their existing services to women. Sadly it appears that a national SIB model does not currently appear to be likely to materialise. Women’s Breakout feel that the concept could however still work at a local level as a locally funded Bond delivering specific savings across a set of combined local authority services and budgets.

The hand back of the initial pilot project housing stock from Housing for Women was completed in 2017, bringing Commonweal’s formal engagement with the Re-Unite project to a close.

4. We’re grateful to all our project evaluators and partners for allowing us to use interviews, data, and quotes from the various reports conducted during the lifetime of the project in the preparation of this review, but special thanks to IVAR, Lorraine Gelsthorpe, Jane Dominey, Gilly Sharpe, and Housing for Women.

Anawim is a women's centre in Birmingham that supports women and their children offering alternatives to custody, family support and prison in reach. It has a special focus on women vulnerable to sexual exploitation, including prostitution.

Women's Breakout is a membership network of 59 organisations across England and Wales, all working with women in the criminal justice system. Acting as a collective voice for the sector, it leverages members' knowledge and experience to bring strategic change.

Baroness Corston, 2010 Evaluation

“ Re-Unite gives families a secure base on which to build their future, and it distances them from the violence that scarred their lives. It helps them access specialist support, such as counselling, mentoring, substance misuse and mental health services. The women are helped to prepare for their move on to permanent housing with advice on budgeting, benefits, debt management, healthy eating and other life skills. Most importantly Re-Unite South London is showing that housing with support can make a fundamental difference to the lives of women leaving prison and to the security, education and life-chances of their children, with early indications showing a reduced risk of re-offending, which is hugely important for the women and their children. Society at large benefits, both in human and financial terms. ”

The Impact of Re-Unite

Conclusions of the evaluations

During the course of Re-Unite, four separate evaluations recorded the considerable positive impact that the project had on the lives and families of women accepted on the scheme. For example, the 2013 evaluation found that, of the 46 women engaged with the project around the country, only 4 were recorded as having committed further offences after leaving prison. This is an excellent result, considering that nationally, nearly half of all women leaving prison reoffend again within 12 months.

Of the 31 service users engaged with Re-Unite South London as of December 2012, only six left the project in an unplanned way, for reasons including rent arrears, disengagement from support workers, and / or pressure from local gangs. This is impressive, as establishing and maintaining a tenancy, paying rent and achieving stability are very positive outcomes for people leaving prison.

Without the extra support provided by Re-Unite, all the women in the sample faced the prospect of homelessness, relying on the goodwill of friends or family, hoping for a hostel place (although very few women's only hostels exist therefore leaving women to stay in potentially unsuitable or even unsafe male dominated hostels), or returning to accommodation made unsuitable by the threat of eviction or domestic violence.

Re-Unite service user

“ [Re-Unite] was pretty much everything. Obviously because had I been away from my daughter for so long, two years, there was going to be an issue about me having her back, whether I was capable to, whether I was in the right place to live and have the secure accommodation for me and my daughter to have her back, just setting up money, looking for work, education like for myself, just everything really. I was in a lot of debt, I still had slight depression issues, my emotions were all over the place obviously with coming out. Just everything. ”

Re-Unite delivers an holistic response supporting mothers (and their children) across a wide range of issues. Some partners recorded progress using an outcome star based approach. As evidenced by this snapshot 2016 Data Analysis of those households engaged in Re-Unite projects 2015-2016 (total number of records: 47) – the range of areas across which positive improvement was recorded:

Issue	No. of relevant records	No. that demonstrated improvement	No. that demonstrated improvement that became self-reliant
General health	36	25 (69%)	13 (52%)
Mental health	43	25 (58%)	14 (56%)
Finances	45	30 (66%)	13 (43%)
Substance use	30	20 (66%)	8 (40%)
Domestic violence	27	19 (70%)	11 (57%)
Education, Training & Employment (ETE)	40	24 (60%)	16 (66%)

The Financial Impacts

The cost differential of keeping a women in prison compared to community alternatives is widely known. The excellent February 2017 briefing report from the Prison Reform Trust 'Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment' pulls together some of the key figures:

- The average cost of keeping a woman in prison for a year is £42,765⁶ compared to a Community Order cost of £2,800 per year and an average of £1,360 per woman for standalone holistic community-based services.⁷
- Imprisoning mothers for non-violent offences costs the state more than £17 million over a ten-year period as a result of the increased likelihood of their children becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) and therefore having poorer long-term prospects. Non-custodial sentences lead to additional savings to the state.⁸

During the course of Re-Unite, three cost-benefit analyses (CBA) were made of the project.⁹ The analysis sought to balance the costs of the project, in terms of housing provision, support, administration expenses etc, versus the financial value of the anticipated outcomes. These benefits include reduction in reoffending rates; reduction in need for emergency housing; lower unemployment; reduction in mental and physical illness and substance misuse; and lower financial burdens on local authority child care and social services. The benefits can be substantial, but they are also difficult to measure, especially with a small sample size – a fact perhaps reflected in the variations between the three CBAs.

However, the three CBAs all agreed that the Re-Unite Project delivered substantial net benefits to society in general, and government and local authorities in particular. These are summarised in the table below.

	Net financial benefit per service user over 2 years /£	Net financial benefit per service user over 10 years /£
2010	13,460	93,646
2013	17,877	38,643
2015	24,932	84,901



6. Ministry of Justice (2016) Costs per place and costs per prisoner – National Offender Management Service annual report and accounts 2015-16 management information addendum London: MoJ 7. Ministry of Justice (2012) A distinct approach: a guide to working with women offenders London: MoJ 8. New economics foundation (2008) Unlocking value: How we all benefit from investing in alternatives to prison for women offenders London: nef 9. Gelsthorpe L & Sharpe, G (2010) – The Re-Unite Project: Early Development Phase Evaluation report (Cambridge University), Gelsthorpe L & Dominey, J (2013) – Re-Unite Revisited: An Evaluation (Cambridge University), Goldsmith C & Murphy C (2016) – Re-Unite London Independent Evaluation (St Marys University)

Looking to the future

Looking ahead for the Re-Unite project, the impact of Transforming Rehabilitation, as well as changes to housing benefit and the Universal Credit, will continue to dramatically reshape the policy landscape for the foreseeable future.

The Impact of Transforming Rehabilitation



Shortly before the publication of the second Re-Unite evaluation in June 2013, the government announced sweeping changes to the prison and probation services in England and Wales.¹⁰ These changes, collectively known as Transforming Rehabilitation, came into force in February 2015 and involved subcontracting much of the probation service to private firms and third sector organisations.

The new system radically changed the environment for voluntary sector organisations delivering services to female offenders, either in prison or the community. 21 newly-formed Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) took over responsibility for the management of low to medium-risk offenders, as well as assuming a new statutory responsibility for supervising short-sentence prisoners after release – two categories that include the vast majority of female offenders.

Although CRCs are required under the Offender Rehabilitation Act (2014) to address the particular needs of women, a 2015 parliamentary inquiry found that there was little evidence that this provision adequately safeguarded quality women's services in practice.¹¹ Transforming Rehabilitation had a major impact on the provision of Re-Unite services and the operation of the various Re-Unite projects around the country:

- Several women's prisons were closed down, including the largest women's prison in the UK, HMP Holloway. With fewer prisons spread over a broader geographical area, several partners were faced with a considerable additional burden on their case workers, who had to travel further afield to meet and identify potential clients.
- The long distances many women find themselves being imprisoned away from their home area make it harder for them to maintain their relationships with their children making longer term (irreparable) family break up more likely in some cases with associated costs to social services and the public purse.
- Funding for women's centres – which made up the majority of Re-Unite replication partners – was severely curtailed under the new arrangements, despite the fact that voluntary organisations faced a greater statutory burden than ever to provide support to prison leavers. Faced with serious budget constraints, many women's centres were forced to curtail or cut their services to female offenders.
- Access to prisons and in-reach became much harder post-privatisation. With high staff turn-over and less interest in engaging with the third sector from the newly privatised administrations, partner organisations found it increasingly hard to build relationships with prison staff and gain access to prisons in order to identify potential clients and support them through the gate.
- The sharp increase in recalls to custody for even minor breaches of parole has seen many more women serving very short prison sentences – two weeks in many cases. This barely gives enough time for Re-Unite workers to even attempt a referral, let alone make detailed plans for post-release accommodation; although in some cases it has been long enough for women to lose a tenancy.

All of the partner organisations interviewed for this report felt that in-reach services were very important in order to successfully identify potential clients for whom the project would be appropriate, and prepare those clients for a smooth transition into supported housing. One partner stated that through-the-gate services were effective "because the rapport you can build and support you are able to give is absolutely crucial. You are able to get to know her and her family." Another suggested that such support meant clients are better able to stay in the process and become less likely to disengage from support.

10. Ministry of Justice, 2013. Transforming Rehabilitation: A Strategy for Reform. Link. 11. <http://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Is-it-the-end-of-womens-centres.pdf>

However, post-Transforming Rehabilitation, providing in-reach services became extremely challenging. With prisons now administered by new companies and new personnel, the relationships that allowed replication partners access to prisons often came to an end. Partners found that the newly privatised prison administrations were, as a rule, less interested in working with community organisations or charities. As such, the referrals process changed considerably. Potential clients were exiting prison without prior contact with project workers, and thus assessments of their suitability for the project had to be undertaken with much less preparation. In consequence, a small number of women were accepted onto the project despite having very little realistic prospect of being reunited with their children.

Several partners identified Transforming Rehabilitation as a key challenge, preventing in-reach access to prisons, making relations with prison staff difficult to establish, and preventing joined-up and cohesive communications and implementation between social services, the partner and the prison administration.

These changes have made it harder for Re-Unite Partners to run dedicated Re-Unite projects for female offenders in their client base. It is possible that these constraints may be temporary, and the situation may ease as the probation system adjusts to the transition and CRCs recognise the value of projects such as Re-Unite.

However, it must be said that most experts in the sector think that such a turnaround would be unlikely, and expect the pressures on specialist support for female offenders to intensify. A 2016 report by Dame Glenys Stacey, HM Chief Inspector of Probation, found that “dedicated funding for women [offenders] has virtually disappeared, and so the future of some services, and in particular those provided by Women’s Centres, is in doubt. With less funding available, and without a clear strategy for women, more women are more likely to re-offend”.¹² The report added that the efforts of probation staff have been hampered by a lack of suitable accommodation for women exiting prison.

Re-Unite service user

“ I’ve got a nice house, I’m working, I’m in my first year at University, I’ve come such a long way and obviously a lot of that is down to me but I couldn’t have done it without [name of support worker] and [name of children’s worker]. ”

12. Stacey, Glenys, HM Chief Inspector of Probation, 2016. A thematic inspection of the provision and quality of services in the community for women who offend

Funding post Transforming Rehabilitation

Since the publication of the Open Public Services White Paper in 2011, the UK government has placed increasing emphasis upon “evidence-based commissioning” and “payment by results”. This philosophy of state service provision is central to the new commissioning model of Transforming Rehabilitation, which emphasizes that work with lower risk offenders (such as women) will be undertaken by voluntary organisations underpinned by funding from social investment companies. In order to attract such social investment funding, therefore, providers will have to be able to show that their projects produce quantifiable results. The number of female offenders in the UK is so low that social investment companies are unlikely to find returns great enough to justify funding specialist support to women.

This poses challenges for projects like Re-Unite. Project outcomes are not easy to quantify: the project works holistically with small numbers of clients over long timeframes and a broad geographical area; the casework is complex with a range of possible positive outcomes; and it is impossible to conduct a meaningful control or locate a comparison group.

The long-term positive impacts on the lives of children who are able to have more and better contact with their mothers should also not be underestimated. The 2013 evaluation found that the Re-Unite project had helped mothers and children to secure school places, transfer to new schools closer to new homes, make the transition to secondary school and, in some cases, address behavioural issues at school. For some children, the existence of Re-Unite has helped prevent them from being taken into, or remaining in, care.

We can evidence financial rewards from Re-Unite, but we have never insisted on the kind of counting which would prove the difference for example on numbers of children failing at school or in care, to do that would mean that the work would cost twice as much and be less attractive to our partners.

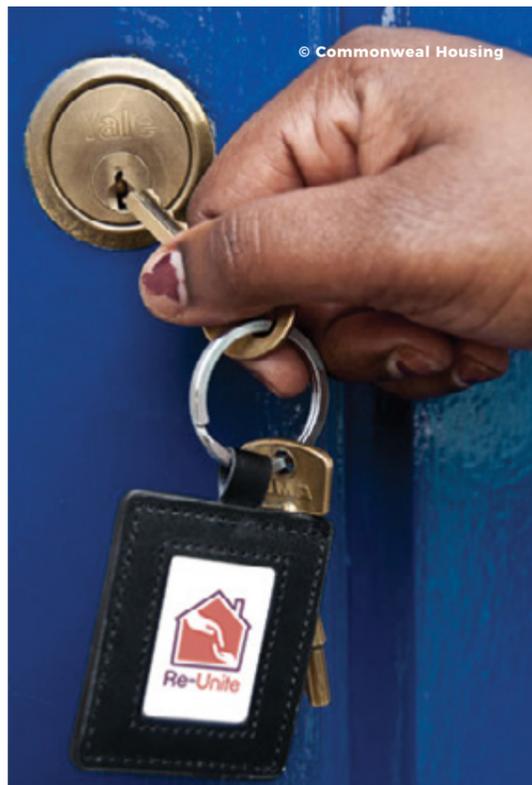
Changes to adoption law

Finally, one project partner noted that the Re-Unite project has been seriously affected by the government's policy push to speed up the adoption process, beginning in November 2015. This has had a significant impact on women seeking custody of their children upon leaving prison, as the acceleration of the adoption process has meant that, for some at least, by the time they are released (even from relatively short sentences), their children have already been placed with adoptive parents – making regaining custody an impossibility. Anecdotal evidence from replication partners suggests that this has had a major impact, with several mothers who were keen to work towards regaining custody on release finding themselves unable to do so.

Re-Unite service user

“ I'm a different person. Some of that is because I was inside for so long but coming outside I was all over the place, very all over the place and they were just there. They just made me know that we're here, not matter how big or small, we're here. Now I've got my daughter back and good things are happening for me. I've got my life back.

”



The future of Re-Unite

Of the replication partners interviewed for this review, only two have been able to secure external funding to continue running a dedicated Re-Unite service for its clients beyond 2016. That this number is so small is largely felt to be a result of the pressures of payment by results and Transforming Rehabilitation, as outlined above.

However, most of the replication partners – although not able to continue with a dedicated Re-Unite project per se with its own funding stream, project staff, etc – have incorporated the core lessons and values of the Re-Unite programme into their on-going work. These include:

- a gender and family-sensitive approach to housing for female offenders
- recognition of the special housing needs and vulnerabilities of women with children entering the criminal justice system
- sensitivity to the impacts on children of a mother's imprisonment, and awareness of the challenges faced by mothers and their children both during and after imprisonment
- greater evidence base, staff capacity and organisational readiness around the issue of families in the criminal justice system
- new resources and knowledge materials on the issues surrounding women in the criminal justice system, their families, and the reunification and housing challenges faced by such women following release.

Mainstreaming these key features of Re-Unite into on-going work helps ensure sustainability of impact, even when replication partners are no longer running stand alone Re-Unite projects. Embedding the values and approaches of Re-Unite into existing service provision, and ensuring that partner organisations are aware of and sensitive to the unique challenges faced by this client group, is a key success of the Re-Unite project.

Replication Partner

“ It is very difficult for women who have been in a structured regime system to then be put back into the community with no support.

”

Reflections, recommendations, and lessons learnt

A record of success

We believe that running the Re-Unite project for the last ten years has provided a depth of data, and deep experience and understanding of the issues and challenges surrounding women in the criminal justice system. Much of what we have learned during this decade of project delivery is relevant to other organisations working with female offenders, families, and post-prison rehabilitation. It should also be of interest to ministers, government departments, councils and contractors responsible for designing and implementing policy in this sphere.

Firstly, it should be stated that the Re-Unite model has a proven track record of successful delivery. All three independent evaluations found that the project has had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the lives of the families involved, that the project has been revenue-positive in terms of delivered benefits to society, and recommended that it should be continued and replicated elsewhere.

However, although the model has been shown to be a successful one, it can only work when the policy context it operates under is appropriate. The changes to the prison and rehabilitation system in the wake of Transforming Rehabilitation and the austerity-first approach of successive governments have reshaped the initial policy landscape to make it almost impossible to continue programmes such as Re-Unite – even where they have a proven track record of success and can be shown to be revenue-positive to the public purse.

With a new government in place following the 2017 General Election there is a chance to fix the policy context and return to a system where effective, efficient programmes such as Re-Unite can continue to provide positive outcomes for some of the most vulnerable members of society.

Re-Unite service user

“ The prison service discharged me from the hospital in North London with a newborn baby, four large duffle bags and £45 I think it was and I had to get back to South London. If it wasn't for [name of support worker] I don't know what I would have done. ”

The nature of “reunification”

The Re-Unite project was launched with the stated goal of helping women gain custody of their children after leaving prison, by providing housing and support that would allow children to return to the care of their mothers. As it was initially designed, the project measured its success according to how many mothers had regained permanent custody of their children and were living together in family-appropriate housing.¹³ This is a very black and white way of conceiving reunification: either a woman is living together with her children, or she is not.

However, over the course of the project, as project partners and replication agencies worked with women across a broad range of needs, challenges, and contexts, it became clear that this binary metric was oversimplified, and perhaps unhelpful. People are complex and multifaceted, and the reunification process is a lengthy, multi-stage procedure. Indeed, it is perhaps more helpful to think of “re-unification” as a spectrum of multiple possible stages, with permanent custody at one end and no contact whatsoever at the other.

Along this spectrum, there are multiple positive possible outcomes that fall short of full permanent custody, and that Re-Unite support has helped clients to achieve. Perhaps a woman leaving prison is able to gain partial custody of her children, sharing care-giving duties with a family member. Perhaps a woman is able to see her children more regularly, without having custody; perhaps she is able to gain regular telephone contact with them, while working with support services to re-establish her life post-release, and build the stability and security required for the next step along the reunification process. Increased access to children can take many forms, and – where it is appropriate – has a broad range of positive impacts on both the child and the mother.

Although Re-Unite was set up to help bring children back together with their mothers, it is important to note that the project was always aware of and sensitive to the fact that, for some families, reunification was not an appropriate goal. Bringing a mother back together with her children was only pursued by case workers when reunification was in the best interests of the children. Re-Unite partners worked closely with prison administration, social services and the criminal justice system to ensure that the needs, security and safety of the children were paramount when deciding whether or not to accept a woman onto the Re-Unite programme.

13. The project did recognise at launch that there are some women for whom reunification with their children is not possible or appropriate. Thus referrals would be declined if social services felt that re-unification with children would be counter-productive or unsafe, if the woman required more support than the project could realistically offer, or if she posed too great a risk to project staff.

The Re-Unite project has also delivered a wide range of positive impacts for service users other than “just” reunification. Re-Unite projects have helped women access accommodation, whether through dedicated tenancies, housing partnerships, or facilitating improved access to social housing, thus helping them begin the process of rebuilding a settled life in a community. Service users and their children have gained access to a wide range of resources and support at women’s centres and in the wider community, with positive effects on clients’ mental health, substance misuse issues, employment, and family life.

Recognising the huge range in possible positive outcomes that could be achieved through Re-Unite support has allowed greater flexibility in designing and implementing project services, as well as measuring what constitutes a successful Re-Unite intervention. This flexibility was especially helpful in situations where prison in-reach was lacking and thus pre-release contact with clients was limited. For example, where clients were serving short sentences of six months or less, it was not always possible for Re-Unite case workers to make a thorough assessment of the likelihood that a mother and children could be re-united before the woman was released from prison.

Important recommendations arising from these insights are:

- Recognise that there are multiple positive outcomes that fall short of full reunification of a mother with her children. Where appropriate, increasing access is broadly beneficial whatever form it takes for both mothers and children.
- Understand that a Re-Unite project can help women and their families in many other ways in addition to increased access, including the provision of more holistic support, better access to good-quality housing, better connection with local communities, etc, all of which have positive effects on a client’s health and well-being.
- Taking this into account, as well as the uncertainty engendered by current changes to the criminal justice system, flexibility should be built into any Re-Unite project so they can respond to changes in the regulatory environment and provide the best and most appropriate level of service to the client.

Looking Through a Different Lens: The impacts on children

Throughout the period of the Re-Unite project two different statistics have consistently stood out:

- Only five per cent of children with a mother in prison remain in the family home during their Mother’s imprisonment.¹⁴
- It is estimated that more than 17,240 children were separated from their mother in 2010 by imprisonment.¹⁵

Addressing some of the negative impacts on family life was at the heart of the original thinking behind Re-Unite. The early pilot partners were looking to tackle the nonsense which was later described by Jenna, reported in the Prison Reform Trust in their 2015 report “the Sentencing of Mothers”¹⁶.

Jenna

“ When I got out of prison I was in a catch-22, that’s what they kept telling me. If your child doesn’t live with you, you can’t get accommodation, but you can’t get your child back unless you’ve got accommodation... I got a room in a hotel. I didn’t want to take my son from his stable home and bring him to a little hotel, he’s just not used to living like this, I wanted to do everything right. But eventually I was just like, I want my son back. ”

The initial focus of the Re-Unite project was primarily on the mother, and how to support her to a position where she could better support her children. The project did address family and child-centred issues at outset, including improved family stability, with settled mothers at less risk of repeat offending; improved attendance and attainment at school for children; and breaking cycles of intergenerational involvement with the criminal justice system.

14. Caddle, D. & Crisp, D. (1997) Mothers in Prison HO Research and Statistics Directorate Findings no.38 London: TSO 15. Wilks-Wiffen, S. (2011) Voice of a Child, London: Howard League for Penal Reform 16. Minson, S, Nadin, R & Earle, J (2015) Sentencing of mothers: Improving the sentencing process and outcomes for women with dependent children- Prison Reform Trust

Over the course of the project, however, the initial focus on the mother grew to include a greater awareness of the importance of the family more broadly, and children within the family. The Re-Unite South London project was able to take on a dedicated Children's Worker from 2012, initially part time but then later a full-time role. Two other replication partners used Re-Unite funds to employ a Family Support Worker, better able to engage with the needs of children. Subsequent evaluation found that "service users gained significantly from having access to the Children's Worker, in addition to their support worker. Service users described how the children's worker supported the family with the sensitive emotional and parenting consequences of separation and impact of being reunited, assisted with school related issues and behavioural problems."

Towards the end of Re-Unite, and prompted by the experience of working with children of imprisoned mothers, research into the impact of maternal imprisonment on the lives and well-being of children was undertaken by development workers from Anawim and Women's Breakout – the Re-Unite Network Coordinators. Drawing on the experience of both key workers and clients from the Re-Unite programme, the research aimed to examine the critical gaps in services impacting on children during the arrest, sentencing, imprisonment and release phases of the mother's journey within the criminal justice system.

This work has helped Commonweal to see the issue from the other end of the telescope. Supporting the mothers to secure housing and supporting them to then be re-united with their children was and is hugely important. However, reducing the number of families torn apart by imprisonment is arguably a more effective solution than intervention after the fact – as the saying goes, "prevention is better than cure".

The 2016 report, entitled **Children on the Edge: Children affected by maternal imprisonment**,¹⁷ was based on a review of monitoring data from the Re-Unite project, interviews with Re-Unite project workers who specialised in working with children, and interviews with children affected by maternal imprisonment themselves, in order to better understand their views, feelings and experiences of separation from their mothers through imprisonment. Its stated goal was the development of an informed and co-ordinated range of child centred services and support to ensure positive outcomes.

This is a complex and sensitive topic, and more research in this field is clearly required. However, the Children on the Edge report, as well as our work with partner organisations in the field, has given us new insights into this area, allowing us to identify **a set of recommendations for further areas for development**. These include:

- **The potential impact of custodial sentences upon children should be taken into account by magistrates and judges during the sentencing of mothers. As part of a court report, there should be a child impact statement which would assist judges and magistrates to assess the impact their decisions are likely to have on dependent children when a primary caregiver is sentenced.**
- **The government should oblige judges and magistrates to consider non-custodial sentences for offenders with primary care responsibilities, and provide an explanation for their decision for imposing a custodial sentence.**
- **Children under the age of 18 months are currently permitted to remain with their mothers in prison. However, the children and their mothers should be accommodated in specific mother-child houses, separated from the main prison. The government should also reconsider the rule that at 18 months (or very soon after) the child has to leave the mother, reassessing why that specific age has been chosen, and in whose interest is it to separate a mother and her 18 month old child.**
- **Clear pre-release plans should be developed for imprisoned mothers approaching their release date, in conjunction with in-reach support from social services and relevant organisations such as women's centres.**

17. <https://www.commonwealhousing.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Children-on-the-Edge-Children-affected-by-maternal-imprisonment-final-1-1.pdf>

More generally, it should be noted that for men, the primary issue that creates a propensity to commit crime or reoffend upon release is the availability of decent, rewarding employment – but for women, it is access to and engagement with their families. This is obviously a rather over-simplified and gender-deterministic way of framing the problem, but it is broadly true that women who lose custody of their children are far more likely to commit crimes and/or reoffend.

This was borne out by the work of our partners with the hundreds of women who engaged with Re-Unite over the past ten years. In a number of cases, women interviewed for the evaluations stated that losing their children was the trigger for “giving up” and committing their crimes in the first place. Improved outcomes for the family, therefore, will tend to lower re-offending and may help reduce overall offending in the first place. As such, it is in the interests of society to work towards the re-unification of mothers with their children, whenever it is appropriate and in the best interests of the child.

These are not solutions requiring housing – indeed they are primarily to try to avoid homes being lost in the first place. As such the Board of Commonweal believe that as a housing-based charity we are not best placed to take these recommendations forward. However Commonweal is committed to adding our voice and support to the broad range of organisations also calling for these reforms – not least Women’s Breakout and the Prison Reform Trust.



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