

# Evaluation of the Ormiston Families' Breaking Barriers Service in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Essex

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Introduction**

Breaking Barriers is a prison outreach service run by Ormiston Families which supports children and their families affected by the imprisonment of a parent or significant carer. It focuses on providing support for children between 4 and 16 years at an early stage in their parent's or caregiver's imprisonment. The service is delivered through one to one interventions in the child's school; information and support for the parent/carers at home and sometimes the parent in prison; and awareness-raising sessions for teachers and staff providing learning support and pastoral care in schools. This evaluation considers the delivery of Breaking Barriers in three counties: Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Essex. A part-time senior practitioner is employed in each of these areas to deliver the service.

Breaking Barriers has four aims:

1. To improve the family links of families affected by imprisonment
2. To improve the child's communication with their imprisoned parent/s or significant carer
3. To ensure that children with a parent or significant carer in prison continue to engage with school
4. To improve professionals' understanding of the effects imprisonment can have on children and their families.

Through the achievement of these aims, the following outcomes are anticipated:

1. Children will have a better link with their parent in prison
2. Children will have better emotional well-being
3. Children will have a better engagement with school or education.

Referrals to the Service are made by a prisoner parent, a parent/carers, teachers, social workers and other professionals in direct contact with the child. A child can also directly request the support of the service. Once a referral has been received the senior practitioner will meet with the parent/carers at home to discuss the child's needs and the desired outcomes for the intervention.

The senior practitioner then arranges a time to meet with the child individually in their school and establish their interest in receiving support. The meetings are intended to provide a safe space for the child to discuss their feelings and experiences of having a parent or significant carer in prison. At the first meeting the child sets two or three personal goals they would like to achieve with the senior practitioner. These often relate to understanding more about life in prison, finding solutions and coping strategies for any worries and problems they face in relation to the imprisonment of their parent or carer. The senior practitioners draw on a range of age-related activities: therapeutic play, creative work, DVDs and discussion sheets, to help the child achieve these goals. In addition they provide information and support for the parent or carer at home and, whilst respecting the confidentiality of the discussions with the child, keep the parent(s) and relevant professionals informed of the progress of their meetings. Further information about the support that Breaking Barriers service provides children is included in their promotional film:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HNGUkuUai34>.

## **Research Evaluation**

In November 2016 Ormiston commissioned the University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology to conduct an evaluation of the impact of Breaking Barriers service in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Essex. The evaluation research has collected and analysed data on the operation and outcomes of the service from January to December 2016. The research has a mixed method design comprising 28 interviews, with children, parents (including one parent who had been in prison) referral organisations, Ormiston senior practitioners and their managers and documentary analysis of 51 case records of children seen in the three areas over the twelve month period (including an analysis of the 'Kidscreen' quality of life questionnaire which some children and parents had completed). Additional information was drawn from internal documentation and external publicity on the service (see Table 1).

**Table 1 Data Sources**

	Bedfordshire	Cambridgeshire	Essex	Total
<i>Child Interviews</i>	4	3	0	<b>7</b>
<i>Parent Interviews</i>	4	3	0	<b>7</b>
<i>Referrer Interviews (telephone)</i>	2	3	2	<b>7</b>
<i>Practitioner Interviews</i>	2	1	1	<b>4</b>
<i>Ormiston Manager Interviews</i>	Bedfordshire and Cambs manager		Essex manager	<b>2</b>
	Senior manager			<b>1</b>
			<b>Total interviews</b>	<b>28</b>
<i>Case Records Jan - Dec 2016</i>	20	17	14	<b>51</b>
<i>Kidscreen questionnaire s completed at start and end of intervention (Version 1 = 10 questions; Version 2 = 27 questions)</i>	V1 <i>Start</i> Children: 2	V1 <i>Start</i> Children: 6 Parent/Carer: 4  <i>End</i> Children: 2	V2 <i>Start</i> Children: 4 Parent/Carer: 4  <i>End</i> Children: 3 Parent/Carer:3	<i>Start</i> Children 12 (V1 n=8; V2 n=4) Parents: 8 (V1 n=4; V2 n=4)  <i>End</i> Children 5 (V1 n=2; V2 n=3) Parent/Carer 3 (V1 n=0; V2 n=3)  <b>Total 28 17 children 11 parents/carers</b>
<i>Other</i>	Internal evaluation documentation Radio interview Internet film Newspaper report			

***The research process***

The research was conducted in accordance with the British Society of Criminology's Code of Ethics for Researchers. The research documentation was reviewed by Ormiston staff and by the Institute of Criminology's ethics committee. Parents and

children were first approached by the relevant senior practitioner in the area to explain the purpose of the evaluation and to ask whether they would be willing to be interviewed. If they agreed, the researcher contacted the parent to arrange a convenient time to meet. The interviews took place in the home and the child and parent were interviewed together. Names of representatives from referral organisations were passed onto the researcher who contacted them directly. These interviews were conducted by telephone.

The data were analysed first to gain a perspective on the management and operation of the service in each of the three counties including information on the children who had used the service over the year and the length and content of interventions delivered. Drawing on data from the interviews and case records a detailed analysis of the impact of the service was then conducted with reference to the specific aims and proposed outcomes of the Breaking Barriers service. Finally the data were studied for evidence of the wider impact of the service on the children's families, schools and other agencies.

## **Findings**

The findings from the evaluation are presented here. They are based on the combined analysis of data on children's progress against personal goals; well-being analyses; and comments on written evaluations and from interviews with children, their parents, schools and referral organisations. This first section provides a description of the location, management and operation of the service in the three counties and an overview of the work of the senior practitioner. The second section presents information on the numbers of children using the service between January 2016 and January 2017 including their age, gender, ethnicity, and the length of intervention they received. It describes the various needs children have and the personal goals they set at the beginning of the service. It then considers children's progress against proposed service outcomes:

1. Children have a better link with their parent in prison
2. Children have better emotional well-being
3. Children have a better engagement with school or education.

The final two sections consider the impact of Breaking Barriers on parents and carers at home and the experiences of schools and referral organisations using the service.

### **1. Location, management and operation of the service.**

The three counties in this evaluation vary in size and population level. Bedfordshire is approximately 500 square miles and has a population of 514,000. Cambridgeshire covers 1300 square miles and has a population of around 635,000. Essex is approximately 1400 square mile in area and has a population of over 1.6 million. County-specific funding is generated for the running of the Breaking Barriers service. Funding is received from a range of local and national grant-giving bodies and local government organisations for periods between 1 to 2 years at a time.

The Breaking Barriers services are based in prison visitors' centres in these counties which are run by Ormiston Families: Bedfordshire's service operates out of HMP Bedford visitors' centre, Cambridgeshire's service is based at the visitors' centre at HMP Littlehey near Huntingdon and the Essex service is based at the visitors' centre of HMP Chelmsford.



Two managers oversee the running of the service, one with responsibility for Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire and one with responsibility for Essex. The three senior practitioners in these areas are employed for 21 hours a week. The post-holders in Bedfordshire and Essex are newly recruited (December 2016 and January 2017 respectively), the senior practitioner in Cambridgeshire has been employed since the service started in 2014. The current post-holders all have expertise in working with children and criminal justice.

## **2. Role of the senior practitioner**

The work of the senior practitioner involves a substantial amount of travel around the county to family homes and to schools where children attend. The main activity of is the setting up and delivering of the interventions with individual children. This involves conducting an initial assessment of the child's needs based on the first meeting with the child and information provided by the parent/carer at home. The practitioner discusses the issues the child would like support with and the desired outcomes of the Breaking Barriers intervention. They collect background information about the family's circumstances, any relevant details about the imprisoned parent's offence together with information about the child's well-being, their school life and their family relationships including their relationship and level of contact with the imprisoned parent.

The content of the intervention is tailored to the personal goals the child sets with the senior practitioner. The activities and materials used to achieve these goals are similar across the three services (see Appendix 1 for examples). They might typically include watching a DVD on life in prison to dispel any myths about imprisonment and provide reassurance about the child's imprisoned parent's well-being; completing work sheets, card games or creative activities (e.g. making a worry box, a hand puppet) to facilitate talk about feelings, to build self-esteem, to establish safe people to talk to and be with; discussing coping strategies for managing negative emotions (anger, sadness, and anxiety) and for social problems, such as bullying. The meetings may also include practical help with writing a letter to the parent in prison. The senior practitioner may also take the child on a visit to the prison as part of the support offered.

The school-based meetings with the child may take place weekly at the start of the intervention and reduce in frequency (once a fortnight, once a month) towards the end as the senior practitioner prepares for the end of the intervention. In some cases in Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire a volunteer from Ormiston Families will take the child on social activities e.g. swimming, visits to the cinema during and after the completion of the intervention.

Alongside the support provided to children and parents/carers at home and related documentation and correspondence the senior practitioner's role includes liaison with schools, social services and related agencies. This can involve feeding back information about any problems the child may say they are having at school or at home, attendance at Children in Need (CIN) meetings and reports to child protection agencies. The senior practitioner is also responsible for raising awareness of the service amongst school staff and referral organisations. In Essex, awareness raising days have been organized where headteachers and staff from local schools have been invited HMP Chelmsford and its visitors' centre to learn about experience of visiting someone in prison. In Cambridgeshire, the senior practitioner has given local newspaper and radio interviews on the work of the Service.

### **3. Children using the Breaking Barriers Service**

#### ***Background Information***

Between January and December 2016 the Breaking Barriers service received a total of 49 referrals: 18 children to the Bedfordshire service, 17 to the Cambridgeshire service and 14 to the Essex service. Of these children, 45 received an intervention: 17 in Bedfordshire, 17 in Cambridgeshire and 11 in Essex<sup>1</sup>. The children who did not receive an intervention either said they did not want support or were assessed as having needs which required a more specialist service.

Of the children receiving an intervention, 30 (65%) were male and 16 (35%) were female. Their ages ranged from 5 to 15 years. The average age was 8 years in

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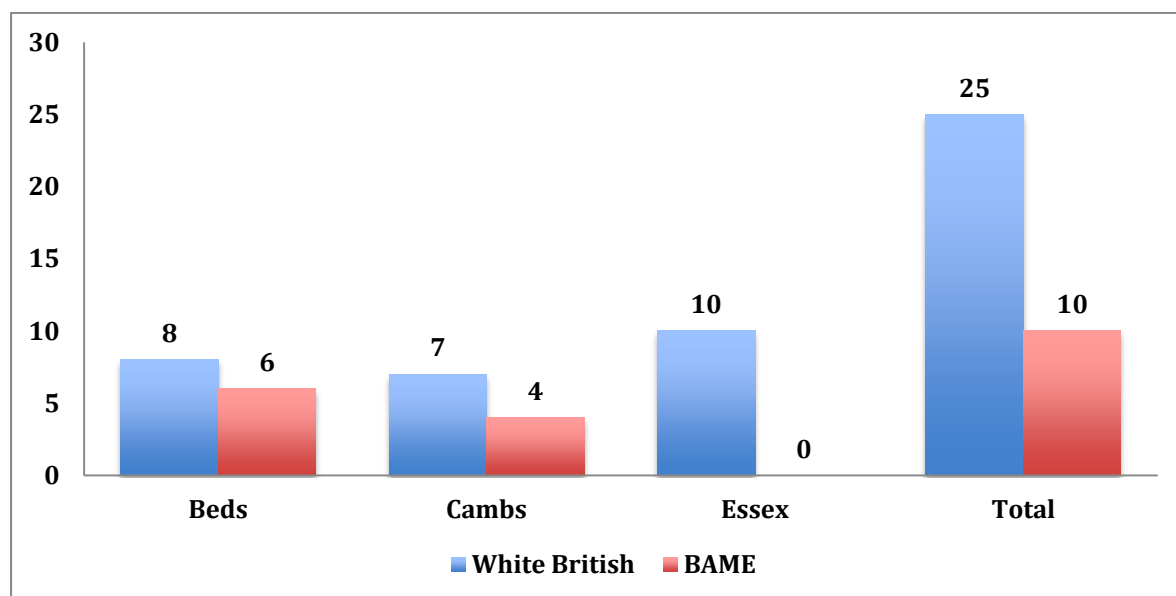
<sup>1</sup> In Essex the Breaking Barriers service was halted in November 2016 due to the departure of the senior practitioner. The service was resumed at the end of January 2017 when a new senior practitioner was recruited.

Bedfordshire, 8.5 years in Essex and 10 years in Cambridgeshire (see Table 2). Based on the available data, 71% (n=25) of children were White British (71%) and 29% (n=10) were from Black and Minority Ethnic groups including Travellers (see Figure 1).

**Table 2 Gender and Age of Children**

	Beds	Cambs	Essex	All Areas
<b>Female</b>	5	4	6	15
<b>Male</b>	12	13	5	30
<b>Mean age</b>	8 years	10 years	8.5 years	9 years
<b>Age range</b>	5 – 13 years	6 – 15 years	5 – 13 years	5 – 15 years

**Figure 1 Recorded Ethnicity of Children**



Most children were living with their parent or other family relative at the time of the intervention. They had both mothers and fathers in prison, although, reflecting the composition of the national prison population, the majority of the imprisoned parents were fathers. Some parents were located in local prisons: in Bedford, Chelmsford or Peterborough but others were sent across the country to Wakefield, Kent, or the Isle of Wight. Parents were also transferred to different prisons during their sentence. Not all children were in contact with the imprisoned parent. This was sometimes because

of the breakdown of the relationship between the parents and other times because they were prevented by social services from doing so for reasons of child protection.

### ***Timing and Length of Interventions***

The Breaking Barrier service was frequently called upon when a parent had recently been sent to prison and it was noticed that a child was experiencing difficulties at school or at home. A standard intervention model of 8 sessions has been developed to provide a period of intensive specialist support to meet the child's personal goals. In some cases a child's needs are longer-term and an intervention continues beyond this period. In 2016 the length of the intervention children received ranged from between 5 and 36 sessions over a period of 8 weeks to 18 months (see Table 3).

**Table 3 Length of Interventions**

<b>No. of Sessions</b>	<b>Beds</b>	<b>Cambs</b>	<b>Essex</b>	<b>All Areas</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Range</b>	<b>7 - 24</b>	<b>8 - 31</b>	<b>5 - 36</b>	<b>5 - 31</b>

### ***Children's Needs and Concerns at the Start of the Intervention***

The personal circumstances of the children referred to the service were varied but there were some common concerns and issues relating to their parent's imprisonment that they shared. Some were anxious about the well-being of the parent in prison. Their understanding of prison life was limited and often based on common myths and exaggerated representations of prison in the media. These children expressed confusion about what had happened to their parent and anxiety about their parent's safety inside. Some children felt sadness and anger about the imprisonment of the parent and showed signs of withdrawal and depression or were acting aggressively towards others. These responses could be exacerbated if they felt they had no control over contact with the parent in prison. Some children displayed signs of post-traumatic stress as a consequence of witnessing their parent's arrest and several exhibited attachment anxieties, fearful they would never see the parent again. In contrast, other children who had experienced or witnessed violence from the imprisoned parent, expressed anxiety about the parent's release and whether or not they or their family, in particular the parent at home would be

safe. One child was concerned that the father's change of faith in prison would mean he would restrict her lifestyle when he was released. The nature of the parent's offence could also generate anxiety, particularly when the offence was a sexual or violent crime. These children felt mixed emotions towards their parent; shocked by the offence and an assumption someone who did such things would be 'bad' or 'evil' while at the same time experiencing feelings of attachment.

Children's relationships with others in the home and at school were frequently affected by the imprisonment. The anxiety at the sudden separation from the imprisoned parent could be transferred and some children worried that they would lose the parent at home too and have no one to look after them. One child had witnessed the police arresting and falsely accusing the mother following the imprisonment of his father. These children could become 'clingly' to the parent at home, maybe wanting to sleep in their bed or not go to school for fear that the other parent would not be there when they came out. In other cases children had been told that the parent was dead or working away rather than in prison. When they had subsequently learned of the imprisonment, they expressed anger towards the parent/carer at home who had not been open with them at the start. Relationships between siblings could be affected too when they had different responses to the imprisoned parent. Some had witnessed or had been directly affected by the parent's offending while others had not. Some older brothers or sisters were allowed contact with the parent whilst the younger ones were not which exacerbated feelings of frustration and helplessness in the younger children.

In school and outside the home, some children had experienced hostility or bullying from others if the parent's offence was known or felt anxious about the negative responses of others if they found out. Some felt shame about having a parent who had committed a particular type of offence or felt inadequate and stigmatized because that they did not have 'a *proper* Mum or Dad'.

Often children did not feel they had anyone to talk to outside the home about their emotions and depending on the responses of their parent and other family members, might not feel they had anyone at home they could talk to either. Their sense of

isolation could have an effect on their behaviour, their family relationships and their attendance and engagement at school.

The success of the Breaking Barriers intervention depended therefore on the ability of the senior practitioners at the outset to be able to accurately identify and demonstrate understanding of the needs of children and to establish a trusting relationship with them. They would then be in a position to help the child to come to terms with their situation and develop coping strategies to deal with their problems. The agreement of personal goals that the child saw as helpful and achievable was central to this process.

### ***Personal Goals***

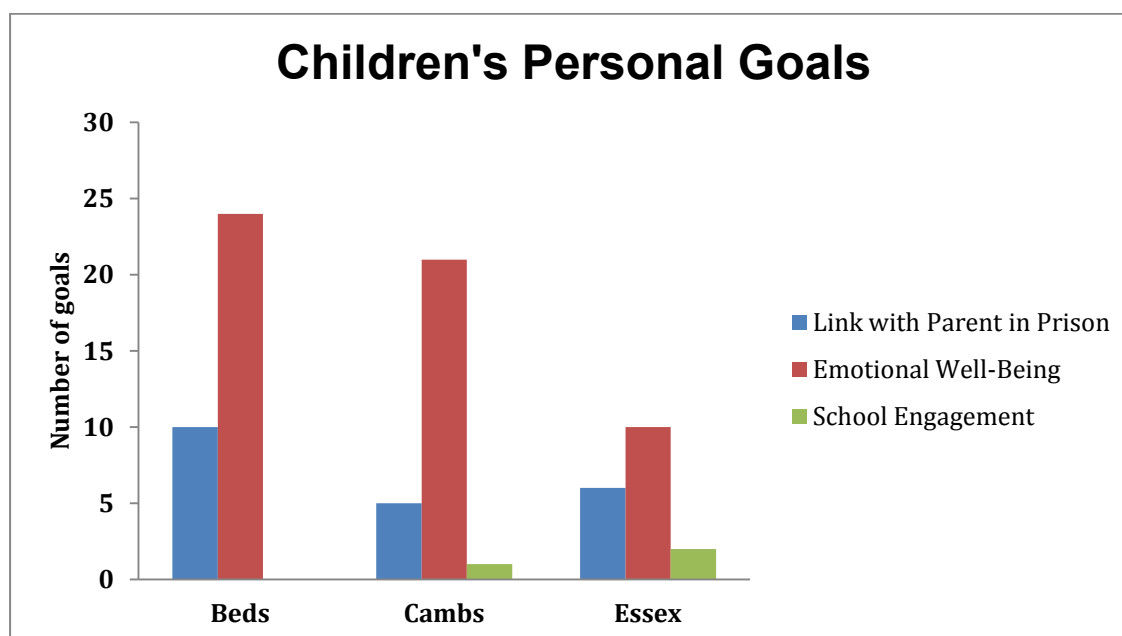
The children set usually two or three personal goals each at the start of the intervention. The majority of these goals was linked to improving their emotional well-being. A smaller number were related specifically to developing a link with the parent in prison and a few were related to improving the child's school experience. Table 4 gives an indication of the types of goals set. Sometimes the goals were written in the child's own words which seemed to be particularly relevant. Other times they were written in the third person by the practitioner.

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the proportion of goals set which related to the three service aims. The goals relating to school were more frequently discussed in the assessment discussion than included in the children's personal list of goals. This may be because the first two aims are likely to be more immediately relevant to the child's concerns. The school engagement aim is likely to be reached as a consequence of the achievement of the first two aims. Some of the goals around the parent in prison were not specifically about direct links as this was not always possible. Instead they were about understanding the parent and the parent's offending and the parent's lifestyle in prison.

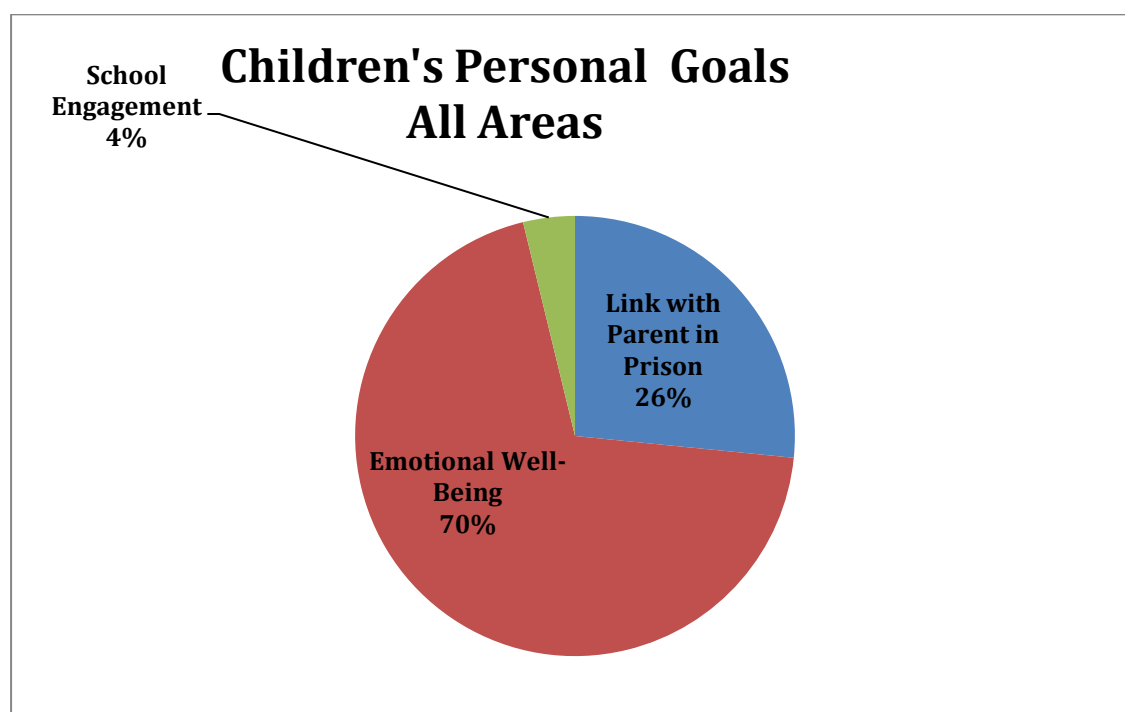
**Table 4 Examples of Children's Personal Goals**

Link with parent in prison	Emotional well-being	School engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I would like help to write to my dad</li> <li>• Not being worried about visiting Dad</li> <li>• Keep channels of communication open</li> <li>• Understand why Dad committed these crimes</li> <li>• Understand what prison is like</li> <li>• Writing to Daddy more</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help me with my anger</li> <li>• Establish friendships</li> <li>• I would like to improve my behaviour at home - not fight with my brother</li> <li>• To feel better about what's happened</li> <li>• Get better at talking and less upset</li> <li>• Stop worrying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To improve behaviour at school</li> <li>• School attendance</li> </ul>

**Figure 2 Relation of children's personal goals to service aims by area**



**Figure 3 Relation of children's personal goals related to service aims - all areas**

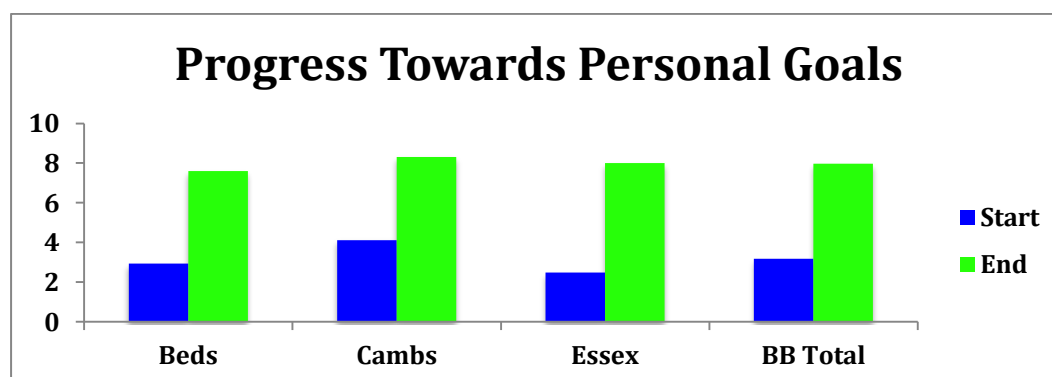


#### **4. Children's Outcomes**

##### ***Progress towards personal goals***

After establishing the child's personal goals, the child would rate where on a scale of 0 to 10 they were at the time in terms of achieving the goals and a set of actions to achieve them would be agreed which would form the basis for the intervention activities. Towards the end of the intervention and sometimes mid-way, the senior practitioner would review with the child their progress towards achieving the goals using the same 0 – 10 scale. Across the three areas the average progress rated by children against their goals was 5 points (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4 Children's progress towards achieving personal goals**

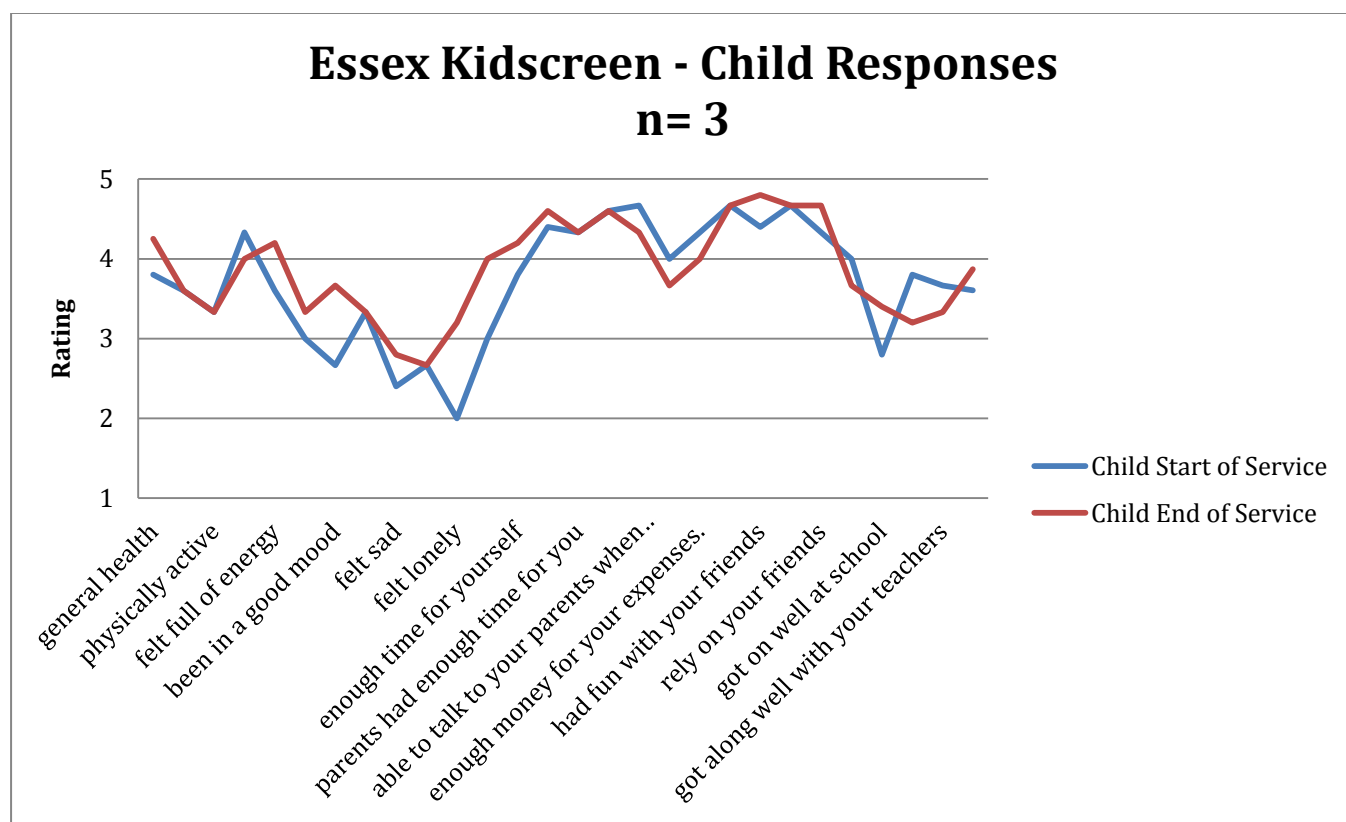




### ***Kidscreen Quality of Life Questionnaires***

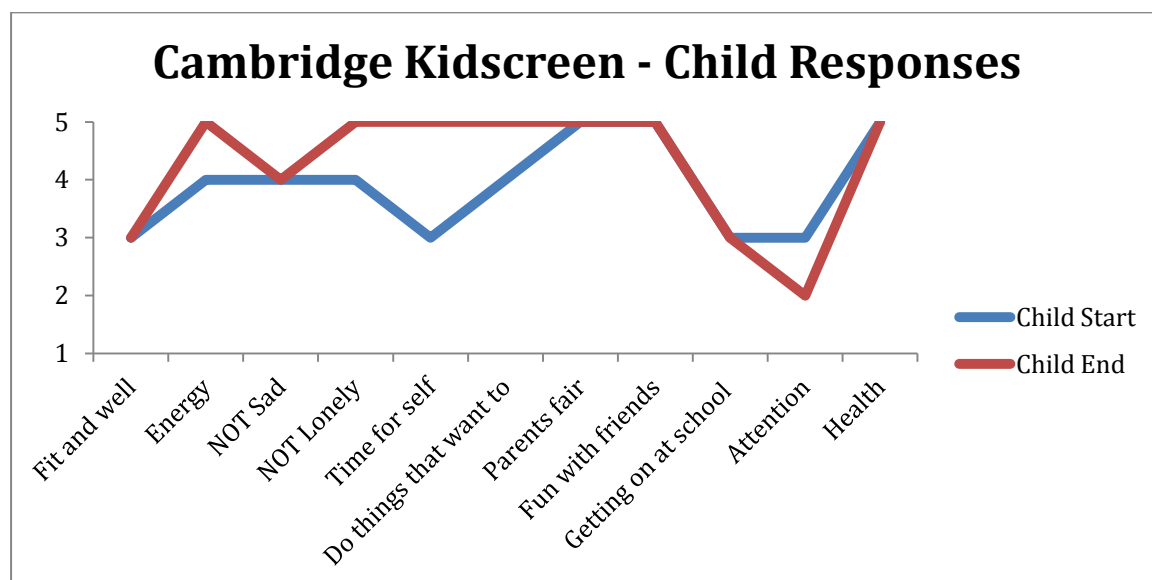
During 2016 the three areas started to measure children's well-being by using the Kidscreen Health Quality of Life questionnaire. Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire use the 10 question version and Essex use the 27 question version. The questionnaire is designed to be completed by the child and the parent independently at the beginning and end of the intervention. As with the setting of personal goals, the children rate their own views of their health, their mood, their feelings, their relationships with their parents and friends and their school experience. The parent/carers of the child answers the same questions based on their observations of the child. The current numbers of completed questionnaires in each of the three areas are too low for any meaningful statistical comparison of measures before and after the intervention. It is nevertheless possible from the descriptive information to gain a perspective of trends over time. Figures 5 and 6 below indicate the responses of children and their parents in Essex and Cambridgeshire who completed questionnaires. It is possible to identify overall slightly more positive responses at the end of the service than at the beginning in both graphs although the differences do not reach statistical significance.

***Figure 5 Essex Kidscreen Children's Self-View at start and end of intervention.***



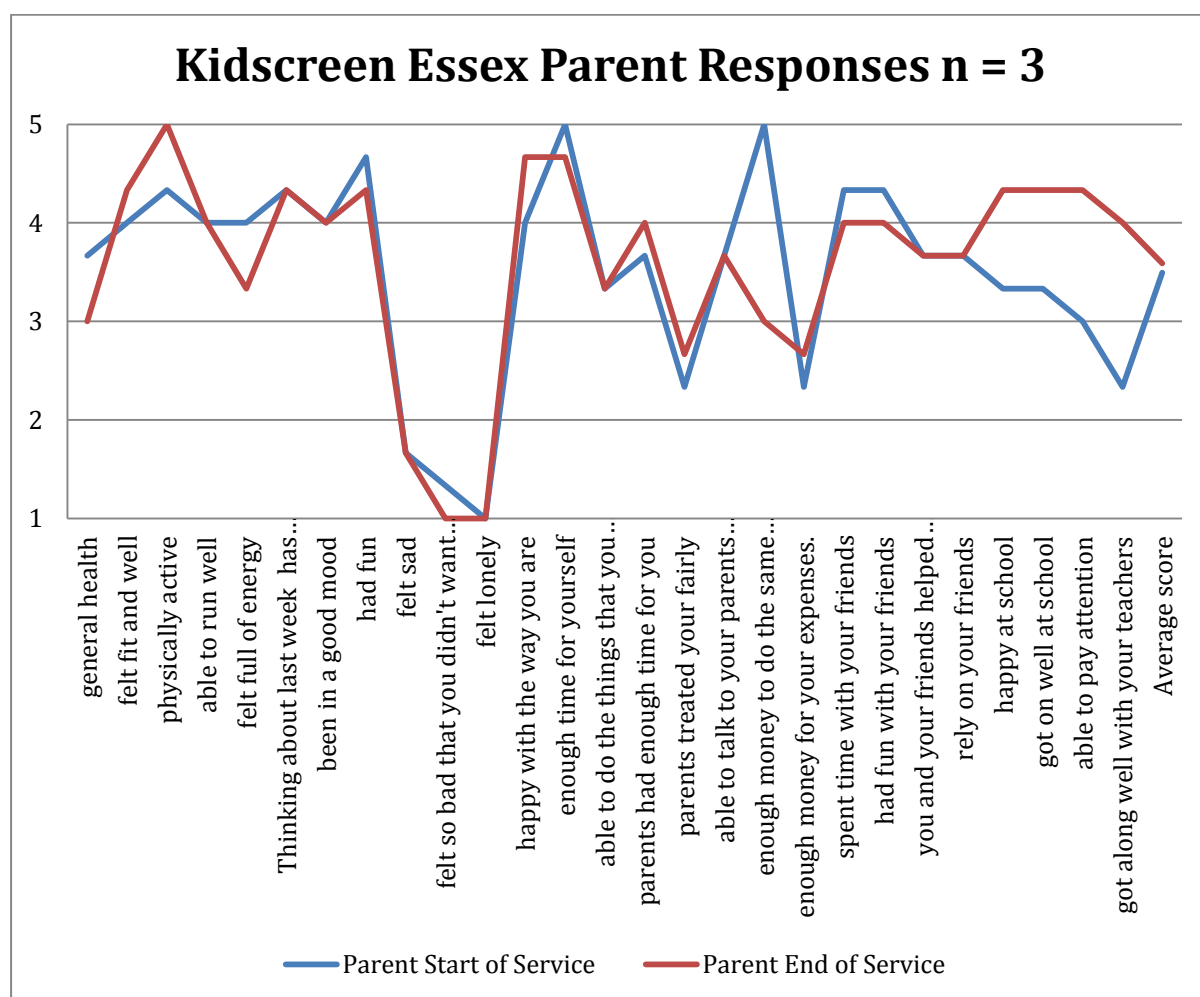
**Scale: 1 = not at all, 2 = slightly, 3= moderately 4 = very 5 = extremely**

**Figure 6 Kidscreen Cambridge Child Self-View at start and end of intervention**



Scale: 1 = not at all, 2 = slightly, 3= moderately 4 = very 5 = extremely

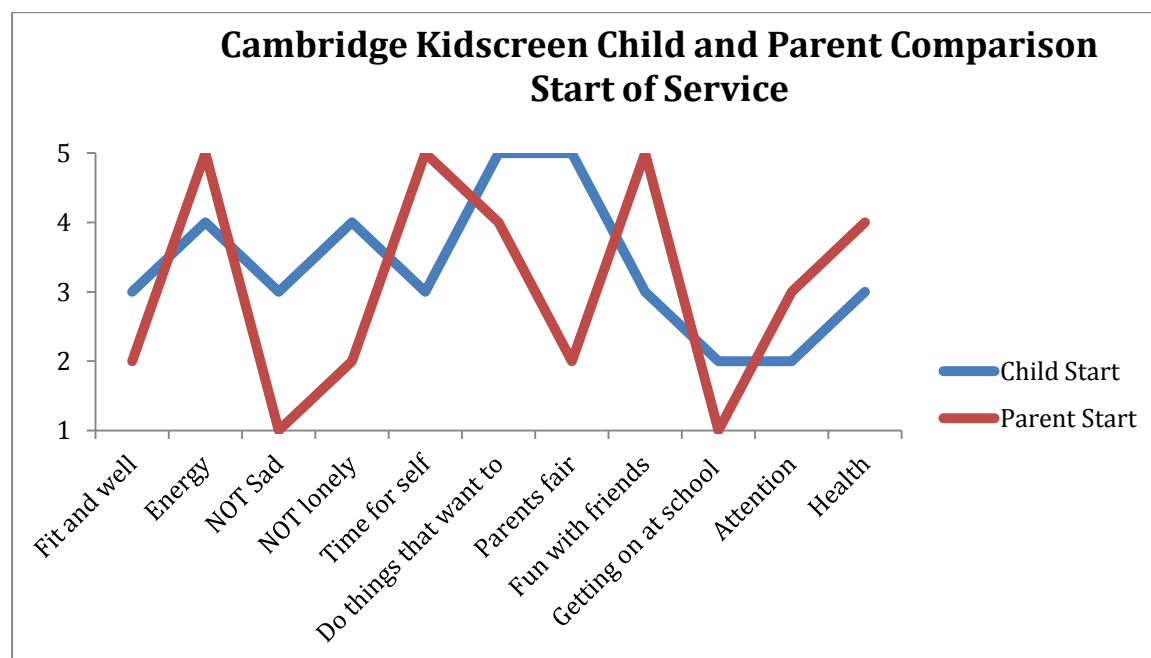
**Figure 7 Kidscreen Essex Parent Views of Child at start and end of intervention**



Scale: 1 = not at all, 2 = slightly, 3= moderately 4 = very 5 = extremely

While the Kidscreen has established reliability and validity as a general measure of well-being, there are some questions over how it is best used as an indicator of the impact of the Breaking Barriers service. First, some of the measures, such as general health, physical activity, having enough money, are not likely to be directly relevant to the aims and efforts of the service. Second, some measures may not capture accurately the child's situation, for example, statements referring to 'parents' may be harder to answer if a child has a different response to each parent. Third, some statements are quite general such as 'getting on at school' and may be interpreted to mean getting on socially or academically or both. Fourth, participants are asked to answer the questions thinking of the week just past. It may be that individual incidents and factors other than those the intervention is aiming to address may affect responses. Fifth, there may be some aspects of the intervention that are not captured by the well-being questionnaire such as the development of coping strategies for sadness, anxiety, bullying. Sixth, there may be a discrepancy between child and parent ratings (see Figure 8). This may make interpretation of the child's progress difficult, although may serve as a useful tool for discussion with the child and the parent.

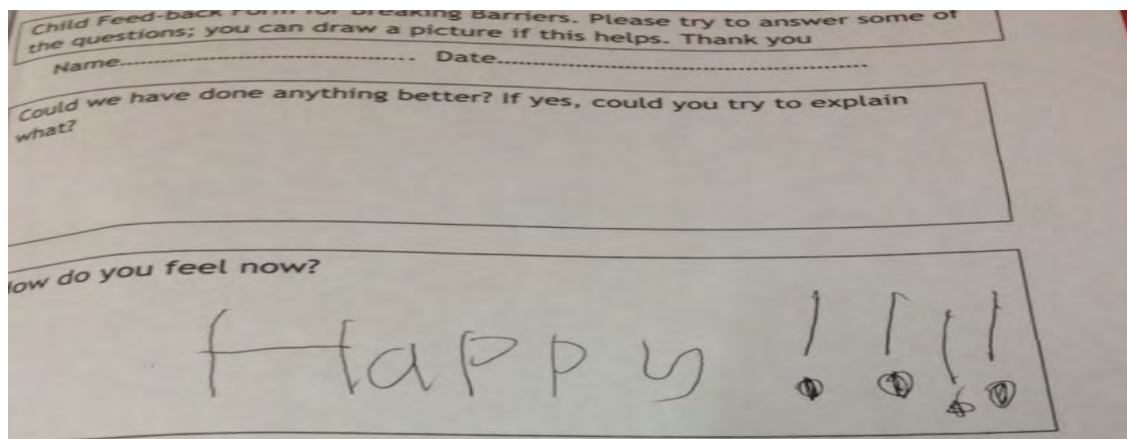
**Figure 8 Kidscreen Comparison of Cambridge Child and Parent Perceptions at Start of Intervention**



**Scale: 1 = not at all, 2 = slightly, 3 = slightly 4 = moderately 5 = extremely**

### **Qualitative evaluations by children, parents/carers and school staff**

The qualitative data, however, provide clear indications of the regard for the service amongst children, parents, schools and referring organisations. From the comments of children interviewed and from the evaluation sheets in case files it is evident that many who received support from the service value it highly. The relationship with the senior practitioner was described as *'really good'*: *'I really liked being with her. It was really fun and I was very happy'*. One girl recalled her initial apprehension at the start but this soon changed: *'At first I was a bit worried. I thought 'will this person really help me'? I then started to think this person is really good. She will help me'*. Children often referred to feeling happier as a result of the meetings: *'We do things to make me feel happier'*, *'It took some of the anger away. I could talk to somebody'*. They mentioned feeling more confident to talk about their feelings and their parent in prison. One girl reported that having the opportunity to talk to the senior practitioner *'makes me feel easier at home'*. Some also appreciated the mediating role played by the senior practitioner at school when things were not going so well with a particular teacher.



Parents reported that children were better able to understand their feelings. A child might become temporarily sad and have some behavioural issues after the meetings but many observed and had developed strategies for coping with their frustrations: *'her ability to control aggressive outbursts is so much better. She is now less inclined to have a complete melt down'*. Some parents recognised the value of the opportunity for children to ask questions and talk about things that they did not feel able to discuss with them. They appreciated the flexibility of the service and the preparedness of the senior practitioner to focus on what the child wanted to do in the

moment. One parent observed that it would have been helpful to have had some follow-up support as the child's unsettled behaviour had returned: *'at the time it made L. a lot happier and more reassured I believe. At this point however I'm now struggling again with his outbursts and swearing and lack of respect for me and people around me.'* Her comments highlighted the challenges to finding a 'neat' ending point for the service for some children.

Staff in schools also observed differences in the children's behaviour: *'It's had such a positive impact on this child... he's much more confident'*. They spoke too about the effect on a child's 'readiness' to learn: *'I have noticed that M is more confident, will ask for help and support. This is in contrast to the beginning of September when he would often struggle in silence and get upset. Now he is finding it easier to take advice on how to improve his work without taking it to heart'*. Staff from welfare agencies praised the stabilising influence of the Breaking Barriers intervention during an unsettled period in a child's life. They said it was helpful to have someone the child could relate to who could support them through the difficult time and help them practically with direct access, including visits to the imprisoned parent.

There was a little information on the children who did not engage with the service. In some cases, the parent at home had decided that the service was not relevant to the child's needs. This may be because they the parent had been in prison several times and they were familiar with the experience and not overly concerned. In other cases the senior practitioner reported that a child was reluctant to talk to them. A few children were considered to have complex needs beyond those directly related to the parent's imprisonment and would benefit from referral to another agency specialising in counselling or providing support with mental health problems.

## **6. Outcomes for parents/carers**

Although the main focus of 'Breaking Barriers' is on providing support for children, it was evident from the interviews that the parent or carer also benefitted. They said they found it reassuring to have someone who could help their child with the anxieties and problems that they might not be able to fully address alone. They valued the mediating role the senior practitioner played between them and the child, between the child and their parent in prison and between the child and school. They

expressed confidence in the work of the senior practitioners and said they were encouraged by the visible improvement in the child's well-being and behaviour. Some found the information about the prison system helpful and in particular the support with setting up and arranging visits.

In a few cases the Breaking Barriers practitioner was also in direct contact with the parent in prison. This was usually related to establishing contact between the child and the parent including arranging prison visits. The letters from parents and the interview with a released parent indicated that parents found it reassuring to know that their children were receiving support whilst they were in prison. They expressed their gratitude to receive updates on how the children were doing and for help the service provided with facilitating contact with the children. This was particularly valued in cases where the parental relationship had broken down or the parent at home was unable to visit.

## **6. Views of Schools and Referral Organisations**

The schools, health and welfare agencies that referred children to the service were appreciative of the specialist knowledge the Breaking Barriers senior practitioners had about the prison system and children's experiences of parental imprisonment. They recognised the value of providing a safe space in which the child could talk openly about their concerns with '*a professional*' who understood what they were going through. In contrast to some other agencies they appreciated the reliability of the service and the speed with which the referral was taken up. They spoke highly of the senior practitioners, their flexibility, and the support they provided to the child and the school: '*she's been wonderful*'. One noted that her view of the Breaking Barriers service overall was exclusively related to her experience of working with the senior practitioner in the area. On several occasions senior practitioners had been invited to contribute to discussions on child protection and child custody issues. In these cases the Breaking Barriers service was operating alongside support provided by social workers and other welfare agencies. Some, but not all of the schools, said they were able to provide follow up support for the children should they want to talk to anyone following the end of the intervention.

The referral organisations had heard about the Breaking Barriers service through several channels: through word of mouth, previous contact, a leaflet sent to the school, a listing on a local government website or through an invitation to an awareness raising day. Several thought there was scope for more publicity about the service and some expressed an interest to learn more about the content of interventions. They indicated that presentations at team meetings their schools or organisations would be well-received.

## **Reflections on the Evaluation Findings**

With reference to the findings presented above, this section discusses the impact of the Breaking Barriers service in the three areas with reference to the service's aims and anticipated outcomes for children and professionals. It considers some of the issues raised around the length of intervention and the provision of follow-up support for some children. It assesses the contribution of the Breaking Barriers service to the work of schools. It reflects on the work of the senior practitioners, the remit of their role and the knowledge, skills and resources required to operate effectively. It will include some wider reflections on the contribution the service makes to broader aims of protecting prisoners' children from criminal justice involvement and supporting the resettlement of imprisoned parents with their families. Finally it offers some thoughts on the processes of monitoring, evaluating and developing the service.

### **Achievement of Service Aims and Outcomes**

#### *Outcomes for Children*

It is reasonable to conclude from this evaluation that the Breaking Barriers service is making a valued contribution to the lives of children affected by parental imprisonment. The data indicate that the service is often effective in achieving the first outcome for some children – having a better link with their parent in prison - by supporting them with letter writing and by helping to arrange and sometimes escort them on prison visits. For other children for whom contact is not possible, the information provided about prison life can instead help them to understand how their parent is spending their time. The work undertaken to help the child differentiate between the person and the offence is be relevant too for sustaining the parent-child relationship in the future. The efforts to build the child's confidence to talk openly about their parent in prison are also likely to contribute to this outcome.

Notwithstanding the difficulties of establishing an accurate standardised measure, the achievement of the second outcome of the service – the improvement of children's emotional well-being - is strongly indicated by the qualitative data collected from the children themselves, their parents and the schools and by the children's assessments of their progress towards achieving their personal goals. A significant contribution of the work here is the teaching of strategies to help the child rationalise



their situation and to cope with negative emotions and experiences associated with having a parent in prison.

The comments of school staff suggested that some children's engagement in school did improve as a result of the intervention but there were also other factors unrelated to the parental imprisonment which played a role. As with the second outcome, establishing a measure which accurately captures the contribution of the service to the child's engagement in school is difficult to achieve, nevertheless it is reasonable to conclude from the interviews with school staff and children that the contribution the service makes to improving children's emotional well-being can positively affect a child's school experiences particularly their social interactions with other children and teachers. The relevance of the Breaking Barriers service was most evident when the focus was on supporting the child on issues related to parental imprisonment rather than general support with family relationships or to engagement in school.

A question that was raised during the evaluation concerned the appropriate length of an intervention and the provision of follow-up support if needed. The standard model of 8 sessions was considered by senior practitioners to be of particular relevance when a parent was first sentenced to prison and the resulting threats to a child's well-being, the stability of their existing relationships and routines. The flexibility to be able to offer a longer period of support for some children with particularly challenging circumstances was clearly appreciated by some children, their parents (at home and in prison) and by school staff. In decisions about the length of the intervention it is clearly important to ensure due weight is given to the child's view.

Careful thought was clearly given to preparing the child for the end of the intervention and in some cases, as mentioned earlier, on-going support was set up through the involvement of Ormiston volunteers. The identification of trusted people that the child felt they could talk to (in school and at home) after the end of the intervention was also clearly important alongside the offer to call on the support of Ormiston again if needed. In some cases there may be the need for extra work with the parent at home and the school to ensure that the people identified as being able to offer further support, know how to help the child with the coping strategies they have learned during the intervention.

### *Professionals' understanding of the effects of parental imprisonment*

Based on the interviews and evaluations in case files, the Breaking Barriers service helped to raise awareness amongst professionals of the effects of parental imprisonment firstly through the everyday contact of setting up and working with individual children and secondly, through awareness raising activities such as arranging opportunities for professionals to experience the prison visiting process. The advice provided by senior practitioners on how to best support a child in school was considered particularly valuable. An extension of the existing work with schools could therefore include support with developing school-wide policies aiming to reduce social stigma around parental imprisonment. This could take the form of presentations in staff meetings and school assemblies and information on sharing of effective practices adopted in other schools. Such activity could support other school policies e.g. on bullying and may help to facilitate the provision of on-going support for a child in school following the end of the intervention.

The achievement of the Breaking Barriers aims and outcomes depends significantly on the expertise of the senior practitioners. They have a detailed understanding of criminal justice processes and of the numerous consequences that parental imprisonment may have on children and families including problems associated with particular offences such as sexual, violence, terrorist or drug-related offences. They are skilled at establishing trusting relationships with children of different ages, helping them to feel confident to discuss very personal and sensitive issues and knowing how to build their self-confidence and coping abilities. Their role may switch between acting as a confidante, an advocate, a teacher and a mentor. At the same time as respecting the confidentiality of their conversations with the child, they establish good relationships with the parent/carer at home and in some cases also with the parent in prison. They set up strong lines of communication with schools and other agencies involved in supporting the child and their family. A structure for regular contact between the three senior practitioners and their managers to provide mutual support and training including the sharing examples of good practice including intervention activities is clearly important for ensuring that this expertise is retained within the service.

## **Contribution of Breaking Barriers Service to wider Societal and Criminal Justice aims**

It is relevant to consider the extent to which the Breaking Barriers service aligns with broader societal and criminal justice interests to protect children from risks associated with parental imprisonment and to support positive relationships between imprisoned parents and their families. Although the direct impact of Breaking Barriers in these domains has not been measured in this evaluation (nor is it necessarily methodologically viable to do so) it is nevertheless possible to identify ways in which the service is likely to be supporting these interests.

### *Protecting children from risks associated with parental imprisonment*

Research has identified that prisoners' children may be more likely to display behavioural problems in comparison to other young people (Murray, Farrington & Sekol, 2012) and that they have a heightened risk of dropping out of school (Trice and Brewster, 2004, Lowenstein, 1986). A lack of involvement in school is a known risk factor for offending by young people (Farrington, 2007) whereas being in school is seen to protect young people from this risk because of their involvement in constructive learning activities and because of the contribution their education makes to future career and life opportunities (Hurry and Moriarty 2004; Stephenson 2007). The work that the Breaking Barriers service does to help children manage their emotions and to support their school experiences may therefore be protecting them from social marginalisation, school exclusion and associated risks of offending.

### *Supporting positive relationships between imprisoned parents and their families.*

The significant role that families can play in providing practical and emotional support for relatives released from prison is well recognised (e.g. Markson et al, 2015) and is of national policy interest (Ministry of Justice, 2012). The promotion and protection of positive family relationships during imprisonment is therefore an important concern. Research, including a recent study conducted by the University of Cambridge in partnership with Ormiston Families (Lösel et al, 2012) demonstrates the value of contact during the prison sentence for the maintenance of such relationships. Contact between imprisoned parents and their children has been found to be beneficial for their longer-term relationship and for the well-being of both the child and the parent after release from prison (Lanskey et al, 2016; Dixey and Woodall,

2011, Clarke et al, 2005). However, it is recognised that many families face difficulties in maintaining contact during the prison sentence (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). By helping families to overcome these difficulties and keep in contact, the Breaking Barriers service is contributing to the maintenance of family relationships which may support the parent's resettlement after release and enhance children's and parent's well-being in the short and long term.

### **Monitoring and Evaluating the Breaking Barriers Service**

The case files provide a useful and detailed record of the senior practitioners' work with the children receiving the intervention, their discussions with parents and schools. The inclusion of some of the worksheets that the children complete and evaluation forms which allow them to record their views of the service in their own words is very informative. There is some variation in the approach to monitoring and evaluating the service across the three counties and it may be useful to agree a consistent approach for future evaluations. In particular it would be helpful to agree a common strategy for the use of evaluation tools which establish measures that directly link the content of the intervention to the service aims and outcomes and which are not too onerous or difficult to complete.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The strength of the Breaking Barriers lies in its specialist ability to help and children and families affected by parental imprisonment. Its detailed knowledge of criminal justice processes and understanding of the effects of imprisonment and particular offences on families enables it to offer a distinctive form of support to children which schools and welfare agencies often do not have the resources or expertise to provide. It is a small service at present which has the potential to grow. The number of children who can be supported at any point is clearly limited by the time and resources available to the senior practitioner and by the size of the geographical area they cover. A challenge may be to find a balance between increasing publicity about the service and ensuring there are enough resources to respond to increased demand. As well as the short-term contribution the service makes to the well-being of children and families a longer-term goal may be about capacity building and policy guidance in schools in order that school communities are recognised as safe and supportive environments for children with parents receiving custodial sentences. A summary of the recommendations from this evaluation is included below.

### **Intervention structure and content**

- It may be helpful to develop a set of policy guidelines for senior practitioners which clarify the focus and remit of the interventions, and the process for ending an intervention and setting up alternative sources of support the child and family can refer to if needed.

### **Post-Intervention Support**

- It would be worth considering the development of a training programme for schools on how to provide follow up support for children who have received the service including how to reinforce the coping strategies that children have learned from the intervention.
- A parallel activity could be undertaken with parents at home to support the child once the intervention has finished.

### **Sharing good practice**

- If this does not exist already, a regular forum for senior practitioners to meet, to train together, to discuss common issues and to share ideas about good practice would be useful.

### **Raising of awareness of parental imprisonment in schools**

- There is scope to publicise the service further amongst professionals in schools and welfare agencies such as by offering to give presentations at team meetings.
- School-based publicity activities with students could be undertaken by Ormiston managers or senior practitioners in order that the anonymity of the support given to a child in the school is retained.

### **Monitoring and Evaluation of the Service**

- It is recommended that further consideration is given to establishing a consistent and direct measure for evaluating the service against its aims and outcomes. This may include a review of the wording and presentation of the service aims and outcomes.
- It is also suggested that the current work to develop a common and consistent approach to the recording of feedback about Breaking Barriers from all service users is continued.

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## Appendix 1 Examples of Worksheets Completed During Meetings with Children

