Family Sentence
An Evaluation
One of the unique features of *A Family Sentence* was the desire to portray the impact of imprisonment from two points of view – that of the prisoner (father) and that of the family members left behind. A group of prisoners at HMP Barlinnie contributed the perspective of those inside, while a community of relatives on the outside (Garthamlock Community Group) contributed their unique perspectives on the impact of jail sentences on the family. In this way it was intended to encourage greater understanding between the two groups and within family units as well as in wider social and community circles.

Another key objective was to create multi-media performances which asked questions and provoked discussion and debate around the impact of imprisonment upon individuals, families and communities in Scotland. It was thought that the subject matter was relevant to Scotland as a whole even though the project was conceived and developed inside HMP Barlinnie and in the communities of Easterhouse and Garthamlock.

*Barlinnie Dads’ Programme*

The first phase of the project consisted of information gathering and research carried out by members of the Citizens Theatre Learning Team Elly Goodman and Neil Packham.

During this phase – from September to December 2016 – Elly and Neil worked closely with family contact officers within Barlinnie to research existing practice in parenting initiatives by SPS and identifying good practice. In the Glasgow jail, family contact officers work to support male offenders and their families, by facilitating regular contact and promoting attachment with their children. The Citizens’ team were introduced to the Barlinnie-based Dads’ Programme, first established in August 2016. A ten-week course supported by Early Years Scotland, the course teaches structured play and allows prisoners regular enhanced visits with children under five years old. The Dads’ Programme made a significant contribution to *A Family Sentence*, enabling the theatre makers to create and record real-life monologues and stories by dads. In doing so they were aiming to increase awareness within Barlinnie about the role of family contact officers and the existence of the Dads’ Programme.

During this phase, weekly writing and drama workshops were held in the HMP Barlinnie Learning Centre delivered in partnership with a Creative Writing Lecturer from New College Lanarkshire, Wendy Miller. The creative sessions started in September 2016 and continued until the final performance in early June 2017.}

From April 2017 the Barlinnie rehearsals were stepped up to two and three times a week until the final performance in early June 2017. As Barlinnie is a short-term prison there were dozens of individuals who made valuable contributions to *A Family Sentence* during early and interim rehearsals. Many were unable to see the project through because they were either liberated or transferred to other prisons. Indeed three of the actors who appeared in the final shows had only joined the cast a few weeks beforehand. But audiences would never have guessed due to the high calibre performances and engagement with the issues, shown by all five actors involved.
The Garthamlock Community Group

In September 2015 Elly and Neil had their first meeting with Garthamlock Community Group. A strong and formidable force, the group had agreed to participate in A Family Sentence, despite the fact that the majority had never acted before. They were eager to participate in a project which gave them the opportunity, via drama, to examine some of the issues around imprisonment of family members.

The issues they wished to explore included:
- What it’s like to raise your children whilst your partner is incarcerated.
- The stigma which surrounds disclosure to neighbours and teachers.
- The treatment of teenagers during prison visits.

A Family Sentence culminated in a series of devised theatre and multi-media performances in June 2017 presented by two separate community groups. Shows were performed firstly by imprisoned men at HMP Barlinnie and then by Garthamlock community members. Supported by professional actors Ian Bustard, Martin Docherty and Sandra McNeeley, performances took place inside HMP Barlinnie, Garthamlock Parish Church and the Citizens Theatre and were attended by hundreds of Barlinnie prisoners, prison officers and those working for a range of agencies working in criminal justice as well as by members of the local communities in Garthamlock, Easterhouse and the Gorbals.

Summary of project aims and objectives:
- Working in partnership with education staff, using art and creativity as a mechanism to examine and influence prisoners’ attitudes to relationships and family life.
- Promoting greater understanding between those on the ‘inside’ and those on the ‘outside’ in order to improve family relationships.
- Allowing communities affected by relative imprisonment to express their views and highlight key issues including the stigma surrounding jail sentences.
- Increased awareness of SPS initiatives like the Barlinnie-based Dads’ Programme among the prison’s population.
- Encourage debate and discussion on relevant policy areas within the criminal justice system.
**Evaluation**

**Challenges and Difficulties – The Prison Project**

Delivery of a long-term project in a short-term prison like Barlinnie with its transient population, was always going to be a challenge and all participants were conscious of this from the outset.

This meant it was unrealistic to expect men engaging in the initial workshops in September 2016 to still be around to perform in the final shows in June 2017. It was not possible to target longer term prisoners as they were relatively small in number and many are in the top end where they are required to be on placement during the day. Due to the subject matter of the project protection prisoners were not recruited for the project.

Careful planning and scheduling of creative workshops was required in order to maximise the impact and engagement of prisoners during different phases of the project. As the members of the Citizens Theatre team had worked in Barlinnie previously and were familiar with the operational challenges of working in prisons early attention was paid to issues of recruitment and scheduling.

Men were welcomed and encouraged to participate and contribute for the duration of their sentences for both the drama and animation workshops. This ensured the project had a bigger reach and in total 56 prisoners engaged with the sessions and had some kind of relationship with A Family Sentence. Furthermore around 100 to 150 prisoners watched the final performances and many took part in after-show discussions around some of the issues raised.

However, it is important to note a smaller number of individual prisoners experienced significant personal change and creative development while working on A Family Sentence; and there is no doubt that the impact would have been even greater had they been able to see it through to completion.

Some prisoners who engaged with the creative workshops for A Family Sentence were transferred to other prisons for various reasons and so, lost to the project. Some of the transfers had been requested by prisoners whilst others resulted from convictions carrying longer sentences. In some cases requests were lodged with SPS for the men to stay in Barlinnie for the duration of the project; however these requests were rejected. The departure during the project of the Governor Iain Whitehead meant that a temporary officer in place. (Availability of other personal items in lockers. It can be difficult and disorientating to work under these restrictions for people who are not used to them. Permission is required by SPS for all recording devices, laptops, musical instruments etc. as well as all props and costumes. Use of scissors, Stanley knives and other instruments must of course be carefully supervised. Set construction must be approved and monitored by SPS. This was mitigated somewhat by involving the prison’s joinery work-party in set construction, thereby engaging a different group of prisoners in the project who already had a supervising officer in place. (Availability of operational officers to supervise sessions can often be problematic which was why the rehearsals and writing sessions took place in the Learning Centre, an area to which officers were already allocated).

On the whole the process was coordinated and managed effectively, benefiting from good relationships and regular communications between the Citizens Theatre, learning centre staff and senior managers from SPS who worked diligently to ensure everything was in place to make a success of each of the three performances.

Unfortunately security was heightened in Barlinnie during the week of the public performances which took place in early June, just days after the Manchester terrorist attack. There were additional internal security measures related to the raised terror alert. Relatives of the five stars of the show were not permitted to attend the performance at HMP Barlinnie, for the cast of A Family Sentence Barlinnie there was a sad irony to this.

Final rehearsals before any theatre production are always fraught with nerves and tension. But the Barlinnie team were faced with a unique set of problems which would never occur in a non-prison setting. One cast member missed an evening performance because he was attending a court diet and was brought back to prison too late to participate. The actor was very disappointed and felt that he had let the whole team down even though the circumstances were beyond his control. The problem was resolved by recruiting a member of the jail’s Barbed Wireless radio team who agreed to join the cast for one night. Even though he was reading from a script, Ryan proved to be a natural actor and everyone congratulated him on a fantastic performance. The next day the original actor was back on stage, determined to outshine his understudy!
Performances of A Family Sentence were seen by around 100 to 150 Barlinnie prisoners and the impact was significant. After the show a number of prisoners approached family contact officers with a view to signing up for the Dads’ Programme. This was a very positive outcome welcomed by the family contact team in Barlinnie.

Jail audiences are known to be frank and discerning and perhaps for this reason, previous plays in the establishment have tended towards the comedic. Although there were humorous moments throughout A Family Sentence, serious issues were explored and actors did not shy away from expressing the raw emotions which a prison sentence can provoke. Prisoners in the audience responded well to this and commented on the relevance of the show’s themes, to their own lives.

The project affected the five cast members most powerfully. They reported feelings of increased self-esteem and engagement with the issues raised. Since participating in A Family Sentence four of the men have continued their relationship with prison education, working as a team on Barlinnie radio. There they are continuing to develop vocal and communication skills as well as learning production and editing techniques. The men have commented on the fact that both the play and the radio station helped provide them with an outlet for self-expression and creativity. Furthermore they reported a sense of feeling valued and able to contribute.

One of the actors, James B, admitted that working on A Family Sentence had made him reflect on his own relationship with his children when they were young.

James said during an evaluation session: “Now I have taken part in the project it has made me question my own relationship or lack of relationship with my own children who are grown up now. It has made me think of how much better I could have been as a father.

Even though the project didn’t look at a father’s role in everyday life for their children, I couldn’t get away from thinking about my boys when they were little. And how much of a bad dad they must think of me.”

Two other cast members, Haji and Andrew, said that taking part in the show had made them more determined to be good dads to their children. During one devising workshop the men were asked to write a statement about the first thing they would do upon being freed from Barlinnie. Andrew did not hesitate. He said simply: “I’ll go home and get the weans and take them oot somewhere.” Andrew has since been liberated and is back with his partner and children, determined to stay out of jail.

Meanwhile Haji recently got the opportunity to interview the new Barlinnie Governor Michael Stoney for Barbed Wireless radio. He used the opportunity to campaign for increased family visits for prisoners with children over the age of five. During A Family Sentence it was highlighted that there is much emphasis from SPS on working with dads of very young children while it’s not as easy to arrange family visits for children over five.

A Family Sentence was also highly praised by prison officers who came to see it. Many were surprised by the high quality of the performances and were moved by the show’s content. The reaction of SPS staff was overwhelmingly positive – testament both to the good relationships built up over the years by the Citizens Theatre staff at Barlinnie and to their skill in extracting the best from the men they work with.

Although Barlinnie Governor Mick Stoney was unable to attend the performance due to other commitments, the Head of Offender Outcomes was present and stayed on afterwards to take part in a post-show discussion about some of the issues raised by the play.

The introduction to the Garthamlock group was facilitated by Families Outside who introduced the Citizens Theatre staff to a group of prisoners. This group member attended the prison visits room along with the Citizens Theatre staff and leafleted to recruit two male family members to take part in the research and as performers.

The Garthamlock Community members were fully involved in all aspects of the project and trialled extracts from the performance at the Open Museums Barlinnie Special Unit event at Kelvingrove Museum and at the SPAN Creative Conversation at the Citizens Theatre. In addition they performed the full piece both in their own community and at the Citizens Theatre where the audience engaged in discussion about the issues after the performance.

At the end of the project the Citizens Theatre asked to do a follow-up group of the Garthamlock project for feedback on their experience of the project. What follows are a number of reflections from group participants on the impact of the project on them and their families.

When I first met Elly and Neil with my children and discussed the possibility of making a piece of theatre, I was intrigued to find out how we as a family could get our stories and experiences of prisoners’ families out there.

So I thought ‘This could be another organisation out to tick boxes for whatever project they are taking a fancy to this time’

How wrong was I? From start to finish, the commitment from the Citiz guys was and still is a vital tool in us growing as not only an individual or group, but as a family. The passion, understanding and support from Elly and Neil has been immense in putting ‘A Family Sentence’ on the stage.

As for myself and my children, who were part of the play, it has given me the drive to keep raising awareness of prisoners’ families and the issues faced by them. My children have a much better confidence and are able to talk about being a prisoner’s child, but they have the confidence to help other children in the same position.

Whilst doing the play, I seen that this piece of theatre raised more awareness and ensured more collective action than anything I have been involved with regarding prisoners’ families in the last 14 years.

I have been open with some of my family. They were asked in response to the play.

I never imagined how far it would go, some parts were serious and sad, but there was a funny side too. The audiences were different for each performance. I would love to do it again and hope it has helped someone.

I said at the first meeting I didn’t want to be on stage but didn’t mind helping out, however I ended up being on stage and really enjoying it. I thought it would be 3 or 4 people watching us. I enjoyed having a supportive cast and directors. I never felt anyone had to hold back.

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Lessons LEARneD

Creative self-expression, personal empowerment, improved confidence and self esteem, the experience of actively participating in a team or community and crucially feeling that your contribution is valued. This is a summary of the main benefits reported by the core group of actors and writers who took part in A Family Sentence Barlinnie. Surely there is a direct correlation between all of these benefits and a reduction in the risk of reoffending.

In terms of maximising the impact of a long-term project of this nature in a short-term prison like Barlinnie, it would be useful if participants who are really engaging with the creative process and the issues being explored, could be given the opportunity to see the project through to completion. It is regrettable that this wasn’t possible with A Family Sentence.

The fact that the senior management team in Barlinnie were going through personnel changes at the time of the project made it difficult to establish clear lines of communication or establish a steering group to oversee the project.

In terms of benefit to individuals there have been clear benefits from the project. By working on A Family Sentence and Barbed Wireless, four prisoners in particular have really made the most of the opportunities made available to them via education in Barlinnie. Perhaps it’s worth noting that the choices made by these four individuals are not easy in a prison environment. Barlinnie prisoners are far more likely to spend their sentences in one of the prison’s vocational work parties where attendance (unlike that at the Learning Centre) is financially incentivised. Prison rules dictate that full-time education is only available to those on remand who are unable to join work parties.

What purpose, if any, does a long-term project like A Family Sentence serve for the two participating communities and what is its value for society at large? Significantly there were two separate creative strands of this work; firstly from the perspective of men inside Barlinnie who explored the ways in which a jail sentence can impact upon them and their family relationships and the second strand looked at family members’ experiences of relative imprisonment with work devised and created by Garthamlock Community Group. Presenting two real and relevant perspectives on what a family sentence means to them, the groups also responded to each other’s writing. In doing so, the voices of both groups were heard, as never before.

Together they started an extremely important conversation about how families affected by imprisonment can be better supported by Scotland’s justice system and its support services. What are the main issues affecting family strategy and which policies could be reviewed moving forward? These are the discussions now being picked up by the Scottish Prison Service, Early Years Scotland, Families Outside and other relevant agencies who have been actively involved in A Family Sentence from the outset right through to the final performances. Using creativity as a catalyst for social and political change can be highly effective.

One very important element of the Garthamlock strand was capturing the voices and stories of young people; how they felt about visiting prisons as well as the stigma and emotional trauma of having a relative – in some cases a parent - incarcerated. This was handled with the utmost care and sensitivity by the Citizens team. Individuals and groups are always made to feel safe, protected and therefore free to express themselves and to grow and develop. The value of the pastoral care the Citizens Community Team bring to a project like this should not be underestimated.

As ever the seriousness of the subject matter did not take away from the magical process of bringing groups of people together to make theatre. As previously stated, participants spoke of a renewed sense of self-confidence and personal empowerment. Not surprising given the high calibre of the work they created, which could be seen in the final shows that were presented.

Some of the men have now been reunited with their families and we wish all of them well with the rest of their lives. Each of them has much to offer the world.

To them and all the people who worked on this project we salute your tremendous creativity and commitment. Throughout the journey there has been a real sense of community and shared humanity. All of those involved felt privileged to be involved in this unique project despite some of the challenges and obstacles encountered along the way.

We would also like to thank Families Outside, Early Years Scotland and The Croft for their support and encouragement throughout the project. Their contributions helped ensure the project’s success.

Wendy Miller
Lecturer, Creative Writing, New College Lanarkshire who also supported the Citizens Theatre during their three-year residency in HMP Barlinnie.
I never imagined we would become actors or for the group to be so open. That helped me a lot.