

# Cross-Party Group on Women, Families and Justice

Tuesday 10 September 2024 6-7.30pm (Zoom meeting)

## Minute

**Chair: Rona Mackay MSP**

## Attended

### MSPs

Rona Mackay	MSP
Collette Stevenson	MSP
Audrey Nicoll	MSP

## Non-MSP Group Members and Other Attendees

Andrew Muir	
Anne Pinkman	
Aoife Fisher	Stirling University
Cameron Smith	Sacro
Eilidh Smith	
Ellen Cowan	Salvesen Mindroom Centre
Emma Mitchell	Midlothian Justice Service
Euan Lowe	Families Outside
Janice Wilson	Soroptimist
Julia Swann	CYCJ
Karen Armstrong	Families Outside
Karen Baxter	Community Justice Glasgow
Kathleen Ramsay	Fife College, SPS
Kerry Knox	Families Outside
Laura McArthur	SPS
Louise Adams	Families Outside
Morgan Dillon	Families Outside
Nancy Loucks	Families Outside
Rebecca Mason	The Young Women's Movement
Rose McConnachie	Community Justice Scotland
Sarah Rogers	Families Outside
Shumela Ahmed	Resilience Learning Partnership
Stephen Sandham	HMIPS
Toni Groundwater	Families Outside

## Agenda Item 1

Apologies	
Elaine Stalker	Families Outside
Georgina Lyttle	Circle
Kate Philbrick	

## Agenda item 2

AGM of CPG on Women, Families and Justice

- Appointment of Convener – Rona Mackay, MSP proposed by Anne Pinkman and seconded by Collette Stevenson, MSP.
- Appointment of Vice Convener – Collette Stevenson, MSP proposed by Rona Mackay, MSP and seconded by Kathleen Ramsay
- Appointment of Secretariat – Families Outside proposed by Rona Mackay, MSP and seconded by Audrey Nicoll, MSP.

## Agenda item 3

Minutes of previous meeting of CPG Women, Families & Justice 5 March 2024

- Approval of minutes – proposed by Kathleen Ramsay and seconded by Audrey Nicoll, MSP.

## Agenda item 4

Travel to Scottish Prisons – contributions from Toni Groundwater, Families Outside and Cameron Smith, Sacro followed by discussion.

Toni introduced the recent 'No Easy Journey' report by Families Outside which illustrated the barriers experienced by families travelling to Scottish prisons. Setting the issue of travel within the context of child poverty, Toni noted the clear commitments by the Scottish Government to tackling child poverty and noted that previous research from Families Outside, 'Paying the Price', demonstrated the role of the justice system in creating, sustaining and deepening poverty amongst children and families. The issue of travel should be looked at from a child poverty angle given that most of the people supported by Families Outside are women, many of whom have children. The 'Paying the Price' research showed that the burden of supporting someone in prison falls disproportionately to women – 2/3 of the research were participants caring for children – and 96% of them were living in absolute poverty before taking account of costs associated with visiting prison.

Toni further highlighted that families affected by imprisonment are recognised across a range of policy commitments including SNAP2, the Vision for Justice, and various commitments and policies from the Scottish Prison Service. Families are recognised as a group whose rights are most at risk. There is a fruitful landscape in terms of policy but the reality is different. The costs associated with imprisonment are severely damaging for families and there is a need to pay to attention to how this issue is falling through gaps in the policy landscape.

Toni highlighted key issues facing families in relation to travel including:

- The average monthly cost to families for travel was £70 during remand and £77 during sentence.
- Over ½ were supporting someone who was not in their local prison.
- For some the costs meant visiting wasn't an option. Others are accumulating credit card debt and finding themselves unable to pay other bills to cover the costs of visiting.
- Public travel options to prisons are lacking and local travel facilities do not effectively and fairly service all prisons. For example, it's not profitable to run a bus service to a prison meaning many families can't get there unless they can afford a taxi or a get a lift.
- Visits times are often not coordinated effectively to consider local travel options.

- The Help With Prison Visits Scheme (the only financial support specifically for families affected by imprisonment) is failing many who need it and doesn't reach all that do, leaving families out of pocket. There have been some improvements recently, including an increase in the mileage allowance from 13p to 20p per mile, but there are still real issues with people accessing the scheme.

Toni went on to highlight examples of some of the real life challenges facing families. For example, families who live further away from the prison face particular issues. One family travel 187 miles one way to visit HMP Grampian. They make the journey by car and claim the then 13p mileage allowance. This was leaving them £26.18 out of pocket for each journey. Toni highlighted that is a significant amount of money for families who are eligible for the Help with Prison Visits Scheme – they are already receiving other benefits and already struggling financially. In terms of geographical issues, Toni explained that people are making huge journeys to visit, particularly those travelling from the islands. Toni highlighted one such family who have to make a 560 mile trip involving overnights stays to visit. In terms of logistics, Toni noted this was the biggest issue highlighted by families and explained that the time it is taking families to visit is being increasingly difficult and unobtainable, with one family's journey experience taking 11 hours for a 30 minute visit. Families Outside is calling for Family Impact Assessments to be carried out to consider what is the impact on families when a person is placed in particular prison and what supports can be put in place.

Toni raised the question of who is responsible for the issue of travel, noting that many of the issues have been largely ignored and it is unclear who is responsible for some of the gaps. Toni highlighted that Families Outside, along with 17 partners, wrote to the Cabinet Secretaries for Justice and Home Affairs, Transport, and Social Justice to highlight that this issue is falling through the policy gaps and to make a plea for collaborative discussions to create solutions to ensure families are adequately supported.

Toni drew attention to a number of areas of recent good practice and progress. For example, SPS has recently committed to putting in place an island proofing policy to support those families travelling from the islands. SPS has also increased the mileage allowance under the Help with Prison Visits Scheme from 13p to 20p.

In terms of recommendations, Toni explained that the travel report makes 14 recommendations for the Scottish Government, SPS, local authorities, and Community Justice Partnerships noting that there are many clear actions that could be taken immediately, including for example, adding the issue of travel to the agenda of CJPs, embedding the use of Family Impact Assessments across the justice system, and expanding the Sacro travel service if funded adequately.

Toni concluded with a reminder of how much this issue is affecting families on the ground stating that many families are choosing between visiting and eating. Toni shared the following words from a family member being supported by Families Outside: "It costs a fortune visiting. I sometimes just pretend to the kids that I'm not hungry and I go without so they can have because I can't afford to do it all. But I know the weans need to see their dad so I just do whatever it takes."

Cameron's presentation followed and opened with a brief introduction to the work of Sacro and the travel service. Cameron noted that at its core the travel service is about designing a service informed by people. Any opportunity to obtain feedback from people around what the service is achieving and if it is achieving the right thing will be taken. Recent feedback has been that the travel service makes an impact.

Cameron highlighted that the travel service is Sacro's longest standing service and provided an overview of the service model:

- The service is currently delivered by 10 volunteer drivers
- Funding is limited to supporting those with an Edinburgh postcode although there is some flexibility around this thanks to funder, City of Edinburgh Council, for example the service has managed to make things work for enquiries received from Fife, the Borders or from the West, if people can get themselves to a place where the service can have a driver pick them up.
- There is one part-time coordinator working 18.75 hours per week.
- City of Edinburgh Council currently fund the service up until March 2026.

In terms of what the service looks like, Cameron explained that the service aims to be:

- Responsive – the service can turn an enquiry into action in a short space of time.
- Flexible – the service can accommodate a variety of people with a range of needs, for example, children visiting and associated equipment such as car seats and prams, people with mobility challenges, people requiring equipment such as oxygen tanks or other aids. The service also accommodates evening and weekend visits.
- Person-centred – the service picks people up from directly from their front door and drops them back off after the visit.
- Trauma-informed – the service is provided by volunteers drivers who are extremely experienced in the justice landscape. The individual using the service can speak with the driver about the visit experience. The service is looking to create that emotional support and often drivers take and make onward referrals through the service borne out of the conversations that take place.

Cameron provided details of data relating to the service for 2023/24 highlighting the following information:

- The service provided 119 trips to a range of different prisons for 184 people
- Nearly 5,500 miles had been accumulated by drivers over the course of all trips
- Average age of adult passengers was 48 years old
- 45% of passengers were partners of person in prison
- 48% of visits included children as passengers
- Average of children visiting was 8 years old
- A total of 29 children travelled with a parent or grandparent
- There was a notable gap in those using the service for the ages of 13-25 years.

Cameron explained that the cornerstones of the service are a clear referral pathway, the provision of direct support and guidance from the coordinator, and strong and effective links with partners. Cameron noted that the service very often makes onward referrals, foodbanks are a frequent referral, and that the service works to take the next step in providing emotional and practical support where possible.

Cameron considered the main challenges and opportunities facing the travel service. He noted that the funding from City of Edinburgh Council provides some sustainability to the service but explained that the service receives only the 13p per mile through the Help with Prison Visits Scheme that eligible families would receive but pays its drivers 45p per mile meaning that the service operates at a deficit. For 23/24 this worked out as about a £9,000 deficit. The Sacro board and wider organisation recognise the value and impact of the travel service and so are happy to absorb that deficit but it would be great to see the scheme mileage allowance increase further. In terms of the volunteer model, Cameron explained this can fluctuate and post-covid was a difficult period but the service has now built back to a

strong position. The requirement to have an Edinburgh postcode is a further constraint on the service and Sacro would like to see expansion of the service into other local areas. Cameron noted that the service is highly replicable and Sacro are actively exploring expansion of the service.

Cameron concluded by highlighting a real life example of a family being supported the travel service. A woman living within 10 miles of the prison in which her husband is placed was struggling to visit. She has four children – one with a diagnosis of Autism and another currently undergoing an assessment for Autism. The children's support needs mean that public transport is not an option as it causes them considerable distress. The woman initially approached the Help with Prison Visits Scheme but support was declined as Child Disability Payment took her over qualifying threshold. She approached Sacro for support to appeal the decision and seek assistance with travel (still awaiting response to appeal submitted April 2023). It was agreed with City of Edinburgh Council that Sacro could offer support in this instance and absorb cost and the family are currently accessing the service.

Discussion points raised:

Stephen Sandham noted that the presentations echoed with what HMIPS find. There are real issues with visit timetables not being conducive to family visits. For example, HMP Dumfries do not have any evening visits that would enable children to visit during the week, and the weekend visits are at a time that is very difficult for people travelling from far away. The recent inspection at HMP Grampian also found similar issues to those raised in the presentations – it is very difficult to get there, even from Aberdeen because of lack of public transport. Stephen highlighted that what we need is sustainable solutions and noted concern around this issue in relation to the example of HMP Grampian where the HMIPS annual report had praised the prison for a new initiative involving a minibus transporting visitors from and to Aberdeen, only to find during the subsequent inspection a couple of months later that the initiative had folded due to lack of funding. Stephen also noted that HMIPS had been informed that the Scottish Government and SPS were working together with local authorities to find solutions to this issue and would be interested to know where these discussions had progressed to.

Toni noted that Families Outside has formed a travel action group but is also working with the Scottish Government who has formed its travel action group. The group involves prison policy colleagues and Toni explained that this was one of the challenges in addressing the issue as the issue expands beyond the justice directorate.

Shumela Ahmed stated that this is a political issue and it is surprising that it is still such an issue for families considering the amount of money that is being spent by government on travel, including active travel and trying to encourage people to use public transport. Shumela highlighted that in Clackmannanshire there is only one train station that is nowhere near the local prison. She noted that this is also a community issue and a public health issue – people should be able to travel freely and access to good travel is part of good health. Shumela noted it is difficult to understand if the argument comes down to money given that so much is being spent in other policy areas trying to encourage people to use public transport. The issue is absolutely a cross-policy issue.

Collette Stevenson, MSP, expressed interest in finding out more about the case study highlighted by Cameron where Child Disability Payment prevented a woman from receiving support from the Help with Prison Visits Scheme. Collette also encouraged members to get involved in the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's post-legislative scrutiny of the Child Poverty Act. Collette is Convener for the Committee.

Audrey Nicoll, MSP, noted she was keen to understand evidence around the importance of face-to-face contact as opposed to remote contact. She also said she was keen to find out about any evidence that supports understanding of what the uptake might be for any comprehensive transport service that was made available to families.

Nancy Loucks highlighted that the 'No Easy Journey' report was the fourth report by Families Outside about travel and noted it was very frustrating that the reports reiterated the same arguments. Nancy noted that in terms of responsibility for travel, the issue keeps getting knocked back into the justice remit. She highlighted that Families Outside had sent its previous travel report to the transport directorate who responded that this was a justice issue. Nancy questioned why this is a justice issue and not a transport issue? This is stigmatising and suggests if you're travelling to a prison then it's different – this is neither appropriate nor fair. The issue is a cross-portfolio issue. Nancy noted that in relation to travel and transport to hospitals, the NHS has paid staff to manage this issue – it would be helpful to understand the equivalence there. In response to Audrey's question about in-person vs remote contact, Nancy highlighted there is a huge amount of research which shows the importance of in-person contact, particularly in relation to young children. The suspension of in-person visits during Covid showed the damage to children. Families Outside supported families where children were self-harming and experiencing suicidal thoughts because of the distress of not having contact and not understanding why. Nancy explained that the USA is seeing problems with this where much visiting is mandatory remote contact. Nancy also noted that the 2018 Council of Europe Recommendations for Children with Imprisoned Parents provides that remote contact should be in addition to in-person contact and not a replacement.

Laura McArthur noted in relation to Audrey's question that SPS collates data on in-person and virtual visits across all establishments. She also explained that the mileage uplift for the Help with Prison Visits Scheme came into effect in June and that the island work had been delayed due to digital issues but SPS were pushing to move this forward and that individuals in custody from the islands would be notified when changes came into effect in addition to wider comms being used to raise awareness of the changes.

## Agenda item 5

Establishment of National Women's Justice Network - Emma Mitchell of Midlothian Justice Service introduced the National Women's Justice Network. Emma explained that the network came into being after Emma came into post at Midlothian Council as team leader at the Spring service (a service located within justice social work to support women in contact with the justice system) and was considering how the service could provide the best service possible within the limited resources available. Emma quickly realised this issue was not unique to Midlothian – some local authorities don't have a women specific service and others are doing wonderful work with lots of goodwill from partner agencies – and having a national network to be able to share and develop good practice, to be able to advocate for the issues women are facing to the Scottish Government would be very useful. With colleagues from Community Justice Scotland, Emma has worked to develop a small network of practitioners. The initial meeting was held in May and it was agreed to name the network the National Women's Justice Network. Currently the network is aimed at membership of social work managers and managers of justice services within Scotland that support women. The focus of the initial meeting was trauma informed practice. Currently the network is working with Community Justice Scotland to map out what services are available to women in contact with the justice system across Scotland. The network is initially planning on meeting twice a year. Emma noted that she is keen to engage with the CPG to make connections and get

suggestions for the work of the network. Emma asked for anyone who might be interested in connecting or speaking at a network meeting to get in touch with her.

Kerry Knox highlighted that Families Outside is working with partners in relation to Child Impact Assessments where children have a family member in the justice system. The original research was based on having a mother in the justice system. Kerry would be keen to connect with Emma to look at collaborations.

Shumela Ahmed noted that the Resilience Learning Partnership is working with the Chief Social Work Office in relation to women in the justice system and would also be keen to link in with Emma.

## **Agenda item 6** Agency updates

Nancy Loucks highlighted a case where a mother with two young children with additional support needs was told to expect a prison sentence and came to Families Outside looking for support and to see how she could make sure the children's voices were heard in relation to sentencing. Child Impact Assessments and information was sent to her lawyers but the judge said that the children's voices were not relevant and a custodial sentence was going to be imposed. This occurred a week or so after commencement of the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 and flagged a clear need for greater awareness amongst the adult criminal justice system about implications of UNCRC incorporation. Families Outside has secured funding from The Promise to develop briefings / training for the judiciary and lawyers.

Stephen Sandham updated that HMIPS has published inspection reports for HMP Stirling and the two community custody units. He highlighted that overall the reports were very positive despite media coverage focusing on the negative aspects of the reports.

**Agenda item 7** AOB - It was noted that the next meeting of the CPG would be held in December with the date still to be confirmed.