

Ormiston Children & Families Trust



Time for Families

Ormiston's work with women prisoners at HMP Edmunds Hill

Autumn 2004

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Aim of this report

Many of the issues faced by female prisoners - particularly those with primary responsibility for children - are very different from those faced by male prisoners. This report aims to highlight these issues and to record the experiences of Ormiston workers in supporting women prisoners at HMP Edmunds Hill, in order to raise awareness of their particular needs. In doing so, the report examines what lessons have been learned and gives examples of good practice which could provide a model for work in other prisons. As HMP Edmunds Hill faces the challenge of being re-roled to a male prison, it was felt to be very important that what has been learned from Ormiston's experience with female prisoners was not lost.

This report also allows a rare opportunity to record some of the issues arising from the re-roling process. In particular it looks at the impact it has on the women themselves and their children, whose individual needs are often hidden amidst the organisational upheavals.

1.2 Background

Ormiston Children and Families Trust is a voluntary organisation providing both community and prison-based services for children and families in the eastern region. It has been engaged in work with families of prisoners in this region since 1989 and since 1999 has provided services to female prisoners and their families at HMP Edmunds Hill.

The last two years have seen many developments in Ormiston's work with prisoners and their families since the launch, in 2002, of the Eastern Region Families Partnership. This is an innovative collaboration between Ormiston Children and Families Trust, the Prison Service, Lankelly Trust and Ormiston Trust, providing funding to develop services for prisoners and their families across the eastern region over seven years. 'Time for Families' is the name of the Partnership's initiative to promote greater awareness and more effective responses to the needs of the children and families of prisoners, both within prisons and in the community.

The main aim of Ormiston's work at HMP Edmunds Hill is to enable imprisoned parents wherever possible and appropriate to maintain close and understanding links with their children for the benefit of the whole family. Research has demonstrated that the

maintenance of positive relationships between an imprisoned parent and his or her children can significantly reduce offending (Social Exclusion Unit Report 2002). The effects of parental absence on children have also been identified in many research studies, including the negative impact on children's psychological health, behaviour and their own future parenting.

Information about the number of mothers in prison is not routinely collected by the Prison Service. However it is estimated that around two-thirds of the 12,650 women imprisoned each year are mothers, with an average of two children each (Prison Reform Trust press release, May 2004).

A Home Office study in 1994 (reported in Caddle & Crisp 1997) surveyed 1,766 women prisoners nationally and a smaller study of women at HMP Edmunds Hill (Ormiston 2003) provided information about 70 women prisoners there. These studies indicated that 61% and 54% respectively of women were mothers of children under 18 years. About a third of the children were under five years old. Nearly three-quarters of the children in the larger study were living with their mother at the time of her imprisonment, sometimes with their mother only. This meant that most of the children lost their principal carer and one-third lost their sole carer. The Home Office researchers (1997) described women prisoners as:

"...in a sense, doubly penalised - they are serving a sentence and at the same time trying to make provision for their children with all the associated difficulties and strains. Fathers on the other hand generally serve their sentence in the knowledge that their partners will continue to care for their children, albeit with difficulty."

Because there are fewer female prisons, on average women are held further from home than male prisoners. Nearly a fifth of women prisoners are held over 100 miles from home (Loucks 2002). Women prisoners are also much more likely than men to self-harm. A 1998 survey (ONSS) found that one-sixth of female prisoners had self-harmed in the previous year. Although women prisoners account for only 6% of the total prison population, they account for more than 25% of all self-harm incidents in prison (Caddle & Crisp 1997). In 2003, 15% of all prison suicides were women (PRT 2004). At least a third of women prisoners are estimated to have been the victims of sexual abuse, which may be disclosed for the first time whilst in prison. Substance misuse and psychiatric illness are also found amongst women prisoners at much higher levels than in the community or amongst male prisoners (Caddle & Crisp 1997).

In 'Working with Women Prisoners' (2003) it is stated that prison staff working with women comment on "*the high level of emotion, the willingness of women to talk about their problems and their wanting staff to be involved in sorting them out*".

The Prison Service recognises the particular challenges of working with women prisoners and provides extra training for all those involved. However, the scale and complexity of issues faced by many women prisoners and their families is daunting and prison staff have to deal with these amidst many competing responsibilities in delivering a safe and effective regime in the prison.

The family support traditionally available from other agencies such as probation has also changed, with their role now focussed on risk assessments and offending behaviour programmes, allowing little time for broader family or pastoral work. Area social work teams are often under-resourced and under-staffed. Child protection is at the top of every local authority agenda and many hard-pressed workers would view the imprisoned parent as a risk factor, rather than a resource for the well-being of a child. Even extended family members who take on the care of children who have lost parents to imprisonment may decide it is "better for the child" and easier for them if they do not visit.

2.0 Ormiston at HMP Edmunds Hill

The Ormiston team at HMP Edmunds Hill comprises a project leader (25 hours per week) and senior project worker (17.5 hours per week). One voluntary worker is also attached to the project. All workers are female. Although such qualifications were not a strict requirement for the post, both the present project leader and her predecessor are qualified social workers, with extensive previous experience of childcare work in social services departments. Both the project leader and the senior project worker also hold NNEB qualifications and have substantial experience of Early Years work.

The project is funded by the Eastern Region Families Partnership. Ormiston Children and Families Trust employ the project staff and HMP Edmunds Hill provides office space on one of the wings and some resources for office and play areas. Project staff participate in regular (4 monthly) prison Advisory Group meetings with a cross representation of organisations which helps broaden the understanding of Ormiston's role whilst offering a forum for sharing views and information.

The work of the project includes facilitating monthly Children's Visits, involvement in the induction process and intensive individual support to prisoners and their families. This work will be examined in more depth.

Parenting courses have also been a regular feature of Ormiston's work in previous years and it is the intention that these will continue to be delivered in the future, but this is dependent upon staffing and resources being available. The courses focus on issues such as effective communication with children whilst in prison, the impact of offending behaviour on children, the changes in family dynamics when a mother goes to prison and the difficulties of reintegrating on release.

Ormiston staff are also represented on the Children and Public Protection Committee and at multi-agency meetings.

Ormiston's project leader at HMP Edmunds Hill, Clare Smith, explained:

"I was originally employed in April 2000 as senior project worker specifically to work with women and facilitate monthly Children's Visits. The role quickly developed to involve a huge demand for one-to-one work with prisoners to discuss any aspect relating to their children's needs and welfare. In July 2003 I was appointed project leader.

Due to having a background in social work my role has developed further to be able to advise and assist with those prisoners who have children in the care system. They have often required help in understanding court and legal processes as well as support with final contacts in cases where their children are to be adopted. I feel this has been a very valuable resource to the prison and prison staff often seek clarification and explanations of the processes so they are better able to support prisoners themselves."

2.1 Children's Visits

'Children's Visits' take place one afternoon a month, from 1.45pm - 4pm. They are held in the gymnasium which is arranged informally for the occasion with toys, games and art and crafts activities. They provide an opportunity for mothers to focus on playing and talking with their children in a more relaxed setting where they are free to move around and enjoy activities together. A photo of the mother and children may be taken during the visit, which the mother pays for. This is a very popular feature. Each visit is normally staffed by the two Ormiston workers and the voluntary worker and two prison officers.

A normal Visiting Order is required for these visits. Any mother can apply, but applications are subject to approval by the security and probation departments. Women are encouraged to take responsibility for making the application and sending a letter to their child's carer confirming the arrangements for the visit.

Arranging Children's Visits entails a complex range of tasks for the Ormiston staff in addition to time spent during the actual visits. There is much time spent in the processing of documentation for those applying for visits, liaising with prison and probation staff on security issues and risk assessments and supporting women whose applications are unsuccessful. Applications for Children's Visits heavily outnumber the amount of places available so decisions have to be taken about how places should be allocated. The process is often complicated by last minute transfers or releases of women who have applied for visits.

Clare commented:

"The fruition of pleasant family contact through Children's Visits has been a pleasure to facilitate although the mechanism for arranging such contact for some families is difficult to say the least."

Feedback from the mothers about Children's Visits has been extremely positive.

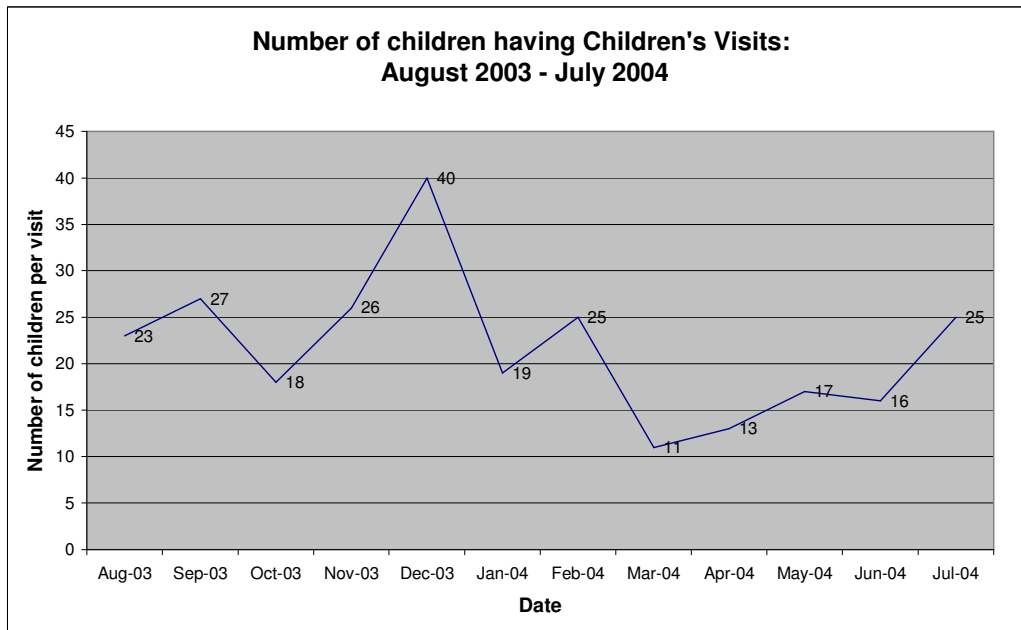
Comments included:

"It felt almost like a normal family environment."

"My kids loved every minute of it - the freedom of their mum being allowed to play with them."

"It gives people such as myself the chance to build a better, stronger relationship with young ones."

It has been hoped for some time to double the frequency of Children's Visits to allow more families to participate, but this is dependent upon prison resources being available. The numbers of children attending Children's Visits over the past year is shown in the following chart; the December peak reflects the popularity of the Christmas party when extra numbers are catered for.



For women whose children are looked after by local authorities (“in care”) there are additional tasks in liaising with the appropriate social services departments to arrange for the children to be brought to the visit. One mother may have children in several different placements with different authorities and trying to co-ordinate a visit with all the social workers involved can be very time-consuming. Social workers are usually unfamiliar with prisons and prison procedures and lack information about what special visiting arrangements are available for children, how to arrange visits, who to contact and how to get there and what documentation is required.

Furthermore, the distances children may need to be brought to the prison are often very long and visiting times may not fit in with social workers’ normal working hours. The whole process therefore needs considerable commitment on the part of social workers. Ormiston staff use their social work backgrounds and skills to emphasise the importance of such contact for children and also have an understanding of the legal requirements which need to be fulfilled.

Probation staff at HMP Edmunds Hill commented:

“The Children’s Visits scheme has proved an enormously valuable resource for the whole prison, not just the mothers, occasional grandmothers and the many children who directly benefit. The visits are so popular they are often over-subscribed. We are routinely involved in the associated Risk Assessments...[the Ormiston staff] take note of our observations and follow up any suggested course of action, for example contacting the relevant Social Services Department. When late giving our comments, they are polite yet assertive in chasing us up!”

2.2 Individual support work

“The most intense and demanding role within this environment is undoubtedly the one-to-one contact we offer prisoners to discuss any issues relating to their children. Often what is presented on a referral form is far from the reality of the main issues affecting women in custody. It has always been essential to keep an open mind and a balanced view of situations. It has also been an asset to have some knowledge of child protection issues. Experience in the field of mental health and self-harm has also been useful as a high proportion of women suffer with a variety of issues.”

(Clare Smith, project leader)

Referrals for support from the Ormiston workers come from social services departments, probation, solicitors, the prison chaplaincy, wing staff, prison education or pre-release staff, prisoner ‘Listeners’ or directly from the women themselves. Many requests for help concern the arranging of visits by the women’s children, but they can cover a very wide spectrum of issues.

These may entail support with adoption matters - for example, arranging final contact visits with children who are to be adopted, or meetings with adopters; offering information and advice to those involved in childcare proceedings, child protection or legal issues; or arranging to send or receive photos of children with whom this may be the only form of contact. There may be requests to supervise contact orders made by the courts, or requests by prisoners for help in completing forms or understanding legal jargon.

An understanding of childcare legislation and social services practice is a great advantage and enables the workers to not only support the women but also sometimes to explain the complexities of childcare law to prison officers dealing with the women.

Workers may also take on work arising out of meetings of the Multi Agency Public Protection system run within the prison. They support prisoners in ways that help the person concerned and reduce the risk to potential or actual victims. For example, they might support a pregnant mother facing the removal of her unborn child at birth because of the nature of her offence.

In many cases women need support to work through issues relating to separation, loss and attachment - areas which would be difficult, if not sometimes dangerous to deal with without the appropriate knowledge and skills. Often one-to-one work is aimed at improving the prisoner’s ability to relate to others through appropriate communication

and listening skills. Such work helps to build the women's self-esteem and to cope better in other areas of their lives.

"Much of this work is emotionally charged for the prisoner concerned and often emotionally draining for the staff involved. The Ormiston team have taken on many of these roles that were formerly undertaken by the Probation Department (thus lightening our workload)... We are aware from our own previous experience and from time to time our joint contact meetings, just how difficult these sessions can be. Nonetheless, it is clear how sensitively and professionally Clare and Karen handle these meetings."

(Probation Officer, HMP Edmunds Hill)

In the last 12 months there were a total of 110 new referrals of women to Ormiston staff, in addition to on-going work with others.

Case example one:

Ormiston workers first had contact with Anne four years ago. She had been sentenced to twenty years, her child was only two years old and she initially wanted to discuss the possibility of arranging Children's Visits. The child is in long-term foster care, which will continue if necessary until she is at least 16 years old, but there is no legal order on her.

Ormiston staff liaised with social services who agreed to make arrangements to bring her child to a Children's Visit. However as time progressed it became apparent that although the child was visiting her mother, she did not understand that her mother was actually in prison, nor the reason for this or the length of her mother's sentence. After much discussion with the mother and with social services, it was decided to undertake some life story work with the child in conjunction with Ormiston's 'Time for Children and Young People' worker.

Staff negotiated with the prison who agreed to allow a number of private visit sessions in the chapel. During these sessions the workers helped the child to build up a picture of her life using photographs and art work. Through this work, the child was helped to answer some of her questions about her mother's absence and to build a stronger relationship with her mother. Anne was co-operative with both the Ormiston staff and with social services, who maintained a very pro-active and supportive approach throughout.

Anne and her daughter have now enjoyed a combination of Children's Visits and 'chapel visits' for almost four years and the benefits of working long-term with both prisoner and child have been very evident. As well as having a very positive effect on the child's emotional well-being, Anne's self-esteem has risen and she is now a 'listener' for fellow prisoners.

Anne is now feeling very anxious about what will happen to future contact with her child and the relationship they have built up together when the prison is re-rolled. There is by no means any certainty that any prison she is transferred to will have similar facilities for Children's Visits or family support.

In total Ormiston workers have had at least 140 separate contacts with or on behalf of this prisoner.

Case example two:

Joy is a woman of Nigerian origin with whom Ormiston workers first came into contact a year ago. Her son was being looked after by a friend in Ireland. However this was only a short term arrangement and the child, who was only a year old, was later accommodated by a Social Services department in London.

Many negotiations took place with Social Services to try to organise contact with the child. When the first visit finally took place several months later, the child did not recognise his mother, which made her distraught and depressed.

Shortly afterwards Joy was told that she was to be transferred to another prison. This caused more trauma to her and she refused to be moved for fear of losing the newly established contact with her son. Joy was put in the segregation unit as a result and was also placed on special observations because of fears that she would harm herself. She described feeling persecuted and punished.

Through further negotiation with Social Services Joy was able to have another visit from her son. Ormiston staff then facilitated weekly 'chapel visits' until Joy was transferred to another establishment a couple of months later. The transformation seen in the child's response to his mother during these visits was outstanding and their bond was obviously renewed.

Following her discharge, Joy telephoned the Ormiston workers to say she was currently living with a cousin in London and had her son with her, which she was very happy about.

In total, Ormiston staff had 61 contacts with this prisoner.

2.3 Foreign Nationals

The problems arising from the separation of mothers and their children are even more acute for foreign women prisoners who normally live abroad. Often serving very long sentences for drug offences, they tend to be older and more likely to be mothers than the average female prison population (Caddle & Crisp 1997). A significantly higher proportion of these women were caring for their children before imprisonment and they were more likely to have been their children's sole carer. Many lived in poverty and cite the urgent need to support their children economically as the prime motivation for their offence.

'Foreign nationals' commonly have to cope with an unfamiliar language, culture, climate and food in prison and are unable to have the support of regular visits and telephone calls from their families. Even information written in their own language

may not be helpful as many lack skills in reading and writing in their own tongue. Richards et al (1995) described their situation as “a prison within a prison.”

Ormiston workers offer individual support where possible, often in liaison with specialist support organisations such as HIBISCUS. The women are often extremely anxious about the welfare of their children.

An example of work undertaken by Ormiston is where a woman with a child is arrested at Stansted airport, remanded in custody and her child is removed but she doesn't know where he has been taken to. The child may not even have the same surname as the mother who may be unclear about the child's age or date of birth, so discovering which local authority is involved is difficult and time consuming. The child is likely to be placed in a foster home where the language, religion, culture and food will be very different and the child may not know where his mother is or how to make contact.

In other instances women have left children behind in their country of origin without them knowing where their mother has gone, perhaps having made temporary care arrangements to cover the two or three days they expect to be absent. Telephone contact may be impossible and women may fear reprisals upon their families from those who hired them for their failed deliveries.

Staff may liaise with International Social Services where there are concerns about the safety of children in the home country, but often their role is primarily offering compassion and support to help these women come to terms with their situation. In the longer term this support contributes to reducing the level of depression and self-harm to which such women are vulnerable.

3.0 The impact of change at HMP Edmunds Hill

In April 2004 it was announced that as a result of the continually increasing prison population and consequent pressure for more capacity in the system, HMP Edmunds Hill was to be re-roled from a women's prison to a men's prison. Prison staff and prisoners were initially told that all the women would be moved out by August 2004. A major move of this kind clearly involves complex organisational implications both within HMP Edmunds Hill and within the prison estate generally and since the news was first broken, the operational dates have changed more than once. At the time of writing the move is expected to be completed by December 2004.

For both the staff working at HMP Edmunds Hill and for the women imprisoned there, this uncertainty has been unsettling, even traumatic for some. Ormiston staff - and presumably many prison officers - feel they have built up experience and skills in dealing with the unique challenges of working with women prisoners and fear these may soon be lost. They regret the imminent loss of the rapport and trust which has in some cases taken a long time to build with the women with whom they work.

In the interim period of uncertainty leading up to the change, Ormiston workers have noted heightened anxieties among the women. Their referral rates have shown a significant rise, much of it related to the forthcoming re-role. The case example of the mother, Anne, illustrates worries which are common to many of the women. They know that they will be moved but do not know when or where. They may request a transfer to a particular prison but have no control over whether or not this is granted. They fear that they will be moved further from home where it is difficult for children and families to visit.

Having experienced Children's Visits and the support of the Ormiston project at HMP Edmunds Hill, the women are worried that they may be moved to a prison without similar facilities where contact, particularly with their children, may be far less congenial. Some families choose to bring their children only to Children's Visits rather than the normal domestic visits and are concerned about the impact on their children of exposing them to the harsher environment of domestic visits, or the risk that their carers may not wish them to visit at all if Children's Visits were not available.

They are also aware of the considerable efforts on the part of Ormiston staff in particular which go into arranging some complex visits, for example where staff need to liaise with different social services departments in order to coordinate a visit by a group of siblings who may be in different placements.

There is currently no systematic collection of information about facilities such as these for families at different prisons. While the Eastern Region Families Partnership has recently collated information on family-related facilities in all prisons in the eastern area, there is no comparable data produced nationally. The changes taking place at HMP Edmunds Hill have highlighted the need for this gap to be plugged.

4.0 Conclusion

The purpose of this report has been principally to make some record of the experience of the Ormiston project at HMP Edmunds Hill before it ceases to exist in its present form following the prison's change to an all-male prison. In doing so it is hoped to demonstrate the importance of the services provided for women prisoners and their families.

The services which have been described in this report were highlighted in the most recent Inspection Report of HMP Edmunds Hill (2002) and recommended as a model of good practice which should be introduced into all women's prisons:

"The work of the Ormiston Trust provided a critical service to women prisoners and their children. Its support for family contact alleviated one of the key sources of anxiety for women prisoners and was increasingly important as population pressures often meant that women were some distance from home..."

We highly commend the work of the Ormiston Trust and recognise its significant contribution both to helping women and their children cope with custody and in preparing for release with plans, hope and responsibilities for the future."

The Children's Visits and the one-to-one work were stated to be of particular importance in re-establishing or maintaining links between the child and his or her family. Further excerpts from the Inspectorate's report are included in the appendix.

It was also felt important to record and bring to the attention of the Prison Service and the public the impact upon families of the re-rolling process. The Prison Service obviously and rightly has its own priorities in managing the challenges of a rising prison population. However, speaking of his vision for the newly created NOMS, Martin Narey said:

"We do need to move to a position whereby prisons are not overwhelmed with the daily challenge of managing the population and can concentrate on work to prepare prisoners for release."

The priority of organisations such as Ormiston Children and Families Trust is the well-being of children and the importance of enabling good quality contact between separated parents and children wherever appropriate. This is embodied in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which states (Article 9) that:

"States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it contrary to the child's best interests."

Through Ormiston's Time for Families initiative, it is hoped to raise awareness of the impact upon children's rights of policies and practice within the prison system so that their needs can be taken account of when decisions are made and implemented.

The final comments in this report come from project leader, Clare Smith:

"My time at Edmunds Hill prison during the past four and a half years has undoubtedly been the most interesting and rewarding work experience I have had to date. I feel privileged and fortunate to have had the experience of working with women in custody. It has given a unique insight into the lives of those families fragmented by custodial sentences.

The main motivation in my work is the belief that the majority of children will want to have contact with their mum wherever they are and regardless of what they are alleged to have done.

Co-working and close liaison with other agencies in the prison has contributed to the success of the project. This, coupled with the respect of uniformed staff generally has made a potentially difficult environment a pleasure to work in.

I am sorry to see this facility closed to women as I feel a real expertise has developed over time with a number of dedicated and understanding people who genuinely want to assist to make custody more bearable for women. I am sure this ethos will continue with the re-role and the commitment and dedication will flourish.

I will reflect very fondly on my time spent in the women's establishment and am glad to have had the experience."

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FPWP/Hibiscus offers advice to women in the criminal justice system and provides a family link between women in prison, their children and extended families. HIBISCUS has an overseas office in Jamaica and is able to provide pre-sentencing reports for the courts. It offers support for Latin American women in British prisons and staff and volunteers speak a wide range of languages. FPWP/HIBISCUS helps women stay in contact with their families - in the UK or abroad - and can help with resettlement.

Appendix

Note: HMP Edmunds Hill was formerly named HMP Highpoint North

Extracts from HM Inspectorate of Prisons Report on a full announced inspection of HM Prison Highpoint North (2002)

Family contact

7.31 Prison Rule 4 stipulates that 'special attention shall be paid to the maintenance of such relationships between a prisoner and his family as are desirable in the interests of both'. The work of the Ormiston Trust at Highpoint North addressed this requirement directly and was an example of good practice.

7.32 In addition to routine domestic visits to Highpoint North, prisoners and their families benefited from the availability of workers from the Ormiston Trust. The Trust's aim was to enable imprisoned mothers, wherever possible and appropriate, to re-establish or maintain links with their children for the benefit of the whole family. This aim was primarily achieved through Children's Visits and one-to-one work. There was one full-time social worker, a half-time social worker and a half-time child care worker based at Highpoint North and South. The Prison Service paid for half of this service, with the remainder provided from the Trust's charitable funds. The service was in its third year and was well established and appreciated by prisoners and staff at Highpoint North.

7.33 The team organised Children's Visits, three of which were held during the summer holidays. Although at least 12 visits were planned each year, these were significantly over-subscribed. Visits took place in the gymnasium for a full afternoon, with activities, toys, refreshments, photographs and opportunities for mothers to have physical contact with and care for their children. The need for these visits was emphasised by the fact that two-thirds of children attending were brought by foster carers or social workers. This was in stark contrast to the children of men in the next door prison, where only two children had attended with someone other than a family member in the last three years.

7.34 In addition to Children's Visits, the Ormiston Trust supervised contact orders made by family courts, facilitated assessment visits for child psychologists writing reports for freeing for adoption or contact hearings, and facilitated production order applications for women needing to attend court for family proceedings. They also met prisoners as part of the induction process.

7.35 The Ormiston Trust had also acted as highly-qualified and experienced consultants for the prison in managing child protection procedures and developing policies.

7.36 The Trust received 95 referrals in 2001, of which 50 were applications for Children's Visits and 38 were relating to court contact orders. In total, 172 children attended Children's Visits in 2001.

Conclusion

7.37 The work of the Ormiston Trust provided a critical service to women prisoners and their children. Its support for family contact alleviated one of the key sources of anxiety for women prisoners and was increasingly important as population pressures often meant that women were some distance from home. Having worked at Highpoint North and South, the Trust was able to provide a reliable and authoritative comparison between the needs of male and female prisoners for these services. We highly commend the work of the Ormiston Trust and recognise its significant contribution both to helping women and their children cope with custody and in preparing for release with plans, hope and responsibilities for the future.

Recommendations

7.38 As the prison separates from Highpoint South, the family workers should be provided with suitable office accommodation and confidential telephone access at Highpoint North.

7.39 The work of the Ormiston Trust should be supported and extended to provide provision of parenting skills classes and greater capacity for children's visits.

7.40 The work of the Ormiston Trust should be used and adapted as a model of good practice for family and child support workers in other women's prisons.

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