Families Outside is a national charity that works on behalf of families affected by imprisonment in Scotland. We do this through provision of a national freephone helpline for families and for the professionals who work with them, as well as through development of policy and practice, training, and face-to-face support. The imprisonment of women has a particularly powerful impact on their children and families, and we commend any efforts to examine the use of imprisonment for women and alternatives to this.

We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Education and Culture Committee’s call for evidence on the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill, as the recommendations have significant implications for the children and families we support. Specifically we would like to highlight the needs of a particularly vulnerable group of young people, namely those whose close relatives are imprisoned and those who themselves have spent time, or are currently, in young offenders’ institutions. We are happy to elaborate on any of these should the Committee require additional information.

In response to the Bill, we would like to comment on two areas in particular:

- **Widening access:** to allow Ministers, when providing funding to the Scottish Funding Council, to impose conditions relating to access to higher education institutions for under-represented socio-economic groups.

Young people whose parents are in prison are extremely vulnerable and yet often overlooked. The shame and stigma they experience can become barriers to learning\(^1\), and it is a challenge for them to reach their potential within the school system. In addition, many young people affected by imprisonment have a fear and mistrust of authority and are more likely to withdraw and disengage from support\(^2\). A study by Pugh & Lansky\(^3\) demonstrated that families affected by imprisonment are often reluctant to access support from outside agencies, and this can make them hard to reach. To this end, partnership working is essential, and Families Outside would urge that a

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systematic and cohesive multi-agency approach\textsuperscript{4} is at the heart of the aforementioned conditions relating to access for under-represented socio-economic groups.

With these issues in mind, we would suggest that:

- The Committee takes the needs of this particularly difficult to reach group of young people into consideration when establishing conditions for the purposes of enabling, encouraging, and increasing participation in higher education, in order to ensure that the very people who need such support are able to access it. If organisations like Families Outside are informed of the financial support available, this will widen the potential access and give young people further opportunity to engage in educational opportunities; and

- Parental imprisonment in itself is recognised as a potential barrier to learning and, therefore, that young people affected in this way are deemed eligible for funding for post-16 educational opportunities.

- **Data Sharing:** to allow ministers to make secondary legislation to impose a legal duty on relevant bodies to share data with Skills Development Scotland on all young people between the ages of 16 and 24 moving through the learning system to identify those who have disengaged with, or may be at risk of disengaging with, learning or training.

Parental imprisonment is a highly sensitive issue, and careful consideration must therefore be given to the sharing of information. Young people affected are entitled to confidentiality and can be wary of divulging information, particularly if they are unsure how that information might be used. For Skills Development Scotland staff to work effectively, and sensitively, with young people affected by imprisonment, training is essential. An understanding of the trauma and stigma experienced by these young people will ensure that they are supported in an appropriate and helpful way and will increase the likelihood of young people engaging in educational opportunities.

With these issues in mind, we would suggest that:

- The Committee considers training for Skills Development Scotland staff on issues of imprisonment and the affects of this on young people, particularly as they move on from school. Families Outside is able to offer appropriate training and would welcome the Committee’s support in this; and

- The Committee raises awareness of the need for sensitive and appropriate information sharing that seeks to empower and support young people, rather than reinforce the belief that many vulnerable young people have, namely that they are powerless to change their situation.

In addition to young people whose parents are in prison, we would also like to highlight to the Committee those young people in Young Offenders’ Institutions (YOIs). Often with low levels of literacy and a negative experience of school, this group of young people is also highly vulnerable and can be difficult to engage in educational opportunities, both during their time in custody as well as post-release. Partnership working between colleges and YOIs is essential, particularly when linking young people back into the community, and organisations like Families Outside, Circle, The Wise Group (via Routes Out Of Prison), Moving On, Positive Prison, and Apex Scotland can have a useful role to play in facilitating opportunities for collaborative work.

In summary, Families Outside welcomes the aims of the Bill, which seeks to widen access to post-16 education for vulnerable young people and looks at how information sharing might increase engagement in learning and training. We would urge the Committee to consider at all stages the needs of young people affected by imprisonment in order that the provisions improve the outcomes for one of society’s most under-represented groups.

Prof Nancy Loucks
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Families Outside