

HM Prison Service Styal Mother and Baby Unit - an appreciative enquiry

Manchester Metropolitan University
Action for Children briefing: March 2011

1. Background and context

In 2006 Action for Children established the Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) provision in HM Styal. From the outset Action for Children's focus has been on improving the life chances of this most vulnerable group of children. Action for Children's approach is based on maintaining and supporting family relationships, improving parenting skills and encouraging mothers to take responsibility. The aim is to help mothers to address their offending behaviour and make positive choices for their children and themselves.

Action for Children became the first organisation to provide wider health, care and education services on MBUs in prison. This provision has flourished exponentially over the last forty-two months. They work in partnership to provide high-quality services that meet the needs of babies and their mothers, as well as the prison's requirements. They put children at the centre of their work, nurturing the mother and baby relationship which is seen as crucial for infant development.

The Unit provides:

- A safe and secure environment for babies and their mothers
- A 24 hour, 365 days service staffed by qualified childcare professionals
- Outings for babies to ensure frequent access to 'everyday' life experiences
- High-quality parenting and childcare support, managed by a team of experienced, qualified and committed staff
- Crèche facilities
- Fully trained staff to support and promote breastfeeding
- Effective procedures for emergency situations
- Close relationships with healthcare providers, links with oral health hygienists and access to wider support networks for mothers and children when they leave

The most recent Ofsted Report in 2011, stated that the 'overall quality of the provision is outstanding'. In addition the return to custody rate for the main women's prison population in general is around 77%, whereas the return rate specifically for the MBU is around 12.5%. As far as Action for Children can ascertain, of a total of 48 women who have been on the MBU, only 6 have returned.

2. The research

The research was commissioned by Action for Children and carried out by the Education and Social Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University over a four-month period, between February and June 2010.

The aim of the research project was: *"to conduct an inquiry which identifies aspects of the mother and baby unit that appear to be working well, and consider ways these can be further developed to meet the best interests of children and families."*

as long as it takes

Since the research was undertaken we have found ourselves in a new environment due to changes in the economic and political situation. The research has identified a number of excellent practice areas, but it is likely that coming budget reductions may lead to prisons seeing this model as unaffordable. This research will act as a benchmark of good practice and provide an aspirational service model that delivers positive outcomes to women and their children.

3. Key findings

Parent support and nursery teams working in tandem in the best interests of the babies:

- Action for Children staff place a clear focus on the physical, social and emotional development of the babies that underpinned the more general progress made
- Parent support workers ensure Sentence Plans are fulfilled, which support the rehabilitation of women and also create a greater chance for post-release mothers and their babies to build positive lives together with their wider families outside prison
- There is an effective system of a 'Key Person' working and a multi-professional and fully active lead from the project manager

Multi-professional and inter-agency partnership working:

- The range of relationships with partners and services enables richer in and out-of prison experiences for the babies, for example, to the prison chapel, the library, journeys on the bus, visits to the Children's Centre, taking babies on trips to the zoo etc
- There are effective relationships between Action for Children and Prison Services
- Action for Children have developed a wealth of inter-agency working relationships with Children's Services, Immigration, Sure Start Children's Centres and health services

Family cohesion and community working

- If mothers are in touch with their partners, Action for Children have a tireless commitment to liaise with the babies' biological or sociological father, even if this is via video link with another prison
- Action for Children has built up relationships with the mothers and babies wider families
- Action for Children are constantly nurturing relationships with communities outside of prison in support of the cultural diversity of the mothers and babies they are working with

Brokering flexible and bespoke arrangements to meet the needs of babies and their mothers

- Action for Children work towards bespoke handing out and shared care arrangements that are in the best interests of the babies
- At times this requires hours of time and emotional investment liaising with a range of services to make it happen in ways that are conducive to the specific needs of the baby and her/his mother

Professional sense of working as an effective team:

- Action for Children staff have clear and articulated aspirations to keep working toward the highest possible standards in all the provision they make available
- Senior staff are committed to self-evaluation and self-improvement to take the MBU provision forward
- Staff are working towards creating an inclusive environment where culture, religion and dietary preferences are balanced with policy mandates and government directives

4. Objectives, observations and next steps

The research team identified examples of excellent practice and also possibilities for further developing the provision in the best interests of children and families.

To enrich the evidence base for women in custody and their children

- The data and subsequent analysis demonstrates that the team in Styal have a wealth of skills, a solid knowledge base and a range of complex understandings around the care and education of babies and their mothers in a prison context.

- The outcome of their recent 'outstanding' Ofsted report (2010) and the honour awarded to them by the Butler Trust (2010) concur with our research findings, in that the team work tirelessly, and for 'as long as it takes' to find solutions to complex dilemmas they are confronted with on a daily basis.
- The key principle that makes Action for Children distinct in the prison work they do is that they ensure the pre- and post-natal baby is always at the centre of their provision, intervention and facilitation. They utilise their experienced and well-trained staff in parent support, early years and business support to mobilise a range of services both inside and outside the prison to offer diverse and bespoke MBU and outreach work as and when necessary.

Next steps should include championing the voice of Action for Children to a range of services including community based services and in prisons where other Mother and Baby Units might be established.

To develop 'best practice' approach for Action for Children services, which improve outcomes for children and mothers within this target group

- Action for Children staff consistently re-define their own understandings of what they deem 'best practice' as they aim for the highest (multi-) professional standards. They are led by a group of senior staff who are thoughtful and reflective practitioners. They understand the policy and statutory demands made on them from the early year's workforce and the prison services, whilst manoeuvring between a range of legislation, policies, languages and practices of early years and other services.
- Staff work to achieve the best outcomes for the babies and mothers given their difficult, challenging and sometimes frustrating context. They try to develop a sense of wider family cohesion by offering family visit days, video links with the baby's father if he is in prison or mediation services for mother and father where a breakdown in their relationship has occurred, as well as bespoke hand out and shared care arrangements.
- The staff team works to reduce the possibility of mothers re-offending by having regular parent key worker sessions, encouraging mothers to engage with education and other aspects of their Sentence Plans and developing continuity of services such as Sure Start Children's Centres to support their post-release experiences.

Future development could include discussion and engagement to find ways to critique some of the directives, mandates and frameworks employed within the prison context to shift current ambiguities and build on the constructive negotiations which have already taken place.

To develop recommendations in planning and commissioning similar services

- MBU prison services need to pay attention to: the make up, education, training and continued professional development of the team; the managerial structures to support multi-agency working and the development of a wider MBU network to share best practice and work through dilemmas.
- The work hinges around the senior staff's ability to forge and sustain workable and flexible relationships that draw in services to support the needs of babies and mothers.
- These, often bespoke partnerships are difficult to plan for and commission, which places heavy demands on the leadership team at Styal to subject themselves to further critical and ongoing self-reflection and self-evaluation.

Future possibilities must include learning from the approach developed at Styal, especially the ways the team are managed which has given a determined vision and clear focus for the whole team. Suggestions going forward included developing a model of unit-based as well as multi-agency training for

practitioners. This would help to develop shared goals and understanding, and, develop a more consistent approach across different agencies.

To explore the possible link between services provided by Action for Children and the impact this may have on the reduction of re-offending and recidivism

- The mothers and babies are given opportunities to work with a range of experienced Action for Children staff and related services, which will support them in developing their confidence as mothers, their attachments with their babies and older children, and their ability to sustain and develop their relationships with wider family members and other community services post-release.
- In the longer term, Action for Children hope that these opportunities for mothers and babies on the MBU will mean less re-offending because mothers have changed their aspirations for themselves and for their children.
- Consequently, although the services are costly to the prison service, Action for Children would hope that the initial statistics indicating that the percentage of women reoffending after having been in the MBU is significantly less than the percentage of those reoffending in the main prison, would indicate a noteworthy social return on the prison's initial investment.

Next steps should include dissemination of lessons on how to reduce re-offending and recidivism, for example close working relationships with health visitors to support mothers and babies in various local communities post release and work with the prison service to ensure the women follow their sentence plans.