



Re-Unite revisited: An evaluation summary report

BY JANE DOMINEY & LORAIN GELSTHORPE
INSTITUTE OF CRIMINOLOGY
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Quite simply, it would be a matter of huge regret if the excellent work of Re-Unite could not be continued. There is a moral imperative to make provision for women offenders and their children and Re-Unite already makes a positive contribution to the Government's Rehabilitation Revolution agenda.

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Seven signs of success



- 1.** Whether by providing tenancies, partnerships with housing associations or acting as a facilitator and negotiator with housing providers, Re-Unite has enabled service users to access accommodation.
- 2.** The work of Re-Unite through new providers extends far beyond housing support; giving service users and their children access to a wide range of resources at Women's Centres and in the wider community.
- 3.** All Re-Unite providers offer excellent support to service users and their children. The work of skilful and committed staff is key to achieving this.
- 4.** All Re-Unite providers have produced evidence of positive outcomes for women and their children: successfully managed tenancies, children no longer subject to care proceedings and improvements in mental health included.
- 5.** Whilst the small-scale nature of Re-Unite and the newness of the replication projects mean that it is not possible to produce clear outcome data about re-offending by service users, case studies clearly illustrate the way that Re-Unite impacts on social problems that are linked with offending.
- 6.** The work of Re-Unite is valuable to the community because it improves the circumstances of a vulnerable group in ways which have the potential to reduce social exclusion.
- 7.** Cost benefit analysis shows that spending money on this vulnerable group of women and children pays dividends in terms of estimated reductions in the long term costs of emergency housing, health and other care.

Female offenders: the Government's view

As the Government's recent announcement on Strategic Objectives for Female Offenders acknowledges, many female offenders have a background of abuse and experience of the care system, there is evidence of a high rate of self-harm, and they are twice as likely as men to suffer from anxiety and depression; many have problems with drugs and alcohol misuse. Significantly, nearly two thirds of women leave behind dependent children when entering prison. Minister Helen Grant suggests that 'we simply cannot afford – either financially or morally – to ignore these issues' in view of the costs of imprisonment of women (£56,415 per woman each year) and the high reconviction rate (almost 45 per cent of women released from custody re-offend within 12 months).

The background to the Re-Unite project

Re-Unite aims to help mothers released from prison to resume or seek to restore their family life through the provision of accommodation and support. 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 often labelled 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 very difficult for a woman to regain the care of her children and those children are consequently left 'in limbo' in care arrangements.

Re-Unite today

Following an initial positive evaluation of the early phase of Re-Unite South London, this evaluation reflects on Re-Unite 2010-2012. Re-Unite has now been replicated in other areas and a distinctive feature of this report is to chart and evaluate these developments - in Birmingham, Gloucestershire, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, Humberside and Greater Manchester.

Whilst all the Re-Unite projects share common principles and a central aim of providing support and housing so that mothers leaving prison can live with their children, they all operate slightly differently. In South London there is a dedicated pool of housing for the project, while the newer Re-Unite projects work in conjunction with different housing providers to facilitate tenancies. Also, Re-Unite South London offers outreach support while the newer Re-Unite projects are associated with Women's Centres or other hubs and so Re-Unite forms just one part of integrated and holistic services for female offenders.

Re-Unite is run by established charities already at the heart of their communities. Re-Unite South London is delivered by Housing for Women, Re-Unite Birmingham by Anawim Women's Centre, Re-Unite Gloucestershire by ISIS Women's Centre, Re-Unite Greater Manchester by Threshold and Re-Unite West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire and Humberside by the Together Women Project.

Re-Unite service users and their needs

The project supports women with a range of issues that have been associated with their offending behaviour as well as with wider social problems. Re-Unite workers have helped women access services and sustain behaviour change in areas such as financial management, substance use and mental health. Re-Unite has provided a base from which women have been able to attend training courses, enter employment and focus on parenting.

THE MOTHERS

- Between January 2010 and December 2012, 31 women had been supported by Re-Unite South London and 26 by Re-Unite projects outside London. Most were referred by prisons but with some referrals from probation and voluntary sector organisations.
 - Most women in South London were aged 30-39 with diverse ethnic backgrounds, whereas most service users in the replication projects were aged 20-29 and white British.
 - Most of the women in South London had been imprisoned for drugs offences or fraud and theft. Outside London, there were also women who had been imprisoned for GBH and other serious violence and about half of the women had a history of offending.
 - The majority of service users in South London served sentences of two years or more. In contrast, nine service users outside of London had been sentenced for under 12 months.
- It was clear that the likely accommodation for the women in the absence of Re-Unite would have been friends or family, followed by hostel accommodation – temporary and insecure accommodation which is hardly ideal for mothers hoping to be reunited with their children.
 - Mental health issues (predominantly depression) and debt problems were common. There was more evidence of mental health issues and other symptoms of chaotic lifestyles in the women supported outside of London; depression was identified in 13 of the 26 cases and substance misuse in 15 cases.

THE CHILDREN

- More than 55 children have benefited from Re-Unite South London – ranging from infants to older teenagers – and around 50 children in the newer Re-Unite projects.
- Children stayed with grandmothers in the main whilst their mother was in prison, but also older sisters, foster carers, fathers, cousins, aunts, stepfathers or friends; a small number of infants were in prison with their mothers. Outside of London, 11 children were living in foster care when Re-Unite got involved.
- Re-Unite South London reported that social services were involved in six of the 17 cases in 2012; in these cases Re-Unite South London staff worked as part of the multi-agency team involved in assessing the family's situation and offering support.

Impact

RE-UNITE SOUTH LONDON

- Of the 31 service users in South London, 15 had moved on in a planned way and 10 were still fully engaged with the project. This is impressive because establishing and maintaining a tenancy is a very positive outcome for people leaving prison. In the six remaining cases, reasons for disengagement included accumulation of rent arrears, disengagement from support workers and pressure from local gangs.
- Only two women are known to have re-offended after they have left Re-Unite; this is a remarkable feat in a context where nearly half of all women imprisoned re-offend.
- In a similarly positive way, evidence suggests improvements in health, financial management, employment and training.
- For a number of women, the support of Re-Unite has enabled them to engage with community mental health teams and receive counselling or drug treatment.
- Mothers and children have been helped to secure school places, transfer to new schools, make the transition to secondary school and, in some cases, address behavioural issues.

RE-UNITE REPLICATION PROJECTS

- The Re-Unite projects outside London facilitated speedier access to suitable accommodation, via social housing providers the local authority and private landlords.
- Without the extra support provided by Re-Unite, all 26 women in the sample were facing the prospect of homelessness, living in a hostel, relying on friends or family or returning to accommodation made unsuitable by the threat of eviction or domestic violence.

Different models of provision are potentially as useful as each other. Each model has something distinctive and valuable to offer, drawing on local or area housing provision... As trust develops between staff in the centres and housing providers it may be that women and their children will become even more of a priority than they currently are.

- Re-Unite efforts during 2012 mean that 10 of the 26 women were already living with their children in stable accommodation.
- Re-Unite service users and their children clearly benefit from the wider resources available from the new providers, such as groups and activities at women's centres.
- Re-Unite is still a young project and, outside London, there is only data about 15 women who have been out of prison for more than six months. It is, therefore, very early to be talking about outcomes. Nevertheless, at the six month after release stage, all but two of the service users remained engaged with Re-Unite and all were successful in maintaining tenancies.

Danni's Story

Danni is 25 and was sentenced to three years in prison for a first offence of arson – she had set fire to her home. She has three children under the age of five and the youngest, born while Danni was serving her sentence, was removed from her care within hours of his birth. Whilst Danni was in prison the three children lived with their paternal grandmother.

PARTICULAR NEEDS

Danni's family background is chaotic and abusive but she has a close and positive relationship with her children's paternal grandmother. Social services felt that the children should remain permanently with their grandmother but Danni wanted to have the chance, with support and monitoring, of living with them again. Although not having problems with substance misuse herself, drugs were an issue for Danni's partner and other family members.

RE-UNITE SOUTH LONDON

On release from prison, and following careful discussion and assessment given her conviction for arson, Danni moved into a Re-Unite property. She had not previously lived in South London, so Re-Unite workers provided considerable support to ensure that Danni and her children had access to schools, health services and community resources. The two older children had some health problems and Re-Unite helped Danni to access the input they needed. The Re-Unite support workers also worked closely with Danni to build her self-esteem and assertiveness.



OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Danni and her children are now living together in their Re-Unite home. Danni's partner has worked hard to address his problems and Danni has resumed their relationship – co-operating with the assessments made to ensure that he was not posing any risk. Family relationships appear to be stable and loving. Social services remained involved after Danni's release from prison, but have made a positive assessment of the care provided to the children and have now withdrawn from the family. Danni's children have adjusted well to their new life with their mother and retain a strong relationship with their grandmother.

When asked what had changed for her as a result of Re-Unite, Danni replied: "My life, my kids' lives, as a mother, as a person I have gained the confidence to lead a good life."

Re-Unite and the Rehabilitation Revolution

Whilst it is straightforward to describe the work done by Re-Unite and produce lots of case vignettes of success, it is not as easy to quantify outcomes; small numbers of service users make statistical analysis difficult, the aims of the project are far-reaching and there is no prospect of assembling a control or comparison group.

This is a particular challenge when ideas like 'payment by results' and 'evidence-based commissioning' are prominent in Government thinking and is an issue that Re-Unite shares in common with other small projects working holistically with service users.

It is not possible to provide a simple answer to the question about whether being a Re-Unite service user definitely makes a woman less likely to re-offend. Reducing re-offending is not the sole aim of Re-Unite; the likelihood of re-offending varies considerably between service users; re-offending rates are affected by many factors outside the control of the project and there is no way of knowing what would have happened to anyone without the support of Re-Unite.

The work of Re-Unite plays a small but significant part in improving the circumstances of children and the aftercare of women prisoners by offering the stability that comes with adequate and secure housing. However, the Government's commitment to payment by results as a funding mechanism puts pressure on organisations whose work does not easily produce evidence of short-term outcomes. There are concerns that these policy developments will have deleterious effects on the development of practice with female offenders as Re-Unite and other small projects seek to present their results in a way that finds favour with commissioners.

Conclusion

In 2010-2012 Re-Unite providers have worked with women with very chaotic backgrounds and significant needs including substance misuse, mental health issues and offending. Such needs are barriers to establishing and maintaining a tenancy and reduce the chances of children returning to live with their mothers.

There is much evidence that Re-Unite is successful in accessing accommodation, establishing effective support, helping the women towards stable lives, and facilitating the restoration of families. Re-Unite has clearly provided the opportunity for children to return to their mother's care with additional support at a time of transition and change. For some children, the existence of Re-Unite has certainly prevented them from being taken into care or remaining in care.

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Re-Unite is currently delivered by Housing for Women (South London), Anawim Women's Centre (Birmingham), ISIS Women's Centre (Gloucestershire), Threshold (Greater Manchester), Together Women Project (Yorkshire & Humberside), Cyrenians (North East) and Solas-Cymru (South Wales)

For more information about Re-Unite and its partner organisations or to become a delivery partner, please contact:

office@commonweal.org.uk

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