

National Assembly for Wales Cross Party Group on Children Affected by Parental Imprisonment

Child Poverty and Children Affected by Parental Imprisonment 7th July 2015

Minutes

Welcome: Christine Chapman AM & Cross Party Group Chair

Children affected by parental imprisonment are more likely to be living in poverty, 'this is an area where, we hope to make difference in Wales'. The Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee have produced a report on poverty in Wales. Christine (as chair) is to ask a question of the First Minister about the issue of child poverty.

The National Context: Dr Sam Clutton, Barnardo's Cymru Assistant Director for Policy

Sam reflected while it is 10 years from the first Child Poverty Strategy in Wales, there is much work to be done. She further reflected on the revised strategy published in March 2015, with an increased focus on children's rights.

The overlap and interrelated nature of children affected by parental imprisonment and poverty leads to a significant potential for compounding the issues' leading to increasing disadvantage for this group of children. Questions need to ask include; how can we make sure they realise their rights along with other children? An issue also raised by the Children's Commissioner for Wales in their latest report; is there are question of deserving and undeserving poor. These families face a real stigma, because of their situation. We need to ensure any child is not punished for what their parents have done; how can we think about a strategy in terms of children affected by parental imprisonment? How can we tackle it?

Sometimes things just don't make sense. Sam provided an example of a father who was complaining that there was no money coming into his family because of benefits, things got a bit heated and he was arrested. The next day the mother was arrested for shoplifting food, the children ended up in emergency care. This just doesn't make sense financially or morally. We need to think of other ways of dealing with this.

Family work in HMP and YOI Parc visitor centre: Helen Steele, Barnardo's Cymru Project Worker

Helen introduced herself and her role within the Family Centre in HMP Parc. She highlighted aims of the project, and described how the bespoke Barnardo's Cymru area has led to more families coming forward and getting to know Barnardo's Cymru staff.

Helen went on to talk further about the service. She was able to emphasise the importance and benefit of being available and building rapport, and that through interaction barriers can be broken down. Less formal opportunities for conversations can lead to finding out more and different information about what is happening for. Helen highlighted the importance of offering practical and emotional support to families,

particularly through the visiting process which can be incredibly intimidating. Sharing information is vital, as is providing support to parents including financial advice and help with forms. The service also signposts to other support agencies and refers families on if needed.

Helen described the financial situation of many of the visiting families including the cost of a family member being in prison producing extra burden on an already tight budget. She presented case studies which included traumatic examples of families facing eviction from their homes and drastic losses to their income.

Since Barnardo's Cymru work a question is now asked during prisoner induction, whether a prisoner has family and if they would like to speak to Barnardo's Cymru. If they do request Barnardo's Cymru support Helen or one of her colleagues will meet with them to discuss their needs. Other support has included assisted prison visits, opportunities to take part in activities such as Scouts, art activities etc. all of the costs for which are covered, providing equal opportunities for children to take part, regardless of their family's financial circumstances. Promotion of the Healthy Start Programme offers vouchers for milk as well as, fruit and vegetables. Finally Helen told delegates about the swap shop which the service has initiated, which donated children's clothes get redistributed between the families. This has received positive feedback and has made the experience of visiting the prison a more positive one for the children.

Prison, Families and Poverty: Jo Mulcahy, PACT Regional Head of Service

Jo presented on the work of PACT with prisoners and their families within Swansea and Cardiff prisons, lots of which, Jo mentioned seems to overlap with what Barnardo's Cymru is providing in HMP Parc.

Jo began by providing an overview of the key themes around prisoners and their economic prospects; these include unemployment statistics, which represent one of the many potential issues that families face before they have entered prison. Looking from the prisoners' perspective Jo read out the wage a person can expect to earn whilst they are in prison, which amounted to £12.50 per week for full time work and £7.50 for part time. A big part of prisoners' expenditure is taken up by phone calls. There is also a tendency for prisoners to apply pressure on their family to send money, as well as to visit regularly and send items in for them such as clothes. Jo discussed how prisoners can lose touch with family budgets, being unaware of their financial situation, and how much of a burden they can be put under by these requests. Within the PACT Building Stronger Families service, families are asked to look at their expenditure and compare what the prisoner thinks is being spent by the family, compared to actual amount of monthly outgoings. This has resulted in prisoner's considering the implications of their requests on the family. Jo further discussed the family cost of imprisonment breaking down the financial implications combined with a lack of awareness of benefits, this is quite often combined with stigma and attitudes of the public, suggesting families should pay for person being in prison. To try to alleviate some of the issues, the prison is providing solutions such as; the set-up of credit

union accounts. Prisoners can start to save, also beginning the process of a Job Seekers Allowance claim before release to avoid a gap in their income.

Assisted prison visits, although well received comes with quite a list of criteria and some families have difficulties in completing the form. There is also a stigma and pride around receiving help. Upon release Jo expressed that the financial situation for many prisoners and their families can look bleak, with difficulties finding work as well as obtaining mortgages. The children of prisoners can miss out on what others do or what they used to do. They are often asked to give up their possessions when the family gets into financial difficulty.

Advice needs of prisoners and their families: Lindsey Kearton, Policy Officer Citizens Advice Cymru

Lindsey introduced Citizens Advice Cymru and the support and advice which they have offered prisoners and their families. Lindsey discussed the multiple ways in which a prison sentence can impact on a family financially as well as emotionally.

The need to adapt to a significant change in their circumstances is significant, around half of all prisoners already have existing debt upon entry into prison, and there is a real risk of the family losing their home. Quite often families can have a low awareness of their rights, Lindsey suggested that it is critical for families to receive advice on support which may be available. Lindsey praised the work of organisations such as PACT and Barnardo's Cymru in helping families to understand what is happening, and how they can seek advice. Lindsey presented case studies, which paint a picture of what is happening with the families. Lindsey explained that visits to Citizens Advice by families tend to be more ad-hoc, with presenting issues such as problems with benefits, housing, bank accounts, debts etc.

Lindsey provided more information on specific work and projects with prisoners and their families, one of which was around improving financial capability, which can be a critical element of reducing reoffending. Lindsey explained how dealing with debts is critical to any programme supporting prisoners and families. The service also helped with opening bank accounts, which can ease problems prisoners face looking for work. The project ran between 2008 and 2010 and formed a successful part of the discharge programme, 6 to 8 weeks before release.

Another programme which Citizens Advice Bureau developed was a money advice service (MASDAP) which involved working with people in prison and upon release with probation. Some citizens' advice sessions are run from prisons offering direct advice. There are also online resources which are around prisoners rights. Financial capability guidance has been offered directly to offenders. Interactive one day workshops took place as well as one to one sessions, which were made available to all prisoners. This project received positive feedback from prisoners who found the sessions helpful. There were lessons learnt such as a need for more help for prisoners on entry into prison. There is also a need to raise awareness of

the help available for families and a need for greater understanding of potential challenges of delivering advice in prison environments.

Questions and Discussion

Christine Chapman AM – one of the issues which has come out of the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee on poverty is this sense of vagueness about poverty. There is a real need for people to understand, that on top of that lack of sympathy, the stigma for children affected by parental imprisonment is a real challenge.

Yvonne Rodgers, Barnardo's Cymru – I wonder whether there is a need for a more joined up approach. We hear about a lot of the solutions within this Cross Party Group, to me there seems to be a need for more integration and co-operation, so working in partnerships. For example, the whole area of financial capability goes across all ages and groups, clearly there is a need on entry to prison, this could link to community family work. I am keen to not leave it here. I would suggest maybe an action to progress on demonstrating collaborative working.

Lindsey Kearton, CAB – Quite often there is a will to do the work, but there are issues around funding. People within the project were keen and could see the value but were unable to continue without funding. There is definitely lots of demand. Things need to be properly and resourced, people need to see the value of investing in preventative action.

Christine Chapman AM – Is it the case, that there was a change of mind set when the project came in? Is the change of mind set still there even though the money is gone?

Lindsey Kearton, CAB – We do have to continually stress the value of the work. There are still these financial projects, however they can be short term for specific groups and there tends to be less flexibility. We need to keep ensuring we raise awareness. There seems to be a gap where people most likely to appreciate intervention, which is when a family member enters prison.

Sam Clutton, Barnardo's Cymru – It is also important to work with people, at the end of a sentence. Jo and Helen talked about the issues at the time of entry, with income being taken away. There is also potentially a kinship care situation, complications with grandparents and poverty tends to transfer with the child.

Lindsey Kearton, CAB – We need to ensure key agencies assist families straight away.

Christine Chapman AM - Referring back to Yvonne's point, it is going to be difficult when we have no more money, maybe it's about trying to work more together, how we are going to do that?

Yvonne Rodgers, Barnardo's Cymru – I'm just thinking about what we have in Parc and what Jo does with PACT.

Lindsey Kearton, CAB – We need to ensure we pass on contacts and talk to colleagues.

Jo Mulcahy, PACT – We need more training for visitor staff so they are aware of the issues and are able to provide a better triage service.

Lindsey Kearton, CAB – A lot of the work is train the trainer, not just direct interventions, so working with community groups, who work with particular vulnerable groups, building their skills on how to deal with

finances so they can pass this onto clients and more people benefit from a cascade.

Christine Chapman, AM – One idea, could be discussed at another meeting. Assembly will be finishing next year, maybe we can create a statement or something at the end and include a suggestion. I don't want to lose anything.

Lindsey Kearton, CAB – Welsh Government financial capability.

Sam Clutton, Barnardo's Cymru – It is very sad and every case involving child poverty also leads to food poverty, there are compounding impacts.

Lindsey Kearton, CAB - We're not sure what's coming down the line either.

Christine Chapman, AM -Thank you all for attending, it is very important to make time and space for networking. Thank you to speakers and delegates.