

The Re-Unite  
South London  
Project

# THE WAY AHEAD

AN  
EVALUATION  
OF  
THE  
FIRST  
TWO  
YEARS



# Foreword

## Baroness Jean Corston

“ In 2007 I carried out a review<sup>1</sup> of the needs and difficulties of women in the criminal justice system. One of the key issues I identified was the need for more supported accommodation for women leaving prison, to help break the cycle of repeat offending and custody, and to help them to resume family life with their children.

I was delighted that in the same year, Commonweal Housing and Housing for Women, with the support of the specialist charity Women in Prison, set up Re-Unite South London as a demonstration project to meet this need by providing housing with support for this vulnerable group of women and their children.

Early successes for Re-Unite South London are identified in an evaluation<sup>2</sup> of the first two years of the project by the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge, which is reported in this document. It found that the mothers and their children were on the whole very positive about the project, which has also been applauded by the probation services and others.

It gives families a secure base on which to build their future, and it distances them from the violence that scarred their lives. It helps them access specialist support, such as counselling, mentoring, substance misuse and mental health services. The women are helped to prepare for their move on to permanent housing with advice on budgeting, benefits, debt management, healthy eating and other life skills.

Most importantly Re-Unite South London is showing that housing with support can make a fundamental difference to the lives of women leaving prison and to the security, education and life-chances of their children, with early indications showing a reduced risk of re-offending, which is hugely important for the women and their children. Society at large benefits, both in human and financial terms. ”

<sup>1</sup> A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the prison system [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/corston-report/](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/corston-report/)

<sup>2</sup> The Re-Unite Project, Early Development Phase, Evaluation Report, [www.commonwealhousing.org.uk](http://www.commonwealhousing.org.uk)



# Re-Unite South London: The project and the principles

Re-Unite South London was set up in response to the Corston Report as a demonstration project. It provides homes with support for 11 women and their children in houses bought by Commonweal Housing in South London and managed by Housing for Women. Where possible the houses have been bought in clusters to allow the women to provide mutual support. Women in Prison supplied support services until December 2009 when Housing for Women took on the task, bringing all the management and support services under one roof. The project seeks to establish and achieve clear goals and positive outcomes for mothers and children. It tests the hypothesis that appropriate accommodation and support at the point of release from prison can ensure positive results for the families and for wider society.

As a first step, it provides in-prison support to identify potential service users at an early stage and provide advice on the nature and requirements of the project. Two services are offered:

- A Mothers' Programme that provides small flats or studios for women leaving prison with more challenging problems to allow them to work with support agencies to get them to a stage where they may be eligible for the return of their children to their care.
- The Mothers' and Children's Programme that provides family housing on the point of release for women leaving prison to reunite them swiftly with their children. Family support is provided to enable the successful reunion of the mother and children and development of the family.

This report is a summary of the future direction of the project and changes made as a result of the findings of the evaluation of the first two years of the pilot Re-Unite project, which was carried out by Dr Loraine Gelsthorpe and Dr Gilly Sharpe, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, between October 2007 and September 2009. It provides an outline for replication of the Re-Unite model across the country and contains the findings and main recommendations of the evaluation team. Many of the recommendations from Drs. Gelsthorpe and Sharpe (see pages 6 - 8) have been adopted by Commonweal Housing and Housing for Women. These are being implemented by the newly constituted Re-Unite South London as the partnership vehicle taking the findings from the pilot phase forward.

Statistical information will be provided twice a year for five years to the Institute of Criminology to enable data to be available from the Re-Unite approach for comparison with other provision and for use generally in future research around the needs of women and especially mothers in the criminal justice system.

Commonweal housing is keen to talk to housing associations and other service providers about setting up new Re-Unite projects in other parts of the country.

# Re-Unite South London's response to the evaluation's recommendations: A blueprint for the future

- 1 The partnership arrangements have been simplified.** Since January 2010, only two parties are involved in the venture, Commonweal housing as sponsor and Housing for Women as the housing manager and support provider. The close alignment of housing management and support provision ensures close co-ordination. Furthermore, Housing for Women, as a housing association with a clear understanding of social housing in London, is well placed to help service users move on to permanent housing. A project worker for this next phase of the project began work in January 2010.
- 2 New publicity material** has been produced and outreach work has started in prisons to encourage new referrals.
- 3 Increased liaison with women before their release helps them consider school options for the children.** Some women may prefer to keep children in existing schools, even if this means greater travelling from their Re-Unite home. At all times the final decision rests with the mother and the family.
- 4 Acknowledging that a two-year resettlement programme may be too long, a new policy of a one-year target for 'move on'** (flexible for individual circumstances) has been established. Extra efforts will be made to ensure service users understand the temporary nature of the Re-Unite housing.
- 5 The long-term housing needs of service users are now addressed as soon as they begin on the Re-Unite project.** At the same time work begins with individual women on managing rent payments, budgeting and negotiating with mainstream agencies (including schools) in preparation for a 'move-on'.
- 6 Six monthly tenants' forums** are held to hear the views of the women and, where possible, their children, to help shape future service delivery.
- 7 Consideration is being given to establishing a separate Children's Forum** and exploring other methods of securing feedback from the children in the project.
- 8 Exit questionnaires** have been introduced for women moving on from the project.
- 9 Contact is maintained for up to a year with families moving on.** This helps them settle in their new tenancies and complements any mainstream tenancy sustainment work by their new landlords. Great care is taken to protect their privacy and desire to build new lives.
- 10 The tailoring of the Re-Unite model for areas of less intense housing demand** will be tested with the Asha Women's Centre in Worcester working with Nexus Housing Association.
- 11 Re-Unite Worcester will also test an alternative model of more support service delivery via the one stop shop Women's Centre.**

## Mothers in prison: the background

Between June 1995 and June 2005, the number of women in prison rose by 126 per cent, according to the Colston Report. By June 2009 their number stood at 4,242, of whom 60 per cent were mothers – many of them lone parents.

A Home Office study of 1,766 women prisoners revealed that 61 per cent had children under 18 years old and 33 per cent had children under 5 living with them at the time they were imprisoned.

The small number of women's prisons means women are often held a long way from their families, which makes visiting difficult and expensive. In addition, some women prefer not to put their children through the experience of visiting them in prison.

As the study points out, children are often the forgotten victims of their mothers' imprisonment. Prisoners' children are twice as likely to develop anti-social behaviour and experience mental health problems as children whose parents have never been



imprisoned, and they are more likely to fail at school and have trouble finding a job.

According to research by Nacro, 38 per cent of women lose their homes when they are imprisoned. Their children have to move and, perhaps, change schools leading to the disruption of their education and friendships. The last government has committed funding to provide additional services in the community for women offenders who are not a risk to the public and for women at risk of offending. However, no special measures have been introduced to meet women's post-prison housing needs.

## Case study 1

# Vicky's story

Vicky and her children have just collected the keys to a new permanent home after a year in a Re-Unite South London property. The three bedroom flat is close to where the family live now – so her young children can stay at the local primary school where they have settled in really well over the last year.

Vicky feels that things have really fallen in to place for her, thanks to the service offered by Re-Unite and is looking forward to returning to work once the children are settled in their new home. But on her release from prison things did not look so bright.

When Vicky left prison on tag after almost three months inside she moved back home to her ex-partner and the children. The children had stayed with their grandparents while she was away but had visited her regularly.

Vicky returned home to be with her children. Returning to the family home for many women is the only option; a permanent address is a requirement of release on tag and a necessity to be reunited with children. In a week she knew it was a mistake, "It was impossible living with my ex-partner, he made life really hard for me".

She asked for help from the staff at the prison, who made the referral to Re-Unite. Vicky planned the move in secret, even limiting contact with her mum, to avoid arousing the suspicion of her ex-partner. Within a month everything was ready. She left to take the children to school as normal but went with a suitcase and took them to the station instead.

"I was so desperate. If Re-Unite hadn't helped me I don't know what I would have done. I was really worried on a daily basis. I dread to think what would have happened. But the thought of being in a hostel with the children was too much; I think it would have been devastating for them. They would have suffered."

The wider package of support offered by Re-Unite has been really valuable. "It was hard for the kids at first, on the day we left they thought they were going to school. They were upset but they've coped really well. I've had the support I needed at the right time.

The trips for kids were brilliant last summer. It was so good for them. "A year later it's just brilliant, everything has fallen into place, the kids love the new school and they are really happy that they won't have to leave it when we move on. Things are really looking up – the next step for me is getting a job."

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## The evaluation

The aims of the evaluation were to:

- Identify the project's benefits for mothers
- Identify any benefits for the children
- Measure cost savings and benefits to society
- Identify lessons for housing providers
- Contribute to a change in public policy
- Establish a model for the viable replication of the Re-Unite project.

The evaluation involved a detailed review of processes and procedures together with a series of regular interviews with 11 of the 12 women accepted onto the project (the twelfth woman having been recalled to prison early on), their children, Re-Unite South London project workers, probation officers and other service providers. Special attention was paid to how far settled housing and the provision of other support helps children overcome the trauma of parent-child separation, stigma and social and economic difficulties.

“ The process evaluation of this demonstration project has been extremely valuable. It provides an important basis for the replication of the idea of a housing and support package for women and their children in other areas. We concluded that the project as an idea is feasible, but we also pointed to the need for a number of organisational, implementation and delivery changes, while holding true to the original idea of providing appropriate housing and support. We note that these have been taken on board. ”

*Dr Loraine Gelsthorpe  
Institute of Criminology Cambridge University*

# Key findings from the evaluation

- 1 Service users and their children benefited from the provision of housing and support.** All the women interviewed were generally happy with their accommodation. Most said they would have been living in a hostel or other temporary accommodation without the Re-Unite project. Several others would have stayed with relatives in cramped conditions.

As one woman said: "If it weren't for them, I think to myself, where would I be?" The project's benefits were confirmed by outside agencies, particularly the probation service. "The Re-Unite project is a very good idea," said one probation officer. "I think it is really important for women who have been offending to get this support when they come out of prison."
- 2 The properties and residential areas were well chosen.** The clustering of properties clearly carried benefits for some of the service users who made informal contact with each other.
- 3 The assessment criteria for the selection of service users were clear.** The mothers did not fit the national profile of female offenders, but were largely in the range of the target group. Moreover, most had a reasonable prospect of being reunited with their children, especially since the children were residing with other family members rather than being in local authority care.
- 4 The personal support was highly valued.** Service users had varying degrees of support from families and friends – very little in some cases. All had been victims of domestic violence, usually from the fathers of their children, and many had mental health difficulties, most commonly depression.

Most had relocated within London to their Re-Unite home to distance themselves from malign influences and valued the supportive and friendly professional advice they received on such issues as budgeting, benefits, debt management and healthy eating. The families were also helped to access specialist support, such as counselling, mentoring, substance misuse and mental health services.
- 5 The children interviewed were extremely positive about Re-Unite.** They particularly liked the size of their new homes and the Re-Unite activities and outings, which included family trips to London Zoo and Brighton. All the children had been obliged to move house on the imprisonment of their mothers. Most had witnessed the domestic violence against their mothers.

Mothers reported that their children's behaviour had improved while they were on the Re-Unite project and that the referral of their children by key workers to specialist support services had been very helpful.

- 6 Most of the children had to change schools when their mother relocated to the Re-Unite project.** Anxiety about having to move again – perhaps to a new area – after two years, when their time on the project had ended, meant that some children had difficulties settling at school. Those applying to new schools or colleges had to do so without knowing where they would be living.
- 7 In terms of re-offending, there were no reconvictions that came to light during the evaluation period.** However, one service user was recalled to prison and another had been charged with further offences.
- 8 The study makes a powerful business case for the Re-Unite project.** Re-Unite's annual personal care costs of £14,825 a client, it says, compare well with New Economic Foundation's estimate of the annual cost of female prisoner places (excluding building costs) of £41,084 for local prisons and £32,529 for closed prisons.
- 9 Several other spending areas where savings can be claimed for the Re-Unite project are identified (including savings relating to crimes of fraud, forgery and drug trafficking which are very costly to the tax payer).** The cost benefits of the Re-Unite project to society are thus suggested as being £86,084 per service user over two years or £93,646 per service user over ten years. These figures are both impressive and persuasive of the overall benefit of the Re-Unite project.



# Main recommendations

- 1** The evaluation supports the principle underpinning the concept of Re-Unite and, based on evidence of demand also it recommends continuation of the project.
- 2** While the project has been of major benefit to the service users, serious thought should be given to limiting the project, or at least the provision of accommodation, to one year (with provision for exceptions to be made where appropriate).
- 3** Continuity of care is of paramount importance. Where required, support should be maintained after service users have moved on to more permanent accommodation, to minimise anxiety about 'moving on' and to assist 'resettlement' this second time around.
- 4** The probation service should be sent information about the Re-Unite Project as a matter of routine and whenever a new service user takes up the offer of a place on the project. This would help to ensure a flow of referrals from probation and an appropriate flow of information.
- 5** To obtain accurate information on risk of harm and risk of re-offending probation officers should be included in the assessment process and asked to provide a copy of Offender Assessment System (OASys) data, which could be used as a baseline against which to measure progress.
- 6** Protocols should be revisited to make clear that information must be sought from outside agencies (social services, probation, drugs intervention projects etc) before a prospective service user is offered a place on the project.
- 7** Systematic recording procedures should be introduced to note service users' problems and progress.
- 8** Changes in schooling for the children should be minimised by moving families into Re-Unite homes near to their children's schools where possible, and strenuous efforts should be made to re-house them close to their Re-Unite home when they move on from the project.
- 9** Mothers should be asked to access school reports for their children and to make these available to project workers and any future evaluators on a continuing basis. Such reports would help form a base line for monitoring and measuring progress. This would circumvent ethical issues regarding project workers/evaluators making direct contact with the school.
- 10** The children indicated that they greatly benefited from the activities provided by Re-Unite. Such activities should be continued. The different needs of older and younger children should be recognised.
- 11** Consideration should be given to establishing a 'children's forum' alongside the planned service users' forum set up in January 2010, to ensure that their feedback on the project is acknowledged and addressed.
- 12** Templates should be used to monitor and record children's contacts with external agencies or the mothers' contacts with such agencies on the children's behalf.
- 13** Courses completed in prison should be systematically recorded to ensure continuity in educational and vocational courses in the community.
- 14** Service users' training and employment aspirations and targets should be systematically recorded.
- 15** A new publicity campaign should be launched in prisons to ensure a steady flow of applications.
- 16** The cost benefit data should be revisited in light of follow-up data on re-offending and reconviction relating to the sample of women in the early phase of Re-Unite's development.
- 17** The evaluation revealed the need for a closer relationship between service partners and a simplified project structure. An alternative would be for the housing provider to deliver support services in-house, which would carry the greatest potential for effective service delivery. One agency would be responsible for housing management, referrals and providing support, improving understanding and communication. It would also ensure the speedy re-use of the Re-Unite homes when they become empty.
- 18** Alternative models of delivery were considered where service users might move into more permanent housing straight after release from prison. However, in the London area, where housing is at a premium and housing waiting lists long, this was considered unrealistic.
- 19** The practice of clustering houses should continue, although service users might usefully give feedback on what matters most to them in terms of where they live. It could be that contact with women in other supportive settings (a women's resources centre, for example) is as important as being near other Re-Unite service users.
- 20** Re-Unite should also offer housing and support to mothers who have already left prison and are living with their children in inadequate housing without support.
- 21** Service users could be asked to complete an exit survey when they move on to measure the impact of the project on their lives and the lives of their children. A six-month or one-year follow-up after support has ended is proposed to gather more information and assess the longer-term impact.
- 22** This evaluation was intended as 'action research' so that adjustments could be made along the way. This has been helpful in terms of ensuring that service users' needs have been addressed in timely fashion (for instance, in relation to the need for greater home security mechanisms). It is recommended that any future evaluation continue as 'action research' to allow appropriate change along the way.
- 23** The 'action research' should be supported by a system of quarterly reports from an external evaluator or the project manager and project workers involved. A service users' forum could also make useful contributions to ongoing evaluation.

## Case study 2

# Kathleen's story

In the last two years Kathleen has started Indigo Girl, a remote secretarial/project management business, trained as a teacher and developed a social enterprise teaching IT and employment skills to other women. In 2009 she was highly commended in the ESF Personal Achiever of the Year Awards. She is also home educating her daughter and has just moved house.

These are proud achievements for any woman. For Kathleen they are the building blocks of the life she has made since release from prison in 2007 after serving 14 months. Her new house is the permanent family home after two years with Re-Unite.

While Kathleen was in prison her children lived with her mother-in-law under a legal arrangement that prevented their abusive father gaining custody. The family had been illegally evicted from their home three weeks after Kathleen started her sentence, leaving them homeless. Kathleen needed an address for release on tag - without it her imprisonment would have lasted longer, increasing the time she was separated from her children.

"Re-Unite was hugely important to me. It was a God Send. Otherwise I would have been in prison for another six or seven months. If you don't have a home, how do you get your children back? I wouldn't have got residency for the children from the court, if I didn't have Re-Unite.

"It's so hard to get housing – even when we fled domestic abuse it took seven months to get a home. When you come out of prison you need to be settled. Your relationships with your children are already fractured, without a home they could be broken forever."

The wider support offered by Re-Unite was also important. "It was scary coming out. You don't realise how institutionalised you get so quickly. I had to learn to take responsibility again. I'd spent 14 months only having to cope with myself, and being directed by other people. The first time I went to Sainsbury's, I stood in the shop and had that momentary: "Oh my Gosh! I don't know what to do."

Rebonding with the girls took around a month or so, but Kathleen had worked hard to maintain their relationship while they were separated. "It was almost like learning to be a mother again. I had to adjust to being with someone 24-7 after being basically alone, it was challenging. We skirted around, being too nice to each other. A bit like treading on eggshells. But we soon got over that. We just had to get used to each other again."

The move to a permanent home has been a real benefit. "We didn't really set down roots before because we knew we would be wrenched out. Now we are settled and relaxed, making friends, and the girls have their own rooms. The move has been good but stressful."

Kathleen's eldest daughter is about to start an animal management course at college. But the positive impact has been greatest on her 14 year-old daughter, who suffers post-traumatic stress disorder as the result of witnessing years of domestic abuse. "Three weeks after we moved here, we saw her psychologist, she couldn't believe the change in her – the confidence, the calmness. The anxiety levels have all dropped because we are finally settled."

Kathleen herself still struggles at times with depression but feels positive about life now. She believes that if you take hold of your fears they can be conquered – an ethos that forms the basis of her social enterprise to help other women.



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**Commonweal Housing** is a registered charity that creates housing projects with bespoke services for occupiers experiencing social injustice to demonstrate how these injustices can be resolved and also provide an acceptable social return on investment. The charity provides the housing, which is specifically procured for each project. Since 2007, around £3 million has been allocated for such projects.

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**Housing for Women** is a registered charity and a London-based housing association that provides affordable housing for vulnerable women in particular (including those subject to domestic violence), and also women more generally. It has more than 750 properties. It operates mainly in South-East London and West London, and works in conjunction with a range of housing associations and local authorities. The central ethos of the organisation is the empowerment of women to take charge of their own lives by providing a secure home.

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