



CASCADE

'Together a Chance'

Evaluation of the Social Worker for Mothers in
Prison pilot project, 2021-2023

Interim Evaluation: Year One

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June 2022



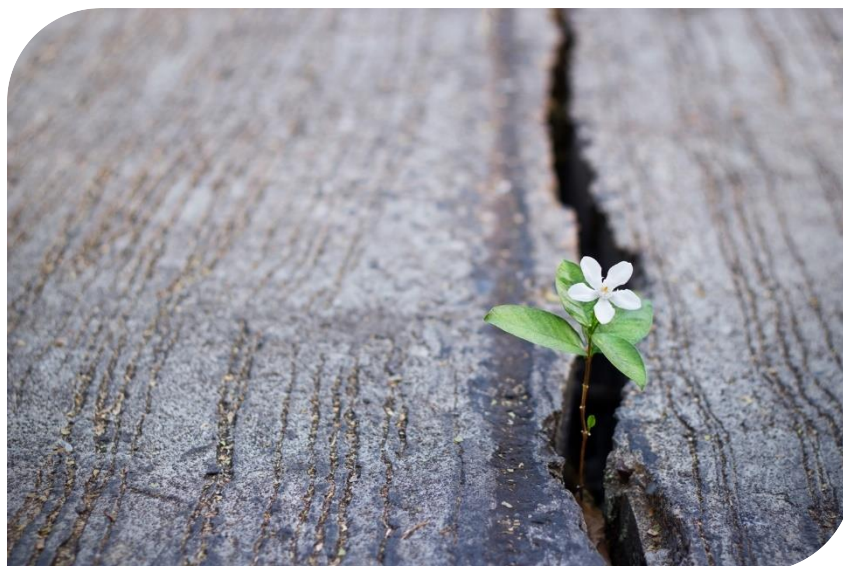
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*All names of mothers and local authorities have been changed to preserve anonymity.

We would also like to note the difficulties that COVID-19 and lockdown caused for mothers in prison who were unable to see family members for many months. The restrictions to visiting commenced in March 2020. The project started during lockdown in April 2021 and the prison service has only lifted restrictions in November 2021, but to varying degrees because of further outbreaks of COVID-19.

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Executive summary

Findings

This interim report covers 13 months of data collection from the Together a Chance (TaC) project's inception in April 2021 to May 2022.

- The Social Workers have reported working with 35 women, 19 in HMP Eastwood Park, 16 in HMP Send.
- The Social Workers are acting as a conduit of information, facilitating contact between mothers and community practitioners, mothers and courts, and mothers and children.
- Relationships between local authority Social Workers and mothers are often antagonistic, fractured and sometimes non-existent.
- The Social Worker provides support to mothers in both attending meetings around their children and family court proceedings.
- The feedback from mothers and community practitioners is that the role of the Social Worker is invaluable to both groups.
- The Social Worker can undertake parenting assessments and facilitate visitation, potentially reducing the workload of the community practitioner.
- The Social Workers support mothers for a short time post release and will continue to attend meetings with women, where this is required.
- The difference in online meeting platforms utilised by the prison service and local authority teams acts as a barrier to attendance at virtual meetings.
- Communication and negotiation with courts is difficult, often providing late notice of court dates which does not facilitate women's involvement or attendance.
- Having a solicitor scheme in HMP Send is extremely beneficial.
- The two prisons are quite different, and thus the service offered by the Social Worker project cannot be standardised.
- The range and extent of the Social Workers' work is impressive, and the role is becoming embedded within both prison establishments.
- The Social Worker has become part of, and in some cases brought together, the team around the child.

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- The Social Workers have taken on new cases, whilst also continuing work with some existing cases from Pact. There is evidence of the complexity of work which reinforces the importance of this being a qualified social worker. The roles of the Social Workers and the FEW are however complementary.
 - In the majority of cases, timescales for the prison Social Worker intervention are either unknown or highly variable due to case complexity and dependency on external agencies for decision making.
 - The Social Workers are building the trust of mothers by demonstrating respect and coming alongside; they are beginning to have an impact on how mothers engage with community Social Workers.
 - The Social Workers are demonstrating that they can hold a 'child-focused plus' approach (Forrester et al. 2008) and are able to work for the benefit of the child and the mother, and the differing perspectives are not necessarily polarised.
 - The Social Worker has been helping women to collate evidence of the extensive training and counselling they have received to demonstrate where significant change has been made, often over a long sentence. This pilot scheme is beginning to demonstrate 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 Social Worker can help gradually increase contact at the child's pace.
 - There are examples where the Social Worker role has been very beneficial for children.
 - For some cases, the role of the Social Worker has changed the trajectory of the case.
 - For those children where ongoing contact is not appropriate due to the nature of the mother's offence, this early data suggests 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.
 - The Social Workers arrange final contact meetings between mothers and children prior to adoption.
 - The Social Workers advise mothers how to better communicate with their children, for example by modelling topics to introduce at contact.
 - Domestic abuse was a significant feature in the previous lives of mothers accessing the project.
 - Where children are residing with fathers and there is a history of domestic abuse, there are ongoing issues around negotiating contact with children.
 - The Social Workers are often mediating between families.

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- A very high percentage of siblings are separated, and this then involves more than one children's Social Worker, sometimes across different local authorities.
 - The MBU within HMP Eastwood Park is not at full capacity (between 2 and five places being occupied)
 - The data around whether women have been known to Social Services or in care themselves as children is incomplete.

There are a range of barriers to the work, and we have suggested a range of recommendations that the TaC pilot might consider, to develop the scheme further. Whilst the list of suggestions is long, this is no reflection on the quality of the service being provided, as evidenced in the full report, but more that this is a new pilot intervention, and should be seen as opportunities for extension and honing the service.

Overall, the data gathered so far suggests that this is a promising intervention which is beginning to have an impact on both mothers in prison and their families, closely aligned with all four healthy prison tests as set out by HM Inspectorate of Prisons, namely safety, respect, purposeful activity and rehabilitation and release planning.

Recommendations

- The length of the TaC intervention is unknown and highly variable. Court proceedings ongoing are taking a year, therefore issues of case throughput with only one worker at each prison, may create the risk of having a waiting list and the Social Workers may need to consider prioritisation or some other solution.
- In relation to early findings of a tension around parental rights and responsibilities for both mothers and professionals, there is an identified need for education in this area. The TaC scheme gives unrivalled access to local authorities (our data suggests that the social workers have links in different local authorities so far) and we recommend that Pact harness this opportunity to create and distribute an educational resource for professionals. A similar factsheet could be created for mothers who identify a need to understand their rights.
- Of the 35 cases, it is worth noting that only 2 cases were brought to the attention of TaC by the children's Social Worker in the community. This suggests that there is a need for awareness raising with local authorities and courts to ensure that cases in proceedings are brought to the attention of the prison.
- Limited data has been collected on how many mothers have care experience and it would be helpful for the Social Workers to discuss this more fully with women as a means of understanding previous experiences of children's social care, and to work towards resolving issues of mistrust, and developing a positive working relationship with professionals for the benefit of their children.
- Relationships with court personnel are difficult, with late notice about court hearings, meaning mothers have less time for preparation; this will impact women in prison more significantly. It seems the court does not seem to appreciate that women are in prison when they send through links for courts dates. Arranging high level meetings to build relationships and understanding with court personnel is recommended.
- Community practitioners have suggested that the Social Workers might attempt to become involved at an earlier stage, potentially at the court or sentencing stage. Again, furthering links with courts might be useful in this respect. The development for guides for women attending court and their Social Workers in the community might also be helpful.
- HMP Send has access to pro-bono solicitor services, and exploration as to whether a similar scheme could be developed at HMP Eastwood Park could be considered.

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- One Social Worker also suggested that McKenzie Friend training be extended across the prison to key workers, for example, so that prison staff more widely become aware of the rights of mothers. It maybe that the Social Workers could also create information sheets and training sessions about the rights of mothers for other prison staff.
 - Most community practitioners are using Microsoft Teams as a platform for online meetings, but this is not accessible from within the prison. It is difficult to know how this can be progressed other than to discuss with higher management.
 - Experience of domestic abuse appears to be prolific and providing or signposting training on this for mothers would be a helpful addition to the one-to-one work, especially to support them with parenting through coercion and control.
 - Similarly, creating training for non-resident parenting, for those mothers who will only have limited contact would be useful, as mentioned by one mother.
 - Life story work seems to be important in helping children develop a narrative and understanding of the situation.
 - Mothers are legally entitled to receive support when their children are being adopted. For some mothers in prison, adoption support will be essential, especially to deal with issues of loss. It maybe that links could be made to the work on Pause projects such as Boddy et al. (2020). In HMP Eastwood Park there is a new peri-natal service who will be dealing with much of this aspect of the work with mothers.
 - It is notable how many siblings are separated, and the importance of sibling support is recognised (Alisic, 2022). It might be useful to consider if there are any ways to support contact between siblings.
 - We note the HMP Send inspection report of May 2021 where ‘rehabilitation and release planning’ was identified as an area in need of improvement. We will continue to interview mothers one month after release and discuss this aspect of their work.

Next stages of the evaluation

Our plans for the forthcoming year include interviewing prison governors to review how well the scheme has become embedded in both prisons, as well as three strategic actors, potentially (i) Lead of women’s estate (ii) Children and families lead (iii) Senior Policy Officer overseeing implementation of Lord Farmer’s recommendations to review their perception of the Social Worker in prion role and any views on how the scheme is working. We also anticipate visiting both prisons in Spring 2023, as part of a plan to collect more data around the practicalities of work on the ground. We will continue to collect data via the case trackers, surveys and interview with

community practitioners, and mothers in prison and released. The second interim report will be due in May 2023.

Background

Together a Chance

Together a Chance (TaC) is a three-year pilot project placing a Social Worker¹ in two women's prisons, one in HMP Eastwood Park, Gloucestershire and one in HMP Send, Surrey. The pilot is running from January 2021 to December 2023. 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. At both prisons, Pact had a pre-existing team, which included a Family Engagement Worker, and it was through their work that the need for additional support for mothers with children was identified.

Aims of the intervention

The post of Social Worker, as part of the Pact team within the prison, is to act as an advocate for women whose children are involved with children's social care in the originating local authority. Together a Chance aims to support best practice, by working together with other agencies in the best interests of the children whilst also promoting the mother's parental rights.

All practitioners should follow the principles of the Children Acts 1989 and 2004 - that state that the welfare of children is paramount and that they are best looked after within their families, with their parents playing a full part in their lives, unless compulsory intervention in family life is necessary.

(Working Together to Safeguard Children statutory guidance, 2018, p.9)

¹ We refer to Social Worker (capitalised) throughout this report to denote the protected title (2008) (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uk/si/2018/893/part/6/made>)

In line with statutory guidance, the TaC Social Worker works collaboratively with the child's Social Worker and/or other key professionals in the multi-agency group and supports 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.

The TaC Social Worker helps women held at the prison to engage successfully with other professionals, and assists with family visits. The aim is for the TaC Social Worker to become part of the team around the child. The Social Worker is responsible for delivery of one to one and group interventions such as parenting courses, skills boosting sessions, family group conferencing and supported visits.

The TaC Social Worker will also play a part in upskilling both the Pact and wider social care workforce about mothers in prison, through liaison and training to external agencies and professionals, including local authority social care teams. The TaC Social Worker also forms relationships with support agencies in home communities to create effective referral pathways to other support where needed, including Pact Through the Gate support and welfare grants applications where appropriate. This evaluation aims to consider the added value brought to Pact by the two new Social Worker roles.

The TaC Social Work role is intended to offer direct support to 120 mothers across the three years of the study (60 per prison, 20 per year, per prison). The TaC Social Workers (usually via a weekly Pact management meeting) make early identification of those mothers in need of support and once identified will provide emotional and practical support, as well as advocacy with regards to any care proceedings and regaining custody. The mothers serving sentences typically originate from across the South of England and Wales. Each TaC Social Worker will also be responsible for providing direct support to carers who are looking after the female prisoner's children in the community (this maybe foster carers or informal carers).

Placing a Social Worker for mothers in women's prisons has long been recommended by previous research studies (Rees et al. 2017). The Social Worker based in the prison is supported by other Pact staff. HMP Eastwood Park have one existing Pact worker and a Visiting Mum worker (a further Visiting Mum worker is based at Styal prison). The Social Worker at HMP Eastwood Park is based in the mother and baby unit (MBU) to enable them to advocate on behalf of the mothers within the unit. There is an existing part-time Family Engagement Worker and team manager in HMP Send.

Prison Context

HMP Eastwood Park

HMP Eastwood Park is a women's prison in Bristol with a population of around 400 women. The prison has a large catchment area that includes South West England, South Wales, and West Wales. At the time of the prison's last inspection in May 2019, almost half (49%) of women were located more than 50 miles from home (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2019). Most women at the prison at the time of the inspection were serving a sentence or indeterminate sentence (73%), but women were also on recall (8%) or on remand or awaiting sentence (18%). Sixty per cent of women were serving a sentence of less than four years. Over half (59%) of women who completed the inspection survey reported that they had children under the age of 18 (ibid). In 2004, HMP Eastwood Park opened a MBU. Six of the 12 women's prisons in England have MBUs (Ministry of Justice, 2020). The units provide women with the opportunity to have their young child with them in prison when it's in the child's best interests. The units support mothers with children up to 18 months old and seek to establish a safe, secure, and nurturing environment and promote the mother/child relationship. HMP Eastwood Park also has specialist units for mental health, drug recovery, and personality disorders (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2019).

HMP Send

HMP Send is a women's prison in Surrey that has capacity for around 200 women. At the time of the most recent inspection in May 2021, almost all women (93%) were sentenced or serving an indeterminate sentence (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021). Most women (89%) at the prison were serving a sentence of four years or more. Forty-four per cent of women who took part in the inspection survey reported that they had children under the age of 18 (ibid). There are two types of specialist units at HMP Send (ibid). First, a psychologically informed planned environment (PIPE) that supports women with personality disorders and complex needs. Second, a democratic therapeutic community (DTC) that provides women with the opportunity to take part in a group-based approach to addressing mental illness, personality disorders, and drug addiction. HMP Send is the only women's prison in England to have a DTC.

Data collection- April 2021 until May 2022

Year 1

- The ethics application for Cardiff University was completed and granted.
- There was a delay to HMPSS accepting applications to undertake research because of COVID-19. The application process only opened up in November 2021 and ethics from HMPPS granted in late November 2021.

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- We have tracked 35 'cases' of mothers taking part in the TaC scheme (19 from HMP Eastwood Park, 16 from HMP Send). Case tracker documentation is completed by the TaC Social Worker at the start of the intervention and a follow-up survey every 6 months or until the work is complete.
 - We have undertaken initial and follow up interviews with both TaC Social Workers, in June 2021 and May 2022 (N=4)
 - We have interviewed five mothers in prison
 - We interviewed three mothers (one month after) released from prison
 - We have analysed surveys completed by 23 mothers at T1 (the outset of the intervention facilitated by the TaC Social Worker) and 14 at T2 (6 months later)
 - We have interviewed six practitioners/Social Workers in the community who have worked with the TaC project
 - We have received surveys from five practitioners/Social Workers in the community
 - We have interviewed one carer in the community

June 2022- write short, initial report (including recommendations for next year).

Data analysis

We have reported descriptive statistics for the TaC case trackers and the surveys completed by community practitioners and mothers engaged with the TaC service. All interviews have been recorded and professionally transcribed by an independent transcription service. We have thematically analysed the interviews and the following substantive themes have emerged: conduit of information, team around the child, a human rights-based approach to social work, relationships with community Social Workers, domestic abuse and welfare of the child.

Guidance for Pact & prison practitioners

This quarter we are aware that a guide to Social Services interventions, a guide to Letterbox contact and an information sheet on life story work have been completed but not yet circulated; we have not had sight of these. These will form the beginnings of the practitioner toolkit and be shared with Pact and Prison staff locally at first, with a view to rolling out the toolkit more widely as it develops.

Findings

Case tracker data

The TaC Social Workers were asked to keep a record of the mothers they work with who have consented to take part in the evaluation. The TaC Social Workers completed a survey on a spreadsheet proforma for each mother when they started working together. The proforma details the demographic information about the mother and her children, offence type and length, the mother's self-identified needs for the service and the TaC Social Worker's assessment and plan. The TaC Social Worker completed a subsequent update survey for each case every 6 months or until the intervention ended. The 6-monthly tracking survey records case updates, a summary of the work completed, updated plans for the intervention, and where relevant, case closure information.

Profile of mothers

The baseline information provided offers valuable insight into the profile of the women who have accessed this pilot scheme to date. Information was provided about 35 women (19 in HMP Eastwood Park and 16 in HMP Send). Fourteen women (40%) were aged between 30 and 34 (see Figure 1), and most (88%) were White British (see Figure 2). Nearly all women were single or separated (83%) and a small proportion (11%) were married or in a relationship. Based on information received to date, 8 women (23%) were known to social services or in care as a child (see Table 1). This is higher than UK 1.15% (community averages) (Home for Good, 2021). This aligns with other research in prisons which places it at almost 25% across the wider prison population (Berman, 2013) and at nearly 31% in women's prisons (Fitzpatrick and Hunter 2021; MoJ, 2012). In 10 cases (29%), the TaC Social Workers did not know whether the woman was known to social services as a child or not. This could therefore clearly be much higher in this study. It would be helpful to gain a more complete understanding of the background of women accessing TaC in the next stage of the evaluation.

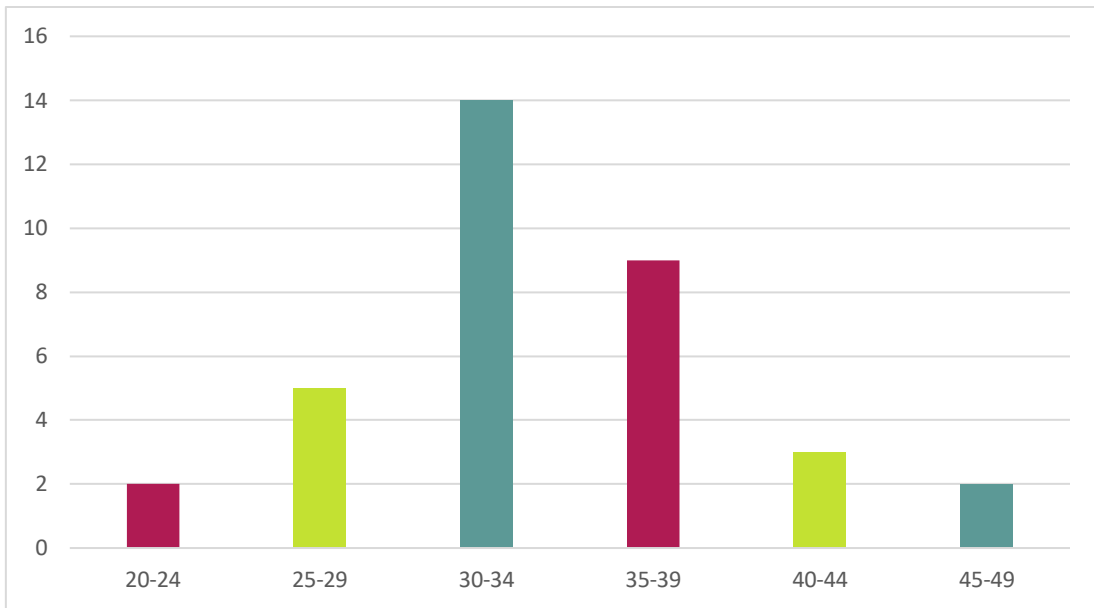


Figure 1: Age profile of mothers accessing TaC across both prisons

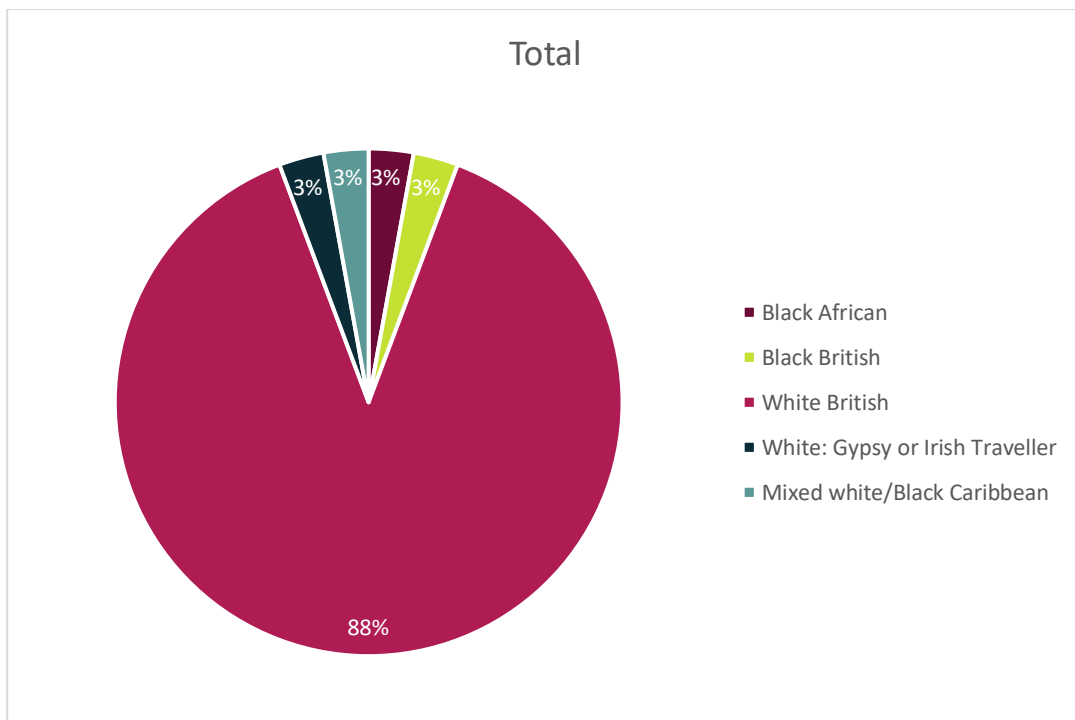


Figure 2: Ethnic profile of mothers accessing TaC across both prisons

	Eastwood Park		Send		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes	5	26	3	19	8	23
Not Known	1	5	9	56	10	29
No	13	68	4	25	17	49
Total	19	100	16	100	35	100

Table 1: Mothers accessing TaC who were known to social services or in care as a child

Mothers were estimated to come from 26 different local authority areas, based on the reported local authorities for their children's Social Workers. The local authorities were predominantly from across Wales (n = 6) and the south-east, south-west, the midlands and eastern regions of England, though also from metropolitan boroughs in north-west and north-east of England. Whilst the originating areas differ slightly, the spread is consistent across both prisons, as each TaC Social Worker has reported a connection with children's social care in 14 local authority areas.

Most mothers accessing TaC were sentenced (74%), and the majority were serving three years or more (72%). As expected, the sentence length varied by prison (see Figure 3). Mothers at HMP Eastwood Park were more likely to be serving shorter sentences and mothers at HMP Send were more likely to be serving longer sentences. This pattern fits with the profile of the prisons (see section on Prison Context above). A small proportion of mothers were on remand (16%) or recall (9%). All mothers on remand were based at HMP Eastwood Park.

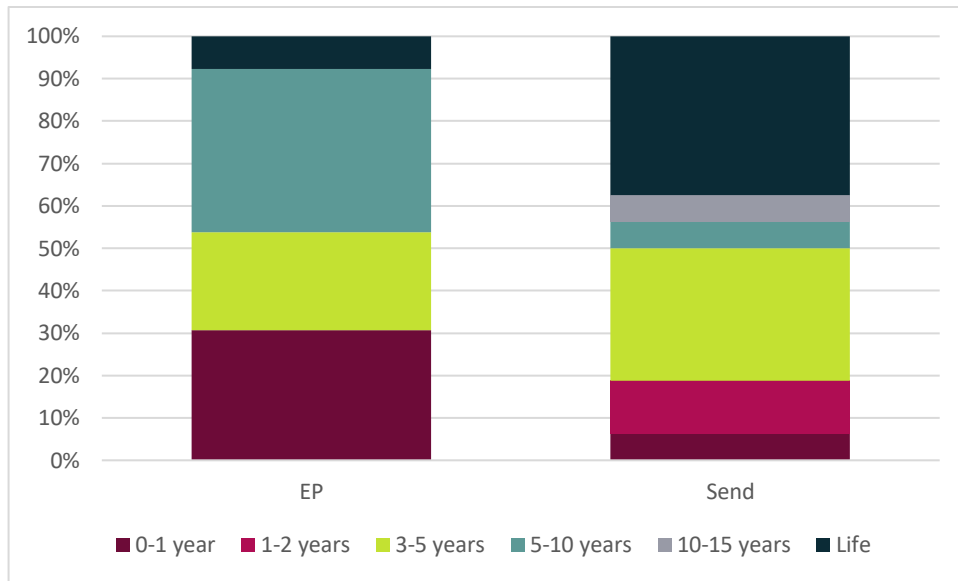


Figure 3: Sentence length profile of mothers accessing TaC by prison

In both prisons, most mothers were in prison for the first time (63% in HMP Eastwood Park and 94% in HMP Send). However, a higher proportion of mothers at HMP Eastwood Park had been in prison previously (see Figure 4).

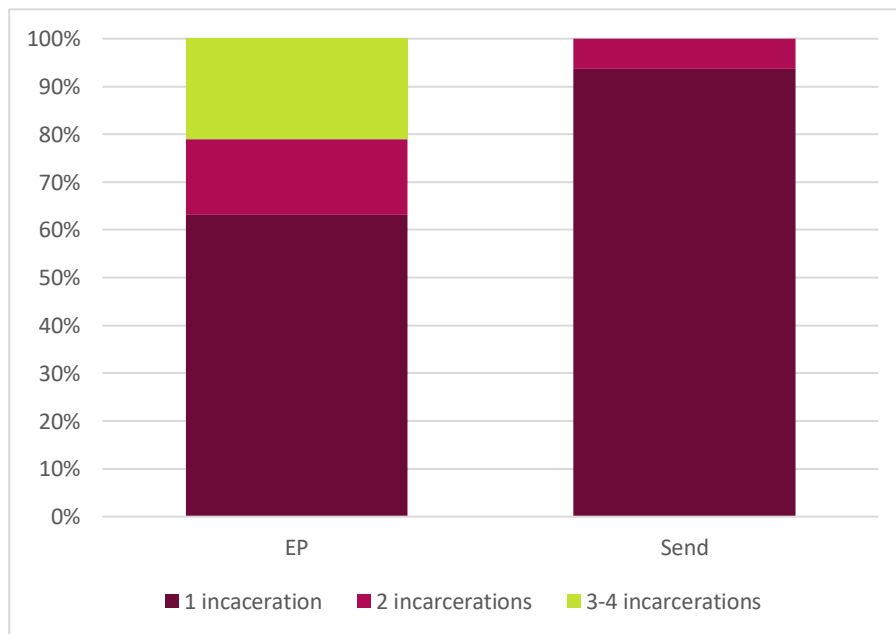


Figure 4: Incarceration profile of mothers by prison

Mothers were in prison for a range of offences, including assault, robbery, fraud, and murder or attempted murder. Table 2 provides an overview of the offences across both prisons. Seven of the mothers (20%) were serving sentences for offences reported to be linked to their own children and this is notable as it has implications for contact and care planning.

Offence category	n	%
Assault/wounding with intent	4	11
Breach of order	1	3
Burglary/robbery/theft	4	11
Child sexual offence	5	14
Driving related	2	6
Drugs related	7	20
Fraud	1	3
Murder/attempted murder	8	23
Neglect/abuse	2	6
Perverting course of justice	1	3
Total	35	100

Table 2: Offence profile of mothers accessing TaC

Profile of mothers' children

Around one quarter of mothers accessing TaC had one child under the age of 18, 17% had two children, and 57% had three or more children (see Figure 5). Of the 25 mothers who had more than one child, 65% had siblings who were living separately and this included a mixture of family placements, foster placements, and adoption (see Figure 6). It is difficult to determine why siblings are separated, this might be due to fractured paternity, the lack of capacity within families and friendship networks, or the lack of foster carers who can accommodate sibling groups. Additionally, it might be that care planning guidance might lead local authorities to put younger children forward for adoption, which would be less possible for sibling groups. All mothers in HMP Eastwood Park have sibling groups living separately, and 69% of those mothers at HMP Send. Studies have highlighted the importance of siblings when having a parent in prison (Alisic, 2022).

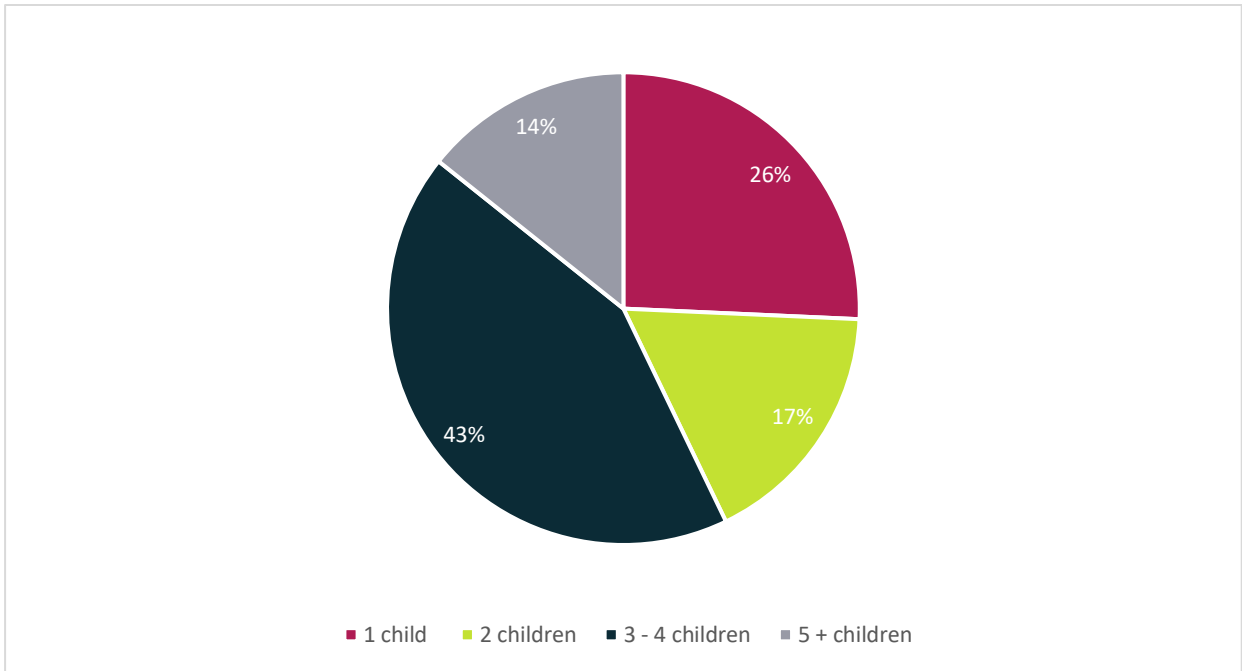


Figure 5: Family size of mothers accessing TaC

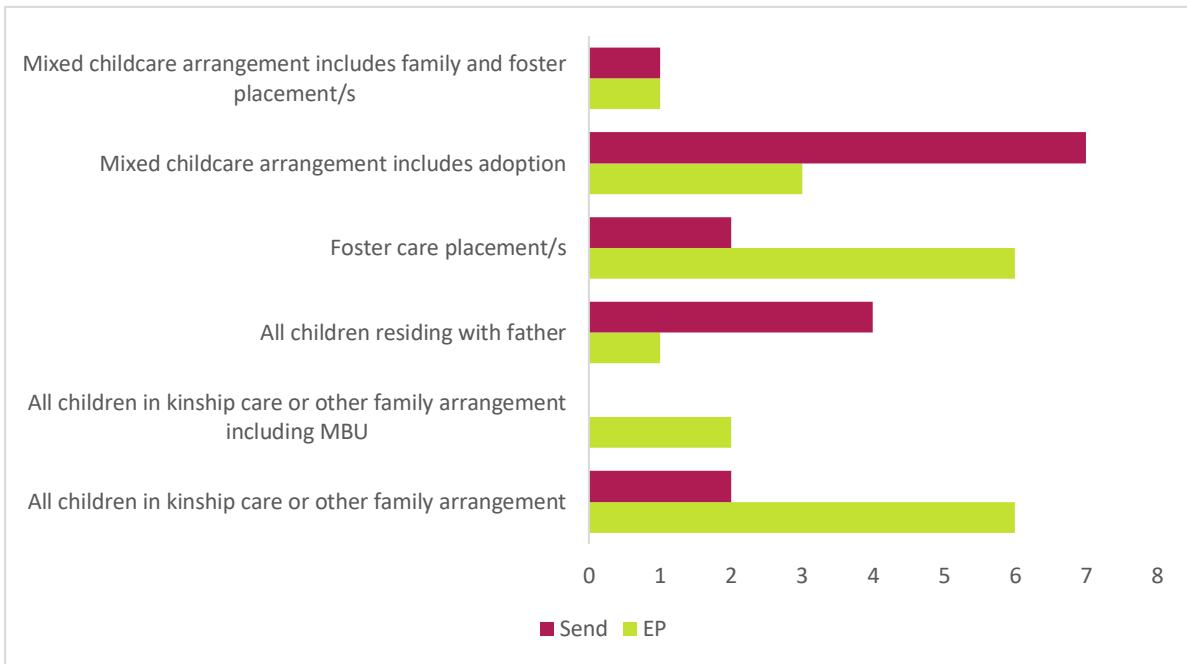
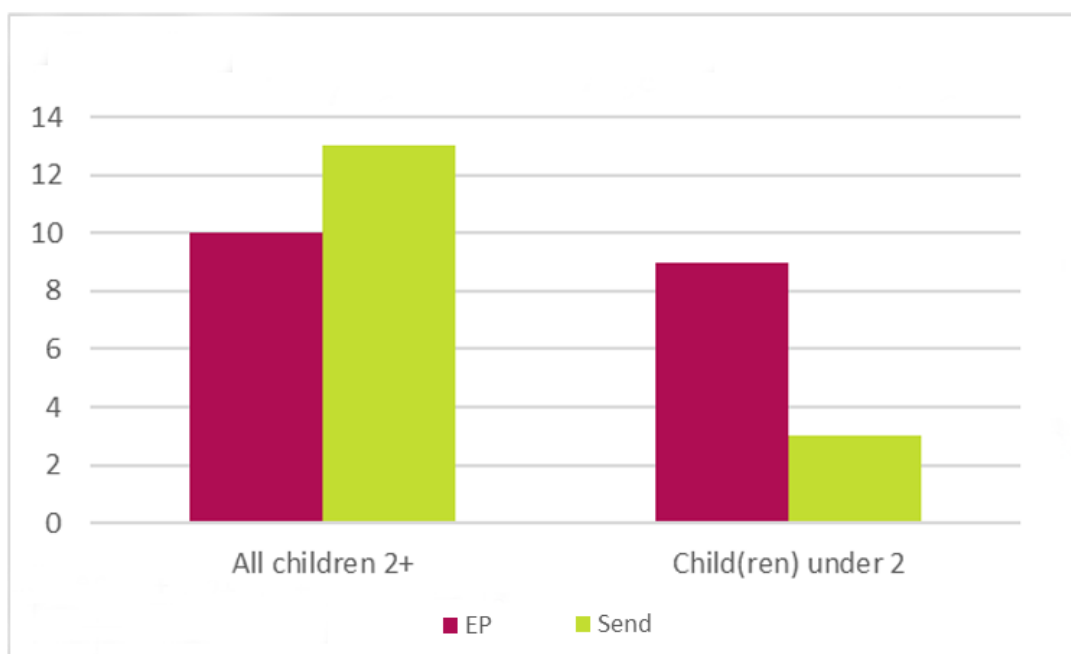


Figure 6: Care arrangement of mothers' children at referral

Only two mothers out of the 19 cases from HMP Eastwood Park were reported to have a child with them in the MBU. This is interesting, given that a significant proportion of mothers at HMP Eastwood Park reported having children aged 2 or under (n= 9, 47%, see Figure 6).



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Figure 7 Age profile of mothers' children by prison

Case complexity

Only one mother had no current Social Worker involvement. Most mothers (77%) had one Social Worker and 20% had two Social Workers. It is assumed that this is children's Social Workers, and reflects the sibling splits across families, with different groups of children placed in different care arrangements. For example, if one group of siblings are in long term foster care they are likely to have a 'looked after' or 16+ Social Worker, whereas younger children in court proceedings would have a children's Social Worker from the locality (or occasionally) a Court team. There will also be a fostering Social Worker supervising and supporting the foster carer. Similarly, if there are some children in kinship care or with father but the placement is not stable, they will have a Social Worker from the locality child in need/child protection team.

Family court proceedings were ongoing in 17 cases (14 in HMP Eastwood Park and 3 in HMP Send) and historical proceedings were reported in 12 cases (9 in HMP Send and 3 in HMP Eastwood Park see Figure 8). This possibly reflects the different offence and profile of the two prisons and suggests that the day to day work of the TaC Social Workers at each prison may be quite different. There were no known orders in place in only 6 of the 35 cases across both prisons.

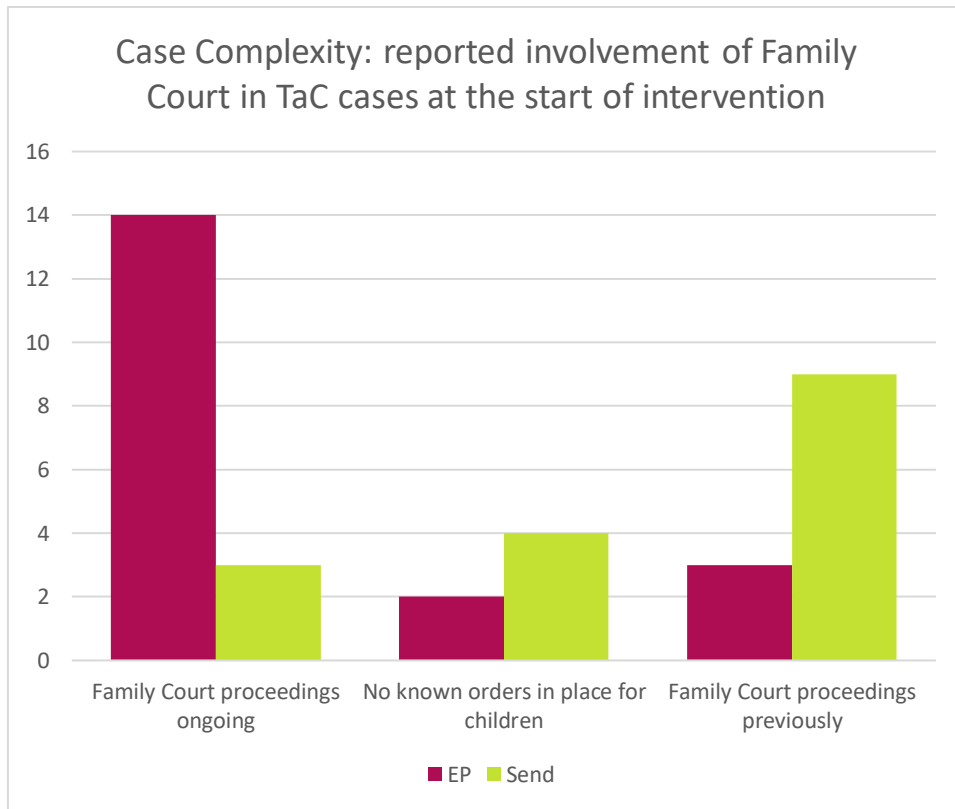


Figure 8 Involvement of Family Court in TaC cases at the start of the intervention

Reported needs at triage

The TaC service uses a triage form in which the mother writes, or is supported to write, information about her needs for support from the TaC Social Worker. This information was provided as part of the initial case tracker survey and thematic analysis of this data was undertaken to ascertain self-identified needs.

Similarly, the Social Workers provided their analysis of priorities for each mother at the outset of the intervention.

Needs reported by mothers at start of intervention

Mothers identified the following needs at the start of the intervention:

- Support to establish/improve relationship and/or contact with children (n=28)

- Support to improve communication with Children's Social Care and be included in welfare decisions (n=17)
- Support pre-release to improve parenting viability and promote contact/care of children (n=9)
- Support to navigate the Family Court process (n=8)
- Support with adoption transition (n=8)
- Support to maintain family placement and sibling relationships (n=6)
- Help to understand rights and likely outcome in relation to children (n=5)

It is notable that whilst contact was identified as the most significant need by mothers at both prisons (requested by 80% of mothers at triage), there is a significant difference between the cohorts of mothers from each prison in their request for help navigating the Family Court process (see Figure 9 overleaf). This reflects the higher number of mothers with ongoing Court proceedings at HMP Eastwood Park.

Another notable finding is that 8 mothers across the two prisons specifically requested support was in relation to adoption. This included tangible aspects associated with goodbye contact, arranging meeting with prospective adopters as well as emotional support. It should be noted that mothers have a right to access support when their child is being or has been adopted².

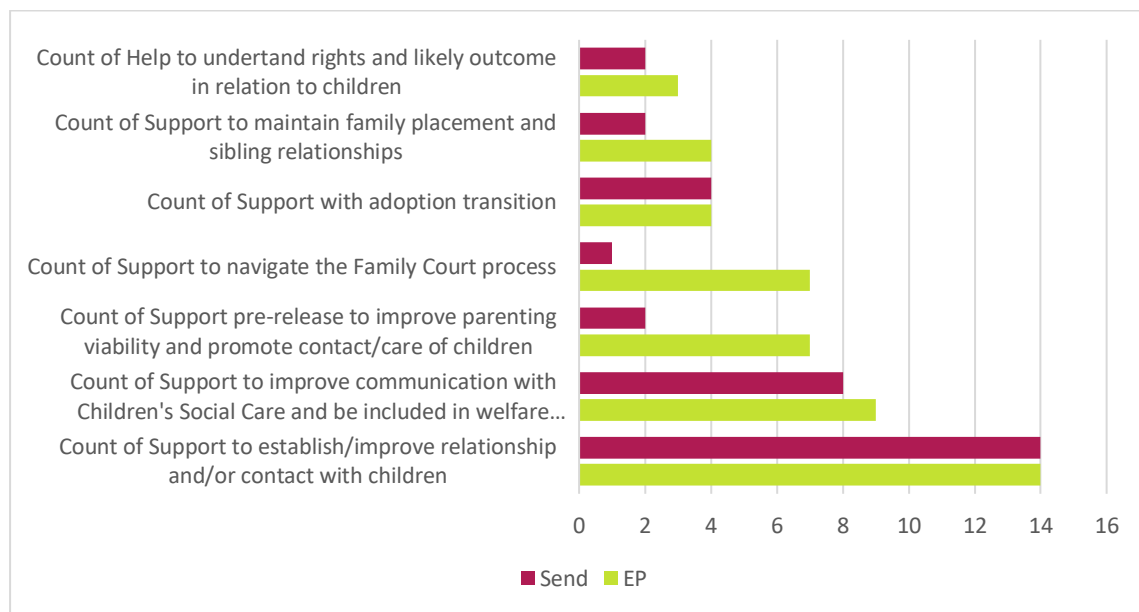


Figure 9 Needs reported by mothers at triage by prison cohorts

² The requirement for local authorities in England to provide or fund support is legislated under the Adoption and Children Act 2002, strengthened by the Adoption Services Support Regulations 2005. See: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/38/contents> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2005/691/contents/made>

Needs identified by the TaC Social Worker

The TaC Social Workers identified the following needs for mothers at the start of the intervention:

- Contact agreement (n=23)
- Improve working relationships (n=22)
- Collaborative plan with CSC now and in longer term (n=16)
- Support mother to engage in legal proceedings and assessment (n=11)
- Educate and provide support for transparency (n=8)
- Support for release (n=7)
- Improve relationships with family carers (n=3)
- Promote maternal identity in prison (n=3)
- Additional support to address needs in prison re DV etc (n=3)
- Collaborative life story work with CSC (n=1)

Figure 10 shows the needs identified by each prison cohort. It is worth noting that although 'contact' is identified as the highest priority need overall across the two prisons, the language used by TaC Social Workers highlighted the importance of clear plans, working collaboratively with the children's Social Worker to put an agreement in place, unlocking legislative barriers to achieve contact (e.g. Child Contact Restrictions/Public Protection) or co-ordinating letterbox contact.

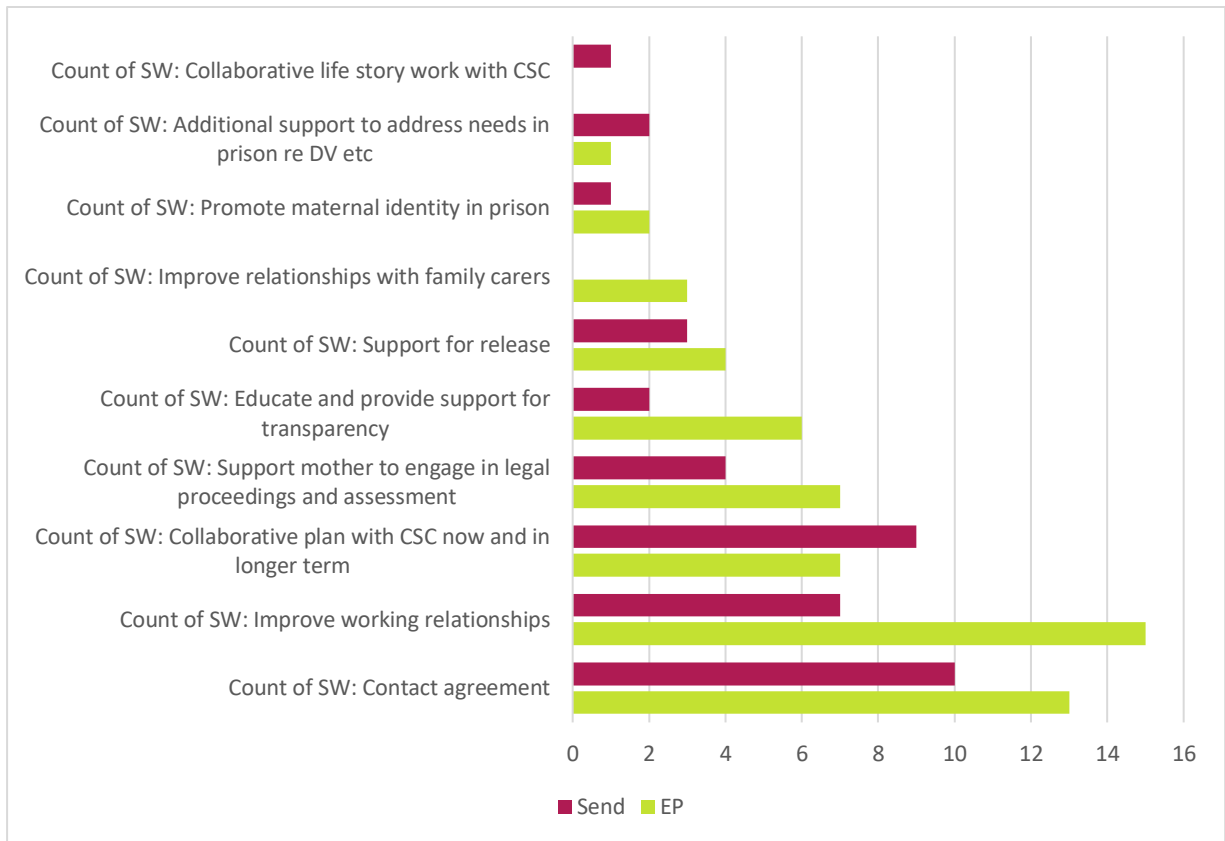


Figure 10 Needs reported by TaC Social Worker at triage by prison cohorts

Referral of cases and timeline for intervention

Of the 35 cases reported so far, a significant number (n=15) were already known to Pact and this probably reflects the fact that there was an existing family worker in both prisons (see figure xxx).

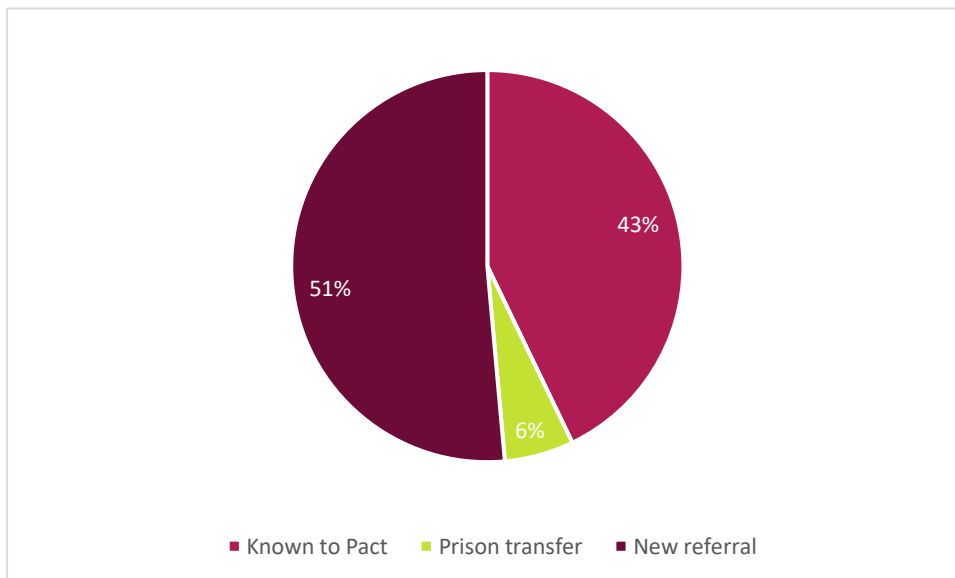


Figure 11 Source of new referrals

Women typically referred themselves to the TaC service, especially at HMP Eastwood Park (see Figure 7). At HMP Send, women were referred to the service by other professionals including the mother's Prison Offender Manager (POM) and others working in the Offender Management Unit (OMU), where the TaC Social Worker is based.

It is worth noting that only two cases were brought to the attention of TaC service by a children's Social Worker in the community. This suggests that there is a need for awareness raising with local authorities and Courts to ensure that cases in proceedings are brought to the attention of the prison.

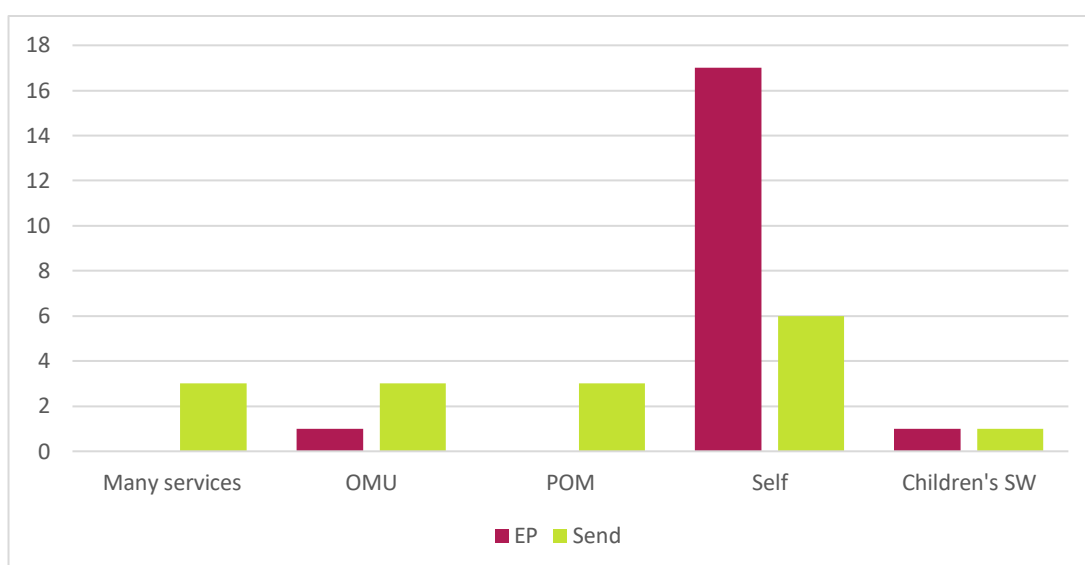


Figure 12 Source of new TaC referrals by prison

Note: OMU = Offender Management Unit, POM = Prison Offender Manager, Children's SW= Children's Social Worker

TaC Social Workers were asked to record the referral date and the date of the 1st meeting or professional contact, and this was taken as the start date for the intervention (T1). The 3 cases reported prior to Year 1 are probably explained by the fact that The Social Worker at HMP Send previously occupied the role of the Family Engagement Worker and so appropriate cases transferred seamlessly to the new service.

Period of reported start	Pre Year 1	Year 1				Year 2	Total
	Q0	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	
HMP Eastwood Park		1	5	7	4	2	19
HMP Send	3	3	3	4	1	2	16
Total per time period	3	4	8	11	5	4	35

Table 3

We do not yet have sufficient data to report on case closures and therefore cannot give any finding about the length of the intervention for each mother. It is worth noting, though, that TaC Social Workers were asked to report on the predicted timescale at the start of each intervention and, unless there was a clear endpoint such as a pending release date, they were unable to give a clear indication. Timescales were either unknown or highly variable. This is unsurprising given the profile of the mothers, the nature of the needs identified by both mothers and TaC Social Workers, many

of which are dependent on decision-making within external agencies, in particular ongoing Family Court proceedings and the resolution of contact issues. However, this does highlight a potential concern with ‘throughput’ as with complex and lengthy interventions, there is a risk that demand might outstrip the capacity of the two TaC Social Workers.

Case tracker data summary

The data from the case tracker demonstrates the breadth and complexity of the work of the TaC Social Worker. The TaC Social Worker is trading a line between the mother and local authority procedures and decision-making relating to children’s social care. Whilst we do not yet have a complete picture of those mothers who were known to social care services or in care themselves as children, the data reported so far give us a clear indication that these mothers have an inter-generational ‘history’ of child welfare services. This is an emotionally charged environment and the range of offences, sentences, complex life histories, numbers of children and caring arrangements will call for tailored responses and interventions for each mother.

In relation to the concern given about the viability of managing demand and supply, we recommend that this is considered as the pilot progresses. We also intend to collect further data about the practicalities of the TaC intervention and in particular look at how TaC Social Workers work in practice across the two prisons.

In relation to early findings of a tension around parental rights and responsibilities for both mothers and professionals, there is an identified need for education in this area. The TaC scheme gives unrivalled access to local authorities (our data suggests that TaC Social Workers have links in 26 different local authorities so far) we recommend that Pact harness the opportunity to create and distribute an educational resource for professionals. A similar factsheet could be created for mothers who identify a need to understand their rights:

“To know where I stand, what I can and cannot do and what I can get help with. To know my children are safe and loved. To work towards contact with children via LA”.

[Mother ‘s self-identified need at triage, reported in case tracker data]

The different nature of each prison also shapes the interventions offered. It is to the interviews with the Social Workers that we now move who discuss the differing settings, challenges and opportunities.

Interviews with TaC Social Workers

First interviews in June 2021

Expectations

Both TaC workers are qualified Social Workers and had worked in prisons previously, one for Pact and the other in the men's estate, as an addiction worker. Both workers were realistic about what could be achieved in the role, and that mothers should be involved in attending court, ensuring where possible parental rights were adhered to as far as possible, even if the ultimate outcome was not what hoped for. The workers did not necessarily expect to be able to 'change the trajectory of outcomes' (SW1), but hoped to support women through their sentences. They both felt they would like women to feel they were 'listened to' and could 'begin to regain trust in professionals'. Many women felt let down by professionals 'who were not doing what they were supposed to' (SW2) and needed legal help to ensure their rights were adhered to. Both TaC workers relished the opportunity to support women 'from the other side instead of being a Social Worker for the children' (SW2). One Social Worker noted that the women in prison had made mistakes, often 'through no fault of their own' and 'deserve to have support and someone who cares about them as people' (SW2). It was noted that '90% of {women} had had to deal with domestic violence or trauma or child neglect or child abuse when they were young'. This worker identified that most mothers had come from a 'very difficult past' (SW2). They saw their role as bridging a gap (Care Quality Commission, 2018) of support for mothers in prison. They also saw their role as bridging the gap in mothers' accessing contact with children, so even women who had spent long periods in prison, might have some sort of contact with their children. The workers recognised that some mothers may never become care givers but they 'can still be parents' or have some involvement in parenting (SW2).

Role

The TaC Social Workers were working with a range of community practitioners, including the child's Social Worker, the foster carer's Social Worker, those based in CAFCASS, independent Social Workers undertaking a parenting assessment, education staff and legal representatives. This meant that there were a 'lot of moving parts' (SW2). This is made even more complex when a mother has several children all living in different places, 'I have this Mum who has two sets of three children' living in different arrangements, which increases the number of community practitioners to co-ordinate with for the TaC Social Worker, but also more importantly for the mother.

The referral processes into TaC were discussed during the first interviews, with HMP Send having a Pact Champion, a risk assessed prisoner, who showed new prisoners around and flagged up the TaC service. Women were able to self-refer using an 'app form' (SW2). The prison guards on a wing might also pick up that there is a problem and contact the TaC worker which is also considered as a self-referral. There was also discussion about how it was decided which part of the Pact service

-TaC or Family Engagement Workers (FEW) women accessed, 'based on the needs of the woman' (SW2). One of the TaC Social Workers noted how by being a qualified Social Worker, practitioners in the community were more forthcoming and more prepared to share information, a difficulty which the staff from FEW often encountered. This also meant that the TaC workers were able to assist practitioners in the community by offering to take on the task of a parenting assessment, for example.

Both TaC workers described a degree of flexibility in their new role, which they enjoyed. This meant, for example, that they could attend core group meetings even after a woman had been released from prison. Both TaC workers felt well embedded and accepted within the prison structure. Both were being provided with regular supervision by a senior member of Pact, they were also going to be provided with clinical supervision from an external source and provide regular peer support to each other.

Structures

In HMP Send the Social Worker is based in the Offender Management Unit (OMU). HMP Eastwood Park has a MBU, where the Social Worker is based. The MBU was not full and only had two women in there at the point of interview. The Social Worker wondered if the unit was not being promoted sufficiently and it maybe that community Social Workers may have a negative impression of it, whereas in reality it is a bright and friendly space, with toys, which is OFSTED inspected. The Social Worker envisaged undertaking some promotional work around the MBU, 'as there would need to be good reasons not to accept a mother and baby on to the unit'. The Social Worker in HMP Eastwood Park was beginning to work with the 'perinatal service', a new development within the prison which provides support for women during pregnancy up to 12 months post birth. This might be support for women whose children had been removed from their care in the previous year and be dealing with some sense of loss, and be something akin to the Pause project (<https://www.pause.org.uk>).

HMP Send does not take women on remand and rarely takes those who have been recalled and houses longer term prisoners. They take a lot of transfers from other prisons where women move there to access specific services. HMP Send has a therapeutic community which works with people with more complex difficulties for longer periods of time, receiving therapy on an 'almost daily basis'. Most of the women in the therapeutic community will have had prior involvement with social services and many are likely to be mistrustful of Social Workers based on their own experiences, as children and/or parents.

HMP Send also have an organisation called Forward Trust which works with addiction and so the TaC worker rarely becomes involved in this aspect of the work. HMP Send also has a link to a law firm that offers 'pro-bono law services to women in prison' (SW2) and are hosted by Pact. They provide a legal clinic for women with free legal support.

Barriers

The Eastwood Park Social Worker saw contacting solicitors and courts as a particular barrier, where solicitors do not return phone calls, especially when mothers have forthcoming proceedings in family courts. The possibility of a duty solicitor scheme for the prison was raised. The other major barrier identified was Social Workers in the community giving mothers inaccurate information, for example, telling a mother 'that by being in prison she had lost parental responsibility for her children' (SW1).

Second interviews May 2022

HMP Eastwood Park

Structures

At the time of the second interview, the structures had changed in HMP Eastwood Park with the employment of two new prison officer liaison personnel. From the TaC Social Worker's perspective, this had not been well planned or had happened without liaison with the TaC Social Worker, and had caused confusion and some role boundary issues. This had been exemplified when a woman who was about to give birth was taken into the MBU without the TaC worker's knowledge, and it transpired when she was given birth, the child was removed by the local authority. The stay in the MBU had potentially set up false expectations in the mother which could have been avoided with more careful planning.

Developing Role

The MBU was further discussed during the second interview with the TaC Social Worker still being based on the MBU. The TaC worker informed that women apply to go on to the unit and the board that makes the decision; the board is chaired by an independent person who is very 'pro mothers' (SW1). The TaC worker had attended 'two or three boards', and where it was appropriate advocated on behalf of the mother. There were five women in the MBU at this time, out of 12 possible places, so is still not being extensively used. It will be interesting to see if utilisation of the MBU increases over the course of the pilot. During a previous study of Visiting Mum no women accessed the MBU (Rees 2017; 2021). The role of the TaC worker on the MBU is attending the admissions board and maternity care planning.

Role

The TaC worker has been working more closely with the perinatal mental health service, working with people up to 18 months post birth. Although the TaC worker (SW1) is also working with a mother 8 years' post separation, as the woman has been referred to bereavement counselling. The mother had been in a domestic abuse situation and the child was removed. The mother could not accept that the child had been removed and continued to try and see the child and was eventually incarcerated as a result of her breaching court orders. The child has little memory of their mother and does not wish to see her. The TaC worker 'is trying to explain that it might be emotionally harmful to the {child to keep pursuing contact}' given that so much time has elapsed (SW1).

The Social Worker discussed fathers who can often block contact and turn children against mothers. Families, especially those who do not have Social Workers are often feuding and this can be difficult for TaC to work with.

The Social Worker has a caseload of 18-19 mothers at this stage. Women have the right to a McKenzie Friend in family court proceedings, this is someone who can (<https://rightsofwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Good-Practice-Briefing-McKenzie-Friends-Rights-of-Women-Dec-2018.pdf>). McKenzie Friends are people who attend court with someone who does not have a lawyer to provide support and assistance. The TaC worker has taken on this role on five occasions to support mothers. The TaC worker continues to receive supervision from a senior member of Pact, who is not a Social Worker, and peer-supervision with her counterpart. The clinical supervision is on-going.

Barriers

Relationships with court personnel are still difficult, with late notice about court hearings, meaning mothers have less time for preparation; this will impact women in prison more significantly. The court does not seem to appreciate that women are in prison when they send through links for courts dates.

Improvements suggested

The Social Worker would other staff for example key workers to undertake the McKenzie friend training, so that the focus 'becomes more rights based'.

HMP Send

Developing Role

The TaC worker still very much appreciates the freedom of the role. The women are serving longer sentences of '5-10 years' in HMP Send and some of the work involves 'lifers battling to get contact with the children'. The TaC worker noted how as a result of the therapeutic community and the intensive work undertaken with women that many of the mothers 'have done a lot of work and are essentially a new person'. The TaC worker went on to describe another mother, noting 'She is genuinely a different human, like she's done so much'. The TaC worker helped women to compile summaries of the work they have undertaken and takes statements from other staff in prison to help mothers prepare, creating a 'court dossier' for family court. The TaC worker noted how important it was women to 'have someone on their side, it feels very much like them against the system in a way'. HMP Send still have a relationship with pro-bono solicitors who work with mothers in the prison and do not have the same difficulties as HMP Eastwood Park.

The Pact workers in Send have created an induction pack, and go once a week to meet new inmates, they have also put posters around the prison to make mothers aware of their services. Working on the OMU also means that the staff alert them to cases if mothers are talking about their children.

The FEW and the TaC worker often meet women together to help decide which pathway is most suitable for the mother, depending on her needs. They also walk around the prison together to increase visibility.

The TaC worker noted that teachers, Social Workers or CAFCASS workers in the community often email the general prison email at OMU Send, but these are just 'filed' and not responded to. The TaC worker has now been able to pick these up. She also keeps an eye on the calendar so that if women are booked for a meeting with CAFCASS, she can help the mother to prepare. Similarly, if she attends a meeting with a mother and the woman thinks of things that she forgot to mention, then the TaC worker can follow up with an email, a facility which the prisoner would not have access to. The TaC worker noted the high turnover of community practitioners, and the relationship she can build with the mother is often stronger and more durable.

The TaC worker has close links with schools to ensure mothers receive school reports, 'attend' parents' evening and she acts as a conduit of information. The TaC worker sees their role as making the job of a Social Worker in the community easier, by doing the organising for meetings, parenting' assessments and facilitating child visitation.

Pact at HMP Send have developed a child friendly information pack about visiting the prison, similar to the one developed by the Visiting Mum project in HMP Eastwood Park. The TaC worker is still receiving supervision from a senior Pact staff member, the clinical supervision is on-going. The TaC worker continues to benefit from peer- supervision with the Social Worker in HMP Eastwood Park. The TaC worker has undertaken training around domestic abuse and working with the LGBTQ community.

Barriers

Most community practitioners are using Teams as a platform, but this is not accessible from within the prison. Similarly, meetings are often held when the women are on 'lunch' and the prison regime cannot be flexible to accommodate this.

Survey completed by mothers

Mothers were invited to complete a questionnaire when they started to work with their TaC Social Worker (T1) and six months later (T2). Twenty-three mothers completed a questionnaire at T1, and 14 mothers completed a questionnaire at T2.

Hopes for the Together a Chance service

At T1, mothers were asked about their hopes for the TaC service. Most often, mothers hoped the TaC service would help them to receive updates about their children, or to establish or improve contact with their children:

"I would like to have involvement in the process of my children's lives and to be given a chance to have some kind of contact with them"

"For there to be consistency with seeing my children on visits socially and on purple visits"

Mothers hoped the Social Worker would support them to contact Children's Social Services and navigate court processes so they could achieve their goals:

"A consistent line of contact to child services and support with my pathways towards becoming a full time mum again"

“A positive relationship with her, seeing/believing social workers can help and support, guidance (to lessen the load), contact with my children, help with court processes”

On some occasions, mothers wanted help with plans for their release from prison:

“Plan for my release (who I can be supported by re. my children and what process/steps can I take upon/beyond release)”

Views on Children’s Social Services

Most mothers reported that they were willing to engage with Children’s Social Services at T1 and T2 (see Table 1). Trust in Children’s Social Services remained low however, there was a shift towards more neutral or positive views at T2. Table 1 shows that there was a lower proportion of mothers who strongly disagreed or disagreed that they could trust Social Services and a higher proportion who were unsure at T2. In addition, a higher proportion of mothers felt confident working with Children’s Social Services after engaging with the TaC service (42% vs 26%).

	T1		T2	
	n	%	n	%
I am willing to engage with Children's Social Services.				
Strongly agree or agree	18	78	10	83
Not sure	3	13	0	0
Strongly disagree or disagree	2	9	2	17
Total	23	100	12	100
I can trust Children's Social Services to help my family.				
Strongly agree or agree	9	39	6	46
Not sure	4	17	4	31
Strongly disagree or disagree	10	43	3	23
Total	23	100	13	100
I am confident working with Children's Social Services.				
Strongly agree or agree	6	26	5	42
Not sure	4	17	4	33
Strongly disagree or disagree	13	57	3	25
Total	23	100	12	100

Table 4 Mothers' perceptions of Children's Social Services

Support from professionals

The majority of mothers felt moderately or extremely supported in their role as a mother by professionals inside the prison (79%), and this increased as they spent time with the TaC Social Worker (92%; see Table 2). Mothers felt less supported by professionals outside the prison. Around one in five mothers felt moderately or extremely supported by professionals in the community at both timepoints.

	T1		T2	
	n	%	n	%
Feel supported by professionals inside the prison.				
Moderately or extremely	19	79	12	92
Somewhat	2	8	0	0
Not at all or slightly	3	13	1	8
Total	24	100	13	100
Feel supported by professionals outside the prison.				
Moderately or extremely	5	22	3	23
Somewhat	3	13	0	0
Not at all or slightly	15	65	10	77
Total	23	100	13	100

Table 5 Mothers' feelings of support inside and outside prison

Involvement in meetings

Mothers were asked to rate how involved they felt in the decisions that were made about their children's care on a scale from one (not at all involved) to ten (extremely involved). On average, mothers rated their involvement in decisions as a four at T1 and five at T2, thus demonstrating a slight improvement. At T2, a higher proportion of mothers agreed that they were always or often able to share their views in meetings about their children's care (38% vs 23%; see Table 3). Although around half of mothers felt that their views were rarely or never listened to by professionals in the community at both timepoints. There is a difference between being able to share your views in meetings and being listened to.

	T1		T2	
	n	%	n	%
How often able to share views in meetings about your children's care?				
Always or often	5	23	5	38
Sometimes	4	18	1	8
Rarely or never	13	59	7	54
Total	22	100	13	100
How often do you feel that your views about your children's care are listened to by professionals in the community?				
Always or often	5	23	3	23
Sometimes	6	27	3	23
Rarely or never	11	50	7	54
Total	22	100	13	100

Table 6 Mothers' ability to share views in meetings about their children's care

Relationship with their children's Social Worker

On average, mothers rated their relationship with their children's Social Worker as a 4 on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 10 (excellent) at T1 and T2. Mothers were asked to complete the Working Alliance Inventory (Horvath and Greenberg, 1989) however, there was a substantial amount of missing data. It was only possible to calculate total scores for over a third of mothers (39% at T1 and 36% at T2). Mothers reported that they were unable to complete the inventory because they had not met their child's Social Worker or rarely meet with them:

"they will not tell me who my daughter's sw is. Never told me what I need to do as will do anything. Never told what I need to do or who sw is so cannot answer this."

"I've seen her once they keep changing my son's social worker. I don't know her and she does not know me, only what's on file"

"They refuse/are reluctant to be involved with me."

One mother reported that their child did not currently have a Social Worker.

Views on the Together a Chance service

At T2, all mothers (n = 14) rated that they were 'very satisfied' with their TaC Social Worker. Everyone reported they had received practical support from their TaC Social Worker and 86% (n = 12) had received emotional support. When mothers were asked what they had achieved with the help of their TaC Social Worker, they gave a range of examples, including arranging telephone contact and visits with their children, attending meetings about their child's care, and establishing better communication with Children's Social Services. Mothers described that their TaC Social Worker had played a key role in contacting individuals on their behalf (e.g., their child's Social Worker, teachers, carers, family members). One mother explained,

"I have now been given monthly updates and I can have photos and she is always emailing or phoning to find out things for me. She also has contact with my mum and she does video links with social services and I have never been hopeful about being involved or seeing my son, I have now more input than ever before".

Everyone reported feeling listened to by their TaC Social Worker, and most (93%; n = 13) agreed that their TaC Social Worker had helped them to feel more confident planning for their family's future.

Mothers were asked what the most helpful thing about their TaC Social Worker had been, and they frequently described their TaC Social Worker's supportive nature and non-judgemental approach:

"She will fight my corner and do all she can to help me and she is so supportive and nice. She doesn't judge me. She treats me like a mum not a prisoner!"

"she's there for me when I'm sad, stressed, angry, confused. She helps me understand she never ever lets me down or doesn't turn up"

Some mothers noted that their TaC Social Worker had been proactive and quick to get things done for them:

"Emotional support and so dedicated and gets things done so fast"

"Having someone I can ask to do something or find out something and actually doing it for me".

While others valued their TaC Social Worker's knowledge, advice, and reassurance:

"Supporting me with my court paperwork and giving me confidence and advice on how to respond to social services and court."

"Listening to my concerns. Supporting me during phone calls with my daughter's social worker offering advice and reassurance."

Recommendations for the Together a Chance service

Mothers did not identify any ways that their TaC Social Worker could have supported them better. Instead, mothers praised the efforts of their TaC Social Worker and appreciated the work they had done:

"My PACT worker has displayed compassion, patience and really showed she cared by using her time to help me meet my goals successfully. I am grateful for help and will never forget her kindness."

"she is amazing and without her I wouldn't be in the amazing position I'm in today regarding my daughter."

One mother disliked the 'app' process in prison which they used to send messages to their TaC Social Worker, and they were concerned other staff in the prison may read it:

"It's not her fault but I dislike the APP process as it takes time and I worry about other staff (e.g. reading what I have wrote) as it is private. Maybe there could be a specific form to get a message to PACT (which isn't general so can't be read by officers)"

Another mother would have liked additional training courses to be available in the prison, alongside the TaC service, including on domestic violence:

"With social worker in prison, it's important to have mandatory courses topped with other courses e.g., domestic violence, as this 9/10 times it affects parenting. I would have loved to enrich myself and learn through a course."

Survey completed by community practitioners

Five community practitioners completed the survey. Three of the practitioners were Social Workers, one was a school safeguarding lead, and one was a children's guardian at CAFCASS. Three participants first heard about the TaC service when the TaC Social Worker contacted them, and two were alerted to the service by a colleague. Several participants (n = 3) specified that they had contact with the TaC Social Worker every four to six weeks. Participants were not aware of any other projects similar to TaC. Everyone agreed that the TaC service was important in contributing support to the mother. Most (n = 4) agreed that the service had supported the child and the Social Worker in the community, and two agreed that service had supported the children's carer. The practitioners' views on the support that the TaC service provided to the mothers, children, carers, and professionals are discussed in turn.

Mothers

All participants agreed that mothers had been more involved in decision making about their children and better represented in key meetings because of the TaC service. In one example, a CAFCASS worker explained that the TaC service had supported the mother to understand the decisions made in family court and empowered the mother to be involved in the family proceedings. The worker explained that without the support of the TaC Social Worker, they would not have felt comfortable discussing the family court plans with the mother in detail due to concerns about the mother's well-being. The worker valued the role of the TaC Social Worker and reflected on the importance of being able to involve the mother's views in the court plans:

“In my professional experience it is very hard to speak to/contact mothers in prison yet the mother's voice needs to be heard in family court proceedings and this is vital for children. The TAC scheme has facilitated this. Also the TAC worker was able to support the mother to process very difficult information about her children (eg that she will likely be unable to see them before the age of 18) and help her understand the reasoning of the family court. This in turn will feed into the children's life story. There were concerns about the mother's wellbeing and I would have felt uncomfortable discussing such topics with her if she had not had support within the prison- she would likely have been a suicide risk. I was able to seek the mother's views on the plans for the children and she was able to feed into these.”

In another example, a school safeguarding lead noted that the TaC Social Worker had supported the mother with a child protection conference, parents' evening, and virtual visits with the child at school.

Everyone reported that the TaC service had changed the prison experience for the mother and child relationship. Most participants (n = 4) agreed that the mothers had been empowered to receive regular family visits because of the service. One participant said that the service *"eased some of the anxieties that the child had around seeing his mum in prison"* and another said it had *"made the mother and children feel more connected to each other even though they were geographically apart"*.

Participants reported that there had been no negative effects of the TaC service for mothers. Everyone agreed that the mothers will be more able to settle back into the community because of the service, and four agreed that the mothers will be more able to settle back into her family and less likely to re-offend after release.

Children

Nearly all participants (n = 4) agreed that the TaC service had improved the relationship between the child and mother. Two participants reported the child was more settled in their placement because of the service. No one reported that the child was less settled, and everyone agreed that there had been no negative effects of the service for children. One participant said that the service had led to an *"improved understanding for the child on his cultural background/heritage"*, and another noted *"The social worker has enabled the mothers voice to be heard. This is vital for the children and will feed into their life story work in years to come"*.

Carers

Most participants (n = 4) agreed that the TaC service had improved the relationship between the carer and child. Several (n = 3) agreed that the service had improved the relationship between the carer and mother and made visiting easier for the carer whilst the mother was in prison. Two agreed that the service had helped the carer to liaise with home Social Workers.

Multi-agency working

Everyone reported that the TaC Social Worker had been a useful resource for practitioners in the community and helped to improve the relationship between the home Social Worker and the mother. Most (n = 4) reported that the TaC Social Worker had liaised closely with professionals in the community and became a valued member of the team around the family. On two occasions,

the TaC Social Worker made links to support agencies in the home community to help garner support for the mother on release.

Upskilling the social care workforce

Three participants agreed that the TaC Social Worker had provided advice to social care workers in the community. One participant reported that the TaC Social Worker had provided training for workers in the community about mothers in prison. Another participant explained that the TaC Social Worker's role had included *“educating social care workforce about what actually happens to mothers in prison”*.

Recommendations for the Together a Chance service

Two participants recommended that the TaC service should be rolled out to other prisons. One participant commented, *“I cannot stress enough how positive this experience has been- it is reassuring to know these schemes exist”*. Another participant recommended having *“Stable, Long-Term workers who can ensure continuity of care”*.

Interviews with mothers and community practitioners

The data in this section of our findings is drawn from analysis of fourteen qualitative interviews from people who have direct experience of the Together a Chance service during Year 1 of this pilot. We have interviewed five mothers in prison and three women one month after release. We have also interviewed five practitioners in the community who have worked with the TaC Social Workers, these are three children's Social Workers, one fostering Social Worker and one safeguarding lead from a primary school. They gave a varied view of the TaC Social Work role and what it offers. Many of the themes reiterate those voiced by mothers and a synthesis of the findings is therefore presented based on the themes identified.

Sentencing

All of the women said the court had been aware of their status as mothers when sentencing. Amy who only served a short sentence of four months noted,

“So, prior to my sentencing, the judge was aware that Honey was in my full-time care, and he sentenced me regardless.... I've been her sole carer since she's been born.”

Amy in the community

Mothers are often noted to be given short sentences (Jones, 2018) which causes huge disruption to the lives of children. Little discussion or mention of children was made in court, which led to little planning,

“I didn't really let the court, they knew that I had a baby recently, but they didn't ask me any questions.”

Karen in the community

Community practitioners recognised that mothers are particularly anxious about the welfare of their children at the beginning of a sentence (Rees, 2017; Rees 2021) and recognised how important the role of the Tac Social Worker would be at this point,

“Yeah, and I suspect from mum's perspective, again that, you know, that the, the high level of anxiety, not knowing the system, the process, knowing that there was so many people involved in making decisions...so I, I imagine from mum's perspective, she would have felt quite supported in terms of navigating and understanding what's, what's happening.”

Community Practitioner 3 (CP3).

Mothers too talked about the stress and anxiety of not knowing what was happening to their children when they were first sentenced, when they had no means of contacting children or family. Given there had been no planning, this was extremely difficult for mothers.

So in the first week, you're just paralysed, you don't know what's going on. You're a wreck. And I saw that few times with different ladies as well. Sort of going through the same thing. And it's always the same thing, they're not able to get hold of their loved ones, their family, to find out if their children are okay. Or if social services had taken their children because of their sentence, they didn't know what the statuses with their, with the children. And that is the most distressing thing. And honestly, just not knowing what was happening, not knowing what was going on. Because even though I have family members there that were willing and able to take care of Honey..... And then I found that news out, I think two weeks after I was sentenced,... And they didn't have to give me updates as to what was going on.

Amy in the community

This led to mothers becoming acutely anxious and desperate,

*"I was self-harming, I was taking drugs, I wasn't coping at all."
Karen in the community*

Conduit of information

Negotiating contact and access to a prison is extremely difficult for community practitioners, as it is for mothers to contact community practitioners. If mothers are to be involved in decision-making around their children, then community practitioners need to be able to gain access to them and vice versa. Social Workers in the community struggle with making contact with those in prison and in some circumstances may not even know which prison a mother is in,

"I didn't even know what prison she was in"

CP2

The old social worker, kind of left and I've not managed to get anywhere and I say ohh fantastic because I know how difficult it can be to find somebody in prisons when you've got somebody there. So she ..managed to track me down, which was really helpful because then that gave me a link into mum."

CP6

A major benefit of the Social Worker role is as a conduit of information and the means to make contact with a mother in prison,

I've worked with families before, where a parents in prison, you don't have that named person to contact

CP2

{in other prisons}, so you're just going to have to struggle through the normal route. I've been trying to contact this particular parent in prison for four months, got nowhere. I sent emails, and they haven't been

returned, but no response... I've got the address, and I've got the prison number, write to the prisoner directly, and the parent directly and say "look, you've got my contact details, can you write back and inform me of the person that I need to contact in order to facilitate a visit?" because it's the only way through.

CP1

For busy practitioners navigating the prison system is extremely frustrating. The community Social Workers commented favourably on the TaC Social Worker' role, especially in relation to those prisons without such a worker. They also noted how time consuming the process is,

In addition to those sort of practicalities, you know, in terms of arranging contact, or getting the {dates} sorted, those are seemingly little but very time-consuming thing to do.

CP3

The TaC Social Worker role helped alleviate pressure on busy practitioners in the community, who are sometimes involved in children visiting the prison, and the practical difficulties that this entails,

So if it was a prison visit, are the foster carers happy to support the child there, and go through the protocols to take the child in? If they aren't, can we organise an escort? And if there's a video link sort of like capacity, who do we have to get in contact to get that sort of up and running? That would be my role normally in this.

CP1

Making contact with the TaC worker resulted in a speedy response, rather than the more routine and slow workings of an institution,

I did expect that I'd send an email off and hear nothing for weeks and weeks. But she responded I think the same day, and gave really detailed information,

CP2

This all helped open up communication with mothers in prison. As well as helping the community practitioner, the TaC Social Worker also supported mothers to make contact with the outside world, including solicitors, social workers, schools and other services in the community.

From the mothers' perspective the TaC Social Workers made a huge difference as they were able to provide a conduit of information to and from children, as well as to and from social services, and other practitioners in the community,

{TaC Social Worker's} made that easier, she's took that stress away from me, because I... it, it, it makes me ill. I have had mental breakdowns over court processes with my children, I've tried to commit suicide over it. So that's, on a personal level that's how, how hard it is for a parent.

Paula

The involvement by the TaC Social Worker reduced anxiety and feelings of helplessness for mothers. Once the TaC Social Worker was involved, mothers were able to make contact with social services to find out what was happening. As mothers in prison do not have access to emails and can only access a phone erratically and for limited amounts of time, it is impossible to speak to staff in busy social services offices, and mothers were therefore reliant on sending letters in and out of the institution,

We don't have access to email, you can send stuff through the post, but you risk it getting lost and she, with the email, she {TaC Social Worker} then has a thread of everything, of all the conversations. That's things we don't have, they can't say, we sent you a letter when... and they didn't, because, you know, I don't wanna paint a bad view of social services, but they, they do make mistakes, but they won't own them.

Paula

The TaC Social Worker was able to speedily find out information and advocate on behalf of mothers,

{TaC worker} has been in touch with the Director of Social Services and all sorts of people. I don't even know who. Social Services haven't wanted to get involved while I'm here... We have only really gotten somewhere this week. We had a phone call to say probation have had a MASH meeting and they are going to do an assessment.

Chris

Some mothers felt they had been cut out of decision making for their children, but having a line of communication with community practitioners allowed mothers to be kept in the picture,

So before, before {TaC worker}, like, I didn't even get a report, I didn't even find out anything... But now, I can give my questions to {TaC worker}, and she will forward them to his Social Worker,

Jen

It is particularly difficult where a woman has more than one child and they have been separated, so the mother has to try and track several family members or carers,

No, because I didn't know... they split them up {two younger children} and put them in two different foster carers.

Miriam in the community

We can see how vital this conduit for both community practitioners and mothers. It is to the team around the child we now move.

Team around the child

The team around the child is a way of working where all those supporting the child and involved in their life come together to safeguard their welfare and ensure that the child's needs are paramount in welfare decisions. The TaC Social Worker was able to facilitate the mother joining this multi-agency team, and there is also evidence of them creating a team around a specific issue, such as day-to-day care arrangements for the child.

She contacted myself who is the allocated Social Worker for the child of the prisoner that she's working with, and she spoke to me, and also the supervisor and Social Worker of the foster carers. So she created a sort of like group around this meeting and contact, which was really good and informative, and all the professionals had to be there, yeah, that was good.

CP1

Here we can see how the TaC worker initiated the team coming together, each member working with a different party. Currently there is no person who supports and advocates on behalf of a mother in relation to her child when in prison, although the Social Worker for the child is supposed to advocate for the child and all relevant family members and supporters of child, whilst keeping the needs of the child paramount, in accordance with the Children Act 1989 and 'working together' statutory guidance (HM Government, 2018).

I do believe {Tac Social Worker} would be doing that work with the mother, and I would be doing that work with the child, and my colleague would be doing the work with the foster parents.

CP1

it was a three-way communication, you know? It was Kiri myself and {Tac worker} because Chloe brought the perspectives of the foster carer and she's worked with them for like five years.

CP2

Without the TaC Social Worker, mothers are routinely left out of meetings because they are in prison and it would seem that an assumption is made that they have 'chosen' to forgo their mothering role.

Attending meetings

As women in prison cannot readily make contact with the outside world or attend meetings, it is the TaC worker who ensures they can attend or at the very least can bring their perspective, such as to 'child in need' review, 'core group' or 'looked after child' reviews,

So the children were on a child in need plan and the TAC worker has attended every challenging meeting, every review, sometimes when the mum wasn't able to make it to the review meeting, because of whatever connection issues, etc. she would be the voice of the mum in the, in the meetings.

CP5

It was noted that mothers in prison are easily forgotten, and the TaC worker ensured that this was not the case,

I think that was, that kept us on our toes. Let us not, sometimes it often becomes the fact that once you're out of sight, you become out of mind, but the TAC worker did not let that happen.

CP5

They also ensure mothers were kept in the picture,

When mum felt that she didn't understand things, or needed some extra help and support, {TaC worker} had organised for a three-way meeting

CP3

There were many barriers put in place to mothers in prison (and sometimes even the TaC Social Workers) attending meetings, which made it virtually impossible for mothers to retain any foothold in decision making,

So when we first had the child protection meeting, she wasn't invited. And you know, I had to really advocate for the mum and for this {TaC} Social Worker to be included and Carmel Council, you know, hadn't really had this situation before where a mother was able to join their system and they made it very difficult for her to join it, you know, they put it on a Teams meeting and we're quite rigid in saying no, we only have Teams meetings. That's it. We won't do anything else.

CP4

Thus, we can see that systems are set up that do not allow mothers to remain involved in decision making around their children. Where it was possible for them to attend, mothers appreciated the support offered for them to attend meetings,

She sits with me on, like core, core group meetings and conference meetings, which is a massive, like, support for me, 'cos obviously I, I get quite nervous.

Sian in the community

When reports are written to feed in to decision making, the TaC Social Worker helps mothers to process the information,

You know, as soon as I got the report she {TaC worker} sat with me, with, with the report and stuff, you know

Sophie

The TaC Social Worker also facilitated community practitioners coming into the prison to undertake parenting assessments, so that mothers (and children) were not left waiting until they were released before decisions can be made,

But she definitely helped with the independent Social Worker coming to the prison. ... If it wasn't for that ...it would have had to take place when I got home and my daughter would probably still be in the care of her dad until that had been completed, so yes, that was a huge, huge help.

Amy in the community

In this particular case as a result of the parenting assessment it was arranged for the child to live with her mother on release.

A human rights-based approach

A human rights-based approach is about empowering people to know and claim their rights and increasing the ability and accountability of individuals and institutions who are responsible for respecting, protecting and fulfilling rights (BASW, 2015). Much of the work of the TaC Social Worker is about ensuring that mothers are aware of their rights, this is an approach that has long been embedded within social work practice (Healey, 2008). The TaC Social Worker ensured that community practitioners became aware of this, as previously many did not seem to be cognisant that mothers in prison still have parental rights,

Because she {mother} had parental responsibilities. So that was the 1st. So the contact that I had came directly from the prison itself, asking me if I would facilitate parents evenings for the mother.

CP4

Once practitioners had taken this on board, they too were able to advocate (as should be their role) for the mothers they had contact with,

So I kind of am always reminding them {team around the child} that there's another person in this family who should be involved and just because she's in prison doesn't mean that she can't participate in what's the decisions about her child.

CP4

This enacting and operationalising of rights allowed decisions by the team around the child to be considered more thoughtfully,

Our initial care plan, that was before I became involved, was for the child to be permanently removed from of the family to be, to be placed in, in care. So that was a very stressful time for, for mum,

CP3

Once the TaC Social Worker became involved, decisions were reviewed and on occasion overturned,

so {TaC Social Worker} did kind of advocate, not advocate, that's not the right word, she supported mum to kind of make sure she's got the right information and she's involved..... Which was granted by the court, which is when the ISW came in completed another assessment, just prior to her release, and that a balanced assessment, you know, with, it wasn't without concern, but it was, it had quite a few positive aspects. Based on that assessment, we changed our care plan. So our care plan was for the child to be placed in mum's care subject to a care order.

CP3

There is clear evidence that the TaC Social Worker's involvement changed the trajectory of this case. Her involvement removed the barriers to access in prison - this included facilitating access to the mother for assessment and also the sharing of data from prison visits as it pertained to the safeguarding and welfare of the child.

All of the women we spoke to were aware of their rights but had only become aware of these as a result of the TaC Social Worker.

Knowing my rights, what I'm allowed. Like, I didn't even know I had parental rights anymore until she told me, and I was like, "Oh, oh right." So yeah, that was nice. ... Yeah, it was amazing, yeah. Like, being able to have an input into the LAC reviews, getting the reports, his school reports, everything like that. I didn't know I could do any of that until TaC worker told me.

Amy in the community

'Cos before it was just like the initial, what, what rights do I have as, as a mother in prison.

Sian in the community

Mothers became aware of what these rights entitled them to, and this can be seen as a rights-based approach to Social Work (Ife, 2012; Holland and Scourfield, 2004)

And if we have parental responsibility, like I do, I, I should have copies of those. And it's things that I haven't been getting, I have been kept out of the loop because I'm in prison. She's {TaC worker} like, 'but they have a duty to give you that, it's, it's part of, part of their service is to'.... She's just like lifted me up, she's made me feel validated, like my rights as a parent are real.

Paula

When {TaC worker} got involved, I felt more, I felt I had more of a right to know what's going on, like school reports and things like that.

Karen in the community

The mothers had not previously been included in any meetings and had thus been excluded from decision making, as being in custody was usually seen as having forfeited all rights. The TaC Social Workers helped women wrest back some control, and ensured that at the very least information was being shared with them,

And really my, because she was a bit, like my backbone there because I kind of felt like I did lose that control and I had lost all that, that privilege of that information. And I kind of thought, well, that's it now, I, I've lost her and I, that was just, because when you're there, and they're not giving you any of that information, and they're not making you party to any health or anything like that, you kind of think well, I've lost my rights then, even though I hadn't, at my core was just because, it wasn't, information wasn't being shared with me.

Amy in the community

This helped mothers feel re-engaged and involved in their child's lives and helped preserve their mothering identities,

I feel like I'm part of my son's life, even though physically I'm not. I'm able to put my input in meetings. They ask me, like, for permission for stuff. Like, my, my son's been booked in for the vaccine because he's 12 on Tuesday, and - but they - or they asked {TaC worker} to ask me for my permission, sorta thing, and I was like, wow, I felt like a mum for the first time in years.

Jen

Mothers were very relieved to have someone listening to them and 'fighting their corner', as previously they had been forgotten and overlooked,

it's, it's nice to have someone - I feel like she fights my corner for me, when, when you feel like the whole world's against you, and like, it's nice to have someone in your corner.

Sian in community

Because there's so many women and children who have got access {rights} to their children but because there's no-one fighting for the mum, the Social Workers are just not facilitating contact between children, and it's heart-breaking.

Karen in the community.

Community practitioners noted a need for someone to support mothers too,

But no, I was really hopeful because they do seem to be able to, like, provide the support that mums need on the inside. So they're saying, actually, yeah, we can help you navigate through all this, but also be somebody who's a bit on their side when everything's going on.

CP6

Even if nothing could be done, mothers were appreciative of someone trying to help them, which made them feel they had at least tried, and made their sentences more bearable,

Yeah, you just feel safe when you're around her, and you know that she'll do everything in her power to help, even if at the end of it there's nothing she could have done, but she will try her hardest, yeah.

Jen

Respect as mothers

Many mothers felt they had previously been denied not only their rights, but their mothering status,

When I came to prison, I kind of felt like I lost that status, like, their mum... I feel like I'm part of, rather than just like an outsider looking in.

Sian in the community

Once the TaC Social Workers became involved this mothering identity began to be reinstated and helped empower mothers, this is especially important to retaining a meaningful relationship with their children, and will facilitate them taking up the mantle of parenting on their release,

But like I was included in things, like my voice mattered as a mum.

Karen in the community

Mothers noted that the TaC Social Workers treat mothers respectfully, as mothers, rather than as offenders, which is understandably usually their overriding status in a prison establishment,

We're viewed as parents, not prisoners, and that's the important thing in this project, is that we are still parents.

Paula

It is to the relationship with Social Workers that we now move.

Relationship with Community Social Worker

Many mothers had had negative relationships with the children's Social Worker in the community and felt very distrustful of them as community practitioners recognised,

So in our first meeting, there was a lot of, she wasn't antagonistic, but she was making the point that as far as she's concerned, Social Workers were not really good, we're not good, you know, we make excuses, we don't do what we're going to say,

CP1

Because I know she wouldn't have spoken to Social Workers from (home area), you know,

CP2

Promoting effective working relationships between mothers and community Social Workers seemed to be an important role of the TaC Social Worker. This helped the community-based Social Workers to work more productively and co-operatively with mothers,

we wouldn't have got this depth of information, and I don't know she would have been so willing to meet with us, and to share what she has, so I think its definitely made the role a lot easier and

CP2

It also led to mothers' surprisingly requesting to meet with community practitioners,

Tim's mum had asked to meet with myself and Tim's new Social Worker – Which in itself was quite a big thing because she didn't want to meet any Social Workers before. And she'd thought through why she wanted to meet us, and the questions she wanted to

CP2

This was facilitated by the home Social Worker for both the TaC Social Worker and mother to attend,

so she'll now be included on, invited to look after reviews and any other meetings that will take place about Tim, {TaC worker} will be included.

CP2

The previous hostile contact with some mothers combined with the difficulty in access made working together difficult, if not impossible. The TaC Social Worker having built a good working relationship, greatly facilitated the work of community practitioners, and gave them a clearer understanding of the mother and her strengths. It also helped community practitioners to feel more empathetic,

I think it really challenged my views on people who are in prison, you know, obviously I see the mother in a completely different light and it's quite strange

CP4

and it's not sort of like, what would it be, a review of case notes to get an impression, an actual physical meeting of this person, and being able to say I spoke to her, and this is what she said, this is what she looks like, this is how she responded. It's a real... it's given that humanity in a wayshe was, to all intents and purposes, on paper for me, you know?

CPI

For the safeguarding lead in the school, she noted that although they invariably have around three children at any one time with a parent in prison, they have never before had contact with any penal institution,

We were aware that mother was in prison quite a while after the child had joined the school, but we didn't know any of the details or any of the situation behind it, so the family hadn't disclosed this to us. So then I was contacted by...Somebody obviously who worked in the prison and they asked us if we would do a piece of work and in terms of supporting the child using a book called Pact and then they also wanted to know if we could facilitate the mother having parents evening appointments.

CP4

The opening up of this channel of communication made a huge difference for this child, and enabled the school to provide daily support to the child.

The relationship mothers have with the TaC Social Workers is separate and discrete from any previous more antagonistic relationship they may have had with community practitioners,

she's really good and I, I have a really mistrust of social workers, it... I, I've, I've had a lot of them in my life and probably only like one in five I've managed to have positive relationships with.

Paula

But with the social services outside, they just.. do not give me the information that I'm entitled to. I've still got - I've still got parental rights over my boy, you know, and I just feel like I'm fighting them all the time.

Jen

Here we can see Jen feeling she is still battling with the Social Workers in the community. Whilst mothers may not get to the point of completely trusting Social Workers in the community, mothers feeling confident to have a working relationship and feeling included in decision-making is a realistic goal for TaC Social Workers (Forrester et al., 2009).

Mothers commented favourably on their relationships with the TaC Social Workers,

Yeah, so she's really positive, a really good support, she is, she is everything I could wish for in a social worker, combined with like a mother, cos that's what she's like to him, so that's good.

Paula

[TaC worker], like, {is} the most positive one I've ever met.

Sophie

And it doesn't matter, she doesn't judge me. And she's like... I don't know if you've ever met her, but sometimes I think she may get mistaken for a prisoner, because she's just like, like funky in the way she dresses, like she's just, she just fits, she fits, she's approachable... I think maybe she must have extensive knowledge of how prisons can be, and even surrounding the mental health aspect.

Paula

I have a good relationship with her, and she has a great relationship with [name of child]. She has a great relationship with all the babies on the unit to be fair.

Chris

This rebuilding of trust in Social Workers allowed mothers the opportunity to build relationships with Social Workers in the community,

So yeah, I do worry, they're my, my main worries is, is the lack of... with my son, the care system as a whole, but now he's got this good social worker and we have a good relationship, that worry is alleviated a bit.

Paula

It's helped me to communicate with Social Workers and get new relationships off to a good start. ... I've achieved already the stigma of social worker title, that's gone.

Paula

Turnover of staff

The relationship with community practitioners is often less durable because of the turnover of Social Work staff in particular, as noted in the literature (Simpson, 2022) and also noted in the interviews with community practitioners and mothers,

One of her points that she's never informed of when her child gets a new Social Worker. So there's always this like gap as the information

CP1

Community practitioners 2 and 3 also note this difficulty,

he's had a lot of changes of Social Worker.. And he didn't have anyone, sort of... to because there was such a high turnover of staff

CP2

Because the previous worker, had, had some long period of sickness so there'd been a change in the team.

CP3

Jen, one of the mothers also comments on this,

but I, I think I've had three or four Social Workers since me and TaC worker started working together, 'cos they were all, like, part time, or - I can't remember what they call them now - like agency workers, is it?

Similarly, Paula was unaware of whether there were Social Workers for some of her children,

And then that same social worker... so the middle two, as far as I know they don't have a social worker. I think sometimes it's voluntary input... But, as far as I know again, she hasn't got a social worker at the moment, which surprises me because she's disabled.

Paula

Given the often-changing personnel, the TaC Social Worker can be a consistent figure who retains the information about the case and continues to keep the community practitioner and mother in the picture. New practitioners may not have met the mother before and can be reliant on the knowledge of the TaC Social Worker,

I've come in, not having met this mum in person, and having to, you know, sort of make some important decisions. So having somebody obviously, who's a qualified Social Worker with sort of eyes on this mum in terms of the relationship, a working relationship and the work that she's doing, it's just been really helpful insight to have.

CP3

Here we can see the importance of the TaC worker being a qualified Social Worker. It is very helpful to have a colleague who has more in-depth information, especially when community practitioners may be tasked with undertaking a parent assessment,

detailed records, which was very, very welcomed by everybody, including, you know, kind of the parties within the proceedings, which also added to mum's sort of parenting assessment.... Liaised with, with the independent social worker, who was completing an assessment of mum. So again, that, that was very helpful.

CP3

Cautionary approach

The community practitioners rightly have a commitment and overriding concern for the child, with their welfare being paramount (Children Act, 1989),

My responsibility is to that young person.

CP1

There will be occasions when it is not in the interests of the child to have contact with their mother in prison, depending on the history of the relationship and nature of offence. If it is decided that contact cannot happen, then there is also the issue of sharing information,

See, that's a balance for us because actually she's done some horrific things to these children and they need to know that they're safe and we need to safeguard them a bit in terms of how much information are we giving her because in a few in a like 10 years later, if they turn around, say, well, actually, my mom {xx} abused me and then you're giving me all this information, giving her all this information about me. So it's a real kind of balancing act there.

CP6

Community practitioners are rightly cautious about the impact that contact with mothers might have on children, especially if they anticipate this might be detrimental,

It would be getting, where possible, the views of the child and the wants and wishes so they want to see their parent,... assessing that contact and its impact on that child's behaviour, because a lot of times, children say "yeah, yeah, I want to, and yes I'm happy to" and then they finish the contact, and they come back and their unease or their anxiety is reflected in their behaviour, so they're not sleeping properly, they're acting out, they're breaking stuff, they're depressed.

CP1

Community practitioners want to ensure that the mother's need to see her son or daughter does not override the needs of the child,

it's like trying to get her to recognise the impact of her incarceration and that contact on her child, and going forward, like if she's successful in parole, what's that impact going to be on him?

CP1

This often makes them cautious in supporting contact. TaC Social Workers helped mothers prepare for contact and retaining a strong commitment to the welfare of the children. Some mothers were so desperate for information and contact that they did not always think of the impact of their approach on the child,

Whilst we met, giving his mum like clues, like have a conversation with him. It's not an interrogation, what you done, you know, share things about you that he can't find out from anyone else but you.

CP1

The TaC workers helped advise mothers about constructively communicating with their children, without bombarding them, and in ways that were mutually enjoyable and beneficial,

I think his mum didn't know what she was meant to say when she went, that... When he came to see her, and yeah it just wasn't very helpful for either of them. But {TaC worker} done work with his mum around topics she could discuss when he comes in, and the types of things they could talk about, and she's helped her to write some letters to him which have been really nice, and they've really helped him.

CP2

For some mothers they realised that the children were not ready for contact,

But that's because my children aren't ready and I've realised that now. And having [TaC Social Worker] to help support me and coach me through that is a really big thing.

Paula

For others the TaC Social Worker worked with mothers to help them accept that contact would not happen as discussed by a community practitioner,

{Mother says} I'm not gonna be able to see them, but I still want them to know that I care and I still want them to know that I want to be involved in that everywhere I can.

CP6

In this way the TaC intervention has mitigated against some of the potential negative impacts and enhanced the many benefits of parent and child contact. There were numerous ways in which TaC workers helped mothers prepare for contact,

And all the extra bits she did as well, like she'd helped his mum provide a load of bits for his life story work, and ...Sort of, spoken to her about her

background and her heritage, things we didn't know at all before, that have really helped her son, and he's loved hearing all these, like, little stories about her first job.

CP2

The TaC worker took things slowly, gradually helping to build the level of contact mothers were having with their children,

And then, sort of, developed that into some letterbox contact –And now he's having video contact with his mum....Yeah, and, and positive contact as well because before it really wasn't very positive.

CP2

And I've also just approved something saying it's okay for the children to spendan overnight in prison with the mum.

CP5

The quality of the contact improved and had a beneficial impact on children.

... they were both interested in like art and, and then following the video contact she sent him some pictures she'd drawn.. And about two weeks ago she sent over some paintings that she'd done for Tim, so I passed those on. And when I visited end of last week they were up on his wall, he'd framed them – So that's a huge thing because before he didn't want any mention of his mum

CP2

It is to the contact with children that we now move.

Contact with children

An important aspect of the TaC Social Worker role is facilitating contact with children, this occurred in a myriad of ways, including sending of photographs, helping to write letters, virtual contact and face to face meetings. It is important for children to keep in contact with mothers, if they are to come to terms with the situation, understand what has happened, be assured of her welfare and be able to return to her care or have contact with her in the future,

We, we correspond each year –And {TaC Social Worker} helped to get a photograph... So, I've always had letterbox contact with.

Sophie

Like my youngest daughter has got disabilities and ... it's really important for me for her to remember me, and my way of doing that is photographs, because I don't have direct contact.

Paula

I now get regular updates every few months with photos, and an update on what Craig's doing, and that's down to TaC worker..... She's also helped me write my sorta life story and Craig's life story and what happened the night of the crime. She helped me through that, which was really hard to do.

Jen

Helping mothers to contribute to life story work is an interesting aspect of the TaC workers role and one which might be further developed.

The TaC Social Workers also helped facilitate meaningful contact between mothers and their children by arranging child friendly visiting rooms with toys and space for the mother and child to be together as well as longer visits,

*My son, my son, he's got autism and he's got learning difficulties, and visits are quite difficult for him, like, being in such a hall, like, big hall and stuff. But {TaC worker} was able to arrange us to have the family room, so it was a quiet room.... Oh, it was lovely, it made such a difference, yeah.
My son was more at ease and he felt - I, I knew he just felt calmer, and, and it was nice, because I got to sit on the sofa with him and, like, give him a cuddle properly, rather than having to, like, talk over a table. So it was nice, it just felt more relaxed and more, more natural than, than a normal visit, yeah.*

Sian in the community

I think 10 times better, I couldn't have imagined... so it's all our own private space to see each other. And yeah, it went, unexpectedly really well, really, it sort of, it was very heartfelt. And just, yeah, it was I was really anxious about how my daughter would feel.... But actually, it sort of it took a bit of the pressure and a bit of a burden off, not being in with everyone else. And sort of just being us really, and it kind of just made it feel a bit more natural.... and the toys and everything so we could play.

Amy in the community

Mothers appreciated the benefits of enhanced visits, which are much improved on usual visiting arrangements (Rees et al., 2021).

Domestic abuse

One of the major things impacting contact is domestic abuse. This was not much mentioned by community practitioners, but was captured in the interviews with the TaC Social Workers. Six out of the eight mothers interviewed talked about experiencing domestic abuse, this is perhaps not surprising as this issue was noted by Corston as far back as 2007 and by Farmer (2019),

When you've been through domestic violence twice and it's happened to the children, that's when I know that I've let them down, because I couldn't protect them.

Miriam in the community in the community

but me losing care of my youngest child because of domestic abuse.

Paula

we didn't have nothing, we left in bad circumstances, the police had to escort me {out of} there.

Sophie

Here we see the failure to protect mantle often ascribed to mothers (Hester, 2011). We did not discuss offending with mothers, and so we do not know whether their criminal behaviour was as a result of, or related to, being abused. Mothers were particularly anxious when the children were then placed with their abusive fathers during their incarceration,

My six-year-old is living with their Dad. I do have concerns because me and his Dad were in a really abusive relationship and I'm not sure what sort of life he is having.

Chris

One mother was anxious that the Social Worker had been promoting that the children be placed with their father,

Like, I still had managed to get away from him with the kids, like, and she's {community Social Worker} saying, "I'll give kid out... {to} Steve to take your kids." I'm, like, I just didn't get it

Sophie

Community practitioners might find themselves in a difficult situation, as under the legislative framework, they have to keep children with their birth families wherever possible, rather than placing children with foster carers, and are unlikely to be fully aware of issues of domestic abuse, given that it is often hidden from agencies, in part to avoid blame 'failure to protect' (Hester, 2011). Given that women had been in abusive relationships, it was perhaps not surprising that if children were placed with male partners, those carers were then undermining and controlling with regard to contact with their mothers,

because my, my middle two children, their dad isn't very workable and he's painted a very, very negative picture of me. So his view of me has gone onto the children and, and they then don't wanna have any contact with me.

Paula

Some mothers were aware of parental alienation (Harman et al., 2019)

Plus, he was controlling in our relationship, he's used the kids as a weapon then.... Like, he's, he's told the kids that I'm this big bad person and, and, do you know...he's not told them the truth about everything – So, the kids don't know, they don't know no different, they're just hearing what he's saying.... So, she saw {barrister} through that, that he basically primed them to talk, to say things –Yeah, my barrister [said it was] a clear case of parent alienation ...they don't see none of my family, they've been turned against us all,

Sophie

This meant that mothers had to tread very delicately if they wanted the father of the child to facilitate access,

don't wanna, like, upset him in a way where he, he makes contact difficult for me. So I feel like I'm kind of - not so much now, but at the time, like, I kinda felt like I'm walking on eggshells.

Sian in the community

So it's a bit more tricky, but she, her dad is a professional manipulator and she couldn't see it and it was sort of turned around on me.

Paula

The TaC Social Worker was supportive in these circumstances and was able to contact the fathers to arrange for children to visit (taking the heat out of the situation), liaise with community Social Workers where the father was blocking contact, and could also sit in on visits, so women were not left alone with ex-partners,

He just wouldn't let me speak with her. And {TaC worker} then she could liaise that back with the Social Worker as well and say, look, these are the times that we've tried to call Carl together.... Because before that it was my word against this.... And she helped me, she'd speak to my ex-partner as well, on my behalf,... And also she sat in, in the, in the, in the room with us so I wasn't alone with my ex-partner as well... So I didn't have to talk to him or engage with him, and I didn't have to sort out the visit with him, as such, she sorted all of that for me. So it took that pressure off of me.

Amy in the community

Here we can see not only how difficult it is for mothers who are incarcerated to make contact with the outside world, but doubly difficult when ex-partners are further controlling access to children. There may be a place for family group conferencing (Holland and O'Neil, 2006) to be considered for certain mothers, to mobilise wider family members who have a deeper understanding of the dynamics and can challenge others to the benefit of the child. It is to birth family and carers that we now move.

Contact with birth family/carer

As already highlighted, mothers in prison can only have access to their children if the foster carer or family member brings the child to the prison or facilitates contact. Family members often struggle when taking on the additional responsibilities and with bringing the children to the prison. Several mothers commented on how the TaC Social Worker had supported the carers of their children,

Because my sister was ringing social services and they weren't ringing her back, so when {TaC Social Worker} rang them, like people started to move.

Karen in the community

She even is in touch with my mum, like, emails my mum about stuff as well. So that's good that she's in touch with my family as well.

Jen

Here again we can see the TaC Social Worker being a conduit of information between carers and family members. We have interviewed one carer, who is the sister of a prisoner and had taken on the care of three children; she was previously living alone. The TaC Social Worker has provided immense support to the carer, helping her secure new accommodation (the sister was previously living in a one-bedroom flat) in a different local authority and when the carer was due to move into the new home, providing her with vouchers to buy food for the children, whilst her benefits were being reinstated. The carer moved home just before Christmas which coincided with the children being due to visit their mother in prison. In these circumstances the TaC Social Worker arranged for the children to be taken to visit their mother, so they did not miss out on the Christmas visit. The carer was incredibly appreciative,

saying the service the TaC Social Worker provided was 'fantastic' Bev (carer). Similarly, the mother of the children commented how the TaC Social Worker had made her feel less guilty about the stress caused to her sister,

And, it gave my sister a sense of security knowing that we've got, like I'm getting people on her side as well. So it's not just her on her own, like, I'm doing my bit.

Karen in the community

Here we can see how the TaC support helped the three children (providing food and housing), it is to children's welfare that we now move.

Children's welfare

Many of the difficulties for children occur when they do not fully understand the background situation and what their mothers have done to be incarcerated. Parents often hide the truth from children which is not helpful (Raikes & Lockwood 2016). When they are separated from their mothers, they sometimes blame themselves,

And, sort of, helping him to make sense of why he's in foster care and what happened. Cos, I think he had a tendency and he still does, but to blame himself for a lot of that, because he didn't know what happened, and his family had moved about all over, so we didn't really have a clear picture of things.....

CP2

The confusion and fear are often exacerbated by high profile media reports

I think there's been a huge impact because not only have we been able to sort of allow her to understand her parents' situation, particularly her mother's....the child wasn't aware of the circumstances behind her mother's imprisonment at first and it, it's sort of been a bit of a rumour around the school and it was in the local press, I think, was in the national press, actually, what had happened as well

CP4

This naturally instils fear and shame into the child, especially when no-one is discussing it directly with them, it becomes a 'dirty' secret,

So, I think for this young person, he had very negative view of his mum and he'd googled her and read some newspaper articles on her and – And he had a really negative view.And he's conflicted with these things that he's read and these images he's got of her, and things he's heard about her from his brothers.

CP2

And I was worried for her...as my face was all over the papers, because it was, it was a, sort of like a bigger, bigger case. I wouldn't say high profile, but from the area that I live in it, it is small.

Paula

Children are often left with a gap in their knowledge about their family history, especially those looked after, with no-one talking about their mother, who is erased from the landscape. The TaC Social Workers have increased contact between mothers and community practitioners, and between mothers and children, this has been of great help, allowing mothers and practitioners to talk to children honestly and openly about the situation that led to incarceration,

Now, she broached it with her child and she was able to do that with the support of the prison and in a very controlled way to enable her child to understand the reason behind her going to prison. What had actually happened before. It was told to her. You know in a different way, which I think would have been very damaging, so I think those two things mainly the contact and the fact that her child was able to hear first-hand from her mother, the reason why she was put into prison and what happened

CP4

Rather than viewing their mothers only in terms of their imprisonment, children have had the opportunity to learn about their own background and family story, with interest and commonality,

So, it's been nice, it's given him a lot of pride now I think in his background and he was saying how he's gonna... His mum's gone to Scotland and he's recently said, "Oh next time Scotland are playing, that's who I'm gonna support now, because I'm half Scottish," and yeah, its nice, I think its really helped his, [sort of], sense of identity....So, my role was to try and support his foster carers to, you know, give him a more positive view of his family and his identity. ... Lot of it was wrong but he'd, sort of, given himself this narrative.

CP2

Having openly discussed the situation with the child, the safeguarding lead in the school, in particular, was able to provide a very supportive environment and safe space for the child. She was able to arrange school parent' meetings virtually with the mother and contact between mother and child for special events,

I'm happy to do it whenever it's suggested. So if it's her birthday or if it's coming up to Christmas or there's a special sort of occasion that, that kind of thing, you know we, we would facilitate it at any time, really,

Community practitioners saw great benefit for the children as a result of this, by reducing some of the shame,

I don't feel he's got that embarrassment anymore with talking about his mum, I think he's got a more realistic picture of who his mum is and what she's like, and its helping to fill in some of those gaps he has about his early life

CP2

This allowed for some children to be honest with their peers about the situation,

I think she's confided in a couple of friends about what's happened to her mum and you know she will often see me in the corridor and she'll be with a group of friends and she's able to say to me, oh, I I spoke to mum last night or I'm seeing mum at the weekend and it's not this big, you know, dirty, awful secret.

CP4

It has also allowed community practitioners to offer more support to children,

in some kind of way as surrogate mother that I can explain to her and support her and feedback to her mum and I can contact her mum for her so I can speak to her mum and speak through her mum and I think she really values that.

CP4

Training

Mothers commented positively on the training they received from the TaC Social Workers. This helped them think about their children as well as their parenting style,

It taught me a lot of things like what kind of child I have. So there's the very sort of, outspoken child, the child that's not that bothered by that many things and then you have sort of the child that is very sensitive, and lots of things can upset your child. And it was like all these different things that you kind of, like, oh my God, yeah, that's, that is my child. ... A lot of was brushing up, but it was sort of, it was nice to do that because it gives you, you take, you take away certain things, and you think I'm gonna use that in my day-to-day life.

Amy in the community

Others commented on training around relationships,

Building stronger relationships, anger management and other stuff with {TaC worker} that I did.... I did a parenting course as well with {TaC worker}.

Miriam in the community

Some mothers noted that because of COVID they were receiving training in smaller groups, and this was preferable,

And I think normally it's more than that, but because of Covid, it had to be smaller groups. No, but actually, I quite preferred the smaller groups, because then it doesn't feel so intrusive on yourself.

Amy in the community

Others commented that because of COVID they had just undertaken workbooks alone in their cells,

Just the PACT workbooks. That's because of Covid. We're on Level 3 here at the moment which is like a lockdown because of the number of cases. I'm going to take the workbooks with me to the next place so they've can see the work that I've done.

Chris

This mother noted that no-one went through the workbooks with them, and they would have preferred this follow-up to consolidate learning,

... It would have been good to go through them with someone. They were given out by TaC worker but there was someone else, I don't know their name, who was going to go through them afterwards. That was supposed to happen via video link, but it never happened.

Chris

On release

The three mothers interviewed talked about struggling with accommodation on release; Karen was living in a probation hostel as she did not have a guarantor for rent. Miriam was working in a charity shop with associated lodgings as she did not have sufficient money for a private rental. Neither Miriam or Karen had their children living with them. Amy did have her daughter come to live with her on release, and the TaC Social Worker was very instrumental in helping her prepare some of the practicalities,

I mean, she done nearly all of it, really. Yeah, she, she sort of set everything up for me and got everything ready, I explained that I was worried because I needed a bed for my daughter coming home, otherwise she wouldn't be allowed overnight stays.....And {TaC worker} organised getting me some vouchers for Argos and Asda to pay for a new bed, which was amazing and it helped massively. ... Obviously, things like benefits and things like that don't start for sort of five weeks after you get home... And that massively helped, and it helped me get my first week's food shopping when my daughter was back with me.

Amy on the community

It is difficult to see how children can return to live with their mothers without this financial and practical support. Otherwise, they would be without food and heating, which would be damaging to child and mother. The TaC Social Workers make contact with the mothers, a short time after release, to follow up on progress,

...That she called me. ... it was just... just a general check-in to see how I'm doing and.

Miriam in the community.

One mother noted that although she was living in a probation hostel, things were going well and her engagement with services had led to her more positive attitude and an increase in the confidence her family has in her,

I've come out, and I haven't gone back to drugs, I haven't committed no more crimes, I haven't, I'm doing everything that I'm supposed to be doing, I've gained a lot more trust with my family.

Karen in the community

Summary and improvement suggested by those who have experienced the TaC service

Overall, both mothers and community practitioners were hugely positive about the TaC service. However, they were aware that this is a pilot scheme which is being evaluated and offered a few suggestions for improvements to the service. One was the need to increase awareness of the service, especially amongst schools. There may be an increasing need for more publicity of the scheme. The other suggestion was the need for the TaC Social Worker to become involved at an earlier stage so that the start of contact was not delayed,

And obviously happened very quickly. So this child had grown up with her mum, you know, her mum's care as the sole carer, and then all of a sudden, you know, everything was turned upside down and mum went to prison. So it was a very sudden loss for her. So the ability to have contact was extremely important. So the first, so mum went to prison on 24th June (to another prison), and then the first contact I don't believe occurred until November, so there was no...

CP3

There was a suggestion that the process could even start in the court setting,

It would be really good if it could be involved from sentencing, you know, so that parents who want to have contact with their children or at least, yeah, contact, whether it be letter, phone call, video call or visit, can start

to be looked at in the very beginning. So for the children, they don't get that gap in sort of knowing what's going on with their mum and stuff, and the parents don't have that unknowing in between... And so I think, yeah, the organisation, the earlier you could get involved, the better. Obviously, you know, there are loads of checks and balances, some people will not be able to have contact. But for the ones that care, yeah, if it's possible, make it possible, because it's good for the kids, even if it's a letter in a card.

CP1

There were few suggestions for improvements of the TaC service made by mothers, other than following up on the training workbooks,

There's nothing really. I appreciate the work she has done for me and I'm a PACT orderly so I know how busy they are and the work that goes on behind the scenes.

Chris

One mother also mentioned parenting training could cover Special Guardians and it may be that the development of training to understand the role of foster carers, kinship carers and Special Guardians and how to work with them and children, when only limited contact is allowed by mothers, might be helpful.

The focus on life story work is an interesting development and smaller groups for training should be considered.

Conclusion

The data collected so far in the Together a Chance pilot scheme highlights the complex nature of parental rights and responsibilities, and the tension that exists between the rights of mothers and children. Support with contact was the most common need identified for obvious reasons. It is common practice for parents to cite Article 8 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child when seeking contact of a non-resident child, highlighting family relations as important in establishing and preserving a child's identity. The Children Act 1989 which continues to form the mainstay of child welfare decision-making in England and Wales, is clear that the welfare of the child is paramount, yet it also based on the principle of partnership working and promoting family life. A mother automatically acquires parental responsibility (PR) at birth for her child, and whilst the evidence suggests that this is shared with a third party (typically the local authority or a kinship carer) for many of the mothers who have participated in the evaluation so far, parental responsibility is only lost if a child is adopted. For mothers in prison, capacity to exert parental responsibility is hampered by a lack of capacity to protect and maintain a child not in their everyday care, and therefore legal rights and responsibilities are limited. The case tracker data completed by the TaC Social Workers consistently identified the need to educate mothers about their rights and the limits of parental responsibility. In addition, data both from mothers at the outset of the intervention and interviews with community practitioners revealed a barrier to enabling parental responsibility for mothers in prison. A key reason cited by the children's Social Workers interviewed is the logistical challenge of contacting parents in the prison system, but the data also revealed a sense that, once an Order had been granted, the local authority can exert parental responsibility to make child welfare decisions as the corporate parent, without the mother's input. Previous research has highlighted the low likelihood of a 'standard local authority case management approach' being successful with birth mothers that have been through recurrent care proceedings and have persistent difficulties rooted in early childhood (Broadhurst et. al, 2017).

One of the highlights of our evaluation to date was recognition from community practitioners that working alongside the TaC Social Workers had changed practice for children subject to child protection proceedings. This pilot scheme is beginning to demonstrate 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. For those children where ongoing contact is not appropriate due to the nature of the mother's offence, this early data suggests that skilled support in educating and being transparent with mothers is having a positive impact on wellbeing. The TaC Social Worker role is also contributing to the child's identity through life story work. The measurement of this impact will be considered further as this evaluation progresses.

The early findings from the small sample of community practitioners surveyed so far suggest that it is beneficial for children's Social Workers to adopt a more collaborative and respectful approach where a mother (or even a father with parental responsibility) is in prison. Indeed, it would seem that the outcomes for child and parent can be positive when the TaC Social Worker is able to facilitate access and contribute to the local authority's assessment as part of care proceedings. There is support for this professional collaboration as a model of good practice in other research

studies. Forrester and colleagues (2008) found that Social Workers that demonstrated empathy in child protection conversations were less likely to face resistance and suggested that, whilst voluntary sector practitioners have a tendency to be parent-focused and fail to raise concerns with parents, statutory Social Workers have a tendency to be simplistically child-focused, the aim should be a 'child-focused plus' approach. Similarly, as evaluation of the Family Drug and Alcohol Court has reported positively collaborative, transparent and timely support underpinned by a belief that parental change is possible in working with parents in care proceedings (Harwin et al, 2014, Roberts et. al, 2017). Given the TaC Social Workers are liaising with mothers from 26 local authorities, it is hard to see how the role could be fulfilled by a Social Worker employed by one specific local authority. Additionally, as highlighted above, children's Social Workers are often simplistically child-focused (Forrester et al., 2008) with a case management approach (Broadhurst et al., 2017) and it would seem that having a Social Worker employed by an independent charity allows for a new type of mother-Social Worker relationship to be forged.

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