

RE-UNITE TEN YEAR REVIEW

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY BRIEFING

TESTING A HOUSING SOLUTION

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

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. As an action based learning charity we exist to enable others to use this learning to shape future policy and service delivery. Through our work with specialist partners we help to demonstrate not just the role that appropriate housing can make in addressing social injustices, but also provide specific examples of how these injustices could and should be addressed through housing.

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.

Outlined in this executive summary are a series of conclusions developed from the experience gained over the ten year cycle of the Re-Unite project alongside ten recommendations for further action. It is our hope that through this report and the unique insight the project has developed through its evaluations, others will capture everything we've learnt from Re-Unite, helping to shape policy, achieve value for money and transform lives.

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.

Conclusions from Independent Evaluations and Reviews

- 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 insomuch 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.

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**

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.

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