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Child Impact Assessments for children with a parent in the justice system

Phase three report: creating systemic change
October 2024 to December 2025

Sarah Beresford

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DULVERTON
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Firebird
COLLECTIVE

About the Prison Reform Trust

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane, and effective prison system. We aim to do this by reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime; improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families; and promoting equality and human rights.

We support people in prison through our Advice and Information Helpline and our information booklets and leaflets. We regularly engage with prison staff and other justice and community stakeholders (including police, judiciary, probation, women's centres, social work, health, education, voluntary sector organisations) to improve conditions for prisoners and their families, and we push for policy reform with government leads and other officials.

Background to the project

Since 2018, PRT Associate Sarah Beresford OBE has been leading our work on the impact of parental imprisonment on children to shine a light on the systematic neglect of some of the UK's most vulnerable children.

> *There was just nothing; no one asked how we were doing or what support we needed. Nothing.*[1]
> Layla, aged 10 when her mother first went to prison

Through a series of workshops with children and young people impacted by parental imprisonment, and with input from practitioners and policymakers, Sarah co-developed the Child Impact Assessment resources, designed to ensure children with a parent in contact with the justice system are listened to, supported, and included in decision-making about that support.

Child Impact Assessments are underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and call for a child's rights approach that prioritises children's wellbeing. From its inception, the Child Impact Assessment project has been iterative and evolving, guided by the views of children and young people with lived experience. Phase one of the project (September 2021 to December 2022) culminated in the publication of the "This is me" toolkit and associated resources. Phase two (February 2023 to September 2024) focused on dissemination and implementation of Child Impact Assessments. This report summarises phase three activities.

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[1] Beresford, S. (2018). *What About Me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system.* Prison Reform Trust. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/what-about-me.pdf

Summary of phase three activities

Generously funded by the Dulverton Trust, phase three of the Child Impact Assessment project began in October 2024 and concluded in December 2025. Its aim was to consider what systemic change is needed to ensure children are offered the right support at all stages of a parent's journey through the justice system (arrest, court, prison and community sentence and release) and how Child Impact Assessments can support policy and practice.

During phase three of the project, at least **161 children used a Child Impact Assessment** to identify their support needs and any actions that would help them. This number is a consolidation of data provided by organisations actively using Child Impact Assessments within their standard practice. As the Child Impact Assessment framework is freely available on the PRT website and can be accessed and used by a wide range of practitioners and by families themselves, the precise number of children who have received support using a Child Impact Assessment is likely to be much higher than stated here.

Training about Child Impact Assessments was delivered to 654 staff from across the sectors (education, health, social work, prison and probation, police, voluntary sector, and academia). This training often included participation from children and young people with experience of parental imprisonment who are part of the Time-Matters UK support group.

Other activities included:

- **informing the Government's manifesto commitment to recognise and support children with a parent in prison** (this included meetings with Ministry of Justice and Department for Education policy leads; a roundtable discussion on the recognising and supporting children with a parent in prison jointly hosted by Janet Daby MP and Lord Timpson OBE; and a meeting with Josh MacAlister, Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing)
- **supporting the Scottish Government in their considerations of how to support children impacted by parental imprisonment** (this included meetings with the Scottish Government Advisory Group on Children of Prisoners; and working with the Scotland's Children and Young People's Centre for Justice to include information about Child Impact Assessments in their guidance for families)
- **informing policy and practice within Merseyside Police** (this included co-creating a video resource with Time-Matters children and young people to be used in police officer training)
- **informing considerations of how to take account of the impact on children within sentencing decisions** (this included workshops with sheriffs in Perth Sheriff Court and Judges at Liverpool Crown Court Judges on the role of Child Impact Assessments in sentencing)
- **informing policy and practice related to prisons, probation and the parole board** (this included presentations to the HM Inspectorate of Prisons team together with Time-Matters children and young people; training for prison staff; facilitating a 2025 HMPPS Think Child campaign event; and facilitating a workshop to consider the role of Child Impact Assessments within Parole Board hearings)
- **adapting the Child Impact Assessment resources** (this included adapted resources for children with a brother in contact with the justice system as described in this blog: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/oh-brother-where-art-thou/; adding a section in all of the resources that helps practitioners supporting children understand a child's relationship with their parent as described in this blog: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/relationships-matter/; and adapting the resources to support children impacted by domestic violence)

- **supporting pilot projects using Child Impact Assessments** (this included attending project steering groups and highlighting good practice as laid out in this blog: www.familiesoutside.org.uk/world-childrens-day/)

A key strength of phase three was the involvement of children and young people, bringing them together with practitioners and policy makers to guide their considerations. Having their voices heard in this way had a lasting impact on the children and young people:

> *I love being able to talk about what it's like having a dad in prison to the people who can actually make things better.* 17-year-old boy whose father was in prison

> *I'm always buzzing after doing something like this* [speaking at a conference]*!*
> 15-year-old-girl whose father is in prison

> *I am really grateful for the opportunities Sarah has given the Time-Matters children. Emboldening them to have their voices heard in various ways, through speaking to policy leads, in conferences, on podcasts and in training sessions, is extremely empowering for our children and gives them valuable life skills and confidence. Importantly, any shame that our children may have felt when their parent first went to prison, is vastly diminished, as they are able to speak 'up and out' not only for themselves, but for children who share their experience. This is a hugely empowering experience which forms an essential component of them thriving and reaching their full potential.*
> Founder of Time-Matters UK

The *Right here, right now!* event

A stand-out achievement of phase three was the Westminster-based *Right here, right now!* event on 7 May 2025.

The event considered why a children's rights approach is needed, how that can be achieved collaboratively, and the role that Child Impact Assessments can play in supporting children with a parent in prison.

Funded by the Firebird Collective, the event included a performance of *8 hours there and back*, which powerfully portrays the stories of three children with a parent in prison.



PRT CEO Pia Sinha, Minister for Children and Families Janet Daby MP and Sarah

A key strength of the event was that it was co-facilitated by two children (under 16 years of age), three young people (aged between 17 and 25) and two young adults (aged between 26 and 29) with lived experience of parental imprisonment as a child. Event participants included the then Minister for Children and Families Janet Daby MP as well as policymakers and practitioners from education, health, social work, prison, police, probation, housing, local community, academia, and voluntary sector organisations. The children, young people and young adults were supported before, during and after the event to enable them to participate in a way that did not retraumatise them but rather helped them to draw on their experiences to inform discussions throughout the day. Their input was highly valued by participants:

> *I really enjoyed the day especially because it was lovely to see young people with lived experience feeling so comfortable expressing their true feelings and opinions, and to see them thrive in such a supportive space.*

It was an honour to hear children and young people, to hear them speak, to see them have a seat on every panel, each table.

The event highlighted the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration. Participants considered the following questions in mixed sector roundtable groups that were co-facilitated by the children, young people and young adults with lived experience:

- How can we establish a shared culture that upholds the rights of children affected by the imprisonment of a close family member?
- How can we create an infrastructure that prioritises children's rights and encourages collaboration?
- How can we develop practice that is rooted in a child's rights approach and responds to the needs of all children impacted by the imprisonment of a close family member?
- How can we embed in effective review systems that take a children's rights approach?

From the combined discussions, participants emphasised the need for:

- A fundamental shift from adult-focused to child-led approaches;
- Quality training that is available for all those working with children as well as those engaging with adults in the justice system;
- Effective collaboration across all agencies and sectors;
- A cultural change that normalises rather than stigmatises the experiences of children and young people affected by parental imprisonment;
- Consistent and tailored support that respects children's rights and takes account of their diverse needs and their wider family situation;
- Accountability measures that reflect what matters to children and young people; and
- Structural reforms that make support a right rather than a privilege.

The roundtable conversations were summarised into a set of proposals under each of the 12 themes listed in the summary. These can be used to inform recommendations in the participants' own contexts to improve outcomes for children and young people who have a close family member in contact with the justice system: https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Summary-of-Right-here-right-now-roundtable-discussion-groups.pdf.

Participants found the day helpful in informing policy and practice:

Collaboration is essential – having all the voices around the table, including those with lived experience, is critical in developing informed, realistic and child-centred policy and practice.

The day felt welcoming, energised and most importantly child-centred. It inspired constructive, collaborative conversation – a fantastic catalyst for change 'right here, right now'.

This blog provides an overview of the event: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/a-call-to-action-right-here-right-now/

The difference this work has made

Children and young people were involved throughout phase three of the project in delivering presentations to policy leads; facilitating training for practitioners; and in the development of resources. This had a significant impact on participants:

- *The training was very impactful and interesting, and* [child] *was fantastic – I think hearing first-hand experience like that really hits home and she was so refreshing to listen to.* Training participant

- *Training was brilliant, listening to* [child] *really opened up thoughts and was so important us to hear directly from a young person. I think you have helped every professional take something away and be more aware of a whole family approach. Moving forward, I will be encouraging my team to ask questions to understand the impact on all individuals, especially the young people.* Training participant

- *I thoroughly enjoyed today's session - I found the storytelling aspect to be really powerful as I feel I can put myself into others' shoes more, which allows me to appreciate how someone may feel.* [Child] *is a credit to the professionals that have worked with him too, as it was evident there was a lovely working relationship where he felt emotionally safe in opening up. This training isn't something I will forget easily. Incredibly helpful hearing about Child Impact Assessments and how they could be used.* Training participant

- *Very engaging session and I find the way Sarah talks and explains things very easy to understand and follow. I enjoyed the videos and hearing from young people, the voices who truly matter and deserve to be heard and the fact Sarah makes that happen is amazing! Thoroughly enjoyed it, thank you!* Training participant

Partners involved in coordinating Child Impact Assessment pilot projects appreciated the support they received in delivering their work:

- *Having Sarah's support on our Child Impact Assessment work has made a real difference. She brings a huge amount of knowledge and really helps us see the bigger picture and connect our local projects to national work. Sarah has a brilliant way of keeping the focus on children and making sure their voices are at the heart of everything. She's also been great at helping us think through practical challenges, share ideas across teams, and build stronger links with other organisations. Her involvement gives our work extra confidence, direction, and credibility — and helps us keep improving what we offer to children and families.* Lived Experience Lead, The Maslow Foundation

- *In my role at The Maslow Foundation and being a part of The Family Connections Project, I have had the privilege of being part of the same team as Sarah Beresford. Working alongside Sarah is an inspiring experience. Her natural pedagogic qualities shine through in every interaction. She has a unique ability to make complex ideas accessible and engaging. Sarah's positive manner creates an atmosphere of trust and collaboration, and her deeply held values of kindness and respect are evident in the way she approaches both colleagues and the communities she serves. The Child Impact Assessment Toolkit is a testament to her commitment to thoughtful, compassionate reform.* Director of Operations, The Maslow Foundation

- *Sarah's involvement has played a vital role in the success of the Child Impact Assessment project across Perth and Kinross. Sarah spoke at several strategic meetings, explaining the purpose behind the toolkit, its development, and its potential to assist young people facing challenging times. Her*

enthusiasm for the toolkit and its positive impact on young people is clear in her presentations.
Community Justice Quality Improvement Team Leader, Perth and Kinross

- *Recommendations for Child Impact Assessments when a parent is caught up in the criminal justice process have been made repeatedly since 2007, both in Scotland and internationally. Tools and guidance on how to put this into practice were completely lacking, however, until development of PRT's 'This is Me' toolkit. Developed alongside children and young people with experience of a parent's imprisonment, this tool offers something concrete for decision makers at key stages in the criminal justice process, such as police, social workers, and judges. Sarah Beresford's work to develop the tool, but also to support its implementation, has been crucial for our work at Families Outside. In Scotland, Sarah helped embed the use of child impact assessments into the work of Perth & Kinross Council, with at least four additional councils now expressing interest. We continue to work alongside her to explore how the tool is being used, where barriers exist, and how to address these. Without this additional capacity and specific expertise, the voice of the child in adult criminal proceedings remains buried, with the new momentum behind the use of child impact assessments at risk of faltering and disappearing completely.* CEO, Families Outside

- *We have built the Child Impact Assessments into our training for teachers as they are a simple yet effective tool that enables the teacher/practitioner to ask the right questions which in turn gives the child the space to say how they're affected and what support they feel they need. We find teachers are wary of broaching the subject with a child or young person in case they say the wrong thing, but the Child Impact Assessment gives the teachers confidence to ask questions.*
  Children and Young People Quality and Development Manager, Pact

Those using Child Impact Assessments to support children continued to say it is an effective and helpful tool:

- *The Child Impact assessment - a really valuable tool.* Teacher

- *Loved the Child impact Assessment tool – it's so simple!* Teacher

- *I've spoken to our Senior Leadership Team about all staff being trained to use the Child Impact Assessment.* Teacher

Most importantly, Child Impact Assessments have helped children cope with both the emotional the practical challenges of having a parent in prison:

- *Just being able to be honest about how I was feeling really helped me. I'd been feeling really guilty about not wanting to visit dad [in prison] every week because I want to see my mates sometimes. This* [Child Impact Assessment] *helped me speak to my mum, and we've got a bit of a plan now.*
  15-year-old-girl whose father is in prison

- *I was worried about him* [dad] *coming home. I wrote down all my questions about it, and it helped me. I think it helped my mum as well.* 9-year-old-boy whose father is in prison

Lessons learned

Reflective practice is central to the work on Child Impact Assessments, and this continued throughout phase three. A key element of this project was the involvement of children and young people in co-facilitating training and co-presenting in meetings with policy leads. While this was both hugely impactful for participants and the children and young people themselves, it was time and labour intensive ensuring that support was available to children and young people before, during, and after their participation and that their parents and care givers were fully briefed in order to provide informed consent. Further consideration will be given in phase four of the time needed to support and prepare children for their participation.

The following areas of learning were identified within phase two but were not fully addressed within phase three:

a) Effective data collection

Data about the number of children using Child Impact Assessments is at present only available through specialist organisations that are using them as part of their routine offer of support to children. Ensuring the resources remain free to use and easily accessible is a priority, and phase four will explore ways in which useful data can be collected without this being onerous for stakeholders or a barrier to the resources being used.

b) Robust evaluation

Feedback from children, parents, practitioners, and policy leads about the effectiveness of Child Impact Assessments remains ad hoc. Conversations are underway with a group of academics to explore ways of gathering qualitative and quantitative data that measure outcomes for children related to their emotional wellbeing and educational progress.

c) A change of name

As highlighted in phase two of the project, the term ‘assessment’ is not helpful and can be a barrier to families and children using the resources. Furthermore, it became clear in phase three that there is confusion in Scotland between Child Impact Assessments to support children with a close family member in contact with the justice system and the Scottish Government’s Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments, which were created to ensure children’s rights are taken into account in all legislation, policies, and strategic decisions in line with the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill. Progress on changing the name began in phase three but has been slow because of the need to involve children and young people as well as practitioners. This work will continue in phase four.

Next steps

Phase four of the project will begin in January 2026 (until approximately April /May 2027) and will build on the achievements of phase three as well as consider the challenges highlighted in this report. At its core, phase four will focus on embedding child-centred policy and practice into existing systems of support and will support the Government's continued exploration of its manifesto commitment to recognise and support children impacted by parental imprisonment. The project will build an evidence-base that can be used to push for policy reform and will demonstrate how Child Impact Assessments can enhance good practice. Project activities will be iterative and evolving, co-developed with children and young people with experience of having a close family member who is in contact with the justice system. Activities will include:

a) Empowering children and young people to be advocates

Phase four will continue to work closely with children and young people and empower them to advocate for change. This will include co-presenting with children and young people at meetings with policy leads; co-delivering training to practitioners; co-creating resources that convey the impact of parental imprisonment on children and, crucially, demonstrate what policy leads and practitioners can do to mitigate the harm to children.

b) Developing support for children during the first 1001 days

Birth Companions is leading a project to adapt the Child Impact Assessment resources to support unborn babies, babies and children in the first 1001 days. This will also include the needs of their mothers, given the interplay of needs and dependencies. Sentencing guidance now makes explicit reference to the needs of women who are pregnant and postnatal and those who have very young dependent children; it is therefore key that all practitioners involved in decision-making about pregnant and postnatal women in contact with the justice system, and those with very young children, have a means to collate relevant information on women's, and their children's, needs and the impacts of decision-making, including sentencing, probation contact and license conditions.

Sarah will work with the Birth Companions Institute, and members of its Lived Experience Team, to shape an extension of the Child Impact Assessment designed to understand the specific needs, concerns and opportunities for this group of women and children.

c) Supporting new pilot projects

This includes support for the Inside Out project, run by Jigsaw and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, which supports children, parents and carers across West Yorkshire who are impacted by the imprisonment of a close family member. Child Impact Assessments are key to this project, and all project staff will receive in-depth training and ongoing support throughout the project on how to use Child Impact Assessments with children:

> *The Child Impact Assessment provides our family workers with a framework to effectively enable children and young people to identify their own support needs and inform a support plan that responds to those needs. As a new area of work for Jigsaw, the training on Child Impact Assessments will form an integral element of our staff induction process - ensuring a consistent understanding across our team about the potential impact of parental imprisonment and how we can ensure the support we provide for children is informed by their own individual needs and experiences. One of the proposed outcomes for the Inside Out service is to 'Increase children and young people's feelings of being listened to, supported and included in decision-making' - Child Impact Assessments will be a crucial tool in helping us to achieve this outcome.* CEO, Jigsaw

Similar projects are in the development phase in other areas of the UK.

Acknowledgements

Phase three of this project would not have been possible without the generous support of the Dulverton Trust and the Firebird Collective, and we are extremely grateful to them for sharing our vision for change. We are also extremely grateful to all the organisations who have engaged with the Child Impact Assessment within phase three activities and the staff, both policymakers and practitioners, who have provided insightful feedback. As ever, it is the children and young people themselves who are integral to this work; their passion for change, and their commitment to drawing on their own experiences to improve the wellbeing of others, is inspiring.

Always think about the children in all the work you do, don't stop listening to children, and hopefully we can work together to make a change.

17-year-old girl whose father is in prison

