

'Out of Sight Out of Mind': Arguing the Case for Social Workers in Women's Prisons.

Dr Lucy Baldwin is a Associate Professor Durham University. Katia Parent is a prison-based Social Worker at HMP Send. Becky Wray is a prison-based social worker at HMP Eastwood Park. Jo Mulcahy is Assistant Director of Services at Prison advice and care trust (Pact).

Introduction

In his recent review, 'The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime',¹ Lord Farmer responded to previous evidence-based recommendations for Social Workers to be present in every women's prison. In 2019, and in partnership with Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact),² a three-year pilot project (funded by the Sylvia Adams Foundation³) began which saw two Social Workers being placed in two prisons for women in the UK. This article will outline some of the evidence that fed into the Farmer Review, which then informed the recommendation and justification for a Social Worker presence in the prisons. The article also reflects on the first year of the Social Worker pilot, highlighting impact and outcomes of the project and makes the case for the project to be formally adopted and extended.

Lord Farmer's first review in 2017 concluded that 'family was potentially (or should be), the 'golden thread' running through reforms across the prison estate'.⁴ The report recognised that strengthening ties between people in prison, their family, loved ones and significant others can help to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime. It is important to note that whilst Farmer used the term 'family relationships' he clearly stated in his 2017 report that broader

definitions of 'family' and other 'significant and supportive relationships are inferred'. The report made a number of recommendations which included targets and funds for prison governors, to trial and develop innovations specifically around families and relationships, and importantly, against which prisons would be audited and held accountable. Farmer argued that 'family work' needed to be at the centre of operational policy and work with prisoners, and that planning for release must incorporate work and action around positive relationships. Farmer recommended that more must be done to ensure that contact with families and loved ones was established and maintained, and significantly, that operational disruption to those relationships be reduced and minimised. He recommended that any 'new build' prisons must consider 'family ties' in the suitability of their location, design, technology and facilities for families. Lord Farmer's first report was solely focussed on the prison estate for men. He then undertook a similar review which looked specifically at the plight of criminalised women and their families.

Unlike in Scotland, where there is a Criminal Justice Social Work branch of 'social work' in the criminal justice system, in England a range of 'social work' tasks are often given to Probation Officers and other criminal justice staff. However, in recent times, and particularly post Transforming Rehabilitation (TR),⁵ the Probation Service has been pushed into becoming

1. Ministry of Justice. (2019) The importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime, Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/809467/farmer-review-women.PDF.
2. The Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact) is a national charity that provides support to prisoners, people with convictions, and their families. <https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/>
3. Maintaining the link between women in prison and their children. The Trust is funding Prison Advice and Care Trust to trial the implementation of a key finding in the 2019 Farmer report <https://sylvia-adams.org.uk/prison-advice-and-care-trust/>
4. Ministry of Justice. (2019) The importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime, Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/809467/farmer-review-women.PDF.
5. Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) was the name given to a White paper issued by the UK Ministry of Justice in May 2013, and to a programme of work from 2013 to 2016 to enact the strategy outlined in the paper. TR was concerned with the supervision and rehabilitation of offenders in England and Wales and was initiated by Chris Grayling, the then Secretary of State. It involved the splitting and partial privatisation of probation services. The new legislation meant that all prisoners serving a sentence of 'more than one day' would now be subject to post prison licence – whereas previously only those serving 12 months, or more were.

more punitive and enforcement focussed, and as a result much of the 'welfare' aspect of probation work had been lost or given less priority.⁶ The new Nationalised Probation Service is revisiting the remit of probation supervision, including that of women in recognition of the importance of family and maternal needs. Nonetheless, in recent years the presence of prison-based Probation Officers and/or Social Workers has been inconsistent. As a consequence, family related, and welfare matters have been neglected. Public sector prisons have Family Engagement Services (FES), also called Family and Significant Others Services (FSOS) — provided under contract by specialist charities, such as Pact. Prisons run by the private sector have 'Family teams' who undertake similar work. FES/FSOS work is defined as 'specialised casework based in prison which aims to build and maintain contact between prisoners and their family members'.⁷ Power asserts that more than this FES/FSOS 'offer emotional and practical support',⁸ which is intended to minimise and/or reduce trauma, improve the quality of relationships, and improve outcomes for imprisoned people and their families, especially children affected by imprisonment. However, prior to 2008 the importance of family ties, although understood widely by practitioners, was not matched in policy. Indeed, Andy Keen Downs CEO of Pact stated in 2016,⁹

"Whilst everyone was talking about how we needed to strengthen family ties and support people in having healthy relationships, there were next to no casework practitioners in prisons working on these agendas".

In attempts to bridge this gap in policy and practice the MoJ introduced a 'children and families' pathway into its 'seven pathways for reducing reoffending'.¹⁰ Following a successful family focussed jointly run pilot at HMP Low Newton and the successful evaluation of Pact's Integrated Family Support (IFS)

programme in 2012,¹¹ the development of family engagement work in prisons was pursued nationally, and most prisons then had some sort of FES/FSOS. FES/FSOS's are most often provided by charities and/or voluntary services and are not always permanently funded. This can leave FES/FSOS, and importantly FES/FSOS staff, vulnerable to abrupt terminations resulting in loss of services for prisoners and their families. There are of course alternative models of provision (for example statutory provision as happens in Scotland), However, it has recently been revealed that the current social work pilot is being adopted and expanded to other prisons. Part of the current problem has been that there is no minimum standard in policy for the level of the service upon which commissioners, and indeed prisons themselves, can base contracts or justify the role. Services can however be permanently funded on a commissioned basis and in the absence of statutory permanent funding, we would argue for this to continue and be a widespread approach.

As highlighted by Power,¹² the role and remit of Family Services has expanded beyond one-to-one support and now extends to running visits, family engagement days, helplines and community services, as well as delivering group work programmes. Thus, the many demands on the time of the individual family engagement workers (FEWS) means that they often have less time for the important one-to-one work that is so important to people in prison, arguably especially to mothers subject to childcare proceedings. Furthermore, the funding allocated for family engagement work often only supports one member of staff to support an entire prison, and although the FEWs are dedicated and hardworking, this is often inadequate. There is therefore a need for some means of quantifying the work as well as specifying it.

Family work in women's prisons can be very different to family work in men's prisons, not least

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6. Walker, S., Annison, J., & Beckett, S. (2019) Transforming Rehabilitation: The impact of austerity and privatisation on day-to-day cultures and working practices in 'probation'. *Probation Journal*, 66(1), pp.113-130.
 7. Dominey, J., Dodds, C. & Wright, S., (2016) Bridging the Gap: a review of the Pact family engagement service. *Cambridge: Institute of Criminology*. Pp7.
 8. Power, E. (2021) 'Without it you're lost': examining the role and challenges of family engagement services in prisons. *Critical Reflections on Women, Family, Crime and Justice*, p.107-129.
 9. See above also (on page 110)
 10. Ministry of Justice (MoJ) (2008) Strategic plan for reducing reoffending 2008-2011: Working in partnership to reduce reoffending and make communities safer. A consultation National Offender management Service (NOMS).
 11. New Economic Foundation Economic Study (2012) Pact Website <https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/the-pact-story>
 12. Power, E. (2021) 'Without it you're lost': examining the role and challenges of family engagement services in prisons. *Critical Reflections on Women, Family, Crime and Justice*, p.107-129.

because the majority of women in prison are mothers. Whilst it is true that many male prisoners are fathers, Baldwin argues that the ideas and ideals surrounding motherhood, maternal identity and role, alongside maternal emotions, adds an additional layer of complexity when working with women.¹³ Significantly, women in prison are very likely to have experienced childhood and/or domestic adult abuse, be experiencing mental health issues, be separated from children for the first time, be at least 60 miles away from home, and almost half will have previously attempted suicide,¹⁴ and for many women their 'offending' will include a relational element. In short many women are criminalised in the context of poverty, trauma and multiple challenges. Many are also involved in childcare proceedings and challenges. This set of circumstances means that delivering FES/FSOS with women in prison holds additional importance alongside practical, emotional, and relational challenges.

Following his review of women convicted of crime, Farmer recommended the presence of Social Workers in all women's prisons. He recognised this would go some way towards responding to the often unmet needs of women in prison, especially those who were mothers. Farmer described how Baldwin's research evidence, provided via both written and oral submissions to his review, 'made a significant contribution' to his findings and was 'particularly salient' in this development and recommendation. It is important to note that others had also echoed the need for a social work presence in prison in their submissions to the Farmer review (Raikes)¹⁵ and elsewhere (O'Malley and Devaney 2016).¹⁶

Baldwin's research demonstrated evidence of the need and justification for prison based social work, as well as the need for and importance of improved

relationships with 'outside' Social Workers.¹⁷ Mothers in Baldwin's research described how they felt 'out of sight out of mind' (Carla), in relation to social work input and childcare proceedings:

'...as far as they [social services] are concerned I'm in prison, so I'm out of sight out of mind, they don't involve me in any discussions or decisions about my kids, it's like I'm invisible now, I don't count'. (Carla)

Similarly, both Beth and Nicola felt that as 'prison mothers' they 'mattered less' (Nicola), also feeling that it was 'easy' for outside Social Workers to 'forget' (Beth), about them during their incarceration, and to focus and prioritise cases considered more pressing in the community. There is no doubt that limited resources and financial restrictions mean that all Local Authorities, individual Social Workers and social work managers, have to make difficult decisions concerning allocation of time and support, but imprisoned mothers felt that at times they were given no consideration at all. Nicola who had one son in foster care and another adopted whilst she was in prison, described how she felt excluded from the proceedings surrounding her children.

'I would find out after the event that meetings had taken place about my kids, decisions made without me even being involved ... how can that be right, I might have been in prison, but they were still MY kids' (Nicola).

Beth, who served a short sentence for theft, leaving behind a three month-old baby described how decisions made by Social Workers impacted on her relationship with her daughter post-release.

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13. Baldwin, L. (2015) *Working with Mothers in Criminal and Social Justice Settings*. Hampshire, Waterside Press.

14. Bromley Briefings (2021), Prison Reform trust (PRT).

<http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Bromley%20Briefings/Winter%202021%20Factfile%20final.pdf>

15. Dr Ben Raikes and Dr Lucy Baldwin both spoke of the need for improved relationships with Social Workers 'outside' in their verbal evidence to the Farmer Review and Baldwin expressed the need for prison-based SW in both her verbal and written evidence.

16. O'Malley, S., & Devaney, C. (2016) Supporting incarcerated mothers in Ireland with their familial relationships; a case for the revival of the social work role. *Probation Journal*, 63(3), pp.293-309.

17. Baldwin, L. (2021) Executive Summary, *Motherhood Challenged: Exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role - summary of original research* Baldwin, L. (2021) *Motherhood Challenged: A matricentric feminist study exploring the persisting impact of maternal imprisonment on maternal identity and role*. Doctoral thesis. <https://dora.dmu.ac.uk/handle/2086/21372>

'they wouldn't bring her to the prison, I begged and begged but they said prison was no place for a baby... but that meant she didn't know me when I got out' (Beth).

Beth went on to describe how the fact her daughter 'didn't know' her made her feel 'worthless' as a mother and she herself predicted she would return to substance misuse 'or worse' because she struggled to cope with what she perceived as her lost positive maternal identity and her lost relationship with her daughter. Beth did indeed later take her own life just over a year later, leaving her daughter motherless.

Sikand in her research around prisons' mother and baby units (MBUs), found that Social Workers often made decisions about the suitability of an MBU space without ever having been to an MBU or seen its facilities.¹⁸ Similarly, many Social Workers have not visited prisons at all and have not seen how accommodating some visiting spaces can be for mothers and children (there is always room for improvement, however). More importantly there is a failure to appreciate the significance and value of maintained contact both for imprisoned mothers and their children. Consequently, funding or supporting prison visits for incarcerated mothers of 'looked after' children is not always given the priority or attention it should have.

Bridging the 'gaps' and improving communication between inside and outside is important and will play a significant role in maintaining contact and/or reducing permanent separations. The Social Work project is therefore a welcome and much needed addition to in-prison family engagement services.

The Project

Following the Farmer review, a roundtable discussion with a number of multi-agency professionals, including (amongst others) the lead author of this paper, the Chief Social Worker Isabelle Trowler, Pact representatives and Lord Farmer, took place in December 2019. It was decided that although ideally supportive social work should be undertaken with all mothers in prison, if funding was to be limited to one Social Worker in each establishment, then the focus for

this project would be working with mothers whose circumstances were most complex, and with those whose children were likely to be subject to childcare proceedings. Thus, whilst the Social Workers were accepted and integrated into the prison's system and diverse service provision, their remit would be essentially protected.

In the light of this a job description and person specification was designed in consultation with roundtable stakeholders. Two women Social Workers with several years post-qualifying experience and a background in child and family social work, were appointed in April 2021 (Becky and Katia). The Social Workers are line managed by Pact but also have both formal and informal support in their roles by mentors, clinical supervisors and prison colleagues.

Currently the two prison-based Social Workers in the pilot project work alongside FEWs but take the lead on the more complex cases, for example where there is substantial involvement with the Local Authority and/or where mothers are involved in childcare proceedings. Thus they (Katia and Becky) are providing a service either not previously provided or provided by unqualified (though often very able and experienced) FEW's who are not always familiar with the legal aspects of proceedings or the rights of the mothers, or who because of their unqualified status often feel unable to challenge or question

Social Workers and their decisions.

The first year of the project has already provided a strong evidence base for the need for Social Workers in women's prisons. Prison staff have accepted and embraced the pilot and the physical presence of the Social Workers, and regularly and appropriately refer women to this additional service. Prison Officers have described feeling 'relieved' to have someone 'take on' this work, which they had previously 'muddled through' but had often felt overwhelmed by and unqualified to undertake.

Both of the project Social Workers feel that they have been effective in building a 'bridge' between the inside and outside of prison by assisting in maintaining contact, encouraging outside Social Workers to involve mothers directly in any childcare proceedings, and also in preparation for release. Molly and Ness describe how having 'in prison' social work support has enabled

More importantly there is a failure to appreciate the significance and value of maintained contact both for imprisoned mothers and their children.

18. Sikand, M. (2015) *Lost Spaces: Is the Current Provision for Women Prisoners to Gain A Place in A Prison Mother and Baby Unit Fair and Accessible?* the Griffins Society, University of Cambridge institute of Criminology.

them to be more involved in the proceedings involving their children.¹⁹ They describe the positive impact this has had on their wellbeing and their maternal identity and role:

'I have come further [with social services] than ever since I have had Katia as a worker. I have had more contact with social services and I'm getting photos and updates of my son now which I haven't for two years! It has given me peace of mind [...] I got my risk lowered to do with my son and I have updates and photos again after so long. I feel a bit more involved in his life after so long.....' (Molly)

'..... [Katia has] helped me be in ALL social services meetings. Really made me feel involved in my kids life's It made me feel connected and made difficulties so much easier as I knew what was going on with my children at all times and I had a say which has been AMAZING. It's helped me remain focused and calm and helped me feel like a mum which I am so grateful for' (Ness)

Despite some initial hesitancy and suspicion of Social Workers (often rooted in negative experiences and perceptions of previous involvement with social services), both Social Workers have been successful in engaging mothers in positive working relationships. The mothers have clearly felt that having an advocate has ensured representation of their voices, which has led to increased or maintained involvement in their children's lives.

'Becky has supported me with my children and always kept her word [...]. Becky went to the effort of finding out my son's Social Worker so quickly and passed on a list and letter of all his favourite foods and activities to the foster parents. Becky has made the process of being away from my son easier. I still feel like I am a part of his life. Due to the complex case I am going through I have felt very alone and was almost ready to give up. Becky came and

listened to me, guided me and gave me the fight I needed to carry on.' (Paula)

Mothers, who had previously felt 'invisible' and 'unheard',²⁰ felt that the involvement of the prison Social Workers helped them to be seen and heard, which they felt was important and productive in terms of their relationships with their 'outside' Social Workers and importantly their mother and child outcomes.

'Having a Social Worker in prison helped because social services respond and so do other professionals. Becky has found out information for me to help understand situations and have a different outlook on situations. Having Becky here helps and shows that we'll can work with a Social Worker that I can trust to help me.' (Amal).

'My Social Worker [Becky] has supported me with my court paperwork and given me the confidence and advice on how to respond to social services and court.' (Nadia).

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In one particularly poignant instance, the prison Social Worker was able to work with both the mother in prison and social services in the community to restore long lost contact between mother and child. The mother is serving a long prison sentence. It had been a challenging and complex case and the mother, initially feeling overwhelmed and hopeless at the beginning of her sentence, had lost contact with social services and felt her son would be 'better off without her'. Her son had also initially not wanted contact with his mother. However, through mediation, patience and compassionate work, the prison Social Worker was able to restore contact with social services outside, leading to mother and child having postal contact after a seven-year period of no contact at all. Furthermore, community-based social services agreed to sustain communication with the imprisoned mother, which they had previously refused to do. This example really highlights the importance of ongoing contact and support from social services. As Beresford highlights, feelings change, time moves on, children and mothers

19. All mothers' names are pseudonyms
20. See Baldwin 2021 as per footnote 17

change their minds about contact, and as such decisions made in the aftermath and shock of the initial separation and sentencing should not always be considered permanent.²¹

Demonstrating further positive impact, the pilot project Social Workers, Katia and Becky, have supported mothers through a range of different difficulties including the adoption process, challenging planned adoption, re-establishing visits, preparation for release, assisting mothers in understanding their legal rights and related childcare proceedings paperwork. They have also facilitated mothers to undertake mothering-related tasks such as registering their child at school, or informing foster carers of child needs. Referrals to the social workers come from mothers themselves, often after other mothers have had positive experiences with the Social Workers and then encouraged others to seek support. Referrals have also been received directly from the wing-based officers, induction/reception staff and from the Offender Management Unit. The two prison Social Workers have both been welcomed by prison staff and some of whom have evidenced the Social Workers' positive impact:

'Since Becky has been at HMP Eastwood Park she has proven herself to be an invaluable asset to the team. Within our role as officers on the MBU we often liaise with community Social Workers for referrals and assessments. This can be challenging at times with some community teams not understanding the urgency of the referrals and Becky has often assisted with speeding the process along due to her knowledge and understanding of the referral and assessment process [...]. She is also breaking down the misconception for prisoners that Social Workers have a negative impact on their lives'. (MBU officer).

'The work Katia has been doing has assisted me immensely in my role as a Prison Offender Manager and is invaluable. I would never be

able to support women/mothers in the way that she can as we just don't have the time or experience to invest in them. Katia is experienced and knowledgeable in her role which gives me confidence that mothers I manage, and their children are being given the best support and chances at moving forward.' (Offender Manager)

The project Social Workers themselves feel they are viewed positively by the prison, especially by prison officers.

'They [the officers] do appreciate us and what we do, not least because it frees up their time and we take back some of the things they were doing but felt maybe wasn't their role- but no one else was doing' (Becky).

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The two prison Social Workers have also received very positive feedback from 'outside' social services and other agencies about their role. Outside agencies have described how not only have they benefitted in terms of improved knowledge and understanding of the challenges and experiences of mothers in prison, but also how their presence has contributed positively to outcomes for children.

'I honestly think that the children have hugely benefited from the communication I have had with you (Katia), and Zuri [mum] also. I hope that having established a relationship with Zuri prior to her release will help her to continue to do well and be able to sustain a positive relationship with the children with my ongoing support'. (Outside Social Worker)

Previous research has demonstrated that children having contact with imprisoned parents (where appropriate) is beneficial in terms of wellbeing and outcomes for children.²² Obviously, in the context of appropriate safeguarding, it has been evidenced that improved and maintained contact between mothers

21. Beresford, S. (2018) 'What About Me?' the Impact on Children When Mothers are involved in the Criminal Justice System. Prison Reform Trust. Available At; <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/what%20about%20me.pdf>

22. Beresford, S., 'What About Me?' (2018) The Impact on Children when Mothers are Involved in the Criminal Justice System. <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/what%20about%20me.pdf>

and their children during a period of maternal incarceration, has a positive impact on mothers and children, and importantly on their relationships post-release.²³ It is clear that the social work project has a significant role to play in improving outcomes for children and families affected by imprisonment.

Conclusion

The prison social work role has contributed positively to the welfare and outcomes of both mothers and children. We are certain that the two remaining years of the project will only serve to confirm what is already being evidenced. We know that a significant impact of the recent and ongoing pandemic has been an increase in self-harm rates amongst prisoners, especially in women's prisons.²⁴ This has been attributed, at least in part, to the loss of contact with loved ones, especially children: a painful reminder of the connection between maternal wellbeing/self-harm and familial contact.²⁵ Any services that work deliberately to improve and maintain contact and outcomes for mothers and their children must be actively pursued and supported.

We argue strongly for the prison Social Worker role to be extended and supported permanently in all women's prisons. We would argue that social work

training should include knowledge and understanding about the importance of supporting imprisoned mothers and their children, more effectively and consistently than currently occurs. We would like to see 'Criminal Justice social work' per se explored more fully in social work training and practice, which we feel would reduce 'silo' working and encourage and facilitate increased multi agency working — which is often so essential when working with criminalised mothers. In a similar vein we would like to see social work students offered placements in prisons with a view to informing future practitioners so that they never again view mothers in prison as 'out of sight and out of mind'.

We end this paper with a final quote from Jo Mulcahy, Assistant Director of Services (Pact), and line manager for the two Social Workers.

'I feel like there's such a massive difference because of this project especially where mothers' voices were previously not represented. There is so much potential to make a significant difference to mothers and children's lives and their outcomes, it has to be continued — it is the right thing to do.'
(Jo Mulcahy).

23. See Baldwin 2021, as per footnote 17 and also Booth, N. (2020) *Maternal Imprisonment and Family Life: From the Caregiver's Perspective*. Policy Press.

24. Safety in Custody Statistics, England and Wales: Deaths in Prison Custody to September 2021 Assaults and Self-harm to June 2021 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1029027/safety-in-custody-q2-2021.pdf

25. See Baldwin, as per footnote 17.