



**CIRCLE'S FAMILIES AFFECTED
BY IMPRISONMENT (FABI) PROJECT:
THROUGH-CARE FOR FEMALE
OFFENDERS**

**A report on outcomes in relation to the
4-year service evaluation (2008-2012)**

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS	i
1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND	1
2. CLIENT CRIMINAL HISTORIES AND RE-OFFENDING DATA	3
3. CLIENT INTERVIEWS	6
4. FINDINGS FROM STAFF INTERVIEWS	9
Overview	9
Staff background	9
Supporting the women and their families	9
Challenges faced in working with women exiting custody	10
Consideration of 'difficult' and 'successful' cases	12
Would you change anything about the service offered by Circle?	12
5. FINDINGS FROM STAFF FOCUS GROUP	13
Working with clients	13
Hindrances to good practice	14
Supports for good practice	15
6. FINDINGS FROM INSTITUTIONAL INTERVIEWS	16
7. DISCUSSION	19
8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	20
References	22

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- Criminal history and prison data shows that, prior to contact with the Project, clients had accrued over 300 non-custodial and 110 custodial sentences during criminal careers of up to 18 years in length.
- After contact with Circle the average number of non-custodial sentences received decreased from an average of 8.2 per person to 3 per person. The average number of custodial sentences received decreased from an average of 3 per person to 1.8 per person.
- In spite of some extensive criminal histories of the 37 historical clients for whom this data was available, at December 2012 fourteen of these had been offence-free for between 12 and 23 months. A further 17 clients had been offence-free for over two years.
- In order to provide consistency with previous reports, it is noted that the 'return to custody' rate remains low at 19%.
- Interviews were achieved with nine historical clients and the mothers of two further clients; and information obtained from a further one client through their Circle worker. Of these, six are still working with the FABI Project.
- Clients felt their needs were understood by the Circle workers and that they had been supported to make relevant changes on their own initiative and at their own pace. Support received while in custody, both personally and for family members, was highly valued.
- Clients were also grateful for the support they had received in dealing with statutory services, along with that provided immediately after release.
- Interviews with all nine of the FABI staff working with female offenders were achieved. All were found to be highly qualified, have extensive work experience, exceptionally passionate about their work and proud of the service Circle provides.
- In spite of many challenges, workers felt that their focus on helping their clients to see they have options and supporting them to realistic and realisable solutions was a key aspect of good practice.

- From the staff focus group it was clear that being able to build a good relationship with an individual before they are released from custody is a vital element in both effective engagement and support, with empathy an important factor in this.
- Being compassionate, non-judgemental and maintaining belief that individuals can change was also cited as important, as was the ability to work with the whole family where possible.
- A focus on identifying individual strengths and abilities was considered a sound method of maintaining a positive, forward-focussed emphasis on working with a client.
- There is much to suggest that the way in which staff are recruited to Circle has a great deal of influence on their success and therefore may merit further exploration in the future.
- Institutional interviews highlighted the unique nature of the service provided by the Circle FABI Project in terms of both staff and the nature of support provided. The positive contribution their support could make to both female offenders and their families was also highlighted.
- Cost savings to other agencies, such as the NHS, were mentioned as a 'by-product' of the support offered by Circle, as was a reduction in offending rates.
- It was suggested there would be considerable value in the service having a national remit, as currently there are female offenders in areas such as Tayside and Aberdeenshire who have no comparable support.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report is written four years into Circle's work with female offenders, and constitutes the seventh stage of the evaluation. Circle is a charity that provides holistic, community-based support to marginalised children and families. In 2007, the Robertson Trust funded Circle to conduct research into the women's prison population at HMP/YOI Cornton Vale. The subsequent report from Circle, *What Life After Prison? Voices of Women of Cornton Vale* (Cavanagh *et al.* 2007), identified a need for more structured throughcare for this vulnerable group but equally identified the capacity for Circle to offer this to women with dependent children who were returning to certain geographical areas within Scotland. After considerable negotiation with the prison, Circle began delivering a pilot throughcare service – Families Affected by Imprisonment ('FABI') - in August 2008 for women released from Cornton Vale to Edinburgh, West Lothian, Glasgow and the Lanarkshires. Subsequently, women housed at HMP Greenock and HMP Edinburgh were also included.

1.2 A report was produced in December 2011 that covered the first three years of the Circle FABI project and covered the 59 women they had provided support to during that time. This current 4-year report also considers these same women in order to provide long term evaluation of outcomes. As reported previously, these women were aged between 17 and 46 years at the time of first contact with FABI, had over 100 children between them and at the time of first contact with Circle ranged from being on remand for what would become their first custodial sentence to serving their seventh custodial sentence. Those with prior custodial sentences had been incarcerated for up to 41 months most commonly for crimes of violence, dishonesty or in relation to the Misuse of Drugs Act. Over half of the women (57%) had offending 'careers' of 10 years or more, with first offences being recorded as early as at 10 years of age.

1.3 As is often the case with female offenders these women have multiple and complex needs with drug misuse, physical abuse and mental health issues being the most prevalent. Factors such as problems in regard to housing and debt are also common. While in custody a considerable proportion of these women received no visitors, including no visits from their children, adding to the isolation of the prison experience.

1.4 As was cited in the previous report, Circle had achieved meaningful voluntary engagement with 85% of their clients; a considerable achievement considering recent reports of 72% engagement with statutory orders (Easton and Matthews, 2011). In addition, of the 52 women already released from custody over three-quarters (79%) have received no further custodial sentences since their release. Of

the few who *have* received further custodial sentences these have been much shorter and generally lower in frequency than any previously received, indicating that the offences committed were much less serious in nature.

1.5 Those who engaged with the service were less likely to receive further custodial sentences (18%) than those who did not engage (44%). Additionally, although numbers are small it was also noted that those who self-referred to the service were marginally less likely to receive further custodial sentences (8%) than those who were approached by Circle staff. The time between receiving their first custodial sentence and receiving effective support also appeared to be important in producing positive outcomes; those cases where the median length of time between first custodial sentence and contact with Circle was less than one year were less likely to receive further custodial sentences than those where the median length of time was over three years.

1.6 The importance of family bonds and support was emphasised in the finding that those who received visits while in custody (63%), particularly from their children (41%), were more likely to attract no further custodial sentences than those who did not receive such visits (41% and 25% respectively). Reasons why visits from children were not received emerged from interview data, with financial/transport problems, poor family relationships and involvement with statutory agencies being commonly cited as barriers in this regard.

1.7 In supplement to the information already gathered, for this stage of the evaluation it has been possible to obtain full criminal history data for 37 of the 59 historical clients discussed in this report, with supplemental information gathered on returns to custody for the remainder. Findings from interviews with some historical clients are also included. The decision was also taken to make an attempt to better understand the good practice evidenced in earlier reports and to this end interviews have been conducted with those nine FABI staff working directly with female offenders, as well as a focus group including all staff involved in the Project.

1.8 In this report findings related to criminal history and reoffending data will first be presented, followed by a findings from the client interviews. Information from the staff interviews and focus group will then be covered before findings from interview with 'institutional' staff (*i.e.* those working within the prison estate) are considered. A discussion of the findings will then take place before conclusions and recommendations are presented.

2. CLIENT CRIMINAL HISTORIES AND RE-OFFENDING DATA

2.1 While the unique, identifying number that allows for criminal history data to be tracked should be entered onto the prison record for each individual, this was unfortunately not the case. In these circumstances the name, date of birth and a recent address can be submitted to the Scottish Police Services Authority in order to obtain this identifying number, and some were indeed tracked down in this manner. However, it was ultimately only possible to obtain criminal history data for 37 of the 58 historical clients considered for this report.

2.2 In previous reports offending behaviour has been measured to a certain extent by 'returns to custody' as this was the only information available to the evaluation team. Although the criminal history data provides a much more complete picture of offending behaviour, for the purposes of continuity it should be noted that the return to custody rate as measured for the current report stands at 19%. This figure is consistent with previous findings.

2.3 As can be seen in Table 1, the criminal history data indicates that the 37 women for whom this data could be obtained had each received up to 21 non-custodial and 12 custodial sentences prior to contact with the FABI service. In total, the women had received over 300 non-custodial sentences and 110 custodial sentences. Including offences recorded through the Children's Hearings, these women had been offending for between 13 months and over 17 years prior to contact with FABI, with average offending rates ranging from one offence every 2 months to no prior offences.

Table 1: Sentences received prior to contact with FABI

	Total number of sentences	Minimum	Maximum	Average no. of sentences per person
Non-custodial sentences	304	0	21	8.2
Custodial sentences	110	0	12	3

2.4 After contact with FABI and release from custody (see Table 2), the same women received 45 non-custodial and 64 custodial sentences. All of the women had experienced a length of time free from offending, ranging from nine months to over four years. It is in comparing the average number of each type of sentence pre- and post-contact that a considerable decrease in non-custodial sentences is apparent. In contrast, the average number of custodial sentences appeared to have increased slightly. However, this may have had much to do with two 'outliers' who

had received 10 and 11 custodial sentences respectively; if these are removed from the analysis, the average remains constant at 1.3 per person.

Table 2: Sentences received after contact with FABI

	Total number of sentences	Minimum	Maximum	Average no. of sentences per person
Non-custodial sentences	45	0	6	3
Custodial sentences	54	0	11	1.8

2.5 As mentioned above the most notable decrease could be seen in relation to non-custodial sentences, where a greater number of women (16) received no such sentences after FABI contact than prior to FABI contact (4 women). Although the average number of custodial sentences received by each woman remained constant after removal of the one extreme case, the numbers receiving either no custodial sentences, or a maximum of three, decreased after contact with FABI. As with the non-custodial sentences, decreases in higher numbers of custodial sentences were also evidenced.

2.6 It is of interest to take account of the length of time these women have been able to remain offence free, particularly in contrast to their criminal histories. For example, the fourteen clients who have no offences recorded for between 12 and 23 months had:

- combined criminal careers of over 90 years
- criminal careers ranging from 15 months to over 15 years, with an average length of 6 years
- accrued 178 sentences
- individual sentence profiles ranging from no offences to 31 offences, with an average of 12.7 offences per person

2.7 In spite of these intensive criminal histories, after contact with FABI the number of sentences accrued decreased to 55 (ranging from none to 11) and averaged 4.2 per person but had nevertheless been offence free for at least 12 months. If a comparable time frame is considered (i.e. total time since initial contact with FABI compared to the same amount of time prior to FABI contact), the average number of sentences received still shows a small decrease from an average of 4.8 prior to contact to the 4.2 average mentioned above.

2.8 Similarly, the seventeen clients who have had no offences recorded for 24 months or more had:

- combined criminal careers of over 165 years

- criminal careers from 13 months to almost 18 years, with an average length of 10 years
- accrued 204 sentences
- individual sentence profiles ranging from no offences to 29 offences, with an average of 12 offences per person

2.9 Again, in spite of these intensive criminal histories, after contact with FABI the number of sentences accrued decreased to 33 (ranging from none to 12) and averaged 1.9 per person but had nevertheless been offence free for at least 24 months. If a comparable time frame is considered (*i.e.* total time since initial contact with FABI compared to the same amount of time prior to FABI contact), the average number of sentences received still shows a decrease from an average of 2.9 prior to contact to the 1.9 average mentioned above.

2.10 As is indicated, the range of criminal histories is a diverse one, ranging from some women with no offences before or after that which brought them into contact with Circle to those who had committed a considerable number of offences yet still seem to have achieved positive outcomes in relation to offending following contact with Circle. For example:

- Woman A had committed 31 offences across an 11 year period (an offending rate of one offence every 4 months). Since being in contact with Circle, while she has received one further sentence, she has nevertheless been offence-free for 16 months
- Woman B had committed 31 offences across a 13 year period (an offending rate of one offence every 6 months). Since being in contact with Circle, she has been completely offence-free for 4 years

2.11 For others the path to desistance is more complex:

- Woman C had committed only two offences across a three year period prior to her contact with Circle, but went on to receive 12 further sentences after release from custody. Nevertheless, she has now been offence-free for over two years.

3. CLIENT INTERVIEWS

3.1 Attempts were made to interview 37 historical clients who have been interviewed across the life of the evaluation in order to obtain information on their current status and experiences of the Circle project. A summary of the outcome of these attempts can be found in Table 3.

Table 3: Outcome of interview attempts

Outcome	Number
Interview achieved	9
Interview achieved with client's mother	2
Information obtained from secondary source (worker)	1
Refused interview	3
Interview not practical*	2
Could not be contacted/did not respond to messages	10
Contact details no longer valid	10

* These two women are both currently in prison and the only option given for interview was via video link. As both of these women had failed to attend interviews arranged on prior occasions, it was decided that the expense of the video link procedure could not be justified.

3.2 In addition to the three women who refused to be interviewed, two of those spoken with (from the 9 cases where interviews were achieved) stated that they did not wish to be contacted in future. Both felt they had put that particular aspect of their past behind them with one saying that:

"I am at a stable place in my life now and I want to leave it at that"

3.3 So far as their current relationship to Circle stands:

- four are no longer working with Circle
- four are still working with Circle
- one is still working with Circle but feels her need for support is decreasing

3.4 Findings from these interviews very much support those previously reported, with all nine women very satisfied with their experience and happy to recommend the service to others. Distinctions were again made between the support received from Circle and that from other agencies, with the women feeling that the Circle workers understood their needs well and genuinely wanted them to succeed. Although it can be said that 'nothing new' arose from these interviews, some of the points most commonly made by these women certainly bear repeating.

3.5 There was consistent appreciation of the impact Circle had made on the women's likelihood to both trust other services to help and seek support where needed. Along with helping the women to make contact with relevant services, early support to keep up appointments had made fully utilising these services a more

straightforward process. Perhaps most importantly, some of the women also mentioned that their experiences with Circle in this regard had given them the confidence to seek support on their own initiative; this ranged from literacy and employment-related courses to mental health support.

3.6 This confidence was also evident at a more personal level, with most of the women stating that the support they had received had made them feel good about themselves, that they were valued as individuals and deserved to have a positive future. Having someone to talk to outside of the family, who seemed to understand the difficulties the women were facing, was highly valued as was the support to maintain distance from negative influences. All of those interviewed praised their worker strongly with all but one having had no issue in cases where there had been a need to introduce a new worker into the process. One mentioned that:

"It is hard when you get a new worker because you have to go back to that bad place and tell them all the reasons why you are where you are. I did find it hard"

3.7 However, in turn most of the women mentioned issues of funding and felt that, were this more readily available, it would allow services such as Circle to continue their service uninterrupted and on a wider scale.

3.8 Also mentioned by many of the women was the support they had received while in custody such as assistance in arranging visits from their children and help maintaining contact with family members. One woman stated that just knowing that Circle was providing support to her children while she was in custody helped to put her mind at ease and felt she would not have survived the experience without this. She added that Circle had helped her to have hope and:

"Without that hope I would not have made this turn in my life"

3.9 The families of some of these women had also received support from Circle with this too being greatly valued. Everything from practical help with daily tasks to arranging outings for the children was mentioned, with the Circle workers noted for 'going the extra mile' in doing such things as taking the whole family for an excursion. While this is positive in itself, one of the women also mentioned that the support her children had received had helped them to build their confidence while another stated that she and her child were receiving support during the child's transition to secondary school. In talking of their children, another woman mentioned how proud she was of a story her daughter had written at school about how well her mother had coped with the difficulties she had experienced. In relation to Circle, one woman felt that:

"This service keeps families together"

3.10 Many of the women also mentioned the support they had received in dealing with statutory services and processes such as Children's Hearings. They felt that they were assisted in making better representations of their circumstances and better understood both the processes themselves and what was required of them. While not all had physical custody of their children, they nevertheless felt the support from Circle had brought clarity to the situation and relieved some of the associated stress.

3.11 Finally here, the importance of providing support on exit from custody was emphasised. Although rather lengthy, the following quotation highlights this issue well; the woman is talking about the support she received from the Circle worker and how she felt that her exit from custody would have been "pandemonium" without her:

"I don't know what I would have done without her. I was homeless and had nowhere to go. She took me to the homeless department and they wanted to put me back in the area where my ex used to live, he really abused me and I was too afraid to say to housing that I didn't want to go there but (the worker) said it for me. So they put me in an area of town that is a good 45 minute drive away from where my children were living with my mum. Without (the worker) I don't know what I would have done, I would have been stranded. She made sure that I was able to go around and see my children.... The house that I moved in didn't really have much in it and (the worker) even took me around an old TV and as I had no aerial she even gave me a DVD player and DVDs. It sounds silly but I was all alone and after I would get back from seeing the children at least I had that as company."

3.12 Although the majority of the women interviewed were doing well, with two even in employment, on a less positive note in the two cases where it was possible to speak with the woman's mother neither were reported as doing well as a result of drug-related issues. This highlights the issue that not all of those supported by Circle are at a stage in their lives where they are ready for change and it is therefore reassuring that those women interviewed who were no longer working with Circle knew they could turn to them if required. Additionally, the fact that Circle makes great efforts into supporting clients to make changes at their own pace and on their own terms is again emphasised, with one woman stating that:

"Circle put me on the path, without them I would have been stranded"

4. FINDINGS FROM STAFF INTERVIEWS

Overview

4.1 Eight Circle workers were interviewed individually to establish their experience, background, highlights and challenges of their work, how they feel about the support they receive and also if there is anything they would like to change about the work they do. Overall it was clear from these interviews that the Circle workers are passionate about their work and proud of the service and although this discussion is focused more on the challenges faced this does not negate the positive attitude Circle workers have toward their work. Many consider themselves to be in a 'privileged role' where they are supporting people who perhaps have never really accepted help before and any difficulties faced are essentially viewed as frustrating but worth overcoming.

Staff Background

4.2 Circle staff are highly qualified and extensively experienced with most having careers spanning more than a decade. Workers ranged from having Scottish Vocational Qualifications to being at Postgraduate level in either social work or education, or indeed both.

Supporting the Women and their Families

4.3 From very early in the interviews it was clear that workers are passionate about helping people and feel this is the best thing about the job, as was the reward of seeing progress no matter how 'small'. It was felt that working with the whole family and not just the woman exiting custody has a number of advantages. Specifically, Circle can reach out and offer support to those who otherwise would not receive it and, by working with the whole family, the 'cycle(?) of change' (or circle of care?) can involve everyone around the woman and so provide a pro-social support model which can benefit all. Although workers are often alone they feel very encouraged by management and the rest of the Circle team. are trusted to manage their own diaries and therefore can be responsive to clients particularly if there is a need for more intensive support.¹ Workers emphasised that they have a manageable number of women and their families to support and as a result quite a few emphasised that the service offered by Circle is about quality as opposed to quantity. The workers noted that they operate in partnership with a wide range of services including housing, social work, addiction support, health, mental health and local groups, depending on the needs and strengths the women present.

¹ Workers appreciated the opportunity to discuss their cases with other staff and at supervision; however one worker suggested that it would be good at staff meetings to split up into smaller groups to discuss a number of cases rather than focusing on one.

"We are the glue that brings all these services and support together, in some ways it is all out there but actually getting it isn't, we provide that."

Challenges faced in working with women exiting custody

4.4 A number of challenges were noted in relation to working with this client group.

- ***The women sometimes leave prison with nothing***

4.5 People leaving prison, often without family support, sometimes have literally nothing. One worker described how a woman who had been on remand (and subsequently found not guilty) left prison with only the clothes she was wearing and required intensive support simply to get the basics of her life in order.

- ***The Benefits System***

4.6 The current way in which the benefits system is arranged for those coming out of prison was felt by workers to make little sense. The fact that a benefit claim can only start once the individual leaves prison can create many difficulties. For example, in one case this meant the woman had no money for four weeks and as a result she is in debt to a high rate lending organisation. Workers felt that the benefits system should be changed so that claims could be started before the person leaves prison so that the gap in processing could be shortened.

4.7 The workers were also very worried about the change in the benefits system due in April 2013, which will mean benefit payments being made monthly as opposed to weekly. They felt that the most chaotic women they support, particularly those with substance misuse issues, would not be able to cope. One worker stated that it was likely that, once this change is implemented, the cases of overdose would increase.

- ***Stigma associated with offending***

4.8 Some of those in the medical profession, particularly doctors, were said by workers to treat the women with disdain and therefore it was understandably difficult at times to support the women to attend appointments. Workers stressed that although there are some individual professionals who are incredibly supportive, in the instances when this is not the case this shows that effective support can often be down to personalities rather than any standards or protocols that should be followed.

- ***Housing***

4.9 Housing was cited as a considerable challenge, primarily as provision is scarce and many of the women do not want to leave prison as they fear living on the

streets. It was felt that there could be better communication between the housing officers in prisons and externally, although workers acknowledged that they were overstretched. Housing associations can also sometimes place women in difficult and risky situations. For example, one woman was offered accommodation at the same housing in which her abusive ex-husband lived, and a 'fight' was necessary for an alternative option to be obtained.

"There is no way out for the women when this happens and we are sending them back to the same environment which they have tried so hard to leave behind."

- ***Empowering women by raising their self-esteem and self-confidence***

4.10 The role of the Circle worker is often about making the women aware that they have options and that it is possible to seek another path or ask for help. Workers spoke about their job as sometimes simply helping women to make it 'through the door' to speak to professionals as they often feel that they have no worth and can find this process both intimidating and difficult. Having a client successfully meet with a professional or make an appointment on her own could be considered a major success in some cases. It is such examples that show just how little self-confidence and self-esteem the women that Circle supports can have. Arguably this may be the biggest challenge that the service faces.

- ***Gaps in service provision***

4.11 Access to services supporting those with mental health issues were identified as lacking, particularly access to psychiatric support. One worker felt that people leaving prison should have more options for moving into supported living accommodation as some felt they were not prepared for solo living. For example, they did not know how to budget money. Two workers felt that in comparison to somewhere like Edinburgh, both Aberdeen and Ayrshire have very few support services for women in general, while some of the services that *do* exist have too many conditions to meet before they can be accessed.

- ***Lack of consistent funding***

4.12 All of those interviewed felt that Circle's expertise is respected by other agencies, however, this was earned rather than something which came easily. Workers described how when Circle first started providing throughcare support other agencies were sometimes hostile to 'yet another' voluntary organisation. This would seem to indicate that Circle has now secured their credibility through hard work in what is a very difficult landscape. This comment also points to the lack of consistent funding that services face which can result in a high turnover of voluntary agencies that can make others reluctant to signpost to a service that may cease with little notice. At this stage Circle is regarded as a mainstay in the field, however, this does

not recognise the reality that they are like all other agencies in the voluntary sector in having to continue to fight for funding and constantly prove their worth.

Consideration of 'difficult' and 'successful' cases

4.13 Workers were asked about their most difficult and successful cases. All said that each case presented difficulties and successes throughout, however, they were also able to describe particular cases which show how complex and challenging their work can be. For example, workers described helping women to determine the underlying problems related to their addictions which can mean them opening up for the first time to talk about histories of past abuse. One worker described her frustration when this happened to find that there was little relevant support this woman could be signposted to. Another worker described providing support to a woman who tried to commit suicide on a weekly basis, and how through a combination of their training in suicide risk and wider work experience, they were able to deal with this complex and heartbreaking case.

4.14 Circle workers stated that it is important in their job to be realistic and not expect too much too soon. Often the successes they described were small but significant, such as a child attending school regularly. Workers felt that when whole family support was in place it was much easier for the women. For example, the family would be happy for the woman to live with them which can overcome any immediate housing issues. Big successes were said to be when a woman is eventually reunited with her children and a case can be closed as support is no longer required. Circle workers feel that closing a case should be handled sensitively and not rushed and to end contact on a high note, for example by going on a family outing. One worker stated: "I think it is as important for us as much as for the family."

Would you change the service offered by Circle?

4.15 Workers did not want to change anything about the service except that it would be available on a national basis. The following quotations give a good indication of how the workers interviewed felt about their position with Circle:

"Circle have given me a lot through this job and I want to give that back. No one working in this field can be any other way, you have to really care."

"I feel really supported in my job, from the bottom to the top we are all able to bounce off one another and I have never worked in a place before where there is such a shared value base and everyone genuinely wants to help."

5. FINDINGS FROM THE STAFF FOCUS GROUP

5.1 In total, of those staff involved in the interview, nine worked with female offenders. Three workers involved with male offenders were also in attendance though it was made very clear that only female offenders were being considered at that time. The two questions for discussion were:

1. What are the best techniques for working with clients (in relation to engagement, etc.)?
2. Are there any particular pieces of legislation or agency protocols that help/hinder your work?

Working with clients

5.2 All staff agreed that being able to build a relationship with the woman while she was still in custody made a considerable impact as it allowed them to best understand the woman's individual needs so that support can be tailored to suit. One worker stated that:

"It is about investing the time and really trying to get to know the person"

5.3 Cases are assigned quickly as the importance of getting this relationship underway is acknowledged. In developing this relationship, all staff regarded the issue of empathy as key and the meaning of this was explored within the group. Understanding the stigma that is often associated with being an offender was mentioned, as was having an understanding of what the woman has gone through. Many of the workers agreed that they themselves understood what it was like to have to deal with difficulties in their lives and they were able to use that experience to better understand their clients. Although it was acknowledged that this process sometimes necessitated sharing some personal information, all workers agreed that it was necessary to keep this to a minimum, remain strong and provide reassurance that change can happen.

5.4 It was noted that a realistic, solution focused approach worked well, with staff helping women to see options for themselves and decide how to move forward. One staff member stated that they "walk alongside their clients" in order to support them to make changes at their own pace. Being able to break goals down into small, achievable stages was cited as important as was genuinely listening to what the women need. It is known from interviews with clients that some feel that their contact with the Circle worker is the first time in their lives they have been listened to.

5.5 Belief in change was also discussed on a number of occasions and it was felt that having this belief in the woman can be very important to them as again this may not have been their experience previously. Being compassionate and non-judgemental was also mentioned as important, with the staff agreeing that the women would 'know' if they were being disingenuous and would therefore not find the support credible. The term 'stickability' was also mentioned, with the staff emphasising the importance of exploring *why* an individual may be having difficulty engaging rather than simply rejecting them as not being willing to engage. Cases are not 'cherry-picked' in any sense and, on some occasions, work will continue with family members even if the women herself does not want to be involved. The whole family approach was also discussed by the workers as important, as work done with an individual in prison can only be truly supported if the family is able to accommodate any changes made.

5.6 A focus on identifying individual strengths and abilities was also discussed as staff felt this was a good way to maintain a positive, forward-focussed emphasis on their work with a client. Being able to provide examples of where the woman has shown strength and initiative in the past can help them move forward and this emphasis provides a good indication of why Circle is often set apart from other agencies by their clients, as the more common 'risk; needs; responsivity' model does not allow for this approach. In addition, the resilience and drive of the workers, their passion for their work and their often innovative approach to finding ways in which to support clients clearly stood out. There is much to suggest that the way in which staff are recruited to Circle has a great deal of influence here and may merit further exploration in the future.

Hindrances to good practice

5.7 The structure of criminal law itself was considered as a hindrance in some respects, particularly in its lack of flexibility to take into account individual circumstances. An example was provided of when someone may breach bail conditions (not through offending) and be subject to serious penalties, with no account taken of any progress that had been made. Housing legislation was also described as difficult at times, being something that local authorities and other agencies could 'hide behind'. Thus, individuals could be placed in any area with no thought given to the realities of what that may mean, such as living in a high crime area or being away from family and support networks.

5.8 The fact that legislation and protocols were not always applied consistently was also raised as an issue with the primary example of this given as lack of respect often afforded to offenders. It was felt that the notion of rehabilitation and change in general was often ignored with one staff member saying:

"To be honest it is disgusting what you hear; I had a woman at a meeting recently and they were throwing up stuff that she did ten years ago"

5.9 While it was acknowledged that it was important to take full account of potential risks and that background information could be used as a baseline to better understand what an individual had experienced, staff felt that this emphasis on the past was detrimental to progress in many cases. Also mentioned was the tendency to take information not only on face value with little evidence of verification but also from individuals who had had little contact with the woman herself:

"I went to a meeting with one woman and there was... twenty-five other people there, some of them hadn't seen the woman in years and you wonder why they are there"

5.10 All staff agreed that the procedures imprisoned women were subject to when attending events such as a Children's Hearing or a family funeral lacked humanity. The fact that women are handcuffed in these circumstances could lead to feelings of shame and degradation. It was further noted that the need for restraints was often a major barrier to women even attending important meetings. However, this is not to say that staff did not appreciate the need for security in such circumstances, rather they felt the women could be treated with more dignity while still taking account of procedural needs.

5.11 Although not a hindrance in the sense of protocol or legislation the staff also mentioned the impact that inconsistent funding can have, particularly when an otherwise effective programme is brought to a halt when a funding stream ends.

Support for good practice

5.12 The focus group was close to coming to an end as this subject was broached so it is unsurprising that little was covered in this respect. Both the GIRFEC principles and SHANARRI well-being indicators were provided as examples of guidance that promoted good practice and both were considered as being in line with the Scottish Government nine offender outcomes. Ultimately however, having respect for the individual and a realistic approach to outcomes were considered the most effective platforms for success.

5.13 All staff also agreed that an early referral to their service was helpful and mentioned that referrals in custody often came close to a woman's release date. Readiness for change was discussed once more in this context, noting that some referrals from external agencies felt 'forced' at times and may have had an impact on the woman's willingness to take up the service Circle offers.

6. FINDINGS FROM INSTITUTIONAL INTERVIEWS

6.1 Interviews were conducted with six individuals working within the prison estate, the majority of which (five) were direct Scottish Prison Service employees. All SPS staff had considerable experience of the FABI Project and ranged from officers involved in daily contact with the women to those in senior management posts. The sixth interview was an NHS doctor (General Practitioner) who was responsible for delivering health care within a prison establishment. The interviews were open in structure with participants being asked to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the Project, along with any particular needs they identified female offenders with children as having.

Interview Findings

6.2 It was reported that initially there was general scepticism over 'another new service' being introduced to the prison regime as staff had seen many come and go with little impact. In spite of this the FABI Project was considered to have ultimately proved its worth in the support it had provided to the women and the relationships it had built with prison staff and had achieved a great deal in a relatively short space of time. Key strengths of the service were identified as being:

Project staff: It was noted that a service could only be as good as the staff who work for it. FABI staff were described as "first class" in their approach and easy to work with. Also, the project is considered to follow through with the promises it makes as it 'does what it says on the tin'. Staff are considered to have the drive and commitment to make the project a success where other services have suffered due to a lack of presence and consistency within the prison estate.

Flexibility of approach: FABI workers are considered to have a 'can-do' attitude and are willing to 'go the extra mile' in order to achieve positive results. When faced with individuals who do not fit the project criteria, they are willing to take the time to signpost them to relevant services and not simply reject them.

Engagement: The project workers are considered to do more than most to achieve engagement as they do not 'give up' on individuals, do not impose negative judgements upon them and understand that relapse and/or dips in engagement should not compromise support. As one staff member stated: "Women knew that they could go back"

Practical support: That the project could assist with practical support ranging from assisting a woman in receiving visits from her children through to picking her up on release were considered to be great strengths. After release, it was noted that even the simplest of tasks, such as grocery shopping, could prove to be

overwhelming and therefore the practical assistance offered by the project was vital during what could be a risk-laden resettlement process.

Relationship consistency: Developing relationships with the women prior to release was considered not only an aid to effective engagement but also as helping to keep families together and the women on track after release. The evidence provided in evaluation reports (e.g. Hutton and Nugent, 2011) of **reduced reoffending rates** was proposed as highlighting this.

Information sharing: Project staff are able to keep prison officers up-to-date with progress and other relevant information both in and out of prison. For example, knowing that women have received bad news or may even have been seeing their children for the last time, helps officers to understand and manage the behaviour and mood of such women. Additionally, the officers support some extremely vulnerable individuals and find it useful to know how they are after release.

Working with families: Although never a pleasant experience, it was noted that female offenders with children are subject to far more practical and emotional pressures than those without children. Offenders who are mothers are often harder on themselves, can have greater feelings of loss or guilt and a range of worries that are not easy to address. Therefore, the fact the FABI Project works with whole families can go a considerable distance towards ameliorating such concerns, which not only contributes to the well-being of the individual but also reduces the likelihood of associated behavioural difficulties that officers may have to deal with. Two interviewees stated that there could be considerable resistance towards and stigma placed on female offenders in attempting to continue relationships with their children and the FABI Project was felt to provide invaluable assistance in this regard.

6.3 In regard to weaknesses, none of those interviewed could identify any aspect of the work carried out by the FABI Project as being deficient in any regard. However, all suggested that it would be of greater overall benefit to have the service operate at a national level with areas such as Aberdeenshire and Tayside identified as accounting for a considerable proportion of the female prison population but having no access to comparable support.

"We are a national prison service and it would be good to have the situation where a postcode lottery is not happening"

6.4 It was also noted that most prison staff are not provided with copies of the evaluation reports and it was suggested that it may be useful in future to disseminate summaries more widely.

6.5 The doctor interviewed had provided some additional views that are worthy of recording here. Given that individuals with mental health needs (from general anxiety and depression to more complex diagnoses) often manifest these needs in physical terms, the doctor first noted that it was important to fully explore any symptoms in order to understand their cause. This could prove to be difficult in the short amount of time allocated to see each patient and the length of time it could take to arrange appointments. It was in relation to this that the first benefit of the Circle FABI Project was noted as, in collaborating with workers it was possible for the doctor to 'keep track' of a patient's progress and receive valuable information on such things as daily routines and significant events that may impact on the patient's health. Also, while confidentiality was always respected, the Circle workers were able to do such things as remind the women to take medication regularly and support them to maintain any regime suggested by the doctor. It was the opinion of this doctor that this collaborative and reciprocal relationship was not only of considerable benefit to the patient but was ultimately saving the NHS a great deal of time and money.

"If they don't have a Circle worker it's a headache for me"

6.6 The doctor went on to emphasise that medical professionals within the prison estate necessarily have to take a 'conveyor belt' approach to seeing patients and the input of Circle workers provided some continuity of contact as well as assisting the women in better understanding the doctor's requirements and instructions. The Circle workers had also proved invaluable in providing support in cases where bad news in relation to health had been received. In addition, as the Circle workers were connected to a wide range of other services, they were also able to signpost women to relevant support that may help with their physical and mental health needs. The doctor also felt that Circle was the only service to link the health of the women to their relationship with their children, therefore the support provided in this regard was considered to be of great health benefit also. Ultimately, the doctor felt that the service provided by Circle was "a bit of a gold standard" and hoped that more agencies would adopt their holistic approach. In one final comment the doctor noted, however, that "the system operates in a fashion that fails agencies who work holistically, with any blame for such failures often falling on the agency itself rather than the system that creates the difficulties."

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 In spite of the very complex backgrounds of the clients supported by the FABI Project, there is evidence from the criminal histories to suggest that the FABI staff have at least some influence on the considerable decrease in offending behaviour. The fact that almost two-thirds of those currently in the community have remained offence free for over one year is testament to this. In collecting this data it was of interest to note that even in a small sample such as this, custodial sentences for as little as seven days in length were still being handed down as late as September 2011.

7.2 Although a reduction in offending is a very positive outcome, it is in speaking with clients that perhaps the most significant benefit of Circle's work can be seen in the increased confidence and ability to cope with daily life that the clients seem to experience as a result of the support they have received. Clients felt their needs were understood by the Circle workers and that they had been supported to make relevant changes on their own initiative and at their own pace. Support received while in custody, both personally and for family members, was highly valued as was that provided during their transition to the community.

7.3 Circle workers are highly qualified and experienced and are passionate about their job and proud of the service. All workers felt well supported by management and other staff and working with the whole family is regarded as being the best way of supporting the women to make lasting change. Workers acknowledge the many challenges the women face and the service often has to address a history of issues such as long-term abuse. Ultimately the workers believe that helping the women to see that they have options and to focus on the solutions and make them realisable and realistic is what their work is about. There are many challenges the service faces in terms of structures, funding, procedures, provision and individual attitudes which highlight that working in this field requires resilience, and from the interviews it was clear that Circle workers have this in abundance.

7.4 From the staff focus group it was clear that being able to build a good relationship with an individual before they are released from custody is a vital element in both effective engagement and support, with empathy an important factor in this. Being compassionate, non-judgemental and maintaining belief that individuals can change was also cited as important, as was the ability to work with the whole family where possible. A focus on identifying individual strengths and abilities was considered a sound method of maintaining a positive, forward-focussed emphasis on working with a client. There is much to suggest that the way in which staff are recruited to Circle has a great deal of influence on their success and therefore may merit further exploration in the future.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 It is clear that Circle's model of support works well and highlights important lessons for good working practice. Women and their families generally begin their contact with Circle at least a few months before they are released, which gives the service invaluable time to establish good relationships and plan in detail for the future. The success of this approach highlights that the current four week pre-release plan for prisoners is perhaps not a realistic time scale for sufficient planning and should be revised. It is therefore suggested that other services should note that contact with the women at as early a stage as possible works best.

8.2 Circle appears to provide excellent practical as well as emotional support. Circle workers assess the barriers the women face and have been commended on their ability to be pragmatic, flexible and realistic in providing support. Throughout this report Circle workers have been identified as one of the main, if not *the* main reason why this service is so successful, both in terms of the professional respect it is afforded by other services and in engaging meaningfully with the women and their families. In meeting women at the prison gate Circle is not merely a taxi service, but is able to provide support and assistance in helping these women to make appointments that otherwise may not be met and put their affairs in order. This type of support has also proved invaluable in simply 'getting around'. For those on benefits public transport is expensive and in some areas very limited, so receiving help to, for example, attend appointments and visit children is of great value. It may therefore be of value for the Scottish Government to review the current discount structure in place to include those on benefits and at least make it a little easier to access vital services and support.

8.3 Circle uses a solution focused approach which highlights the women's strengths as well as their needs, something that both the clients and the FABI workers feel is empowering. It is therefore recommended that such an approach be more widely used by other services working in this field.

8.4 Circle works with women on remand and those who have been sentenced to less than four years; neither of these populations are entitled to statutory support and therefore this input is needed, appreciated and should be continued. It was particularly noted that prisoners on remand, many of whom have not yet been convicted, are in reality the least likely population to receive any support at all. It is recommended that research into this population would be beneficial and that other services could benefit from adopting Circle's flexible approach to include these women and offer them support.

8.5 Circle was identified by other services such as the NHS as being a valued partner and one that saves them time and resources which, particularly in this economic climate, is important to note. Circle is careful not to duplicate work that other services specialise in but rather to facilitate the women and their families to connect with existing provision. Circle is regarded as being consistent, flexible, easy to work with and willing to 'go the extra mile.' It is strongly recommended that their funding is continued and that ideally it is extended on a longer term basis.

8.6 It was agreed by all of the non-Circle professionals interviewed that women with children present different needs to other prisoners as they are emotionally and practically burdened by not being able to be there for their families. It was agreed that until now, no other service has worked the way that Circle has to help keep families connected and supported. Prison personnel felt strongly that it was time to question which services are funded and assign resources based on the evidence of what works. Prison personnel appreciated that unlike many other services Circle is evaluated and therefore able to provide evidence that they make a difference as well as being a service that women and their families appreciate. Two prison personnel specifically pointed out that voluntary throughcare provided by social work services does not offer the same level of support and that women were weary of approaching them. They suggested that the funding allocated to voluntary throughcare should be re-allocated to Circle. Although there is no published figure available for the uptake of voluntary throughcare it is said to be 'low' (Hinds, 2012), lending increased merit to this suggestion.

8.7 Circle's service is successfully working to help women change their lives. Circle is playing a key role in supporting women to stop their offending and as a result they are helping families (and the wider society) look to a better future. While it is impossible in reality to put a figure on what this service could actually be saving the criminal justice system, future youth justice system, health services, police and other organisations as a result of their intervention, the savings should not be overlooked or underestimated.

8.8 As highlighted in previous reports Circle helps to fill gaps in service provision, such as helping women connect with mental health support in the community and ascertaining information about their children. Although this shows the good work that Circle is doing, it also suggests that other services could be doing more. Workers have discussed the stigma the women face from professionals and that frankly they are treated as 'unworthy' of support. It is therefore recommended that this attitude should be raised with services where it is noted in order to inspire a cultural change in working with women who have offended.

8.9 This stage of the evaluation builds on past findings to show that this is a service that women and their families continue to want to engage with and that there are significant benefits to working with the whole family (Hutton and Nugent, 2011). Circle has secured both a high engagement rate following release from prison and a low rate of return to prison, which denotes a harder measure of its success as well as an impact on 'soft' measures such as hope and self-esteem. The service's success is largely based on the relationships established between the clients and the workers and it is recommended that the service continues to monitor caseloads so that quality relationships can continue to be fostered.

8.10 Circle continues to provide needed support to the women and their families. Based on these findings and those of the previous evaluation it is reasserted that this service could usefully be extended throughout Scotland. As resources are restricted it is helpful to note that prison personnel advised that the areas of Aberdeenshire and Tayside are where a growing number of women are returning to with limited support and therefore this should be given special consideration. In addition, looking to the future it could be said that the family support offered by Circle could provide a valuable contribution towards reducing the inter-generational cycle of offending and poor outcomes for the children of offenders.

8.11 In conclusion, this evaluation shows that Circle works well as a support for those leaving prison. It also has the potential to be used to support those serving community sentences or as a diversion from prosecution.

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