

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evaluation of Circle's East Lothian Children Affected by Parental Substance Use Project

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Introduction and Overview

This report focuses on the narratives of eight parents and three children who took part in a qualitative study.¹ Four of the parents participated in longitudinal research over three to eight months. This provides depth into the work Circle have carried out with 44 families over the past year, made up of 150 individual family members. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed.

Key Findings

The report highlights that there is a demand and need for this service. The relationship between the worker and individuals within the family, as well as the family as a whole is central and underpins any success or progress achieved. Building trust takes time and perseverance in the initial stages, to overcome wariness of services and anxiety. The families and workers alike report that what sets this service apart from others is the intensive whole family, long term, strengths based approach and also the level of practical as well as emotional support offered on an outreach basis. Crucially, this engagement with the service is also a choice. This project is enacting the Independent Care Review's 'The Promise', by keeping families together.

The interviews highlight how isolated family members have become through addiction, and the impact of bereavement, loss and also experiences of homelessness, which contribute to the feeling of having hit 'rock bottom.' These testimonies spotlight the prevalence of mental health issues and how substances have been used as a way of coping, with parents also carrying a lot of guilt and stigma, affecting their self-esteem. One of the most important things Circle do is reinforce the positive identity of being a parent, and emphasise roles within families, for example by highlighting strengths and guiding parents through parenting programmes.

The service has had a significant impact on the families engaging. It has helped some parents to open up about childhood abuse and link in with appropriate services. Throughout the pandemic the families report that their connection to Circle as a way of breaking down feelings of isolation has been accentuated. In some cases Circle have acted as a 'go-between' for parents who have

not been able to see their children and helped them to maintain these connections. By supporting people to engage with mental health and recovery services, all had greatly reduced their substance use, specifically, in two cases stopping taking drugs completely and in another six becoming stable on methadone and lowering their levels over time. One other person had limited their alcohol use. Three people had been supported into housing and one into temporary accommodation. The impact of stable secure housing is significant and one young man reported that it was the first time he had felt safe his whole life.

This research shows that people face significant barriers to making connections in their local community and this is because of a lack of awareness, accessibility and not understanding their rights to support.

Staff reported having experience of universal health services in particular being prejudiced towards individuals and for those already lacking in self worth this can make access insurmountable.

Over the past year one man has secured full employment and another had been volunteering up until the pandemic began, an opportunity sourced by Circle, and which he said he had not thought himself capable of without the encouragement given.

Families report a high prevalence of anxiety and the emotional support provided by Circle to help them connect to services is significant and marks the beginning

¹ One of these interviews was conducted by Media Education, a social enterprise who co-produce material with individuals to help to tell their story and affect change. To find out more about Media Education please go to: mediaeducation.co.uk. You can view the video created at: circle.scot/families/family-rights-and-inclusion/





of turning points. Families feel that without this help to take those first steps, this would not be possible. Connections to other services and into communities are vital, so that when Circle step away families have lasting links to rely on that will help make their lives better.

The challenge at the present time though is that not only are such connections on hold, but for the future may also be under threat. Workers for example report a number of cases where individuals who had been active in the recovery community have now relapsed.

Although there is no quick fix for overcoming the shame felt for the past, through Circle's support, interviewees reported regaining or attaining the role of being a 'good parent.'

Within the eight families in this small study, six children had come off the Child Protection Register (CPR) and one woman would have had her two children taken into care, had it not been for Circle's support. Based on the wider sample of 44 families and specifically 29 children and 10 unborn babies engaging with Circle over the past year, 23 children were kept out of care, five children and one baby were taken off the CPR and two babies avoided being put on the CPR as a result of support. Taking the average cost per week of Residential Care is around £3,700, keeping the 23 children out of care who were deemed at risk for even a week saves £85,100.

This emphasises that not only is early intervention and prevention the most helpful way to support families, it is also the most cost effective, and although costs should not be a factor in supporting or championing this approach, in reality it is.

A small number of children took part in a short interview and reported that Circle have helped them to talk about their feelings, to understand addiction, that it is not their fault, and it could be said, in turn to regain their role as children. This study evidences that by supporting families, young people's attendance at school and attainment increases. In the wider sample, in seven out of ten families where attendance at school was identified as an issue this was improved, and in one case from 48-68%.

It is important to recognise the structural inequalities these families face. Circle for example have helped families access many food parcels when their misplaced shame means they are unable to do so themselves. This backdrop of enduring poverty, of a daily struggle to get by as benefits is not enough to live on, and with the ongoing impact of the pandemic, is set to get worse. The links between alcohol and drugs addiction, mental health issues and isolation to poverty is clear. This reinforces the importance of Circle's support and also the need to address inequalities. Circle are reaching and engaging meaningfully with those who have struggled to engage with services in the past, and these interviews emphasise that now more than ever these families need this support. At present there is an ongoing eight-week waiting list and demand for at least one more worker.

The main recommendations are that:

- The project is sustained and expanded to also work with families who are affected by mental health issues, and targeted towards early intervention and prevention, with referral sources coming from self referrals ideally as well as Health Visitors, early years and schools.
- Circle use this research and ongoing research to inform policy and practice, highlighting in particular from this report the challenges faced as a result of poverty, and the limited access to mental health services and support for dual diagnosis experienced.
- Circle share learning to inform future service delivery and design across Scotland, such as: the need for substantial investment of time for families to engage; the need for practical support and to help families deal with debt and poverty; the extent of isolation which highlights the importance of outreach; the positive impact of a strengths based approach; and how to adopt a whole family approach so that children's and parents' voices are heard in their own right, as well as the collective identity as a family.



"This is different because with other services they either work with the adult or the child, they don't work with them both, but with this they do. He has helped us to come together and with attending meetings at the school with me he is helping me to understand and to be understood." (Helen, interview 1)

"Mum was addicted to alcohol and I never really understood why...Circle helped me to know that it wasn't a choice for my mum to drink alcohol, it was a mental illness...I thought it was my fault she was drinking which caused me to have low self-esteem... (now) I know it's not my fault...Because of Circle I talk more." (Lewis, aged 11)

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