

# scottish justice matters

# POLICING

Reflections on developments and  
changes to policing in Scotland





# “THE BENEFIT SANCTIONS ARE BRUTAL”

**Maura Daly**, director of operations and **Liz Dahl**, CEO of Circle interviewed by **Mary Munro**

## **MM: Can you tell me something about Circle?**

**LD:** Circle was originally part of the Family Service Unit across the UK which was itself set up during the war to help bombed out families. When I came here in 1996 our work was focusing on hard to reach families and especially those affected by drug and alcohol issues. We work with families who statutory services find hard to reach and difficult to engage.

Circle started as a separate organisation in Scotland in 2006 when the original FSU across the UK disbanded. We are based here in Pilton and offer services across Central Scotland

**MD:** Like everyone else, the parents that we work with want the best for their children, and we support them to achieve this. We get very good engagement overall even with families who do not engage with statutory services. We work with kinship carers as well.

We do old fashioned social work, the preventative case work that statutory social work doesn't have the time or capacity to do. Similarly we can provide support in a way that social worker in criminal justice cannot because of the demands on their time to produce court reports. When we have social work students here they like the experience of doing this type of hands on, helpful social work.

**LD:** Our approach is very solution focused. The resilience of our families is amazing: they have had to endure a lot in their lives more than you or I can imagine putting up with, but remarkably are able to find solutions and focus on what is going well. We can work with them together through their hopes for the children.

**MD:** There's a lot of shame though and stigmatising. The children can feel this especially at school and many of the families are in any case not comfortable about school. Mums and Dads have often had bad experiences themselves in relation to education, so one of the things we try to do is to break through that, and offer support in their working with the school for the sake of the children.

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## Can you tell me about your work with parents who are offenders?

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**MD:** First of all we don't talk about offenders, we talk about Mums and Dads. It is important to respect people's roles as parents rather than have them defined in other ways.

Our work in prisons really got going following a piece of research I was involved with in Cornton Vale in 2006. I found that there was very little support for Mums in prison and help on their release, so that's when we started Circle's work there.

**LD:** Because that was going so well, we were invited to also start projects working with Dads in other prisons, in HMP Addiewell we have a project that identifies and supports fathers from the Lothians and Lanarkshire. We work with them and their families in prison and then on their release, in the community.

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## So how does the criminal justice system impact on the families that you work with?

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**LD:** Being sent to prison can be a disaster for families. It can result in losing a house, losing a job, losing contact with your children. Many of the children in the families that we work with have to be looked after by other members of the family or are taken into care. Sometimes that happens even for short stays in prison on remand and we know that many of the people who are remanded never actually get a prison sentence. Meanwhile the damage has been done. We believe Child Impact Assessments should be done a point of arrest and then at sentencing to reduce the impact of parental imprisonment on children.

**MD:** Actually at the moment it's also benefit sanctions that are causing a lot of problems. The benefit sanctions are brutal. We're seeing an increase in desperate poverty and hunger and major inequalities. We're seeing families dependent on food banks to eat. We're also seeing a big rise in obesity caused by malnutrition. There was one father we work with who was detained in a police station and then released without charge, but he'd missed reporting to the Jobcentre Plus, and even though the police gave him written evidence to say that he couldn't attend, he was sanctioned.

**LD:** Another mother we work with couldn't attend because she was in labour but still got sanctioned.

**MD:** If a fine is imposed as a sentence people are unable to pay them and usually end up in prison for non-payment of fine.

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## Can you tell me a little more about your services in criminal justice?

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**LD:** We have 11 staff working in our FABI (Families Affected by Imprisonment) team at the moment. As we said, we originally got started working in Cornton Vale in 2008 and that work has been since been evaluated reviewing the first four years of the project (Hutton and Nugent, 2013). What that said was that we were offering a unique service and one that appeared to result in fewer custodial sentences, and also health improvements. Many of the women in the study had no contact in prison with their children because of a variety of reasons such as financial and transport problems, poor relationships with their family and the involvement of the statutory services. Although many of the women we worked with had a long history of offending, it looks as if the sooner they engage with Circle in custody the better the outcome even though all of them, have complex and multiple needs from mental health to debt.

It's important to work with people on an emotional level as well as the practical and also to talk about endings. We make a point about meeting people at the gate to make sure that they get support at this absolutely critical time in dealing with all the essential appointments and arrangements. Otherwise the system makes it very difficult for people as soon as they are released. The key to our work is about building relationships both before and after release, so this makes sense.

**MD:** In 2013 we were awarded a share of funding through the Shine Public Social Partnership (PSP) for women offenders and also for the New Routes PSP for prolific male offenders, specifically to work with mums and dads in prison who were returning to areas in which we had services. Circle brings something very different to the PSPs because we are the only organisation that works with the whole family. All the literature on desistance says we have to repair existing bonds, and families have a significant impact on helping offenders desist from offending. That in essence is the Whole Systems Approach.

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## Given that you work with many mums who have been in prison, what's your view about the current ideas from the SPS about how the women's custodial estate should be organised?

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**LD:** We were pleased that the decision was taken not to go ahead with the large institution at HMP Inverclyde but we're disappointed that the SPS want to provide for even more places in prison for women than we have at the moment.

Although there will be a need for a small central unit, we think that the suggested 100 places is too large. Also we're not clear about the point of the smaller units in the 'community'. There should be fewer women being sent to prison in the first place. It would be good if voluntary sector agencies such as Circle could be funded consistently to make that happen.

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Hutton L and Nugent B (2013) *Circle's Families Affected by Imprisonment (FABI) Project: throughcare for female offenders. A report on outcomes in relation to the*

*Four year service evaluation (2008-2012)*. Available from the Circle web site: [www.circle.scot](http://www.circle.scot)

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Further reading in this issue: Nancy Loucks on *Imprisoning mothers: the impact on children and families* on page 29

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