

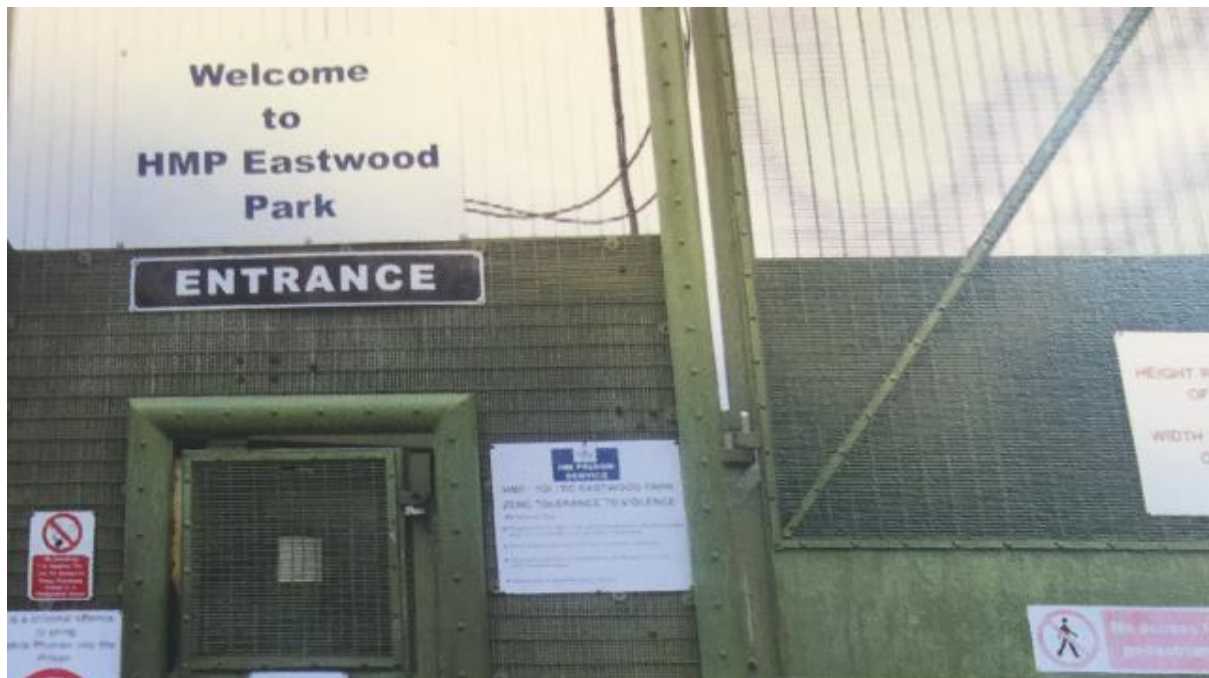


Executive Summary of the Final report June 2017

Evaluation of Visiting Mum Scheme

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Executive summary

Introduction

The Visiting Mum scheme is run by the Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact), which is a national charity that provides practical and emotional support for prisoners and their families. These services include prison visitors' centres, a national helpline, mentoring and befriending services, relationship and parenting courses, advocacy and campaigning work (Pact, 2016). The charity focuses on ensuring children and families of prisoners have access to support which is tailored and responsive to their needs. Visiting Mum is operating at the female prison, HMP Eastwood Park, in Gloucestershire, the local prison for female offenders in the southern half of Wales as there is no women's prison in Wales (female offenders in the northern half of Wales are sent to HMP Styal in Cheshire). On average women prisoners are held 60 miles from their home address, but at Eastwood Park, 20% of women are held over 150 miles from home (HMP/YOI Eastwood Park, 2011). The Visiting Mum scheme works with Welsh female prisoners, to facilitate contact between them and their children during their period of incarceration.

In Wales, despite the Welsh Government's adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as the basis for policy making about children and young people, there is no national strategy for the children of prisoners, who thus receive little support. No routine data is collected by Local Authorities about children of prisoners (in either England or Wales), meaning that this small but vulnerable group of children are unknown. Justice is not a devolved function, and Welsh Government

do not routinely disaggregate and publish data on prisoners or their children to enable estimates of this population to be made.

Visiting Mum is a 3-year partnership project funded by the Big Lottery Innovation Fund, which has been running since October 2014. It operates using volunteers who work with individual families in the community to prepare carers and children for visiting Eastwood Park and transport children and carers to the prison. It was designed specifically to address these issues and to support families to keep in contact (where it was in the child's best interests to do so), removing barriers to contact and supporting the whole family through the process. A well-designed and unique project, Visiting Mum currently supports and provides benefits to children living across south Wales when visiting their mothers at Eastwood Park.

The volunteering organisation Sova, a charity that has been established for 40 years, working 'to help people steer clear of crime and to live healthier lives' (Sova, 2012), recruits, trains and supports the volunteers who furnish the Visiting Mum project. Volunteers support children to prepare for visits by talking about the prison regime, showing pictures of the establishment and letting children know what they can expect when they arrive. Volunteers also answer questions so that children are able to make an informed decision about whether and when to visit and provide transport for the visit. Where required, volunteers offer support to the carer and children after the visit has taken place and help to arrange future visits.

The Visiting Mum scheme aims to reduce reoffending, and reduce the emotional distress caused to women incarcerated away from their children. The scheme also aims to reduce the impact of incarceration on children, and has the potential to improve the longer-term mental health of both mothers and their children. The relationship between mental health and offending is well-known (Chitsabesan et al. 2006). Incarceration may impact on both women and their children's well-being, their propensity for holding down employment and avoiding offending in the future (Welsh Public Health Wales 2016). This evaluation of the Visiting Mum scheme, examines how it operates, captures the experiences of those involved, assesses its strengths and weaknesses and determines whether it has reached the objectives set out by Pact (below).

Objectives of Visiting Mum Project

The objectives of the Visiting Mum scheme based in HMP Eastwood Park are as follows:

1. The children of Welsh mothers imprisoned at HMP Eastwood Park experience improved mental and physical health through involvement with the project.
2. There is increased community safety as a result of reduced offending by mothers taking part in the programme.
3. Imprisoned mothers experience less anxiety about issues relating to children and families, leading to fewer incidents of self-harm.
4. Learning from the project leads to improved policy and practice at both local authority Welsh Government and UK Government level.
5. A review of the quality, efficiency and cost effectiveness of the scheme.

To date, the Visiting Mum scheme has worked with 97 mothers (not all of these cases have necessitated the support of a volunteer (as some have been helped only from the prison) and 292 visits have taken place. In total, 164 children have utilised the Visiting Mum scheme in order to visit their mother in prison.

The scheme is widely appreciated and highly valued by all of the key stakeholders, including staff within the prison. Children benefit hugely from the scheme and it is clear that it should continue to operate. Visiting Mum is now embedded within the prison establishment and can be regarded as a flagship project within HMP Eastwood Park, as was noted in the recent inspection (HMIP 2017).

Findings

1. The Visiting Mum scheme reduces the anxieties of children; most children worry about how their mother is coping.
2. Children feel less intimidated by the prison environment, better supported and the Visiting Mum scheme improves the experience of visiting their mothers in prison.
3. The quality of the first visit to the prison is significant for the child as a negative first experience can result in the child not wanting to go on subsequent visits.
4. Visiting Mum does not always manage to intervene and access the child and family prior to the first visit
5. Children hugely value the Visiting Mum service and believe that it has helped to preserve and in some cases strengthen their relationship with their mother and other family members.
6. The less formal, longer visits that the Visiting Mum scheme provide facilitate a high quality, more intimate and nurturing environment for mothers, children and carers.
7. Children receive little, if any support outside of the Visiting Mum Scheme.
8. Children are very appreciative and comment favourably on the skills of both volunteers and Visiting Mum staff. Volunteers and staff provide a potential layer of support for the child.
9. Consistency of volunteer is important for children and carers.
10. Children generally enjoy meeting other young people in similar circumstances.
11. Contact should be viewed as a right of the child, not as a reward for the mother.
12. Women are very appreciative of the Visiting Mum scheme and comment favourably on the commitment and skill of the staff; the project goes some way to addressing and bridging a welfare gap within the prison.
13. Women feel less anxious about the welfare of their children and most have a minimum of monthly visits and regular telephone contact.
14. Women feel that their mental health is improved by accessing Visiting Mum services.
15. Self-harm and adjudications are reduced for those accessing Visiting Mum.
16. Most mothers maintain some of the parenting role from prison- this is seen to be helpful for family re-integration.
17. Women feel that the scheme will help them to integrate back into family and community life upon release.
18. Women feel well supported by Visiting Mum in the prison, but post-release services are minimal, particularly with regard to housing and employment support.
19. The volunteer is well-received and provides a good role model for both mothers and children.

20. Most volunteers would like to be involved in more wrap around support and post release services.
21. The carers for the children believe that the Visiting Mum scheme helps to relieve the emotional and financial pressures on them, where little other support is available.
22. The prison staff value the Visiting Mum service and feel that it is embedded in the prison establishment.
23. Schools in all cases have been helpful in giving permission for children to visit their mothers.
24. There is little knowledge about the scheme across the social care spectrum.

Further benefits of the work are that the project has designed and distributed resource packs for both schools and social workers, and is currently working on a training pack including a new film, which will be completed and launched before the end of the project in September 2017. These resources will be available to local authorities. The Visiting Mum scheme would appear to be an innovative, far-reaching programme, which improves well-being for both mothers and children; it is currently funded at £168,216 per annum.

Recommendations

1. Preparation and support for children's and carer's first visits are vital and a review of how volunteers can become involved more quickly would be helpful. This could be via a duty rota where a volunteer is on daily stand-by and by the use of more specific Visiting Mum orderlies within the prison to pick up referrals.
2. Developing a film that guides the child through the prison visit to accompany the Visiting Mum booklet, may be helpful for the carer and child where a first visit with a volunteer has not been possible.
3. As children receive little or no support when their mother is in prison, the provision of peer group support meetings should be considered, to be held outside of the prison, where the child and family feel that it is appropriate.
4. The preparation and training programme for volunteers could be tailored more specifically for the Visiting Mum scheme, covering attachment, child development and the impact of separation, with an on-going follow-up training programme (covering addiction, domestic abuse and mental health) to help keep volunteers engaged with the scheme and to extend their role.
5. Having the volunteer co-ordinator co-located in the prison would be helpful for staff within the prison and for providing the co-ordinator with an understanding of the needs of the individual women.
6. Visiting Mum staff within the prison may benefit from both specific child law training and clinical supervision given the complexity of the cases that they work with.

7. More use of volunteers (possibly via the Women's Institute) could be made within the prison for the story book CDs (which is time consuming) and provision of food, so that the time of skilled staff is protected.
8. More thought could be given to food more generally and its importance as part of the Visiting Mum visit.
9. More activities to engage older children could be developed, e.g. quizzes and games.
10. The timings of the Visiting Mum visits could be reviewed with regard to a very early start, or indeed for those young people studying for examinations, so they do not miss any of their schooling.
11. Visiting Mum could become involved in more wraparound support for those who would like it, and in particular in post release support (at least for a short transitional period) for those who require it, drawing on the expertise of both Sova and PACT in this area; a focus on both employment and housing would be helpful.
12. More dissemination and engagement with social workers about the service that Visiting Mum provides is important. This might mean inviting social workers into the prison or going out in to the local authority teams. The annual conferences held are helpful and a specific conference for children's social care practitioners may be a way to disseminate information about the scheme.
13. Exploration of how Visiting Mum could have more of a role where social workers are involved with families.
14. Having a liaison social worker based partly in the prison might be a useful addition to the team to build bridges across services and better support women and children. Alternatively, having a designated social worker link for each south Wales local authority would facilitate communication between Visiting Mum and social workers.
15. An exploration of whether the Mother and Baby Unit (when not fully occupied) could be utilised for the Visiting Mum visits. This would provide a more private space, which would not be subject to interruptions.
16. Volunteers would like to be involved in booking the visits, which would increase contact, could help build trust and rapport with carers and would ease the staff's workload.
17. Visiting Mum could be replicated across Eastwood Park prison.