

progressive

Community Justice Scotland  
Voluntary Throughcare and Mentoring  
Support Research – interviews with  
families  
April 2023



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# Project background



Community Justice Scotland (CJS) will take over the commissioning process of voluntary throughcare and mentoring services for short-term prisoners and those on remand in 2024.

CJS is conducting a Strategic Needs and Strengths Assessment (SNSA) to provide a foundation for the planning and delivery of these services in the future, and as part of this, wanted to conduct research into the reintegration needs and experiences of individuals who are currently or have previously served short term prison sentences or been on remand.

Progressive was commissioned to undertake research to better understand what the current services deliver, gaps in services, and to develop recommendations for improvements to service design and delivery.



Qualitative research was conducted with people serving short-term prison sentences or on remand, and with individuals receiving throughcare support in the community, alongside an online survey with professional stakeholders.

Additional research has been commissioned by CJS to explore the experiences of families and wider networks of people with experience of supporting others with reintegration, so that their perspectives could feed into the commissioning review of throughcare services funded by Scottish Government delivered by the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector.

This document reports on findings from depth interviews with family members or loved ones of individuals currently in prison serving a short-term prison sentence or on remand, or recently released from prison.

# Project objectives



## Understanding current service delivery and potential improvements

### Overall project objectives:

1. How are the current voluntary throughcare and mentoring services funded by Scottish Government delivered?
2. Who might access current voluntary throughcare and mentoring services?
3. How do people access the services?
4. What needs do those that access services experience that the services can/should address?
5. What are the strengths and challenges in current service delivery?
6. What are the opportunities for improvement?
7. What can be recommended to ensure that services are effective in meeting people's needs and achieving positive outcomes?

### Specific objectives of the families interviews:

To explore the experience of supporting a loved one currently in custody (regardless of whether or not they are receiving voluntary throughcare and mentoring (VT&M) support), and the experience of supporting a loved one who is returning to the community (regardless of whether or not they are receiving VT&M support).

# Method



- **In-depth interviews were completed with 6 participants either one-to-one or in pairs.**
- The sample comprised of people supporting a family member or partner who was currently in prison (serving a short-term sentence or on remand), or had recently been released from prison (after serving a short-term sentence or being on remand).
- Interviews were conducted via video call or phone call.
- Participants were recruited by two organisations offering support to families of individuals in prison: Families Outside and Circle.
- Anyone who expressed an interest in taking part was offered an interview. Dates and times for interviews were arranged flexibly around the convenience of participants, as was interview type (online or telephone), with one-to-one interviews conducted at participants' preference. Workers were present during two interviews at the request of participants.
- All who took part were offered a £10 supermarket voucher upon completion of the interview as payment for taking part.
- Fieldwork took place between the 16<sup>th</sup> of March and 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2023.
- Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.
- The sample included a range of experiences, including feedback from both parents of and partners of individuals in prison or reintegrating the community. It also included a mix of people supporting someone in prison or released, who was/had served a short-term sentence or been on remand, and who was/had been in prison for the first time or had been in prison before.

## Limitations of research

A small sample of 6 participants took part in research and views expressed can't be generalised beyond the sample interviewed. Findings do not aim to be representative of all families/loved ones supporting an individual in prison or reintegrating the community, and this should be borne in mind when assessing results. In particular it should be noted that:

- In order that participants be able to comment on existing support the sample was made up only of people currently engaging with services. Timings and budget constraints did not allow for those who were not receiving support to be included and there may be variation in the experiences and views of those choosing not to access, or not being aware of the availability of, support.
- It should be noted that the response to calls for participation was lower than hoped for and the sample reflects the profile of those who responded to the invitation to take part. All who volunteered to take part were female, all were supporting a male partner or child, and the sample was also weighted to people supporting someone currently in prison (4), rather than someone who had recently been released (2). As a result participants' feedback was often focussed on prison experiences (though several people were supporting someone who had been in prison before so were able to discuss previous experiences of reintegration into the community).
- There is a possibility that those that participated in the review may be more engaged with services, or have stronger views on reintegration, than those who did not want to take part. Progressive was reliant on Families Outside and Circle providing a good mix of participants. A wide range of views and experiences were captured, but the views of anyone who may have dropped out of the support have also not been captured as part of this research.





# Findings

# Supporting someone in prison

## Families feel desperate and helpless

- Among those who participated in research there was feedback that when their partner or child went into prison, they felt uninformed about what was happening, and when and how they would be able to contact their loved one.
- Some examples of positive support were described however this was seen as happening in an inconsistent way and **all participants reported some lack of support in prisons for their partner or child**. In particular they highlighted:
  - Insufficient mental health support (including reports that wait times for support were too long or that self referrals had been ignored, including for individuals with a history of serious mental health issues and/or attempted suicide)
  - Insufficient addiction support (with some advising that addiction and mental health support were refused concurrently, and concerns that drug taking was likely to increase in prisons as substances were considered very readily available)
  - Poor medical treatment (with requests for medical attention reportedly not being taken seriously by staff and difficulty securing doctors appointments).
- As a result, **high levels of anxiety were reported**, with families concerned their partner or child's needs were not being met and/or that they were at risk but feeling powerless to help them.

*They gave him a 20 second phone call later on that afternoon. Then I never heard from him for about 4 days. Which is a long time. When you've been with a man for 26 years, you've known what he's ate for breakfast, lunch, his dinner... I had my son asking 'where's daddy, where's daddy?' I couldn't answer him, I didn't know*

*He was in an accident in prison, he slipped and actually banged his head but he took half his head off near enough. For 5 days he never got to see a doctor, the nurses came down and tried to glue his head, so he'd actually got me to phone in*



# Supporting someone in prison

## There is frustration around a lack of services



- Families described their child or partner not receiving support in prison for a number of reasons:
  - Services being unavailable (this was commented on in particular by those supporting a person who was/had been on remand, with ineligibility a barrier to receiving support; but also by some serving/who had served a short-term sentence, with some comments that long wait times meant sentences could be over before help was provided)
  - Those in prison not being in a state of mind to be able to ask for help, or to be persistent about doing so if it was not immediately available (this was impacted by poor mental health, addiction issues, and in one case impaired cognitive function following an overdose)
  - Those in prison being hesitant to ask for help as they were afraid this made them look vulnerable to others in prison
  - Lack of staff in prisons, poor communication between prison staff, and/or prison staff who did not care, resulting in a poor response to needs.
- Overall this left families with the sense of a vacuum of care for their loved ones in prison. As a result **many felt they needed to take action on their behalf.**

*We were constantly emailing, phoning, phoned the prison saying 'look, he needs help here, he really needs help, something needs to be done' to hear 'oh no, we can't do it, he's on remand, we need to wait till he gets his sentence'. So eventually he did get the sentence and he was still not seen*

*These people they go for help with drugs and then they're just getting slagged in prison – it's as if it makes them look weak... he was alright before he went in there but as I say I'm scared he comes out a junkie*

# Supporting someone in prison

## Accessing support is a main focus

- Much of the support participants described as providing for their child or partner in prison was trying to obtain referrals or appointments for them, most often with mental health support staff, addiction support staff, or medical staff.
- Most reported having contacted prisons multiple times to ask for information, highlight concerns about their family member's state of mind, or to ask for support on their behalf.
- Frustration was expressed about the lack of impact this had had, with instances of **messages not being passed on reported, or of feeling 'fobbed off'**. Two participants said that their child or partner had asked them to stop calling the prison as there had been negative consequences for them as a result of participants' calls being considered a nuisance.
- Participants included one person who had gone on an advocacy course to try and find ways of communicating more effectively on behalf of their son, in the hope that knowing who to ask, and how to formulate requests, would increase his chances of accessing support.
- Families were often also providing significant financial support to their child or partner, providing money for phone calls, clothes, toiletries and food.

*I phoned the prison and I said 'listen, he needs help, he really really needs help – he's trying to stay off it and all these things, and for his mental health he needs help'. I have been feart to go to bed at night in case I got a knock at the door that he's done something to himself*

*The officer had come up and said: 'I advise you to tell your mum to stop phoning in or I'll make your life very difficult'. So what do you do then?... Don't get me wrong, some of the staff are lovely, they couldn't do more for you. But there's always that odd one or two bad apples. And that's how I think they don't want to speak up*

# Needs in prison

## Mental health and addiction support are critical



- In prison and in the approach to leaving prison, participants said **mental health and addiction support were key areas of need** for their child or partner.
- **Support developing 'life skills'** was also highlighted as important by some participants (mainly if a child or partner had been in prison repeatedly or over longer periods and had less (recent) experience of living independently), and it was noted that having spent a lot of time in a prison environment meant they may not know how to cook for themselves, or understand how to budget for a household, and that an added difficulty when leaving prison could be that **changes which had happened during their time in prison** (for example new technology etc.), left them feeling out of touch.
- If those in prison were parents, needs related to their children were also highlighted as important – both in relation to visits and spending positive time with children, and for one person, access to support and advice in relation to a family protection issue which had happened while they were in prison.

*They have to be seen by the mental health team when they go into prison. There shouldn't be a wait list, it should be straight away*

*Why do they not learn them in the kitchen? Take four of them down at a time to learn in the kitchen. They're making meals for hundreds of people. At least they'd get some idea - what meals, how to budget*

# Needs out of prison

## Families want to see tailored and holistic support

- Feedback provided was often focussed on experiences in prison, reflecting the sample being made up of more people supporting someone currently in prison rather than someone who had recently been released.
- When asked what support their child or partner in prison would need when they left, many said they would **like to see a support package that resembled the VT&M offering**, including:
  - A plan for the future
  - People being picked up on liberation and taken to safe accommodation
  - Support with addiction and mental health services
  - Support with accommodation services and help ensuring accommodation is suitable (i.e. is not in an area with significant drug use, repairs have been made etc.)
  - Support securing benefits and employment
  - Someone to talk to
  - A single point of contact to help navigate services and avoid obstacles
- Most did not realise VT&M support existed and none reported their family member having received this support (some, but not all, were supporting males on remand who would not be eligible for VT&M).
- A perception that ‘there’s nothing at all for them’ existed among participants.

*They've got to click with whoever they're speaking to. And see another thing... see that having to go in and tell somebody your story... and they'll be like 'no, you'd be better talking to Jimmy about that' and then he goes to Jimmy and he's explaining the exact same story what he did to Harry, and Jimmy'll say 'no, you need to go to Johnny' so by the time he gets to Johnny he's away down the street to get a £10 bag [of drugs], that does their head in too, that affects their mental health and all that round circle. They need one worker and that's it.*

# Support for those outside

## There are a number of help options for families



- Participants were receiving support from services in a number of ways, including:
  - Information provision: workers' knowledge of the judiciary system, and contacts in prisons and in essential services were valued by participants, who often felt uninformed and unsure where to go for help, particularly those supporting someone in prison for the first time
  - Making requests on participants' behalf: there were several examples of workers chasing prisons and essential services on behalf of participants – and achieving a better outcome than when participants contacted them directly
  - Emotional support, for example phone calls to see how participants were coping. For some this was a critical element as the absence of their loved one while in prison left them isolated/lonely
  - Access to networks of other people supporting a family member in prison. This was a source of emotional support and was also being used for information sharing
  - Signposting to and arranging practical support
  - One participant described no longer wanting to live with her partner and had help from her worker to talk to her partner and set up alternative accommodation for them.

*It's having that other person that can voice concern, and I'm not just this over reacting prison wife that's wanting her husband seen with extra privileges*

*I found it very difficult having to look after his dog for 5 months. I can't walk him. I was finding it difficult to find a dog walker. That's where she [worker] came in again. She found me a charity that done it. It was a woman that would come and take him a good walk for over an hour up the woods and things, which I was very much grateful for*

# Support for those outside

## Support for families is valued but is not enough to overcome fears for those in prison



- The support described by participants was **highly valued by most**. Several noted that having a worker to turn to had made a huge difference to their experience of supporting their child or partner in prison.
- Despite this however participants were generally dissatisfied with support overall because their primary concern was the welfare of their child or partner in prison, who, for all those we spoke to, was felt to be facing difficulties and a lack of support that was of significant concern. One participant expressed dissatisfaction with the support they had been offered, considering it 'useless' because it did not **provide practical solutions** for their loved one in prison.
- There was also some criticism of **support services not working in a joined up way** (including across in-prison services, essential services, and the support being provided to participants). For example, participants included several people who were supporting someone in prison who had caring responsibilities. The extent to which services stepped in to cover these responsibilities was mixed, and participants included one person with significant mobility issues who was left without assistance for an extended period.

*I've had absolutely fantastic support... but they can't do a lot of things either... they have only certain contacts they can use, they don't have influence over social work, they don't have an influence over mental health, they don't have an influence over addictions. They can only say 'you can only try this' or they'll maybe phone up and say 'he can't get on that list because he's either too young, or he's an addict, or he needs to go to mental health first'*

*He was my carer. So with him being away for that 5 months I actually lost 4 and a half stone because I couldn't feed myself, I couldn't stand at the cooker*



# Support for those outside

## Families would like to see more support offered



- Throughout interviews participants were often **focussed on the needs of their family member in prison rather than their own**, saying that knowing family members were safe and well would alleviate a huge amount of anxiety. This included support beyond pre-release and post-release support which does not come under the remit of throughcare services to address, reflecting a desire among participants for a **single source of support**, to avoid having to **navigate a complex set of systems and processes**.
- Suggestions for how support for families could be improved included:
  - A comprehensive information booklet when a loved one goes into prison (current information was described as not being sufficient). Key information needed was: information on visits (when and how they can be made, the process when attending prison, visiting with children (including those with support needs)), and information on support services available to the person in prison, including eligibility criteria, wait times, and how to access services
  - Automatic referrals (for example referrals to a family support organisation being made as soon as an individual is sentenced/put on remand)
  - Being able to make referrals on behalf of those in prison (in particular this was suggested by participants supporting a vulnerable person experiencing mental health or addiction issues)
  - Having a dedicated point of contact in prison to be able to get information from and raise concerns with – this was important both in and outside of prison.

*When they go into prison there should be this booklet or something, you should have a personal officer or something you could contact to ask how your son is – like a named contact directly so you know who you're speaking to, because when I phone, you're fobbed off anyway but you're speaking to different people*

*We should be able to make referrals. If they're struggling we should be able to phone up somebody and tell them: 'look, I need to make a referral for my son because he's struggling. He's in the pure madness of drugs'*



# Summary and conclusions



# Summary and conclusions



- There is a clear desire for support among the families interviewed as part of research. Significant challenges associated with a child or partner being in prison were described during interviews, for example loss of carer support, additional financial burdens, or having to take on responsibilities on behalf of the person in prison. In addition, all participants described very **high levels of concern for the health and wellbeing** of their child or partner in prison.
- The extent to which families who are not currently accessing support experience similar challenges, the reasons they are not accessing support and whether/what services could be helpful to them however is unknown, and consideration could be given to **future research with families from outwith the networks of support providers** in order to add to understanding.
- Over the course of interviews there was some strongly negative feedback on experiences loved ones had had in prison, contributing to high levels of anxiety among families. While these issues may be beyond the remit of throughcare services to address, families' need for more information and better communication with prisons should be considered in the design of future throughcare services.
- Family members who took part in research had dedicated an enormous amount of time to supporting their loved ones in prison. Much of this time currently appears to be trying to obtain basic services for their child or partner to answer immediate needs, rather than being focussed on reintegration, and **any action to relieve anxiety around the in-prison experience may help families to focus on next steps**; however it is clear that families' dedication mean they have the potential to, and are, positively influencing loved ones away from reoffending and towards positive life changes.

# Summary and conclusions



- Feedback from families supports findings from other audiences included in the wider research project, for example highlighting an **overall gap in service provision** (particularly for males on remand), and a **lack of joined up working across VT&M, prison and essential services**. In addition feedback highlighted mental health and addiction support as a critical need in prison and beyond, as well as the importance of the **provision of safe accommodation immediately** upon liberation.
- Positively, the support that families described wanting for their loved ones closely mirrors the current VT&M model; however it is also clear that awareness of the availability of support was low across the sample, with access also impacted by ineligibility for the adult male remand population.

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