

Evaluation summary: Together a Chance pilot project, 2021 to 2023

Together a Chance is a three-year pilot project placing a Social Worker in two women's prisons, one in HMP Eastwood Park, Gloucestershire and one in HMP Send, Surrey. This project is led by The Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact), a pioneering national charity that supports prisoners, people with convictions, and their children and families. The evaluation was commissioned by Pact, with funding from the Sylvia Adams Trust, and extended from April 2021 to December 2023.

Aims of the intervention

This pilot scheme is offered to women at HMP Send and HMP Eastwood Park whose children are involved with children's social care in the originating local authority. The Pact Social Worker aims to work collaboratively with the child's social worker and/or other key professionals in the multi-agency group, supporting the mother in prison to ensure that she:

- has every opportunity to be directly involved in decision making,
- is represented at key meetings and
- is empowered to take an active part in the planning for her family's future.

Key facts about mothers in the study

- 94 mothers have accessed the Together a Chance service since it started in April 2021, 48 at HMP Eastwood Park, 46 at HMP Send.
- 74% of mothers had 2 or more children; and 13% had more than 5 children.
- Most were aged 30 to 39 (62%) and white British (79%), but those identifying as black and gypsy or Irish traveller were over-represented.
- 29% reported being involved with social services as a child, compared to 1.15% across the UK.
- 22% reported a history of domestic abuse and this continues to be a feature in prison.
- The majority were single or separated (77%) – with implications for childcare arrangements.
- The level of social isolation is high - 20% of the mothers reported having no contact or very limited contact with family and friends.
- 46% of mothers reported having no direct or indirect contact with their children at the start of the intervention.
- 35% were subject to the Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) care planning process within the prison due to risk of self-harm.

Care arrangements for related children

- Siblings were separated in 63% of cases where the mother has more than one child.
- This high percentage often involves multiple placements and, in 55% of families, at least one of the children was accommodated away from their birth family.
- At the time of referral, all children were living with their father or their mother's partner in only 16% of families.
- For 19% of mothers at least one child had been or was being placed for adoption, resulting in the loss of parental responsibility.
- The Pact Social Workers supported 44 mothers (48%) who were either in legal proceedings relating to their children or needed assistance with legal access. Active proceedings were more common at HMP Eastwood Park (64%) than at HMP Send (36%).
- The 56 originating local authorities for the children were widely dispersed across England, Wales and Scotland.



About the prisons

- HMP Send has capacity for around 200 women. The mothers in HMP Send had committed more serious offences and are less likely to have contact or have children live with them in the future, and thus the focus is often on supporting women to manage expectations and their feelings of loss and despair, with risk management around contact playing a significant role.
- HMP Eastwood Park has a capacity for around 380 women and offers a Mother and Baby Unit (MBU). There is a higher throughput of mothers, and the role involves more active family court work, supporting and contributing to reports for parenting assessments or for mothers who wish to be placed with their baby on the MBU.

Key findings

- Pact Social Workers are acting as mediators for mothers, supporting engagement with social services and ensuring that wherever possible relationships are maintained.
- Mothers are very satisfied with their Pact Social Worker. Most mothers (91%) reported feeling supported by professionals within the prison, more so than by professionals outside, where relationships are often fractured and antagonistic.
- The trusting and respectful relationship between the Pact Social Worker and the mother contributes to 'a healthy establishment'. Prison staff report that it serves to reduce suspicion and promotes trust in social workers in the community.
- Contact issues were resolved in the best interests of the child for 88% of the 60 mothers where this was identified as an aim: 68% had a contact plan in place and for 20% direct contact was not possible due to the offence and mothers were supported with this outcome.
- The Pact Social Workers also contribute to formal assessments such as parenting assessments, risk assessments and grant applications.
- The Pact Social Workers are helping mothers to improve how they engage and communicate with their children. Community practitioners reported that children were more settled.
- The Pact Social Workers also help to upskill prison staff in 'the legal landscape'. Prison staff noted that this knowledge base does not seem to be held elsewhere within the institution.
- Pact Social Workers play a significant role in supporting women experiencing mental health difficulties including those that self-harm, often related to concerns about their children.
- The scheme appears to improve the utilisation of the mother and baby unit. The number of TaC mothers living with their baby on the MBU increased from two to seven during the evaluation. The Pact Social Worker additionally supported five mothers with child contact on the MBU.
- The Pact Social Workers are helping mothers to plan their 'future family' and learning to accept that this may look different to what might have been envisaged without support.
- The nature of the work is complex and varies in each prison. The overriding view was the role requires a prison-based social worker, although there were differing views about who should employ them - a third sector organisation, the Ministry of Justice or local authority secondment.

Our conclusions

- The study has provided clear and incontrovertible evidence of the need for a qualified, prison-based Social Worker.
- This pilot scheme has demonstrated that mothers can, with the right support, continue to play a role in their children's lives and be involved in decisions relating to their welfare where it is in the best interests of the children.
- The Pact Social Workers are demonstrating that they can maintain a 'child-focused plus' approach and are able to work for the benefit of the child and the mother, and that the differing perspectives are not necessarily polarised.
- For those children where ongoing contact is not appropriate due to the nature of the mother's offence, our findings suggest that skilled support in educating and being transparent with mothers is having a positive impact on wellbeing and contributing to the child's identity through life story work.

“This evaluation adds to the weight of evidence demonstrating the importance of having a social worker based in women’s prisons. Our evaluation highlighted how many women did not have contact with their children prior to the involvement of the prison-based social worker. It also demonstrated how little community social workers know about accessing a prison and are not always aware that mothers retain their parental rights even when incarcerated. The prison-based social workers came alongside mothers to support them at an extremely stressful time, helping them attend court and meetings about their children, whilst retaining a child focus. In some cases, they helped mothers come to terms with not being allowed to have contact with their children. All the mothers rated the service highly and we hope that a prison-based social worker will become the norm in all women’s prisons”.

Professor Alyson Rees, Principal Investigator at CASCADE

Reference to the full report:

- Rees, A., Waits, C and Bezczky, Z. (2024) ‘Together a Chance’: Evaluation of the Social Worker for Mothers in Prison pilot project, 2021-2023, Final Report. Cardiff: CASCADE. Available at: <https://cascadewales.org/research/evaluation-of-together-a-chance/>

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