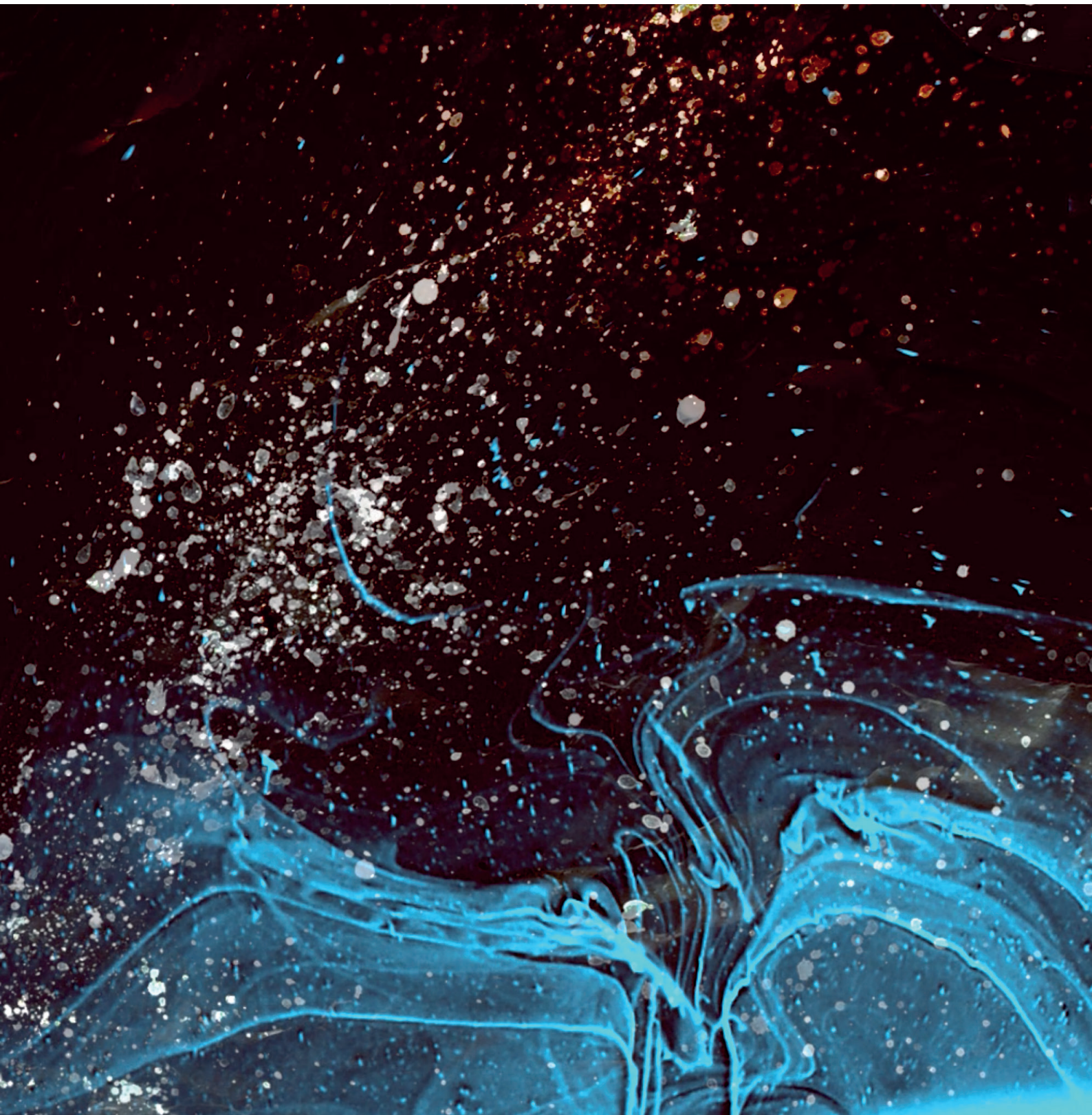


Durham University
Parental Rights
in Prison Project

nepacs

include inform inspire



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Department of Sociology
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December 2023

Front and back cover image designed by Kate Sweeney for Open Clasp Theatre Company's production of 'Rupture', a play about maternal incarceration co-created with mothers featured in this report.

Foreword

This project and subsequent report powerfully echo previous research surrounding the importance of paying attention to the maternal role and maternal identity for criminalised women (Baldwin, 2022, Booth, 2019, Masson, 2018).

As this project has re-confirmed, mothers in prison with care involved or looked after children have most often experienced complex and long lasting trauma that has preceded the removal of their children (ibid). There have usually been many ‘missed and lost opportunities’¹ to support mothers and their children, often from multiple agencies and dating back many years. For example, this report robustly demonstrates the presence of domestic abuse in the painful narratives of the women interviewed, and often its significance to the loss of their children. This raises important questions about women who are victims of domestic abuse, who then go on arguably to be victims of the state, because of the loss of their children due to abuse metered out *to* them and not *by* them. This report forces us to question why long before prison, there isn’t, (and how there can be), more support available to mothers and their children which might prevent child removal and adoption. Significantly, and echoing previous research (Baldwin, 2022), the report illustrates how domestic abuse and coercive control can and does follow the women through the prison gates, further impacting the mothers and their relationships with their children and children’s services.

The mothers’ voices herein painfully describe the additional lost opportunities and harm caused to them *in prison*, by the continued neglect of attention paid their maternal experiences and trauma, and specifically, their parental rights. The report eloquently and movingly demonstrates the powerlessness and hopelessness mothers involved in care proceedings whilst imprisoned can feel, but additionally how risky this is terms of their wellbeing, and indeed at times their survival. Resonating with previous research, the report details the profound impact of maternal imprisonment, further highlighting and evidencing the damage it can cause to the mental wellbeing, relationships and outcomes for imprisoned mothers. That said, the project

powerfully reveals how supportive involvement, especially when focused on supporting the parental rights of incarcerated mothers, can and does have a significant positive impact on mothers and their outcomes.

The report evocatively illustrates the power of women supporting women. Whether those women providing the support are grandmothers, peer mentors, staff, legal advisors, or simply other women detained in prison, it is clear that when safe spaces are created to support motherhood, positive change can occur and wellbeing for the mothers is improved, and potentially lives are saved.

By taking a parental rights focus, the project has powerfully affirmed that rights-based intervention and support is vital to positive outcomes for criminalised mothers and often their children too. The mothers’ voices in the project shout loudly to be heard, but significantly they are not shouting for anything ‘extra’ they are simply shouting for their rights. The uncomfortable truths contained in the mothers harrowing narrative must be paid heed to. The mothers themselves provide the evidence for why the recommendations of the project must be implemented.

Importantly the report provides hope. Adding to the weight of previous research about the impact of maternal imprisonment but uniquely focussing on parental rights; this report powerfully demonstrates not only current failures to support mothers like the mothers interviewed for this project but in its comprehensive recommendations, it provides a solid framework for improved support.

In a system that is committed to being ‘trauma informed’, it must be accepted that unless the CJS, to include prisons, recognises, understands, factors in and responds to maternal trauma, then it cannot describe itself as fully ‘trauma informed’.

Dr Lucy Baldwin,
November 2023

1. Baldwin, 2022. Missed and lost opportunities; Recognising maternal Trauma in probation Supervision. www.probation-institute.org/news/missed-and-lost-opportunities

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Executive Summary

The aim of the Parental Rights in Prison Project (PRiP) was to support incarcerated parents who wished to sustain their relationship with their children who are in the care of the local authority, care of family and significant others or adopted and to provide them with legal advice and support around their rights as parents. The project was funded by HMPPS and took place from January 2021 – December 2022. Initially established in HMP Low Newton prison, the project expanded to also support fathers in HMP Kirkclevington and HMP Durham in year two. The funding paid for one full-time project coordinator (PRiPC) who provided ongoing specialist family support following intervention from the family support workers, Drug and Recovery Team (DART) family support worker or HMPPS prison family support worker. Her role was to undertake complex core family work. She also supports mothers in custody with additional issues such as safeguarding, looked after children, social care involvement, care proceedings, the perinatal pathway, post-adoption support and liaising with professionals including schools, social workers, family law solicitors as well helping maintain family ties. The PRiP Project was externally evaluated using a mixed methods approach and ran alongside delivery of the intervention. The evaluation focused on mothers only, and delivery of the PRiP Project at HMP Low Newton. We engaged with a total of 23 mothers² during the evaluation period which ran for eighteen months. Underpinning the evaluation were in-depth interviews with 18 mothers and 7 prison staff members, analysis of 10 case-studies written by the PRiPC and impact data collected by the PRiPC; and a participatory theatre project involving 7 mothers which is ongoing.

Overview of findings

- Based on our research, domestic and sexual violence are contextual factors in almost all cases involving the removal of children from the mother's care. Coercive control commonly seeps into mothers' lives in prison.
- Engaging with PRiP was the first-time mothers had received specialist family support, guidance and legal advocacy around their parental rights (either in a prison setting or in the community).
- Prior to engaging with PRiP, some mothers said they felt abandoned and isolated before, during and after court proceedings.
- Removal of children commonly triggered self-medication, suicidal ideas, and self-injury (as a response to anger, frustration, depression, anxiety and the grief of losing their children), especially during the early days of custody and approaching release.
- Prior to engaging with PRiP, mothers told us they felt 'fobbed off', 'forgotten', 'cast aside', 'not listened to', in their attempts to get information about their children, especially from their children's social workers.
- Prior to PRiP, mothers were routinely misinformed, given inaccurate or no information about the legal status of their children or their parental rights. This caused significant harm to mothers.
- Mothers in prison are often misunderstood - there can be complex reasons behind a mother's decision not to have contact with her children.
- Women talked about feeling calmer and less anxious, more hopeful for the future, often stemming from (re)-establishing contact with their children following engagement with the PRiPC.
- Educating mothers about their parental rights and supporting them through the complex process of engaging with external agencies (such as Children's Services, solicitors, Family Courts, schools etc.) helped instill in them a renewed sense of purpose, agency and confidence.
- Mothers felt anxious and overwhelmed as they approached their release/transfer and for some, the prospect of re-establishing relationships with family and children on the outside was very stressful.
- Post-adoption support in prison was crucial for many mothers. This included help from the PRiPC writing and sending letters to children and carers, in some cases, accessing photographs, and contributing to life story books. Mothers benefited enormously from post-adoption support. Having letters and photographs of their children helped reinstate their motherhood identity and provided them with maternal self-esteem and self-worth.
- Prison based staff and external partner practitioners are aware of the issues that impact on mothers and draw upon their skills

2. Pseudonyms have been used for women, case-studies and staff interviews throughout the report.

to support as best they can. However, they are restricted in terms of what they can do (due to funding, resourcing and staffing) and rely on the specialist knowledge and skills of the PRiPC.

- Prison based staff experience challenges in undertaking multi-agency partnership work with organisations outside of prison. They are acutely aware of the challenges facing women upon release and the lack of support available to women to transition back into the community.
 - The PRiP Project was crucial for women in validating their mothering identity and their experiences as mothers in prison. The specialist support, advice and guidance, and the liaison and advocacy work of the PRiPC were indispensable in determining and improving each woman's situation in relation to her children and family, from securing contact to ascertaining adoption status.
-

Recommendations

1. The circumstances of incarcerated mothers are diverse and complex and require specialist family and legal support and advocacy. A specialist Parental Rights in Prison Project Coordinator (PRiPC) is needed as core essential provision for mothers in prison.

- The advocacy and support role of the PRiPC is essential to a **mother's safety, wellbeing and development** whilst in prison. The role should be full-time and delivered by a **specialist practitioner**, external to and independent of the prison, e.g. a specialist third sector organisation or specialist trained local authority social worker.
- The parental rights worker is essential to **facilitating and managing communication** with children's services and other key stakeholders, such as carers and family members.
- It is important that the PRiPC supports mothers in a trauma informed way. Mothers place high value on being supported by a worker who they can **trust**, who **listens**, and supports mothers in an **empathetic and trauma informed way**.

Next Steps

HMPPS might want to consider employing Nepacs or/in collaboration with, Not Beyond Redemption³ (NBR) to deliver parental rights training to prison-based family support teams, or to train up a **Parental Rights Champion** from each prison's family support team across the women's estate. The focus of the training would be on key skills and legal knowledge relating to parental rights, care proceedings and post-adoption support. The training resource could be adapted from the current Nepacs Parental Rights in Prison training resource aimed at prison-based staff and practitioners. Whilst recognising that each women's prison is different in terms of capacity, profile and size of family support teams, HMPPS could establish a network of parental rights champions from each of the 12 women's prisons to support each other, exchange knowledge and expertise via online network meetings.

2. A Family Law Solicitor should be employed to work alongside the Parental Rights in Prison Project Coordinator and other Family Support Workers

- **Misinformation** about parental rights, care proceedings and post adoption plans can cause significant psychological and emotional harm and distress for mothers in prison. It is vital that women's prisons employ specialist family support staff who have access to appropriate and up-to-date information and training in family law in relation to adoption and care proceedings. A family law solicitor, preferably with experience of Legal Aid, is best placed to support delivery of parental rights work.
- **Not Beyond Redemption** have begun working with the PRiP Project at HMP Low Newton and are expanding their portfolio of support across the women's estate. Nepacs are currently planning to host legal clinics with NBR taking the lead and taking on pro-bono representation.

Next Steps

HMPPS might wish to consider hiring a family law solicitor to partner with each women's prison, to provide specialist legal advice (but not take on cases) to family support staff (or PRiP Champions). NBR could continue to pick up cases and offer legal clinics. This model would complement the legal support already offered to people detained in prison directly via the Prisoners' Advice Service (PAC).

At a local level at HMP Low Newton, HMPPS might want to explore supporting a partnership between Durham University Law School, Nepacs and NBR to pilot a scheme that would **train law students specialising in family law** to volunteer their skills and take on casework with mothers at HMP Low Newton. A member of the research advisory group is a Professor of Law at Durham Law School and a KC who could advise further.

This model could be replicated if the PRiP extends to the male estate.

3. www.notbeyondredemption.co.uk

3. Integrated support and information sharing are key. The Parental Rights in Prison Project Coordinator should be embedded within a multi-agency partnership structure, alongside other Family Support Workers, Pregnancy and Mother and Baby Liaison Officer, Drug and Alcohol Recovery Team (DART) and mental health team.

- Mothers in prison usually have **a range of complex needs, requiring a joined-up response**. Close **partnership working** between key practitioners and agencies, both within the prison and in the community, is essential to best manage and meet women's needs, streamline resources and prevent any mother from falling between the cracks.
- For some mothers, losing children, or being separated from them with little or no contact, can trigger drug use and self-injury as a coping mechanism. The early days in custody, and the days and weeks leading up to release, can be particularly distressing for mothers. The early days in custody are a high-risk period for self-harm and suicide amongst mothers, especially those who are detoxing during this critical period. The PRiPC, therefore, should work closely with induction focused family support staff to connect up ongoing support at the most appropriate time for the mother.

4. Expansion of parental rights support is required, to include specialist counselling and group work.

- The level of need and demand for parental rights support for mothers in prison requires further complementary investment. Mothers in custody need access to **specialist counselling designed to support them if they have had their children removed from their care**. This would particularly benefit mothers who are going through care proceedings whilst in prison and help manage the trauma that mothers experience in relation to this.
- Undertaking group work with women in prison can be challenging, particularly with mothers, who may be reluctant to share their experiences because of the additional barriers of stigma and shame and potential

repercussions of this. However, the Open Clasp participatory theatre workshops revealed the **huge benefits to mothers in prison of engaging in group work and creative projects**.

- Online group work, as attempted during Covid-19, is not appropriate for mothers in prison. Group work requires careful development and skilled in-person facilitation to support women to overcome the barriers of engagement. Pioneering group work was facilitated by Birth Companions pre-Covid-19, which involved recruiting peer mentors.
- The PRiPC should facilitate a group where women can come together and support and learn from each other, away from their wings, in informal but structured sessions. Development of a **peer mentor system and opportunities for peer-led groupwork**, properly supported with training, should be explored with mothers.

Next Steps

HMPPS might wish to partner with existing specialist counselling programmes providers. Collaboration with **PAC UK** could be explored (PAC UK is a national charity that offers adoption and permanency support to birth mothers, including therapeutic support and counselling).

In addition, once fully evaluated, HMPPS may wish to explore the feasibility of rolling out the **'Motherhood Project'**, a pilot intervention providing mothers and grandmothers with emotional and practical support via; peer-led group work, a mentor programme, and training aimed at both incarcerated mothers and prison staff. The pilot project was co-designed by women in prison with Dr Lucy Baldwin in partnership with Sodexo (see page 23 for further details).

5. Mothers require specialist support that extends beyond prison to support them upon release and during resettlement.

- Mothers can feel anxious and overwhelmed as they approach their release and the prospect of re-establishing relationships with family and children on the outside. Follow-on support through **transition into the community** is essential. Regardless of a parent's legal parenting status in relation to their child(ren), specialist support must be provided to the whole family to facilitate transition from prison to the community, enabling familial engagement as appropriate to meet the needs of the child(ren), parents and carers.
- Despite the concerted efforts of many prison-based staff, partnership working with external agencies and planning for release can be very challenging. Further **investment in PRiP family support team and resettlement services** is required to provide further capacity for transitions support.
- Integral to providing follow-on support for mothers in the community is the pressing need to better invest in **Women's Centres** across England and Wales, ensuring service integration provided in a single safe environment.

Next Steps

With support from Nepacs, NBR, Prison Reform Trust and/or PACT or PAC, HMPPS may wish to develop and embed specialist 'Parental Rights' training for family support workers currently being recruited as part of the **new 'transition pathway' family support teams**. Nepacs have produced a training resource that could be adapted for this purpose.

6. Domestic and sexual violence are contextual factors in the removal of children from mothers in almost all cases. Alongside the PRiPC support, access to specialist domestic abuse and sexual violence support is also required for mothers.

- Almost all of the women who engaged with the PRiP Project had **long histories of violence and abuse**, often since childhood,

resulting in deep and multiple trauma. Their experiences of motherhood were often intertwined with domestic and sexual violence.

- The Believed Project, which has recently returned to HMP Low Newton, is a prison-based specialist **sexual violence and abuse counselling service** delivered by Rape and Sexual Abuse Counselling Centre, Durham and Darlington (RSACC), is an example of a programme that could provide such an intervention and run in tandem with support from the PRiPC.

7. Commission further research and service development work into the needs of Black and racially minoritised women detained in prison who have had children removed from their care.

- Black and racially minoritised women in prison are subjected to greater harm through their **'double disadvantage'** (Hibiscus and Agenda Alliance, 2023) and experience significantly worse outcomes.
- For Black and racially minoritised mothers, **the trauma of racial discrimination intersects with the trauma of maternal imprisonment**. HMPPS might want to draw on expertise in the community (e.g. the Angelou Centre (Newcastle), Imkaan, Southall Black Sisters, Hibiscus, Agenda Alliance) to provide training for prison-based staff to meet the needs of these women.
- **Further research and service development is needed**. This should be undertaken through meaningful consultation with specialist organisations that work with racially minoritised women (e.g. the Angelou Centre (Newcastle), Imkaan, Southall Black Sisters, Hibiscus, Agenda Alliance) to ensure that prison-based specialist parental rights and family support is attuned to, and meets the needs of, Black and racially minoritised women.
- **Legal and culturally specific** training for parental family support workers and other key staff should be delivered by specialist organisations that support Black and racially minoritised women.
- Within the context of double disadvantage, **the experiences of foreign nationals appear to be particularly harmful**. Specialist training for a nominated officer and recourse to specialist legal support is needed.

- Providing more accessible information about parental rights and support that reflect cultural diversity and overcome language barriers also requires investment and development.

8. A number of training needs were identified during the project, particularly the need for trauma responsive approaches, understanding of the impacts of maternal imprisonment and family law.

- The conduct and attitude of prison-based staff and practitioners profoundly impacts upon women in prison. For mothers, who often have long histories of trauma and face additional stigma and shame, insensitive and uninformed attitudes and approaches can be harmful and re-traumatising. **Training is required for all prison staff in both trauma-responsive working and the impact of maternal imprisonment.**
- **Training for women** in custody in **peer-support roles**, such as PID (Prison Information Desk) workers, Listeners and mentors is also recommended where appropriate.
- Whilst training packages exist in trauma and gender responsive approaches and are being rolled-out across the women's prison estate (see One Small Thing), limited training resources exist in relation to parental rights in prison. In order to capture the knowledge, expertise and learning from the PRIPP project, **HMPPS should commission the development of specialist training with an accompanying toolkit for prison staff.** The training resources already created by the PRiP Project could be further developed, alongside the Open Clasp play, *Rupture*, which provides a unique and impactful resource to be developed for this purpose.
- We recommend that funding be sought to enable Open Clasp to take *Rupture* on tour (including to men's and women's prisons) and filmed and used for training purposes.
- Training in family law, appropriate to mothers whose children are in the care system, should also be included.

Next Steps

HMPPS might wish to invite Nepacs to collaborate with NBR, PRT and/or PAS to deliver specialist **training** on the impact of maternal incarceration on mothers and children, and awareness of parental rights in prison to:

- the **local mandatory prison training** for new prison-based staff members (to include some basic knowledge about legal orders and impacts on parental rights; making links between supporting mothers and trauma informed practice; and signposting).
- the national **Unlocked Graduate Scheme**
- the national 10-week mandatory **prison officer entry level training**

Nepacs could adapt its existing parental rights training resource for this purpose.

9. Recommendation for Children's Services

- Many women in prison have prior experience of Children's Services before prison, sometimes as children themselves. Findings from prison-based staff and mothers demonstrates a lack of understanding by many community-based Social Workers of the experiences of incarcerated mothers and the challenges of supporting mothers in prison. **Social workers need training, support and guidance** in order to challenge harmful stigmatising stereotypes; to better understand the experiences of incarcerated mothers; and how to navigate the prison system to engage with them.
- Family Court processes necessarily prioritise the best interests of the child. However, mothers in prison usually do not understand the processes involved in the Family Courts, or their parental rights and are unable to access social workers or support during the process.
- Identifying a key contact in Children's Services to liaise with the PRiPC would help facilitate communication between the two organisations.

- Many mothers in prison have lost multiple children to the care system and describe the traumatic impact of this upon them, with little, if any support in place to deal with this. **Providing specialist support to mothers through this process**, in particular after child(ren) have been removed, in order to address their needs and the concerns of the Family Court, could reduce the harm experienced by mothers and potentially help prevent future child removal.
- Consideration should be given to the following issues:
 - Commissioning research into the experiences of fathers and their experiences of fatherhood and parental rights in prison;
 - undertaking a rapid needs assessment to identify what support fathers need and how they may want to access this;
 - the differing context of each prison and the length of sentence, may necessitate different forms of provision, for example high churn in a category B reception/remand prison may result in differing needs and delivery style compared to a category A prison, with higher levels of men serving life sentences;
 - father's experiences are likely to differ significantly to mothers in prison, requiring a gendered approach;
 - given the level and severity of domestic violence and abuse shared by mothers in prison, the issue of coercive control and possible ongoing abuse should be explored, and a PRiPC may require specialist support and/or advice from a specialist violence against women and girls (VAWG) organisation.

Next Steps

HMPPS might want to explore partnering up with **Social Work England** to explore how maternal incarceration and parental rights in prison training can be embedded into the core curriculum for the 21-week Master's degree in Social Work (MSW) programme.

Step one could be a pilot in collaboration with Durham University's Master of Social Work programme, accredited by Social Work England (and University of the Year in the 'Social Worker of the Year Awards', 2021).

The pilot would be a test-site to explore how social work practice educators can cascade curriculum knowledge and core skills in this area via. The evaluation of the pilot at Durham University could then be fed upwards to Social Work England with a view to rolling out core training in maternal incarceration and parental rights from prison training in the SW England curriculum. The Open Clasp film of Rupture could also be included in the SW England curriculum for this purpose.

10. Extend Parental Rights Project across the male estate to work with fathers in prison.

- There is undoubtedly significant **unmet need across the male estate and extending support to work with fathers is recommended**. Initial work undertaken by the PRiPC in HMP Durham demonstrates the need for support for fathers and for further exploration of how best to support them.

11. Connecting to existing knowledge and policy recommendations

- The findings reiterate and provide nuance to many conclusions already known from other research. Three are particularly pertinent to this report:
- Prison is harmful for women and their children (APPG, 2022) and should only be used as a last resort (MoJ Female Offender Strategy, 2018).
- Further work and training are needed for staff across the CJS about the impact of prison on mothers and their children, particularly in relation to sentencing decisions (Farmer Review for Women, 2019);
- The prison experiences of Black and racially minoritised women continue to be particularly harmful (APPG Women in the Penal System Inquiry, 2021).

Next Steps

We recommend that HMPPS support the development of a **'Motherhood Charter'** currently being co-ordinated by Dr Lucy Baldwin, which will set out minimum standards that will inform how prisons should deliver emotional and practical support to incarcerated mothers across the female estate (ref). This parallels Birth Companions 'Birth Charter for Women in Prison' (2016) and recently launched 'Birth Charter for women with involvement from children's social care' (2023).

Introduction

Coming to jail and losing the baby. It killed me.

(Elisha)

There should be some support for people who've had their kids adopted.

There's got to be support because it affects you.

It's killed me, it's ripped my heart into shreds.

(Grace)

In England and Wales, women account for around 4% of the prison population (PRT, 2022). No data is collected on how many of them are mothers, but it is estimated that over 17,000 children per year are affected by maternal imprisonment (Kincaid et al., 2019). Despite policy and practice identifying the need and calling for better support for mothers and their children, there remains a significant lack of research in this area. Lord Farmer's original report on the importance of family ties in preventing reoffending and reducing intergenerational crime and in particular his follow-up Review for Women outlined the key evidence and knowledge in England and Wales. He noted that "We cannot underestimate the practical and emotional difficulties that 'mothering' from inside prison entails." In acknowledging that "female offenders have often experienced abuse and trauma which can profoundly impact their ability to develop and sustain healthy, trusting relationships," he set out key recommendations to address the importance of good family and other relationships as a "golden thread running through the criminal justice system" (Farmer, 2019:5). Important but limited research exists on the topic of mothers, motherhood, and prison, especially within the UK context. We draw on this limited body of work throughout this report (see Isla Masson and Natalie Booth, 2023, Lucy Baldwin, 2023, and Kelly Lockwood, 2020, recent edited collections that provide excellent overviews of current work in this area).

Many mothers in prison have already had their children removed from them or have them removed from them as part of their incarceration. For others, their children are placed in foster care or in the care of family members. Once in prison, some mothers can feel an acute sense of despair, loss and isolation (Baldwin, 2022). Many women affected by these systems have very little self-worth, self-esteem, or confidence and the experience of prison can be re-traumatising. Upon release, many return to the same circumstances that led to their offending behaviour in the first place, trapped in a vicious cycle of victimisation and criminal activity, declining mental health, emotional damage, and often physical self-harm and/or substance use (O'Brien and King, 2022). However, prison can provide a space and opportunity for targeted support for women and mothers (ibid.).

In the North East, at HMP & YOI Low Newton women's prison, Nepacs established an acute need for accurate and timely information, advocacy and casework support for imprisoned mothers who wanted to sustain their relationship with their children who are in the care of the local authority, living with family or significant others or adopted. The need was exacerbated by a policy to speed up the adoption process involving children deemed at risk of harm or neglect (Children and Families Act, 2014), as well as a sharp reduction in the availability of legal aid (Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act, 2012). In response, Nepacs established a HMPPS funded Parental Rights in Prison Project (PRIP), which aimed to support approximately 200 women and engage with approximately 100 professionals during the lifetime of the project (January 2021-December 2022). At the core of the PRIP Project was a full-time specialist family support coordinator (PRIPC), based in the prison and embedded within the wider prison-based family support service.

Nepacs

Nepacs is a voluntary sector organisation based in the Northeast of England. It has been delivering services to people detained in prison and their families since 1882 dedicated to strengthening family ties between custody and the community. Their support of those inside and outside of prisons aims to reduce the negative secondary effects and stigma of imprisonment and to aid the rehabilitation of offenders. Nepacs support workers and volunteers create positive environments during prison visits, support and relieve personal and financial hardship of those left behind by someone serving a prison sentence and raise public awareness of the effects of imprisonment on the families and children of people detained in prison.

The Parental Rights in Prison Project

The PRiP Project compliments other key Nepacs services in providing support to people detained in prison.

The overall aim of the project was to support parents who wished to sustain their relationship with their children who are in the care of the local authority, and to provide them with legal advice and support around their rights as parents. The PRiP Project built upon an intervention introduced by Nepacs in collaboration with Ben Hoare Bell solicitors, Sunderland, who had been providing advice workshops for women in HMP Low Newton and pro bono support to the Nepacs family support worker when difficult legal issues were encountered.

Nepacs received funding from HMPPS in 2020 to expand this programme of work (ITT 3674 prj_1662). The PRiP Project, which was initially delayed due to the covid 19 pandemic, took place from January 2021 – December 2022. Initially established in HMP Low Newton prison, the project expanded in year two, to also support fathers in HMP Kirkclevington and HMP Durham. Durham University were appointed to undertake an evaluation of the project operating at HMP Low Newton, which was undertaken by Dr Kate O'Brien and Dr Hannah King. The researchers engaged with the PRiPC through debriefs and discussions throughout the project, thus enabling a more dynamic approach to informing development of the project.⁴

4. Dr Kate O'Brien and Dr Hannah King are Co-Directors of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme at Durham University. They are co-authors of a recently published book exploring the experiences of women in prison, 'Criminal Women: Gender Matters', co-authored with women in prison and published in 2021 by Bristol University Press. They are also members of the Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse (CRiVA) and the Criminal Justice, Social Harm and Inequalities (CJSHI) research group, at Durham University.

Research and Policy Landscape

Across England, 12 prisons incarcerate approximately 4,000 women, around 60% of whom are mothers (PRT, 2022). The majority of women in prison (almost 80%) are incarcerated for non-violent offences, two thirds of sentences are less than six months, and over half of those remanded in custody do not then go on to receive a custodial sentence (Women in Prison, 2020). Incarcerated women have a range of complex needs arising from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), trauma, abuse, being separated from their children and family, homelessness, unemployment and substance and alcohol use (PRT, 2019). The majority, 70%, report domestic violence and abuse (PRT, 2022; WIP, 2019) and over half report experiencing emotional, physical or sexual abuse as children (MoJ, 2019). These histories of “abuse and trauma, mental illness and mothers’ guilt, grief and distress at separation from their children increase their suffering” (PRT, 2017).

Following the deaths of 6 women in HMP Styal, the Corston (2007) review of vulnerable women in the prison system advocated the development of “a distinct, radically different, visibly-led, strategic, proportionate, holistic, woman-centred, integrated approach”. A decade later and just two of her 43 recommendations had been acted upon (WIP, 2017). However, increasing understanding of the impact of prison upon women, their needs and experiences of the criminal justice system (CJS) is reflected in the Farmer Reviews (2017 and 2019) and the MoJ’s (2018) Female Offender Strategy. Both echo Corston (2007) in promoting alternatives to custody wherever possible for women, ultimately concluding that custody should be a last resort. However, the most recent data highlights a sharp increase in women receiving very short sentences of less than six months and a decrease in women receiving community sentences (PRT, 2022). This is alongside reconviction rates of 73% within one year for women who serve short sentences, increasing further for women who have served multiple sentences (Dominey and Gelsthorpe, 2020). With 77% of women incarcerated for non-violent offences and nine in ten women held on remand of low or medium risk of serious harm (MoJ, 2018), the government’s announcement in 2021 of 500 new prison places for women was met with widespread dismay. This punitive approach, and the expected rise in the women’s prison population over the next five years (MOJ, 2021), contradicts three decades of evidence from research, practice and policy, which

demonstrates the ineffective nature of prison for most women, and its propensity to cause more harm than the original imprisonable offence.

The gendered nature of the criminalisation of women has a long and deep history, though women’s incarceration has been paid relatively little criminological attention. Interest in the gender-specific needs of women and their distinct vulnerabilities within the CJS has grown over the last half century, with feminist criminologists shifting the lens to women. Under successive governments driven by austerity since 2010, we have witnessed the increasing feminisation and criminalisation of poverty and trauma. For example, the ‘bedroom tax’, benefits caps and universal credit system have led to an increase in women’s shoplifting, often for essential items such as baby bottles, nappies and food (Baldwin and Epstein, 2017). Recent MoJ (2020) data demonstrates almost a third of women’s convictions were for not paying the TV license (£157.50) – and they were ten times more likely to be convicted than men. At the same time, community services and local infrastructures that support women, have been decimated through repeated funding cuts.

Women’s subjection to longer sentences for commensurate crimes is commonplace (PRT, 2020) alongside evidence of the CJS continuing to view women as ‘doubly deviant’ – offending against the law and offending against their femininity, resulting in double jeopardy – harsher social judgement and harsher sentences (Carlen, 1988). For centuries, women who commit crime have been framed as “essentially mad, bad, or sad, or caring or neglectful mothers” (Gelsthorpe, 2004: 84). These repressive, discriminatory and outdated ideologies of womanhood, motherhood and femininity continue to shape prisons and their regimes (Carlen and Worrall, 2004: 2). Thus, the social control of women extends through the gendered structure of prisons. Within these spaces, they are subjected to the “triple disciplines of feminisation, domestication and medicalisation” (Carlen and Worrall, 2004: 2) and expressions of agency and autonomy are treated as non-normative ways of being, and ultimately resistance (King et al. 2022).

The patriarchal structures and ideologies that regulate women in the community also govern women inside prison, with men’s violence against women being a key feature of this. Lord

Farmer (2019: 19), echoing Corston (2007), drew attention to the impact of domestic violence on a woman's offending pathway, stating that "there are key qualitative differences between men and women [in the CJS] in the area of relationships which need to be made explicit, in particular... the high rates of domestic and other abuse many female offenders have endured which can be linked to their offending and, if ongoing, may mean some of their current relationships will not be conducive to their rehabilitation." Furthermore, "many women have experienced domestic abuse and this and other forms of toxic relationships may have been a contributor to, or prime factor in their offending behaviour (Farmer, 2019: 14). With over half of women in prison having experienced some form of intimate partner and/or sexual violence (PRT, 2020), it is unsurprising that prison compounds women's victimisation and is re-traumatising (APPG, 2022). Practices such as strip-searching, the use of physical and mechanical constraints and drugs inspections, are inherently traumatising and compromise trauma-informed ways of working, particularly when enacted by male members of staff.

Recent research by the authors (O'Brien and King, 2022), demonstrates the ways in which the control exercised by the prison and its staff can replicate the coercive control experienced by women who have been victims of abuse. Research consistently reflects the lack of trust that most imprisoned women have of officers and other members of staff who are part of the prison apparatus (see Masson and Booth (eds.), 2023). Historic experiences of having been let down by services and people in positions of power, particularly as children or victims of violence, abuse and racism compound issues of trust inside. The inability to engage in strategies for self-care and control of their access to families, services, medication and support causes further anxiety and trauma (APPG, 2022).

The authors (O'Brien and King, 2022) research also sheds light on the complex and challenging views of some imprisoned women who experience prison as a place of safety. Despite their multi-layered trauma, often further compounded by prison experiences, some found prison, at times, to be an opportunity to escape violence and abuse and receive support not available in the community. The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Women in the Penal System has raised concerns about

the courts' use of remand 'for own protection' (APPG, 2022). Their report included examples from HMIP inspections of prisons regularly being used as a 'place of safety' for women with acute mental health difficulties. One such inspection (HMIP 2021: 3), in highlighting the inappropriate burden of this on the prison itself, concluded that "these women should not be kept in prison where, out of sight, they exist in an environment that does not begin to address their needs."

Nonetheless, it is vital that we do not ignore the voices of women impacted by prisons when they refer to their incarceration in positive terms.

The inherent tension in women (and the courts) sometimes using prison as a place of refuge from violence, abuse and serious mental illness illustrates the reach of oppressive gendered systems that control women inside and outside of prison. Cognisant that most women in prison should not be there (APPG, 2022), the MoJ's (2022: 5) own 'Improving Outcomes for Women Strategy' explicitly aims to; "reduce the number of women entering the CJS by intervening earlier with support in the community". However, this therefore requires investing in those very organisations, services and communities that have been subjected to the harshest cuts through austerity over the last 12 years.

Imprisoned women's experiences are also racially differentiated. Black and racially minoritised people are heavily over-represented in prison and are disproportionately younger (Lammy, 2017). Racially minoritised women are more likely to be remanded or sentenced to custody, feel less safe in custody, have less access to mental health services and experience racial and religious discrimination from incarcerated peers and staff (PRT, 2017). This is despite the UK signing up to the UN's Bangkok Rules for the treatment of women in prison (Rule 54), which states that prisons should recognise the differential needs of women from different religious and racial backgrounds and provide services that meet those needs. Stereotypes of the 'angry Black woman' lead to further discrimination within prison. Charles' (2023) recent doctoral research demonstrates the continued racism experienced by black and racially minoritised women in English prisons. Her research echoes Devlin's (1999) findings of women being viewed by prison officers as anti-social, aggressive, problem makers. Black and racially minoritised women are less likely to have their needs recognised and

be met with punitive responses, including being more likely to be sent to segregation than to be referred for appropriate treatment and support (Cox and Sacks-Jones, 2017). The APPG's (2022) recent briefing paper on women's health and wellbeing in prisons recognises that gendered disparities are structurally ingrained within a prison system and policies primarily designed for and prioritising the needs, health and wellbeing of imprisoned men. It concludes that prisons are unhealthy environments which exacerbate women's physical and mental health needs, particularly racially minoritised women (APPG, 2022).

Care-experienced women and girls are also drastically over-represented within the prison system, even more so than care-experienced men and boys. Whilst less than 2% of the general population have been in care, a third of women and almost two thirds of 15-18 year old girls in prison are care-experienced (PRT, 2022). The relationship and route between the care and criminal justice systems are incredibly complex, particularly for women and girls (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019) and intersect with existing structural inequalities based on class, race and gender in particular. For example, black and racially minoritised girls, are doubly disadvantaged – subjected to racialised and gendered judgements (Hunter, 2019). Cox and Sacks-Jones (2017) demonstrate how care (and gender) status can be used as a tool to escalate care-experienced girls through the CJS, with racially minoritised girls further disadvantaged. Not only do care-experienced women bring multiple layers and experiences of trauma with them into prison, but the experience itself can be further re-traumatising, often replicating trauma experienced through the care system. For example, a lack of trust in prison staff and services reflects experiences of trauma in the care system (Gooch et al., 2022; Waite, 2023).

Recent research by Fitzpatrick et al. (2022) seeks to disrupt the routes between care and custody for girls and women. Given the dearth of literature on care-experienced women's experiences of prison, this research makes a timely and important contribution. For the purposes of this report/project, their findings on the experiences of care-experienced mothers in prison, are particularly valuable. This goes some way to untangling the "complex

and intersecting relationships between care experience, stigma, child removal and criminal justice involvement" (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023: 105) and demonstrates "how their own prior care experience and social services involvement may intensify fears for the well-being of their own children, thereby exacerbating the pain of being locked up" (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023: 105). The study reveals the excessive surveillance, inadequate support, criminalisation and victimisation that care-experienced girls and women are subjected to and the ways these processes recommence when they become parents themselves (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). Understandably, care-experienced mothers and mothers who have had children removed previously, may be reluctant to share details of their children with those in authority, whom they may have little trust or faith in (Morriss, 2018).

No data is collected on how many women in prison are mothers, but one estimate suggests 60% have children (PRT, 2019) with over 17,000 children per year affected by maternal imprisonment (Kincaid et al., 2019). Historic estimates suggest that for 85% of incarcerated mothers, entering prison is the first time they have been separated from their children (Caddle and Crisp, 1997). Separation can occur at different points within the CJS – at arrest; at sentencing; at birth; or after time in a prison Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) (Martin and Powell, 2023). The multi-layered patriarchal expectations of mothers render them triply deviant in the processes of a stigmatising CJS. This can be observed in the inconsistent sentencing by judges who fail to understand the implications of mother-child separation (Minson, 2020) and the sentencing practices of magistrates (Hedderman and Barnes, 2015). The entrenchment of the gendered stigmatisation of incarcerated mothers can also be viewed in access to MBUs. Although there are six MBUs, with 64 places nationally in the UK, many are underused with a steady rise in rejection rates since 2012, particular of women who have experienced previous imprisonment (Sikand, 2017), mental health difficulties, addiction problems and unemployment prior to incarceration (Birmingham et al., 2006). Problematically, those on remand and serving short sentences are also less likely to be accepted onto MBUs (Gregoire et al., 2010), i.e. the majority of imprisoned women (MoJ, 2021).

Recent research on the experiences of caregivers (Booth, 2020) and children (Minson, 2020) of imprisoned mothers evidences the stigma, lack of support and trauma they experience in a system in which their needs remain invisible (see also Condry and Minson, 2020). As Beresford (PRT, 2021) notes, “the imprisonment of a mother has a potentially devastating impact on children, regardless of the age of the child and the length of sentence the mother receives.” Although questions are asked at the court stage and during the reception period in prison, there is no statutory framework in place for recording the numbers of imprisoned mothers (or fathers); recording the number of children and young people experiencing parental imprisonment; recording or understanding the gendered differences and gendered experiences of parents or their children; recording who undertakes the parenting role outside of prison or the impacts of this upon them. However, whilst there is a willingness from HMPPS to collect more rigorous data, and a recognition that data such as this is needed, there are inherent challenges. Given the shame and stigma attached to parental imprisonment, especially for mothers and their children, encouraging disclosure of this information is extremely challenging. The Prison Reform Trust have worked with specialists across the sector to develop and advocate for Child Impact Assessments for all children with a parent in prison (Beresford, 2022). Children Heard and Seen, who predominantly deliver services for children with parents in prison in the Oxfordshire area, champion the need for a roll out of services such as theirs across the country. As the APPG (2022: 7) concluded, “plans to introduce family units in women’s prison will not prevent the negative impact of imprisonment on mothers and children and are not in a child’s best interests.”⁵

The two reviews undertaken by Lord Farmer – on the importance of family ties in preventing reoffending and reducing intergenerational crime (2017); and his follow-up Review for Women (2019), outlined the key evidence and knowledge in England and Wales. He noted that “we cannot underestimate the practical and emotional difficulties that ‘mothering’ from inside prison entails.” In acknowledging that “female offenders have often experienced abuse and trauma which can profoundly impact their ability to develop and sustain healthy, trusting relationships,” he set out key recommendations

to address the importance of good family and other relationships as a “golden thread running through the criminal justice system” (Farmer, 2019: 5). Over the last decade, the pains of maternal imprisonment have become increasingly visible and better understood, with increased attention from research, policy and practice. This body of work consistently reveals the pain, anguish, despair, grief, loss and trauma experienced by mothers in prison. The recent establishment of the Women, Family, Crime and Justice Network (2018) and publication of the Routledge Handbook of Women’s Experiences of Criminal Justice (Masson and Booth, 2023) testify to the vibrant collective work of academics and practitioners, which have been drawn and built upon in this report.

5. Family units are included in the Government Prison Strategy White Paper 2021 as part of the expansion of the female estate.

Parental Rights

People in prison largely retain their human rights during incarceration, as no separate legislation exists in the UK that defines their rights. Fundamental rights as outlined in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) apply to imprisoned people - 'under English law, a convicted prisoner, in spite of his imprisonment, retains all civil rights which are not taken away expressly or by necessary implication' (Lord Wilberforce, quoted in van Zyl Smit, 2012: 569). The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which the UK has ratified but not incorporated into law, provides further specification for people in prison who 'shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person' (Article 10(1)). Despite continuing to hold rights, because they are being held in captivity, incarcerated people are not in a strong position to defend those rights (van Zyl Smit, 2012: 566).

The 'Bangkok Rules' (The United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders), adopted by the UN in 2010, recognises that the needs of women in prison are different from those of men, providing minimum benchmarks for women's treatment. This 'soft law', like the Mandela Rules (Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners date), provide minimum standards and enable voluntary monitoring, but as guidelines only, they carry no penalties. The 70 rules, designed to improve gender equality, recognise women's often long histories of violence and abuse, victimisation and greater propensity for self-harm and suicide. Importantly, the rules emphasise that "when sentencing or deciding on pre-trial measures for a pregnant woman or a child's sole or primary caretaker, non-custodial measures should be preferred where possible and appropriate, with custodial sentences being considered when the offence is serious and violent" (UN, 2011: 6). Furthermore, parent and child details should be recorded during prison admission (Rule 3.1). The reality of this latter requirement is that not only do prisons not systematically seek to record these details but there are many reasons that a woman may not discuss her mother status for fear of stigma, shame and possible reprisals, including child removal (Minson, 2020).

Despite the law requiring that prison only be used as a sanction when the offence is so serious that neither a fine alone nor a community sentence can be justified (Minson,

Nadin and Earle, 2015), there continues to be inconsistent application of these principles in the sentencing of pregnant women and mothers in both the magistrates and crown courts. Article 8 specifically relates to the consideration of parental status and the needs of the child in sentencing. Sentencers (judges and magistrates) are legally required to acquire information about dependent children (pre-sentence report) and balance the Article 8 rights of the child(ren) against the seriousness of the mother's offence. However, Epstein's (2012) research has demonstrated that sentencers do not always conduct this balancing exercise, to the detriment of children and their mothers. Further evidence reveals the lack of understanding by sentencers of the impact of parental, particularly maternal, imprisonment upon children (Minson, 2020). The UK's Joint Committee on Human Rights (2021: 20) recently challenged the government over this in stating: "We cannot see how the welfare and best interests of children are being sufficiently considered if their welfare and best interests are not prioritised as a consideration when a parent is sentenced."

The welfare of the child(ren) is paramount and should be centred in any decision-making that may impact upon them. However, this can come into tension with parental rights. As Lord Scarman explained "There is here a principle which limits and governs the exercise of parental rights of custody, care, and control... it is also a warning that parental right must be exercised in accordance with the welfare principle and can be challenged, even overridden, if it be not" (Gillick v West Norfolk, 1985). This can be further complicated when considering parental rights in prison, particularly when layers of stigma and inequality seep in. The Children Act (1989) defines 'parental responsibility' as "all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property". Parental responsibility can be curtailed by several mechanisms, including a prohibited steps order, specific issue order, child arrangements order, care order, emergency protection order, placement order and special guardianship. Many mothers in prison have been subjected to statutory Children's Services involvement (long) before their arrest and incarceration, which for some, has resulted in the removal, temporary or otherwise, of their child(ren). For others, their incarceration results in children's care proceedings. The interplay between stigma

emanating from patriarchal dominant views of motherhood and children's services decisions is complex. For example, during a Care Order a local authority "can override the wishes of the parents/others with parental responsibility, throughout the time the [care] order is in force" (Family Rights Group, 2014: 7).

If a mother is incarcerated, having access to decision making processes, let alone demonstrating her parenting ability can be near on impossible. Maintaining contact with her children or designated social worker is limited through exclusion from key processes by child-welfare agencies and the courts, which is commonplace (Beckerman, 1991). Even with her parental rights intact, the child's guardian can refuse contact or visits. All of this can be interpreted as not engaging or a lack of interest in the child(ren), which can then be used against the mother in decision making. Even when mothers can engage in parenting from prison, they are expected to perform according to the universal expectations of motherhood and are judged against these, despite being constrained from doing so by their incarceration (Baldwin, 2022). Within this system is an assumption that parents know their rights and have the agency to exercise them. Smith (2003), in reflecting on her own experience of imprisonment as a mother carefully articulates the way that she thought that she had no rights whilst incarcerated and spent years struggling to ascertain what they were, struggling to survive and fighting for her child.

The PRiP Project was originally envisioned to support parents, especially mothers, whose children are in the care of the local authority or residing outside of the maternal family. The first issue in terms of legal and parental rights support involves ascertaining whether the mother has maintained her parental responsibility and who she may share this with, and to what degree. There are legal orders imposed on behalf of the Local Authority via court, such as Care Orders and Supervision Orders, or those imposed by private family court such as Child Arrangement Orders, Prohibited Steps and Special Guardianship Orders. Some of which may impact on the level of parental responsibility the mother retains and others determine the contact arrangements between the child and their parents. All the women who engaged in the PRiP project had been involved in either public or private law processes prior to custody

or during their time in custody. This meant they had prior involvement with Social Care and/or CAFCASS. Many of the mothers who received support from the PRiPC had a child subject to a Special Guardianship Order. This order grants parental responsibility to an appropriate adult in the child's life. However, the other adult named in the Special Guardianship Order has overriding decision making around the child and should make decisions in the best interest of the child and with consideration of the parents' wishes and feelings.

Once orders enter the court arena, this becomes challenging for the mother in prison because of the practical challenges of engaging in mediation (with the father or guardian) and arranging for a child to be brought into prison for visits. For example, the parent/guardian in the community may decide not to comply with the order because they don't want their child to go into prison. The imprisoned mother would then need to apply for an order (if one wasn't in place) or to vary an existing order to specify visitation. However, the continued stigmatising attitudes of the judiciary and children's services (Morriss, 2018) and misperception that bringing a child into prison is not in their best interest, can render this process extremely challenging for the imprisoned mother, not least if she most likely does not know what her parental rights are in this regard. Parental responsibility is about demonstrating a commitment to the child, but this can be difficult if the community-based parent or carer will not bring the child into prison.

Once a child has been subject to an Adoption Order, the parents lose all legal recourse to access the child. In these situations, the PRiP Project has involved extensive engagement with adoptive services and in some cases adoptive parents, in an attempt to establish contact, usually letterbox contact if it is in place. However, many women are often not clear where their children are, what (if any) orders are in place and how to go about finding this out. This requires extensive PRiPC time and effort to attempt to find the child, ascertain the situation and explore the possibility of contact.

Recourse to legal advice, representation and/or the financial means to engage solicitors is almost entirely prohibitive for mothers in prison. In private family law, in order to challenge the behaviour of the community-based parent/guardian, a mother must have the financial means

to do so. Whilst most women in prison pass the income element of the Legal Aid test, passing the merit element is significantly more difficult. The two criteria here are: evidence of protecting the child(ren) from child abuse, which a mother will be unable to do whilst in custody; and experience of domestic abuse, which would only apply to the father, as opposed to a guardian or other (step-)parent, and even then the mother would have to show they have good enough prospects of success to be able to proceed. In Public Law proceedings, if a mother is at risk of having her child adopted, she is entitled to Legal Aid and legal advice/support. However, again, in practice this can be extremely challenging in navigating both the practicalities and stigma of beginning/engaging in the process whilst imprisoned.

The PRiP Project was supported pro bono by an experienced local Legal Aid Family Solicitor, with existing knowledge of the prison, having supported multiple clients. This role was crucial in providing pro bono legal advice, support and legal rights workshops to the mothers. Importantly, the Solicitor had knowledge of the local area and courts, where some of the women are either from, or likely to return to. As a Legal Aid trained Solicitor, she also brought a wealth of experience in working with mothers experiencing similar challenges and from similar circumstances within the local community. Nationally, the charity Not Beyond Redemption provides free family legal advice and representation to women who are in prison. Their team of specialist family lawyers and volunteers focus on helping to re-establish critical access and relationships between imprisoned mothers and their children, for example guiding women through legal matters, ensuring they understand their rights, writing legal letters, issuing proceedings, and representing them in court (NBR, 2022). At the time of writing, NBR had expanded its delivery, from working in just four prisons in the South of England, to supporting mothers in all 12 women's prisons in England. The PRiPC had successfully engaged with NBR on several private family law cases, including with some of the mothers we interviewed for this project. NBR also started offering legal clinics in HMP Low Newton in March 2023.

Practice Examples: Supporting mothers in Prison⁶

The PRiP Project is one of only a few projects in England and Wales providing targeted support for mothers in prison where emphasis is on providing legal advice, advocacy and support around their rights as parents. We discovered only a handful of similar interventions in the UK. The charity Not Beyond Redemption, as we have already highlighted, support women across the prison estate, including in HMP Low Newton and take on private casework on behalf of mothers in prison. The Prisoners' Advice Service (PAS) is a charity that offers legal advice to parents in prison. They offer a freephone number for mothers in prison to call and speak directly to a family solicitor for legal advice. Founded in 2014, *Children Heard and Seen* is a charity that provides support and interventions in the community for children with a parent in prison. They offer a range of one to one and online support to families nationwide, aimed at reducing negative emotional effects of parental imprisonment on children and co-parents in the community. It does not, however, involve direct contact or work with prison establishments.

The Prison Advice Care Trust (PACT) deliver a similar programme to the Nepacs PRiP Project called 'Together A Chance', a pilot programme funded by HMPPS that supports mothers in HMP Send and HMP Eastwood Park. The aim of the project is to, "advocate for women whose children are involved with children's social care in the originating local authority...and support best practice, by working together with other agencies in the best interests of the children whilst also promoting the mother's parental rights". 'Together a Chance' is being delivered by specialist trained PACT social workers, based in the two prisons, and runs for three years. The pilot has already proved to be very successful in supporting mothers with children in care proceedings (see Rees, Waits and Bezeczkzy, 2023). PACT also offer support to mothers, including a 'Mum's the Word' support booklet for mothers in prison. They also deliver the Welsh government funded project, 'Visiting Mum Scheme', which supports Welsh mothers serving custody in prisons in England.

Another example is the 'Motherhood Project', an intervention developed by Lucy Baldwin at HMP Peterborough, funded by, and in partnership with Sodexo. This is a pilot project supported by the family support team at HMP Peterborough, aimed at providing mothers and grandmothers with emotional and practical support via peer-led

group work, a 'Motherhood Mentor' programme, and 'Mothering Justice' training aimed at both incarcerated mothers and prison staff, the aim which is to raise awareness of maternal incarceration and the impacts of custody on mothers and their children. The first phase of the project has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from women and prison staff alike (see Baldwin, 2023). An important outcome of phase 1 of the 'Mothering Project', is the recommendation to expand the family support team in the prison to include social work trained staff to undertake casework and advocacy for mothers who have children involved in childcare proceedings.

Birth Companions provide specialist support to pregnant women and mothers in the CJS. They are currently working in HMP Bronzefield and HMP Foston Hall providing practical and emotional support for mothers separated from their children. The Prison Reform Trust have also supported work in this area via the Child Impact Assessment, a tool that qualitatively assesses the impact of a sentencing decision on children. The assessment tool, co-designed by Sarah Beresford, alongside women and children with lived experience, considers the impacts of a custodial sentence on children *and* mothers, and advocates for parental rights. HMP Downview and HMP Bronzefield offer a specialist counselling service designed to support mothers who have had their children removed from their care. Many women who engage with the programme have had children placed for adoption.

One Small Thing's recently opened Hope Street Hub in Southampton offers residential accommodation for women and their children. It is an example of a community-based alternative to prison which supports mothers with criminal justice experience to keep their children. Similarly, Turning Point deliver the 218 service in Glasgow, is another example of a women's centre that provides an alternative to custody for women offering a range of specialist residential and drop-in based support for women who have been in prison, or at risk of being given a custodial sentence. The service offers practical and emotional support which includes support to women who may have had children removed from their care because of a prison sentence, mental health, and/or drug use.

6. See National Women's Justice Coalition www.womensservicesmap.com

Aims of the Parental Rights in Prison Project

The original aims of the PRiP Project were to improve parental contact (mothers in HMP Low Newton) with children to improve the child's health and wellbeing; improve parental bonds; motivate imprisoned parents to take steps for a positive future and thereby reduce re-offending and the intergenerational impact of crime. Originally, this was to be achieved in three key ways:

- providing practical legal support and advocacy to parents in prison (and kinship carers) about their parental rights on issues around child contact, fostering and adoption, parental rights;
- support for kinship carers, e.g. through liaison with charities e.g. Grandparents Plus, Addaction;
- develop and deliver appropriate training to prison staff and key workers around parental rights for parents in prison and kinship carers

As the project developed in year two, and partly as a response to Covid-19 restrictions, the PRiPC focused more of her time at HMP Low Newton supporting mothers, including facilitating a monthly legal rights workshop. Furthermore, less emphasis was placed on supporting kinship carers through liaison with charities, instead, much more time was taken up with supporting case-work, liaising with charities such as Not Beyond Redemption, and providing post-adoption support to mothers.

Referral Routes

Referrals to the parental rights project were received from a variety of sources, including during the induction period, the Nepacs Early Days in Custody family support worker, the DART team, Safer Custody following an ACCT, or the chaplaincy team and self-referral. PRiP information notices were periodically sent to staff and women in prison to remind them of the project and what it offered.

Methods

The evaluation is based on a mixed methods approach; combining in-depth qualitative interviews, participatory action research and case-studies with quantitative data collected through impact questionnaires. The evaluation was undertaken between January 2021 and December 2022 with ongoing data collection throughout. Qualitative and quantitative data has been collected concurrently, rather than sequentially, exploring the same issues and asking the same questions in different ways, using a variety of research tools. In doing so, we have produced reliable, rigorous, and in-depth findings that have been cross checked and verified throughout the research process (Fielding, 2021).

Research Aims

The aim of the research and evaluation was to examine mothers' experiences of parenting from prison and the effectiveness of the Nepacs PRiP Project in supporting them. Although the PRiP project extended its reach in year two to support men in prison at HMP Kirkclevington and HMP Durham. The evaluation focused on collecting data at HMP Low Newton only. The research aims were to explore:

- i) The experience of mothers in prison and the impact of maternal rupture upon them.
- ii) The extent to which mothers in prison who have a child in the care of the local authority, the care of family, significant others or adopted, feel calmer and less anxious as a result of the support and advocacy they receive.
- iii) The extent to which mothers in prison feel better informed about their legal rights and feel empowered to take action.
- iv) The extent to which mothers in prison are able to obtain timely specialist legal advice when seeking to re-establish contact with their child and/ or to challenge adoption proceedings.
- v) The extent to which prison staff and keyworkers feel better informed about parental rights and care proceedings.

Sampling

A convenience sampling strategy was employed, with participants recruited through the Nepacs PRiPC, who approached mothers engaged with the project and identified those willing to be interviewed. The PRiPC also escorted interviewees to the meeting rooms. Although the researchers were key holders and able to move around the prison relatively freely, they were not permitted to escort women from their wings. Relying on a non-random approach to sampling meant that the researchers were not able to explore the reasons why some mothers might have opted not to engage with the PRiP Project. However, on balance, the researchers benefited enormously from the positive rapport that the PRiPC had established with mothers (and staff). Interviewees trusted the PRiPC and so were relatively quick to settle into the interview and discuss their experiences in a frank and open manner. With more time and funding, the researchers would have facilitated participatory research events, designed to mitigate against sampling bias and to capture a more diverse range of mothers' voices and perspectives.

Quantitative data collection

Quantitative data was gathered using Nepacs monitoring tools, which were co-designed with the researchers to meet the needs of the evaluation. This data included overall project figures and outcomes; baseline data for mothers (through pre-intervention questionnaires); and impact data (through post-intervention questionnaires) with participants who accessed the parental rights workshop, and practitioners and prison-based staff following online training.

Qualitative data collection

Qualitative data collection comprised four elements: eighteen semi-structured interviews with incarcerated mothers who had accessed the project; seven semi-structured interviews with prison-based staff; observation of a Nepacs parental rights training session with practitioners; and case study data for ten mothers who had engaged with the project compiled by the PRiPC. Interviews with mothers explored their experiences of motherhood in and from prison,

their understanding of their rights as parents and their engagement with the project and its impact upon them. Interviews with prison-based staff explored their understanding and experiences of working with mothers in prison, their interaction with the project and its perceived impact on mothers and the regime. Qualitative data was coded and thematically analysed using NVivo software.

Participatory Theatre

The research team secured additional Research England Participatory Research Fund funding through Durham University to support the facilitation of the participatory element of the evaluation. The researchers and the PRiPC collaborated with Open Clasp Theatre Company to co-produce a play with seven mothers engaged with the project.⁷ This involved using democratic drama techniques to create a safe space for open discussion and debate, with women working together as ‘experts in their own experience’. Through a series of five full day workshops, the mothers explored and shared their personal experiences and the impacts of the programme on them. Collectively, they created a character and explored and acted out the decisions that this character made, by unpacking their own life experiences, supported by the other group members, Open Clasp facilitators, researchers and PRiPC. The Open Clasp Director then developed a script for a play based on the characters and stories created by the group, which was collectively edited and agreed upon. The participatory theatre element provided the opportunity to ethically and sensitively engage in co-production methods with the women, responding to a key recommendation of the Female Offender Strategy (MOJ, 2018) which calls for women’s prisons to, ‘work with local partners, including the third sector, to develop a more collective approach to address the specific needs of women offenders and tackle the underlying causes of reoffending’.

Open Clasp is an award-winning women’s theatre company based in the North East of England, that develops ‘truthful’, ‘risk-taking’ theatre informed by the lived experiences of women and girls from minority communities and affected by the Criminal Justice System.⁸ Through theatre, the company aims to improve the lives of their beneficiaries for the

better and change the systems that affect them. Crucially, Open Clasp’s approach enables women to collectively determine how their voices and experiences should be used for social change. This avoids tokenistic ‘trauma tourism’, in which lived experiences are used to illustrate painful stories without seeking change to practice or systems (Booth, 2021; Booth et al 2021). Open Clasp are well-known for undertaking ground-breaking and impactful work, including in prisons. A project with women in HMP Low Newton in 2015 led to the production *Key Change*, which went on to win multiple international awards. Open Clasp also have a long relationship with Durham University, particularly the Department of Sociology.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was received from Durham University Department of Sociology (SOC-2021-07-13T15_01_59-gddp4), along with approval from HMPPS National Research Committee (2021-032). Permission was also granted from the Governor of HMP Low Newton and the research undertaken in accordance with the prison’s rules, regulations and processes. Nepacs robust ethical practices and processes were also adhered to. Participants were provided with tailored participant information sheets, which included details on how to exit the research at any time and without giving a reason. Informed written consent was secured from all participants, which included guaranteeing anonymity and the limits of confidentiality. This was accompanied by verbal explanations to participants about the research, including where appropriate, the researcher reading through the participant information sheet and consent form. The research team worked ethically and sensitively in conducting the interviews and participatory work. This involved working closely with the PRiPC to ensure that participants received appropriate support before and after interviews and participatory sessions and throughout their engagement with the evaluation. Information about the participatory theatre workshops was provided to women at an induction event where the PRiPC was also in attendance. The purpose of the theatre workshops was provided to the women, together with details about anonymity, informed consent and the voluntary nature of the workshops.

7. www.openclasp.org.uk

8. www.openclasp.org.uk

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo to identify the key themes. In some cases, written notes were made by the researcher after interviews. Written anonymised notes were also produced by the researchers following the eight participatory theatre workshops. These notes combined researcher reflections and participant observations. Written notes were typed up but not included in the NVivo data analysis.

The research team were supported by a Project Advisory Group, who provided advice, guidance and feedback at key points during the evaluation, including the planning, interim report and final dissemination stages.

Data Management

Ethical approval included a detailed data management plan, with data sharing agreements in place and all data has been kept safe and secure throughout the project. A digital voice recorder was purchased, which received security approval for use in the prison. All audio files were securely downloaded onto a Durham University encrypted, password protected server immediately after each interview and then erased from the voice recorder. All data and documentation, including consent forms, are held securely on the Durham University server.

Research Limitations

The research is a robust academic study, but small in scale. Consequently, there are several limitations to the research.

- i) The limited budget for the evaluation restricted the scope of the research, including research design, sample size, scale and length.
- ii) Our research design did not include a control group. This was primarily because of the ethical implications of including a group of mothers in a research project evaluating a parental-rights based intervention that they were not able to access.
- iii) A relatively small sample of participants engaged in the research.
- iv) The limited time available to undertake research with women who have accessed the programme of work and subsequently been released limited an assessment of the long-term impact of the project.
- v) As we have outlined above, the researchers relied on Nepacs staff to identify participants to interview. We have thus not captured the views of women who didn't want to engage in the PRiP Project in this evaluation.
- vi) The continued impact of the covid-19 pandemic interrupted and restricted service delivery and data collection during parts of the project. We were unable to observe a legal rights workshop for this reason.
- vii) We recognise that maternal imprisonment has significant negative impacts on children left behind, however, the focus of our evaluation was on mothers and prison staff. A fuller and more complete picture would have been achieved had we been able to conduct interviews with children separated from their mothers, their carers, and social workers.

HMP Low Newton

HMP and YO1 Low Newton is one of 12 women's prisons in England holding women on remand and sentenced. It is a local and resettlement prison located in County Durham, serving courts from the Scottish Borders to Cumbria and North Yorkshire. At the time of our research the prison operated seven separate wings, one of which was designed as a psychologically informed, planned environment (PIPE), and one dedicated to early days in custody, including dedicated support for women coming in to prison with substance use issues. Throughout the research period, the prison operated at capacity with a population between 302-344 women (HMIP 2021). Data is not collected nationally, or locally, on the number of women in the prison population who are mothers. According to a survey completed as part of HMIP inspections in June 2021, "127 women were receiving support for substance use problems", and "on average, 45 to 50 women a month were referred for a mental health assessment" (HMIP 2021: 5).

Considering the high number of women who enter the establishment with complex mental health issues, often rooted in histories of abuse, serious childhood trauma and substance use, the latest HMIP report (2021) found that staff made a concerted effort to provide support. "Levels of self-harm were lower than at most similar prisons and there was a very good range of support available to help women manage their feelings and avoid potential crisis" (HMIP 2021:3). In 2020, prior to the PRIP project being introduced at HMP Low Newton, mothers were supported by the family support team which consisted of the HMPPS family engagement coordinator, the Nepacs Family Engagement Manager, the DART (Humankind) family support worker, and part-time Nepacs Early Days in Custody family support worker. In addition, a pro bono family solicitor supported women on an ad hoc basis. The wider family support team was unable to fully support and advocate for mothers around care proceedings and parental rights. The PRiP project filled this gap and freed up the family support team.

At the time of our research, the family support team at HMP Low Newton consisted of five dedicated support workers:

1. the Nepacs Early Days in Custody family support worker, providing support to resolve early days issues around family contact and family relationships in the first 14 days of custody (part-time)
2. the healthcare provider's (Humankind) Drug and Alcohol Recovery Team (DART) support worker acts as a point of contact for families/carers whose loved one have substance misuse issues, supporting families and women during their prison journey and with recovery;
3. HMPPS family support worker.
4. the Nepacs family engagement manager (part-time)
5. the Nepacs Parental Rights in Prison Project coordinator.

1. the Nepacs Early Days in Custody family support worker, providing support to resolve
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Workshops and drop-in sessions

Legal rights workshops for mothers at HMP Low Newton

Throughout the lifetime of the project, the PRiPC facilitated 8 legal rights groups, co-delivered by the PRiPC and the project's partner family solicitor, which attracted a total of 22 mothers. The workshops were designed to offer mothers an overview of family court and legal orders and their impact on parental rights and parental contact whilst in custody. The original aim was for workshops to be delivered face-to-face with groups of 10 women on a monthly basis. However, restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 meant that the model had to be adapted. Instead, the group ran in much smaller groups (of 3 women) and delivered virtually. Although uptake was generally low, based on the PRiPC reflections, some of the learnings and positive outcomes were as follows⁹:

- Women preferred to meet the solicitor face-to-face.
- On the occasions that a group of 3 women attended, the sessions were effective in developing a sense of peer support – women sharing and realising collective experiences and supporting each other.
- Smaller numbers allowed for more focused discussion.
- advice around interventions more specific to individual needs.
- The legal rights groups offered the opportunity for the PRiPC to devise an individual action plan for the women, identifying what steps needed to be taken and in which order. For example, emphasis was not on trying to get a case to court, but rather encouraging working through steps to resolve matters without court intervention.
- The legal rights groups offered the opportunity for the PRiPC to develop new skills, knowledge and connections that can be drawn upon in the future. For example, the PRiPC collaborated with a local mediation service on two cases, and legal advice and support was received from the PRT and NBR.

The PRiPC plans to continue collaborating with Ben Hoare Bell and offer a legal rights group to women in the future, as well as collaborating with NBR to offer family law clinics.¹⁰

Parental rights training workshop for practitioners and prison-based staff

Throughout the lifetime of the project, the PRiPC delivered eight online 'Parental Rights in Prison' training workshops aimed at practitioners and prison-based staff whose role involved supporting parents who wished to sustain their relationship with their children who were in the care of the local authority, the care of family and significant others, or adopted. A total of 131 prison-based staff and practitioners attended the training workshops, including operational prison staff. The training sessions were delivered online via zoom and lasted two and a half hours. The PRiPC facilitated the workshops supported by a Nepacs volunteer. The content covered the legalities of parental rights and invited participants to explore the challenges and barriers that parents in custody face in exercising their parental rights and remaining an active and involved parent. The researchers participated in one of the online training sessions in October 2021. The session attracted 19 participants from a range of backgrounds, including from HMPPS safer custody and probation, Gentoo housing, academics and voluntary sector organisations.

Parental rights drop-in sessions for fathers at HMP Durham and HMP Kirklevington Grange

Delivery of an alternate weekly drop-in session for fathers in HMP Durham (reception prison) and HMP Kirklevington (open prison) began in year two of the project. The rationale being that assistance at the start and end of a sentence could be the timeliest for men in addressing child contact and parental rights issues. The uptake at HMP Durham was significantly higher than at HMP Kirklevington, which was expected given the high numbers of men being received into custody. A total of 57 men engaged with the PRiPC drop-in service, although many more men had self-referred or had been referred by a friend of staff member but had already moved on or been released before the PRiPC was able to see them. At HMP Kirklevington a full-time family support worker had recently been employed who was meeting the identified needs of the men, so the decision was made to deliver weekly drop-in sessions at HMP Durham only. Based on the PRiPC reflections, some of the learnings and positive outcomes were as follows:

- This high uptake and demand for specialist parental rights advice clearly highlights that there is a need for an additional offer of family support in the male estate.

9. We were unable to observe a legal rights workshop due to covid-19 restrictions and subsequent change to the delivery of workshops.

10. Weekly drop-in sessions were planned for HMP Low Newton. The intended aim was to offer women an opportunity to drop-in and discuss their personal circumstances and get some signposting, support or assistance. It was hoped that cases could potentially be picked up by self-referral this way if additional help and

support was required. However, the drop-ins were directly impacted by Covid-19 related restriction on the movement of people detained in prison and mixing as well as staffing issues and so they never got off the ground. The PRiPC fed back that in the future drop-in sessions might work best if they offered support on a specific legal issue/ theme rather than offering generic parental rights drop-ins. For example, a monthly session for letter box contact arrangements and support, or a monthly workshop to discuss Special Guardianship Orders could be explored.

- The drop-in model provides an effective opportunity for a quick triage service helping to overcome initial barriers to parental contact with children. It allows for making swift contact with external professionals such as social workers and has the potential to prevent breakdown in a father's relationship with his child(ren).
 - Some of challenges of delivering a PRiP drop-in at HMP Durham are limited physical space available to deliver sessions; competing with other activities such as education, exercise and work; dealing with more cases involving public and child protection issues as more men detained in prison have restrictions on contact in place.
-

Quantitative Data Findings

The PRiP Project engaged with a total of 115 mothers between January 2021 and December 2022, and 38 of these women completed a brief 'before' and 'after' engagement survey (see appendix 1). The aim of the survey, which was completed before and after an intervention of casework with the PRiC, was to gain a basic understanding of self-reported distance travelled focusing on the following measures: calmness, anxiety, confidence, empowerment and feeling hopeful for the future.¹¹ Women were asked by the PRiPC worker to provide a score using Likert scale survey questions (0-10, and 10 being the highest score) of how they felt in relation to each of the five measures, prior to commencing casework with the PRiPC, and on completion:

- Feeling more, or less **calm** following the intervention- the highest score was 9 (distance travelled from a score of 1 prior to engagement, to a score of 10 after engagement) and the lowest was 0 (distance travelled from a score of 0 prior to engagement, to a score of 0 after engagement). The mean distance travelled was **1.86**.
- Feeling more, or less **anxious** following the intervention- the highest score was 6 (distance travelled from a score of 1 prior to engagement, to a score of 7 after engagement) and the lowest score was -1 (distance travelled from a score of 5 prior to engagement to a score of 4 after engagement). The mean distance travelled was **1.89**.
- Feeling more, or less **confident** following the intervention- the highest score was 9 (distance travelled from a score of 1 prior to engagement, to a score of 10 after engagement) and the lowest score was 1 (distance travelled from a score of 4 prior to engagement to a score of 5 after engagement). The mean distance travelled was **1.97**.
- Feeling more, or less **empowered** following the intervention- the highest score was 9 (distance travelled from a score of 1 prior to engagement, to a score of 10 after engagement) and the lowest score was -3 (distance travelled from a score of 9 prior to engagement to a score of 6 after engagement). The mean distance travelled was **1.92**.
- Feeling more, or less **hopeful for the future** following the intervention- the highest score was 9 (distance travelled from a score of 1 prior to engagement, to a score of 10 after engagement) and the lowest score was -1 (distance travelled from a score of 8 prior to engagement to a score of 7 after engagement). The mean distance travelled was **1.89**.
- Feeling more, or less **knowledgeable about parental rights** following the intervention- the highest score was 7 (distance travelled from a score of 1 prior to engagement, to a score of 8 after engagement) and the lowest score was 0 (distance travelled from a score of 2 prior to engagement to a score of 2 after engagement). The mean distance travelled was **2.6**.

In summary, the PRiP impact survey revealed that mothers found engagement with PRiPC to be a positive experience, leading to mothers feeling calmer, less anxious, more confident, empowered and hopeful for the future. Although the distance travelled for some mothers was relatively small, overall outcomes were positive. On average, mothers scored 'feeling more knowledgeable about parental rights' highest, which meant that most mothers felt that they had gained important knowledge about their parental rights as a result of engaging with the PRiP Project (see appendix 2).

We now turn to our findings based on the interviews we conducted with mothers and prison-based staff members. We have structured our analysis and discussion into 5 themes:

- **domestic violence, trauma, and motherhood**
- **mothering from prison**
- **mothers' experiences of support prior to engagement with the Parental Rights in Prison Project**
- **impacts of the Parental Rights in Prison Project on mothers**
- **next steps: challenges upon release.**

We begin with the mothers before proceeding to provide our analysis of interviews with prison-based staff. Pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant to maintain anonymity. Within our analysis and discussion of the data with mothers, we include our reflections from the participatory theatre workshops and case-study material.

11. In most cases women self-completed the survey. The PRiPC helped women fill out the form in a small number of cases. Although we included open ended questions on the post-project survey, we do not have access to the qualitative data at this time.

Profile of the Mothers

We engaged with a total of 23 women during the evaluation period which ran for eighteen months. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out with 18 women and lasted between 23-90 minutes; case-studies written by the PRiPC were included and analysed for 10 women, which included 8 case studies of women who participated in our interviews. We also involved 7 women in the participatory theatre workshops with Open Clasp Theatre Company; 4 of them were included in our interviews and 2 were also included in the case-studies we analysed. The racial diversity of the 23 women reflected the racial diversity of the prison; 6 of the women were Black or racially minoritized, 2 of the women in our sample told us they were from traveller backgrounds. Their ages ranged from 23 years to 52 years and one of the women was also a grandmother. Their sentences ranged from three months to six years, although seven of the women were on remand and awaiting trial when we interviewed them. Only three of the women in our sample were in prison for the first time, the remaining women had been in and out of prison several times and had spent time in YOIs and/or other women's prisons notably, HMPs Send, Bronzefield, Styal and New Hall. Most of the mothers in our study had already had children removed from their care prior to coming into prison and/or had had children removed from their care because of their prison sentence. For some mothers, their children were placed in foster care or in the care of a family member while they were in prison. In some cases, relationships between mothers and those with responsibility for caring for their children on the outside, such as ex-partners, maternal and paternal extended family members, could be strained and difficult, resulting in the mother having little, if any contact with her children. It was typical for mothers with more than one child to have been involved in various care orders; for example, to have a child or children being looked after by a family member via a guardianship order; a child or children placed in foster care; and/or a child or children who had been adopted. Not knowing where their children were, or not being able to contact them was extremely traumatic for the mothers we interviewed.

The women in our study were victims of much more serious crimes than those they were accused of, an observation that has also been made by the Prison Reform Trust, amongst others, in recent critical reviews of women in prison (2022; 2017). The criminal activities of the women in our study were intertwined with extensive histories of domestic abuse, coercive control and sexual violence, poor mental health, poverty, and for some of them, childhood criminal exploitation, substance use issues, histories of self-harm and periods of homelessness. The majority had experienced the death of a close family member, in some cases in traumatic circumstances, including suicide, murder and losing a child soon after giving birth. During interviews and during the participatory theatre workshops, the women revealed multiple layers of abandonment over their lifetimes, in many cases abandonment experienced as children themselves, and as adults, when their own children were placed in care and then left to cope alone. During Open Clasp workshops women collectively revealed their feelings of loneliness while in prison. The stories of the mothers in our research resonate with those that have featured in the studies we reviewed in earlier sections of this report, and in our previous writing on women and imprisonment in the UK (O'Brien and King, 2022; King et al, 2021; see also O'Brien and Straub 2023).

Findings: Mothers

We now turn to our findings and forefront mothers' voices. We draw primarily on our interview data with mothers, but we also refer to our reflections from the participatory theatre workshops and draw on the 10 case studies where women feature in our analysis. In the first section we explore the mothers' experiences of domestic violence and abuse, highlighting the various ways in which having children removed from their care were interwoven with enduring serious violence and coercion within intimate relationships. We then focus on how women negotiated motherhood and managed their identities as mothers once inside prison and separated from their children. Here we focus on how mothers coped with the prison regime and coped with the pains of losing children, and in some cases, not knowing the outcome of care proceedings. We also discuss how mothers managed relationships with children, where contact was in place, family members and external agencies from inside prison. We then explore how, if at all, the women had been helped and supported in the past, when children had been removed from their care. Here we focus on their experiences in the community and in prison, prior to their engagement with the PRiP Project. The final sections examine the various impacts of the PRiP Project on the mothers we interviewed, before exploring their ideas for extending and enhancing the project, including supporting mothers in their transition to release.

1. Domestic violence and motherhood

The women in our sample spoke about their lives being defined by multiple and intersecting layers of harm and trauma, much of it caused by domestic violence and abuse (including sexual violence), and coercive control, over many years, including as children themselves (witnessing DV and experiencing violence and abuse). Recent research by the PRT (2017), Roberts (2022), Women in Prison (2022), and Rogers et al. (2023) evidence the high prevalence and persistence of deep and systemic victim/survivor histories of domestic violence and abuse experienced by most women in prison. Yet, "whilst the co-occurrence of domestic violence and abuse and offending is now better recognised, the links between these and mothering remain poorly understood overall" (Rogers, 2023:7). Our findings reveal the relationship between domestic violence and abuse, women's offending, and experiences of motherhood, and at the same time, demonstrate the cumulative impacts of

domestic violence on women overtime and men's violence rarely being tackled (McGlynn, 2022).

In the participatory theatre workshops, the theme of domestic violence and abuse was threaded through so many of our discussions and ended up being integral to the backstory of the character the women created. Of note is how coercive control featured in the lives of the women who participated in the workshops. For example, drawing on their own lived experiences, the women explained how their ex-partners would often use the threat of calling children's services as a weapon to intimidate, scare and control them. The control sometimes continued once they were inside prison.

Some of the women retold their experiences of gender-based violence during their interviews with us. Their stories are difficult to read but they are important to include as they reveal the brutality of their lives and the unimaginable challenges some of the mothers faced in their roles as mothers. For example, Rosie's children were placed in foster care because of domestic violence in the family home. In this extract, Rosie reflects on the violence she was subjected to by her ex-partner who was known to the police at the time of the event she describes. He was under a restraining order at the time:

I was in a domestic violence relationship with a man who was a lot older than me. I used to babysit for him and his partner. Now, I've got two children to him. I was with him for eleven years. I burnt me house down after the children were taken into foster care due to the ongoing domestic violence. I split up with him last August, but when I ended the relationship, his behaviour was just more volatile. The more control he was losing, the more erratic his behaviour become. He slashed me with a Stanley knife across the forehead there. He's stabbed me in the back with a kitchen knife, stuck a glass bottle in me leg. He raped me and bit all the tops of me legs. (Rosie)

Rosie's case illustrates how mothers can find themselves in an impossible situation and unable to leave the relationship, as she goes on to explain here:

I wasn't living, I was surviving. Like, I was waking up and I couldn't wait for the day to be ended, but then I'd be frightened to close me eyes in case he got in and done something to me. Like, I was just constantly fearful, like, he stalked me to the point where he inflicted the fear of violence upon me. (Rosie)

Domestic violence was also a contextual factor in the decision by the family court to remove children from Chelsea's care.

Chelsea's story is one defined by years of domestic violence and substance use. Like other mothers we interviewed, Chelsea used drugs to block out the violence she was subjected to by her abusive partners. Her five children were removed from her care over a ten-year period; the two youngest were adopted and the other three were placed with family members under a special guardianship order. Here Chelsea reflects on her relationship with the father of one of her daughters:

I give birth in a four-poster bed. Her dad was a schizophrenic, he used to take amphetamines, snoot Subutex, drink whiskey and vodka or whatever he could get. He's diabetic type 1 and he wouldn't take his insulin either, so you can imagine. He toilet bleached my hair in 2015...he literally toilet bleached it and then he kept choking me out for about 18 hours. I had to have a skinhead and then wear wigs until it grew back, horrible. I know there's worse off than me but for my age, from age 15 I've gone through the lot. (Chelsea)

It was also the case that mothers who endured significant and prolonged domestic violence and abuse as adults, were often subjected to significant violence at home as children. Kali had been sexually assaulted when she was 13 years of age and received no specialist support at the time. The event triggered her use of heroin to block out the trauma. Kali went on to be in an abusive relationship with a much older man, a pattern that is common with other women involved in this study, including both Rosie and Chelsea. Kali has two children who are adopted. In this extract Kali refers to inter-generational violence in her family as she recounts how she felt reading a letter she received from her daughter:

I cried my eyes out a little because she's been getting bullied at school. She's very trusting, I think she's told them she's adopted, and they've bullied her for it. She's very quiet. She's got no confidence and it's all because she's been brought up in an abusive household... I got brought up in an abusive household. My dad used to hit me a lot, but I adored him. They say that you idolise abusers, don't they? He never sexually abused me or 'owt like that, he just used to hit me and me mum. My dad used to hit me mum a lot. Then I grew up and I was an abuser myself, I used to batter their dad and then he used to batter me, and my kids were seeing that, do you know what I mean? Me

youngest is really quiet and me oldest is really in herself, and that is because they've got brought up in abuse. And that's me own fault and I've got to deal with whatever consequences that brings... (Kali)

For some women whose children were removed from their care because of domestic violence, decisions were made by the family courts to transfer care of their children to family members via special guardianship orders. We found that in some cases these orders resulted in mothers' having no access to their children at all, even when regular supervised access was permitted within the SGO. For example, Steph explained that, ***'my sister's got my youngest boy and we don't get on. I signed my son over to her, when I was in a bad relationship'***. Similarly, although Lorna was legally entitled to supervised visits, her ex-partner, who had custody of her son, had refused to facilitate contact. Lorna had not seen her son for 24 months at the time of our interview with her. When she tried to arrange a visit via her sister, she explained that ***'I tried to get in contact with me sister to see if we could arrange, like, a proper visit or something. Me sister wasn't able to do that. She did agree once, but she then said it's for the best'*** (Lorna). Lorna's complex back story was not uncommon. Her ex-partner, who had been violent to her in the past, was refusing to facilitate access and thus managing to extend his control over her while she was in prison:

"when I first came in, I was obviously wanting to see him [her son] and I knew that he [ex-partner] probably wouldn't let him come here so I thought, well at least I'd be able to speak to him on the phone or have photos, and he said no to that, even photos, that was a big shock". (Lorna)

Being subjected to coercive control in this way was something Grace had also experienced whilst in prison. Grace suffered ***"a significant amount of trauma in her life including domestic violence, rape and bereavement"*** (case study). She had supervised access to her two oldest children who were in the care of her ex-partner. She explained that ***"...he just won't bring them to jail. I asked him, 'Oh, when can I see them?' He wouldn't even let my mam bring them in"***. During an Open Clasp workshop, two mothers shared their experience of coercive control perpetuated by their ex-partners whilst they and their ex-partners were detained in prison. As we will explore further in the next section, an important role of the PRIPC was to navigate safeguarding issues whilst simultaneously working through often complex

family arrangements at home, which invariably involved the ongoing ripple effects of domestic violence and coercive control.

For some of the mothers involved in the research, the domestic violence and abuse they had endured for many years was so severe that prison was regarded by them as a place of respite, safety, and security away from violent men.

We have explored elsewhere (O'Brien and King 2022) and in the background to this report, the tensions at play when women speak of prison as a source of support and respite. Rosie was so traumatised by the violence she had experienced that she refused bail because she was in fear of her life. She explained, *'it felt like a relief coming to prison'*, and went on to explain:

...I needed this time. This hasn't been a bad experience for me, coming to prison, it's saved my life coming to prison. When I first come in, I had to work out how many doors he would have to get through to get to me, and like, I had to make sure in my head. I reassured myself that I was safe. And I am safe in here, away from him. (Rosie)

Similarly, Chelsea explained:

I'm just a bit more focused now. Not about being a mum, if I put the mum bit aside, I'm a bit more focused about everything in my life. Like I've got my confidence back, with being in prison, no man beating me up...I'm done with it all, I can't be arsed. I'm exhausted with it. I just want to be on my own.

2. Mothering from prison

Interviewer:

What does being a Mum mean to you?

Carlie:

Just love, love. I mean, all of the materialistic things there are in life...but that bond. That bond... you know, you look at your child and you feel like your heart's bursting out of your chest.

Carlie's expression of love for her daughter who was adopted, is illustrative of many of the women we interviewed for this project. In this section we focus on the first of our research aims, namely, to explore how mothers deal with the rupture of being separated from their children in prison. For some mothers, the loss of children to the care system took place long before coming into prison, for others, separation was triggered because of a prison sentence. Consequently, mothers were on varied paths and at very different stages of their motherhood journeys

in prison. We first examine the importance of contact for mothers; be that in-person visits, telephone calls or letters, and explore how women cope with not being able to have contact at all. We then explore the impacts of maternal imprisonment on mother's mental health and well-being.

2.1 Contact

A prison sentence can break a woman's connection to society; she can lose her home, her job, and it can irreversibly damage her relationship with children, family and loved ones (Baldwin, 2022). Having supportive family on the outside can be an important protective factor, helping women re-establish and reconnect to society and her children once released, and mitigate against further future offending (Farmer, 2019). On a practical level, having family on the outside to send in money, clothes and books can have a positive emotional impact on mothers in prison; helping them to feel connected to loved ones on the outside, and help foster feelings of self-worth and hope for the future (O'Brien and Straub, 2023). Importantly, if a family member can look after children and facilitate prison visits while the mother is in prison, her chances of re-establishing a positive relationship with her children on release increases significantly.

However, because women are more likely to be the primary caregivers, they are less likely than fathers in prison to have family on the outside to take care of their children and facilitate contact (Comfort, 2008). Some of the women in our study had no family at all. Kali, for example, explained that,

'I'm just on me own really...I had my own family, kids and a partner and that's all gone, so I'm on me own now...I've got no mum, no auntie, no sister for me to chat to and get support off' (Kali)

It is notable that for those mothers who were fortunate to have family to support them and their children, the responsibility fell to female members of the family, especially grandmothers, aunts and sisters.

Women tend to serve their sentence many miles from their home, making regular visits from children and other family members expensive and time-consuming (PRT, 2022). Most of the women in our sample were from regions of the UK located far away from the prison and consequently they had few, if any visits from family and friends. The PRT (2022) highlights

that the 'average distance a woman is held from her home is 63 miles', sometimes much further, and this can have a huge impact on frequency of visits from children, and consequently, negatively impacts on the mother-child relationship. Two of the women in our sample had children residing an 8-hour or more train journey away, and several of the women in our study were from Cumbria and the north-west, located some 100 miles away from HMP Low Newton. Regular phone contact with children, therefore, was vital for mothers in a position to benefit from this form of contact.

Women in HMP Low Newton are allowed one-hour of telephone time a day, although this is not possible for women unable to pay for phone credit.¹² Justine told us that she felt 'lucky', as she had a supportive family outside. Her mother was looking after her young daughter while she was in prison, and she facilitated daily phone contact. Justine explained that she would use all her allocated phone minutes and split them throughout the day calling her daughter:

"I'll just ring like 15 minutes in a morning, give her a quick call, like that's first thing in the morning, so I can say, 'morning' to her and then like dinner time sometimes and then I'll just chat to her on a night-time before she goes to bed to say 'goodnight' and that, for like half an hour". (Justine)

Justine went on to tell us that after speaking to her daughter, ***"I feel loads better like. If I had not been able to speak to her it would be torture".*** Demi similarly explained, ***"I speak to my daughter, daily. I speak to my mother, daily...I need it to get me through me sentence".***

In-person visits from children, when permitted, were of utmost importance to most mothers and their children.¹³ Lexi was the mother of a nine-month-old baby girl when she came into prison. Lexi explains that being able to have monthly visits from her daughter were crucial in helping her to develop a bond and an attachment, it also helped her feel 'calm'. Her account is illustrative of the experiences of several other women we interviewed with small children. Lexi's daughter was in foster care and visits were facilitated by social workers:

"It's helped me a lot. My mind is at rest, I've had a visit with my daughter. I had a visit last week and it's gonna be every month now. I would like it to be a bit more often, but because it's such a long journey, a social worker agreed to monthly visits for now. So, it's better than nothing. Do you know, at the beginning she sorted it all out and it just made me feel comfortable. I see my daughter, that's all I wanted really. And I'm not home with

her, I'm here, but at least I'm getting to see her..." (Lexi)

Lexi went on to describe what the visits with her daughter meant to her:

"Oh, it's lovely. She's now sitting up and when I came into custody she wasn't...She's trying to crawl, she talking...I fed her on a visit. I changed her. It's just nice to see her reaching a milestone and having that contact." (Lexi)

For mothers like Lexi, in-person visits were vital in fostering a maternal bond, enabling mothers to ***'touch, smell, hold and cuddle'*** their baby (Elisha). Mothers, therefore found Covid-19 restrictions on family visits especially difficult and stressful. In-person visits and family days were cancelled with little warning.¹⁴ The latter were extremely important events for those mothers who were allowed contact with their children, supervised or otherwise. Online video calls, or 'Purple visits', were introduced in the summer of 2020 replacing all in-person visits in the prison. Reflecting on parenting her new-born baby from prison during Covid-19, Justine explained:

"I had no visits whatsoever, so I didn't see my daughter for eleven months. I didn't see her in person...it was horrible, worst feeling in the world, 'cause she was a new-born as well, so I couldn't even like speak to her...there was nothing I could do at all". (Justine)

Demi had an adult daughter and two young sons who were being cared for by Demi's ex-partner. He had refused Demi access to them throughout her sentence. She hadn't had any contact with her sons for nearly two years. Speaking about the importance of contact for younger mums in the prison, Demi explained how 'heartbreaking' it was to see mothers of babies not able to have regular contact with them. Referring to Covid-19, Demi went on to say;

'we get the purple visits but it's not the same. You get telephone calls. It's not the same as having your baby, there, in your arms, you know?' (Demi)

Suzie told us;

"I was allowed one Purple visit like every six weeks...and when they first came in the Purple visits were just glitching, there was no sound, it was horrible. There was just nothing they could do". (Suzie)

Our findings in relation to Covid-19 support those presented in a recent APPG report (2022; 5) that emphasised how restrictions imposed on prisons caused significant emotional and psychological distress to mothers and their children. The

12. During COVID women were given £10 phone credit a week and in-cell phones were introduced which gave women more privacy when calling their loved ones on the outside (they are permitted to call anytime between 7.30am 9.20pm).

13. It is important to highlight here that some of the mothers in our research refused visits from their children for reasons other than the distress associated with not

being allowed to hug them, as was the case during the early periods of COVID. Some of the women we interviewed, like Zoe and Demi, explained that their reasons were linked to deep feelings of guilt and shame because of their substance use. They wanted to get themselves 'clean', 'looking good' and 'healthy' before seeing their children.

APPG report (2022) highlighted that in some cases mothers stopped visits from their children because it was too painful to watch their children confused and upset because they were not permitted to hug them. Drawing on the HMIP (2021) findings, the APPG report emphasized that the already high self-harm rates amongst the women's prison population shot up eight-fold during Covid-19, with some women self-harming daily (APPG, 2022; 6).¹⁵

We pick up on the theme of self-harm and maternal imprisonment in the next section.

Some of the mothers in our research refused visits from their children for reasons other than the distress associated with not being allowed to hug them, as was the case during the early periods of Covid-19. Some of the women we interviewed, like Zoe and Lucy, explained that their reasons were linked to deep feelings of guilt and shame they felt because of their substance use. They wanted to get themselves 'clean', 'looking good' and 'looking healthy' before seeing their children. During the Open Clasp workshops, several women reflected on the internal torment of wanting to see their children but not wanting their children to witness them 'in a bad state'. They described how innate being a mother was to them but that they needed to get themselves into a place emotionally and physically where they could be a 'good' mother to their children, even if that meant sacrificing seeing them.

2.2 Impacts on mental health

"There's lots of emotions that people don't understand you go through...and they're very difficult, like, shame, guilt, regret, confusion, anger, blame...and sometimes you don't even understand the emotions that you're actually going through because it is a grieving process at the same time. They're saying you're losing your child. It's like torture." (Elisha)

"I feel a failure. I do feel a failure. I've let my children down and that's the one thing I never wanted to do. I always wanted to protect them and, in the thought process of thinking I could protect them, I let them down... I know my kids love me and I love my kids and yeah, I just take each day as it comes, truthfully. That's all I can do." (Demi)

In her research on maternal imprisonment, Baldwin (2022) found that mothers in prison can feel abandoned and isolated, and have little self-worth, confidence or sense of purpose. Mothers can feel judgement and stigma as

they negotiate their criminalised identity as a 'flawed' or 'failed' mother. For many mothers, the 'guilt, shame and emotional trauma of being a mother in prison' (Baldwin, 2022) and having children removed from their care, or not being permitted to maintain a relationship with their children while in prison, can be a trigger for self-medication, suicidal ideas and self-injury (Walker, 2022; Baldwin et al, 2021; APPG, 2022; see also Dominey et al. 2016; Masson 2019). Our research supports these findings as we discuss in this section.

In the extract below, Grace illustrates the pain and suffering women can experience when their children are removed from their care. Here, Grace is explaining how she felt after her daughter was placed for adoption:

"I just miss her. Like okay like she's gone into care, but to stop me seeing her, do you know what I mean? They don't understand what it does to people's head [crying]...They wouldn't like it if it were done to them... They've got to put themselves in other people's shoes. These judges who say, 'Oh, that's it, you don't see them', it's not right. It affects us and it'll affect my daughter when she grows up, when she finds... 'cause they've got to tell them now, who their parents are, even the judge said that she is going to know who her biological mam is and that, what I done for her.....I fought for her and everything." (Grace)

Grace, like so many of the mothers we interviewed, told us that she started to use heroin and crack to 'block out', 'numb' or 'dim' the pain and trauma of having children removed from her care (see also Grace, 2022).

In this example, Ellie explains her rationale for self-medicating:

"it blocks me receptors, you know, I don't cry, I don't think about things when I'm on the gear. I don't take it to get wrecked, that's what I tell me mam, 'I don't take it mam to get wrecked', do you know what I mean? I take it because it blocks me receptors, like I don't cry, I'm not emotional, do you know what I mean? Well, I am the next day when it's not in me system, that's only the thing." (Ellie)

Zoe grew up in a violent home and was in care between the age of 8-15 years. She has a "significant offending history" (case-study) and had been in and out of YOI throughout her teens. Her son was placed with family members under an SGO when he was six months old, but Zoe hadn't had contact with him for two years. Her use of crack cocaine escalated when her son was removed from her care as she explains here:

14. The Covid-19 National Framework for Prison Regimes and Services' provided a centralised approach to the ways prisons operated during the pandemic. It was removed in May 2022 (PRT 2022).

15. Between June 2020- June 2021 rates of self-harm per 1,000 prisoners increased by 16 % in women's prisons compared to the previous 12 month period (MoJ, 2021).

“...he (son) went to his aunty and then I got four times a year contact. I went to a contact meeting, and I heard him call his aunty ‘mum’ and it kind of broke me and I ended up on Class A drugs. The next time the visit come round I were that far gone on drugs that I didn’t want him to see me in that light, I didn’t want to take that around him because he were having a proper upbringing. So, I thought what’s the point in bringing drugs into his life, so I never went.” (Zoe)

Zoe went on to say, ***the more crack I smoked the less I thought about him (son) because my head were all like whoosh...’***. The impact of coming into prison for mothers who use substances and end up self-medicating can be extremely traumatic and dangerous, especially in the early days of custody when women are having to detox. Withdrawal from drugs can, ‘open deep wounds of pain, guilt, shame, low self-worth and emptiness, that stem from having children removed from their care’ (see O’Brien and Straub, 2023;67). Lucy and Shelley illustrate these findings here:

“It’s hard, when you first come into prison and everyone’s bombarding you with everything and you start thinking about things you wouldn’t have thought about out there. You get on drugs out there, you haven’t got the emotions out there. Then people start talking at you when you come in, you have to withdraw from the drugs, you have to deal with your emotions. It took me a week to get on to the dose that I was on out there. It was horrible. Shit. I didn’t want to talk to no-one, my mind was all over. I started thinking about my little boy and my little girl that’s adopted, and I ended up self-harming. It just got too much.” (Lucy)¹⁶

And Shelley explained;

When you get in here your first couple of weeks your head’s not with it. It takes you a long time to get settled and a lot of lasses maybe don’t have contact with their kids. They come in here, they come off the drugs and then they want to rebuild relationships, where they might not do that in the first few weeks...it takes a lot of people time to get themselves straight and then to want to start changing stuff (Shelley)¹⁷

Thus, the first few weeks in prison can be traumatic as women deal with the shock of entering the prison setting, especially if this is their first time in prison. Justine referred to the first few months of prison while she was on remand, as a period of heightened anxiety, emotional turmoil and stress. She explained that ***‘there was no end in sight’***, she didn’t know when she would have contact with her daughter, and

there was no goal to aim for. Justine referred to feeling ***‘angry’*** and ***‘crazy’*** and ***‘didn’t care telling officers to ‘fuck off’*** and ***‘ending up in the seg’***. For Demi, who lived with her children before being in custody, the thought of her children coping with the loss of their mother, and ***‘the stigma of their mum being in prison’*** only served to exacerbate her negative emotions.

Most of the mothers had, or were experiencing, a range of complex mental health issues, and were prescribed medication to help manage their symptoms. In many cases, women were prescribed anti-depressants to help them cope and manage their feelings of loss and anxiety as Justine explains here:

“...I’m on Mirtazapine for anxiety. When I first come in, obviously like just anxiety like being away from my daughter...I missed her crazy like, never been away from her that much, do you know what I mean?” (Justine)

Also concerning was the extent to which women talked about feeling suicidal and self-harming as a response to the pain they felt having children removed from their care, as Lucy illustrates in the extract above. Steph told us, ***‘I tried to crack the back of my head open when I first come in... It’s just a lot to deal with, when you first come into prison’*** (Steph). Elisha explained, ***‘before I come in here (HMP Low Newton), I cut up really badly because I just wasn’t getting answers and I was so frustrated’***. Kali was referred to the PRiP by the Safer Custody team after she was put on an ACCT¹⁸ because she was self-harming, as she explains here:

I was self-harming, and when you go on and ACCT they ask you like what support do you need, and I said I want to get back in touch with my children. (Kali)

In the following extract, Grace adds further nuance to understanding self-harm as behaviour that can help mothers emotionally regulate; for example, relief from anxiety, anger, frustration, depression, or tension (see Walker and Towl, 2016):

I started cutting up when I first come in because I’d just lost me babby. People do stuff just to get out of their cell where I don’t, I’ll just go behind my door and suffer. Like I suffered in silence where I shouldn’t have to suffer in silence. But I need someone to support me to get out of this...I need to keep my mind occupied because I just sit and cry. I come home to me cell for meds last night and me friend went, ‘Why is your eyes red? You’ve been crying again, haven’t you?’ and I’m like ‘Yeah’

16. Lucy engaged with both the Nepacs EDiC project, and the PRP project.

17. From EDiC Shelley engaged with both projects.

18. ACCT (Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork). It is a case management approach used to support people at risk of self-harm and suicide within HMPPS.

ACCT has been used since 2005 and policy governing ACCT is set out within Prison Service Instruction PSI 64/2011 [Available online: www.gov.uk/government/publications/managing-prisoner-safety-in-custody-psi-642011]

... It's just really important to have like stuff to do with your time, to keep yourself busy. (Grace)

Women described being separated from their children using a range of words that were both poignant and heart-breaking, reflecting their deep maternal trauma and rupture.

This was especially the case in the Open Clasp participatory theatre workshops where women used words such as *'floating', 'burning', 'ruptured', 'torn', 'opened up'*, to describe their emotional states. Women also explored feeling suicidal as a response to being separated from their children. In one of the workshops all seven women participating shared that they had suicidal thoughts 'all the time'.

The intersection between mothering from prison and race further compounded trauma for Black and racially minoritised mothers. Although only a small number of racially minoritised mothers participated in the evaluation, we believe it is important to include their experiences here, cognisant of the dearth of research in this area (Agenda/Hibiscus, 2023). During one of the Open Clasp workshops, one of the women discussed her experiences of being a Black mother in prison, and what she felt were differential responses she had received from some practitioners, both in the community and inside prison prior to engagement in the PRiP Project. Reflecting on her own experiences, Elisha described the heightened levels of surveillance, discipline and punishment she felt she has been subjected to in prisons when displaying her emotions, particularly in relation to losing her children. She felt that some of the social workers she encountered held particularly stigmatising and derogatory views of her as a Black mother (in prison) and that this impacted on her chance of trying to maintain contact with her children (see Agenda/Hibiscus, 2023). Another woman, Miray, referred to herself as *'one of the lucky ones'*, as she had a supportive family on the outside who was taking care of her son while she was in prison. However, she also spoke of the pain and trauma she endured because of her experiences of racism and discrimination in prison. Their experiences attest to the compounding trauma that Black and racially minoritised mothers experience, where systemic and interpersonal racism intersect with the trauma of maternal rupture. We pick up on the themes raised by Miray and Elisha in our analysis of prison-based staff interviews.

3. Mothers' experiences of support prior to engagement with the Parental Rights in Prison Project

Prior to the launch of the Parental Rights in Prison Project in January 2021, and referring primarily to experiences in other establishments, the women told us that they had received little or no support in relation to understanding their parental rights or care proceedings.¹⁹

We invited the women to reflect on past experiences in the community and in prison, especially in relation to their interactions with children's services, social workers and family courts. We also asked women to tell us about their previous experiences of the CJS, particularly in terms of criminal proceedings and prison. As we noted earlier, several of the mothers we interviewed had served sentences in YOIs and in other women's prisons and were able to share with us their previous experiences of parental support, or lack of, in other establishments.

3.1 Supporting mothers' emotional and practical needs.

We found that mothers' emotional and practical needs were not being met prior to their engagement with the PRiPC and there was limited, if any, therapeutic or trauma informed support for mothers separated from their children. The experiences of one of the women we interviewed was especially concerning. Elisha has three children who were all adopted, her youngest child was a new-born baby when she first went to prison, before being transferred to HMP Low Newton. Elisha did not see her daughter until she was eighteen-months old for a final contact visit. During the first two weeks of being in custody in a different establishment, Elisha explained that;

...they didn't give me an expressing machine straight away. I was expressing my milk into a milk carton and throwing it down the sink...I told one of the officers, and she was like, what? And she was like, no, this is wrong...then they gave me an expressing machine...But for a couple of weeks this is what I had to do...I was even like cutting sanitary towels and putting them in my bra. And it was my first time in jail as well. (Elisha)

Mothers were significantly disadvantaged when it came to dealing with Children's Services day-to-day or challenging court orders once in prison. Mothers found engaging with outside organisations extremely difficult and frustrating.

19. Note women were reflecting also on a period of covid lockdown with the restrictions that came with it had a significant impact on support in prisons.

On a practical level, they were unable to call switchboards from in-cell phones, so calling social workers, solicitors and other community-based practitioners was often impossible without a direct line. They were also faced with trying to navigate highly bureaucratic systems. Most mothers, therefore, were reliant on prison staff to facilitate contact with outside agencies.

Mothers told us they often felt let down and unsupported by prison staff and in some cases, women told us they didn't trust officers. Justine, for example explained that she didn't speak to prison staff about family issues, explaining, *"some of them just walk off"* and, *"I don't speak to them about my daughter"*. Steph said of prison staff, *"they don't have time to care about you or your kids and help you"*, and Nancy felt that, *"it's their job to 'lock you up, let you out', that's it"*, and felt that, *'a lot of staff are younger now and don't have children themselves, they don't understand.'* Chelsea explained it was challenging to get practical and emotional support from prison staff because, *'having to go to lots of different people makes it hard...you have to go through it all again and again...I like to stick with just one person'* (Chelsea).

3.2 Misinformation and no information

Prior to PRiP, mothers were routinely misinformed, or given little information, if any, about the legal status of their children, or their parental rights. Misinformation or inaccuracies about court proceedings and outcomes caused considerable unintended harms for mothers. Some of the mothers we interviewed who had legal contact with their children did not know where their children were living, and others didn't know the outcome of court proceedings. Mothers who knew that their child had been adopted didn't always know if they had letterbox contact or if they were able to receive photographs. Carlie, for example, who had been in care herself, was unaware of the outcome of the court proceedings involving her daughter. In some cases, like Carlie's, women were, *"emotionally and mentally unable to attend the final family court hearing"* (case-study) but were subsequently not informed of the outcome. Prior to engaging with the PRiP Project, Carlie didn't know if her daughter had been adopted or if she was allowed to have contact with her. Similarly, Jayden, who had been in and out of prison for twelve years, told us she was not informed about a final contact meeting with her son who was placed

for adoption. In this extract, Jayden refers to an episode when she was not in prison:

Nobody tried to contact me to let me know that there was a final visit in place. But I knew that there were ways that they could contact me, for the simple reason is, when it went to court for the final hearing to say that he was getting adopted, they got hold of me then. They got hold of me then and said, like, we are at court this morning. And I said, 'why would I want to go to court and watch my son be adopted?' I said, no, I'm not coming. (Jayden)

Jayden describes her life at this point as, *'spiralling out of control when me' son got took off us'*. She felt *'abandoned'* and *'lost'*, and not supported before, during, and especially after court proceedings.

In Nancy's case, she felt that social workers didn't listen to her or provide her with information relating to contact and care proceedings. Nancy had extensive experience of engagement with social workers over the years and her family was well known to social services. She had been in and out of prison for sixteen years and had six children aged between 4-18 years. Five of her children were living with family members, and her youngest child was in foster care. In this extract Nancy is explaining that she had been waiting for more than twelve months for letters from her son in foster care:

"No, there's been very little contact. They're not explaining anything (social workers) like is he going to send a letter back? They said he would and photos and stuff but they're just not doing it. They don't invite us to the meetings. On the one time they said I could go there wasn't enough staff in the jail to facilitate it...I don't get any of the minutes from the meetings, even if they were to just send us the print-off of the minutes, I would be happy with that. But I don't, I get none of it... they just don't seem bothered...he's really hard to get in touch with (her son's social worker)..." (Nancy)

Lack of information due to staff shortages combined with heavily bureaucratic systems were causing Nancy stress and worry; *"I just want him to get my letter so he can write back. He can't write back until he's got that letter. He's probably sitting thinking, 'well, where's me' mam? I've had no contact with her, nothing."* (Nancy). Maya's story is similar. Before being transferred to HMP Low Newton, Maya had tried for two years to get help from prison staff to establish contact with the social worker of her three sons. Maya was told that emails and calls

had been attempted but with no success. Maya later discovered that apparently no attempt had been made by the prison and this made her feel fobbed off and insignificant and explained, ***'I was sick of not being heard, I'm his mam'***. A few of the mothers also told us that they felt decisions about adoption were made following outcomes of their sentences, and in some cases delayed, to accommodate postponed court hearings.

3.3 Support around adoption and post-adoption

Prior to PRiP, for mothers whose children were placed for adoption while they were in prison, there was limited, if any post-adoption support provided. For example, some mothers needed help understanding their rights to letter box contact, accessing photographs, support writing contact letters, or understanding the importance of life-story work and memory boxes. Mothers talked about having to repeat their circumstances time and time again to prison-based staff as staff turnover was so high, and quite often ***'things didn't get done'*** (Ellie). Some mothers told us that they found having to explain their story many times frustrating and re-traumatising. In some cases, mothers talked about prison staff giving inaccurate information or misadvising them about their parental rights, and for some, this caused considerable upset and harm. Elisha's experience is illustrative of this finding. Elisha was told by a prison officer in another establishment that she could write to her adoptive daughter which turned out to be inaccurate as there was no letterbox contact agreement in place. This caused her distress and anxiety:

"...when a-all these people are telling you different things and they're not telling you what your rights are. Like you make decisions on things that you don't even know whether it's right or not... and these are big decisions about my children."
(Elisha)

Elisha went on to say, ***"I didn't know that it wasn't a right to have letterbox contact until [PRiP] told me in here. I was so drained in the end..."***

Carlie also explained that prior to engaging in the PRiP project she didn't think she had any parental rights and reflected on the adoption hearing of her daughter the year before:

I didn't go to fight at the adoption hearing. I got told off someone, before I spoke to [PRiP], before I come in here, that apparently it wasn't too late and it hadn't been actually finalised and she'd not been adopted, so that was another thing

I wanted to get straight, and find out whether she had actually been adopted or not. Which, obviously she has, I found that out from the PRiP in the end. (Carlie)

Grace felt helpless, voiceless and unsupported when her daughter was adopted while she was in prison prior to the PRiP Project being delivered:

I was always there, for the doctor's appointment with the babby to weigh the babby. I done everything for her...They done it while I was in the jail. They could have waited until I got out, do you know what I mean? ...'cause you can't do nowt, when you're in here. You're limited to what you can do and what you can't do. I just can't believe she's been adopted. (Grace)

During her participation in the Open Clasp workshops, Lexi was involved in family court proceedings relating to her eighteen-month-old daughter who at the time was in foster care. Lexi brought photographs of her daughter into one of the workshops and proudly showed us, the other women and the Open Clasp facilitators. Lexi found out the following week that her daughter was going to be placed for adoption. She didn't return to the group. She had found the news too difficult to process and had engaged in harmful behaviour and ended up in a segregated cell ('for her own safety').

3.4 Social workers in the community

Most of the mothers in our study had negative experiences of social workers. In some cases, mothers felt fobbed off, forgotten or cast aside in their attempts to get information about their children, especially from their children's social workers, as we have already evidenced above in describing Nancy's experience. Chelsea told us that social workers had, ***'left me in the dark, they really have, for a lot of years'***. Emphasising the importance of 'trust', Grace explained that, ***'I just don't trust social workers for what they've done...And I'll not get that trust back, I know I won't'***.

Several of the mothers explained that they felt judged by social workers because of being care-experienced themselves, believing this was held against them in decisions about their own children. Having their own care-related histories relayed to them from social worker's files was very upsetting. For one of the women we interviewed, learning details about her own childhood abuse for the first time was deeply traumatic. It caused her mental health

to spiral and her relationship with her family to deteriorate, compounding multiple layers of trauma. Carlie became pregnant whilst in care, with one social worker allocated to both her and her unborn child. Representing a significant conflict of interest, unsurprisingly her relationship with the social worker rapidly broke down, further damaging her trust in adults in positions of authority. In this extract, Carlie reflects on the lack of support she felt from her social worker when she was 16 years old, and that this experience severed her trust in professionals:

“For a long while after that, I found that any organisation hard to trust. I wouldn’t trust nobody. I wasn’t trusting anybody from any services. Because of that experience, the trust that got broken, the things that they said wouldn’t happen did. So, if I couldn’t trust them, I couldn’t trust anyone. It did affect my experience of social workers, it did affect it, it really did.” (Carlie)

Rosie and her children were subjected to horrific domestic violence and abuse in the family home. She reflects here on her experience of social workers during a Covid-19 lockdown:

“The social worker placed him (ex-partner), in a global lockdown with meself’ and the children, after he tried to set me on fire. Knowing the risk he posed to me and my children...When the social worker was phoning me in the lockdown, he was in the room looking at me while I was on the phone to these people. So, I couldn’t say, ‘listen, this isn’t going as well as it should be’, he was constantly there, lingering, listening to me talking to professionals.” (Rosie)

Importantly, there were exceptions, and not all the women we interviewed had such negative experiences of social workers. Elisha had positive experiences with one of the social workers she encountered, as the following extract illustrates. Of note in this final example is how Elisha emphasises the importance of trust and not feeling judged by a social worker overseeing her daughter’s care (themes we develop in section 4):

I managed to keep the baby at first, she come home with me from the hospital...her social worker would come to the house, we’d go out, like I could talk to her like about real things without fearing do you know what I mean? But like when you’re in prison you can’t be honest with them because they’re already judging you. (Elisha)

4. Impact of the Parental Rights in Prison Project on mothers

Everybody in my life has given up on me whether it’s family or friends or staff, everybody has given up on me. I’ve given up on myself, do you know what I mean? But [PRiPC] never gave up on me and that’s why I have respect for her, for being bothered. You know with mental health it’s very draining... I’m constantly tired, I could sleep like that any time of day but a lot of it is motivation, and I didn’t have any.

And [PRiPC] not turning her back on me I thought, ‘right, she deserves me to put effort in, she deserves me to be motivated,’ and that’s how it started. It was like a mutual thing. She put effort in, and I saw it, so I put effort in. (Kali)

Engaging with the PRiP was the first time that the women we interviewed had worked with a specialist family support worker (who provided guidance and legal advocacy around their parental rights and role as mothers) either in a prison setting or in the community. All the mothers we interviewed spoke very highly of the PRiP Project, and with deep gratitude for the support they had received from the PRiPC. The project had a significant and varied impact on them. All the mothers spoke about the rapport they had developed with the PRiPC, highlighting, as Kali does in the extract above, the importance of the PRiPC’s tenacity and commitment to working with them in a non-judgmental way. Supporting the impact data we outlined earlier, women described how the emotional, practical and legal support they received from the PRiPC improved their self-esteem, confidence, and feelings of hope for the future. Women talked about feeling calmer and less anxious, often stemming from re-establishing contact with their children following engagement with the PRiPC. Her expert, highly measured but sensitive approach, provided important validation of their mothering identity. Educating mothers about their parental rights and supporting them through the complex process of engaging with external agencies, in particular children’s services, solicitors, family courts and schools, helped instill in them a renewed sense of purpose, agency and in some cases control. In this section we evidence and discuss these findings.

4.1 Importance of empathy: working in a trauma-informed way

The women spoke of the importance of the PRiPC's personal as well as professional qualities, emphasising her ability to create trust and hope. They also placed importance on the PRiPC engaging with them in a way that made them *feel understood, not being judged, being listened to, feeling validated and cared for*. Having their mothering identity recognised, respected and validated was incredibly important to them. The PRiPC was able to build trust with women by being attentive and empathetic. This stood out for several of the women, in Demi's words, *'she's always checking up on me...in a supportive way'*. Nancy provides a further, more detailed example in this extract:

"The fact that she [PRiPC] genuinely wants to do it. She genuinely wants to help and she has got the feeling there and she's not just doing it cos' it's her job... you can see that with her. It's not just because, oh, this is my job title, I've got to do it. She does genuinely want to help people as much as she can and she will go above and beyond, to do it. She will. She really will." (Nancy)

Nancy also referred to the PRiPC as *'someone there for me, in my corner'* and said that she would help liaise with social workers on her behalf. Other mothers told us that the PRiPC took the time to *'connect'* and importantly was persistent in her approach. In Ellie's words, the PRiPC *'didn't give up'*, which for so many of the mothers who had been let down time and time again, this quality was very important, as Justine also illustrates here:

"she was like a dog with a bone... Because there were answers that I just wasn't getting and she just was not giving up. She's like invested in it. She's like not half-hearted in her work." (Justine)

Referring to when she was first referred to the PRiP Project, Kali similarly explained that:

"I didn't want to know. (PRiPC) had to keep coming back, again and again because I weren't interested at first. She would just come in and give me little bits of work and little bits of encouragement. She wasn't too much, she weren't forceful. She were right like gentle with her approach, do you know what I mean? And then she just kept coming. I told her to fuck off the first time I met her, but she didn't. She kept coming back and she kept coming back. She never give up on me." (Kali)

All the women spoke about the importance of the PRiPC being non-operational, although using varying ways to express this viewpoint. Some women made comparisons to prison staff, explaining that they didn't feel able to share and talk about their children with prison staff, a finding we have also referred to earlier. In the example that follows, Carlie underlines the importance of *'trust', 'being listened to'* and *'confidentiality'*, albeit within the context of a women's prison where *'everyone knows your business'* (O'Brien and King, 2022), as important to the PRiPC role. Meeting the PRiPC away from her wing was also important to Carlie:

"The relationship I have with (the PRiPC) compared to the staff is different...you can come out, you're off your wing, you're more open to talk, she's there to talk, she's there to listen. Like I say, the confidentiality thing doesn't get breached; obviously, unless you say something where they would then have to.... you just can't really speak much to the staff on the wing. Cos like I say, being on the wing, you have so many people listening, but obviously [the PRiPC] takes you off the wing and speaks to you. If I need to talk, I know she's there. It feels good". (Carlie)

In the following example, Justine explains how important prison-based family support workers are to her, especially the PRiPC:

Truthfully, I don't think I could have got through this without her (PRiPC), in all honesty, without her support. People don't realise just how important and needed the family workers actually are. I think people think, oh family worker, family worker. I was under that impression at first. Obviously with my history with social services, prior to coming in, I was a bit like, oh somebody else that's just gonna go, 'nothing we can do', but she genuinely hasn't. She's done everything in her power that she could have done to get me to where I am now. (Justine)

Justine also reveals here how her experience of the PRiP Project helped change her views of social workers. We also found this to be the case when mothers talked about the legal support and advocacy they received from the PRiPC and learning about their parental rights. We expand on this theme below.

4.2 Legal support and advocacy

“I just want to be the mum that I’ve always wanted to be. And I think now... now’s my time.” (Lorna)

The PRiPC provided legal support to mothers during the legal rights workshops, and one-to-one when she picked up casework, which was usually involved and complex. In most cases the PRiPC was required to work intensively with mothers, families, and external agencies, as well as liaising between various prison departments. Women spoke about the PRiPC acting as ‘a bridge’, helping them to navigate often-complex legal processes and care-proceedings, and accelerate organisational and bureaucratic procedures. The women told us they benefited enormously from the specialist legal knowledge, advice, and advocacy they received from the PRiPC. In this example, Zoe emphasises the crucial role the PRiPC played in supporting her through family court proceedings:

[PRiPC] has explained how to get to court, how to get the contact started. If you don’t know all these links to go through then you’re buggered, really and truly. [PRiPC] is key to helping you get to the court case, helping you get things. She’s even said to me like when I go to court for my son if I’d like, she’d come with me and support me at the court... it’d be done through video link so she’d be able to sit there with me and I really want [PRiPC] there because I know it’s going to be a lot of traumatic things brought up... Obviously the other side are going to say, ‘well, you were on drugs, you were on this, you did this,’ and report my bad side. And I know my solicitor is going to say my good side but hearing it all in the courtroom and a judge judging you on it, it’s going to be very bad. So, someone to support you through that is a good thing. Do you know what I mean? (Zoe)

Some of the mothers we interviewed told us that prior to engaging in the PRiP Project, they had no idea how to contact their children. Kali explained that, ***‘I wouldn’t know how to contact the adoption people... I wouldn’t have a clue how to start’***. Lexi also emphasised the importance of the PRiPC in helping her understand care proceedings, a process which she understandably found overwhelming:

I didn’t really understand it all. I don’t know. I was quite emotional. Every time I mentioned [daughter’s name], I was crying. And then she [PRiPC] got the social worker and the solicitor on the screen a few times, and the family solicitor. Separate meetings to find out what was going on because I wasn’t really sure what was going on.

[PRiPC] helped me get answers and she was there to explain it. (Lexi)

Other women similarly emphasised the importance of the PRiPC’s legal knowledge and practical support relating to their case, as Demi illustrates here:

“[PRiPC] helps me read all the legal paperwork because I’ve got dyslexia. So, she tells me in layman’s terms what it means which helps me a lot because I now understand what’s going on. I’m working with Not Beyond Redemption. I wouldn’t have known anything about them or getting help from them if it weren’t for [PRiPC]” (Demi)

4.3 The importance to mothers of learning their parental rights

I still have rights even though I’m like in prison. Like all me’ other rights have been took away, but the most important rights haven’t, me’ rights as a mum, that’s the most important thing. (Justine)

An important aim of our research was to explore the extent to which mothers who had engaged with the PRiP Project felt better informed about their legal rights and felt empowered to take action. Our interviews revealed that the PRiPC performed a crucial role in this regard, educating women about their parental rights, providing them with accurate knowledge, and supporting them to exercise those rights from within prison. Some women stressed the importance of having accurate information and knowing their rights, in Maya’s words, ***‘honesty and knowing the truth, no matter how painful’***. For Chelsea, accurate information about her parental rights was important because she felt that not knowing about contact arrangements with her daughters who were adopted, was having a negative impact on her son who was in the care of a family member. In this example, Chelsea makes an important point about the impact of adoption orders on siblings, a theme that warrants further research in the context of maternal incarceration:

“I’d rather know my rights, even if they push me aside. My son wants to know. He’s lost like four sisters really... it’s not just about your rights as a mum but it’s their rights as siblings...” (Chelsea)

Learning about their rights provided mothers with agency and a greater sense of control. During Open Clasp workshops the women reflected on the power of knowledge – of knowing what their rights were and how this was empowering and validated their mothering identity and knowledge of motherhood as mothers. However, this also led to feelings of

anger and regret for some – anger that they hadn't known what their rights were and blaming themselves for **'allowing'** their child(ren) to be taken from them.

Lorna, whose son was in the care of her ex-partner, who was un-lawfully refusing her access, refers to discovering she had rights to contact here;

I didn't know that I had rights to contact when I came in, I was like well now I'm in prison like he's (ex-partner) got control, I can't do anything now. So, she (PRiPC) really helped me with that. I now know that I do have rights in here. (Lorna)

She went on to explain the impact of learning about her parental rights from the PRiPC as, **'now I'm kind of armed with everything I need for when I get out'**. Lorna went on to leave prison, secure accommodation with her sister and find employment. Once settled she went on to pursue legal action and gain contact with her son (case-study).

Being informed about their parental rights was vital for many of the mothers we interviewed. Accurate and honest guidance about their legal rights led to a renewed sense of confidence, self-awareness and hope for the future, as Rosie illustrates in this extract:

I done a video call with the solicitor. And I think she was really impressed because I went in there like, 'I need to know these things', like, I knew what my rights were and what was going to be my next steps if I wasn't going to be released from custody'.....when they've made the final order, the judge has had to say long-term foster care because he didn't know how long I was going to be getting in prison. But now I've done that research and I've spoke to the solicitor I know that it doesn't mean that's set-in stone. Like, I can go and revoke that order, do you know what I mean? But I don't want to be setting myself up to fail by jumping in the deep end and saying, right, I want me kids back. Because I need time to make sure that I'm the best version of me, before I can parent them kids. (Rosie)

Justine told us she felt more confident and more equipped to deal with social workers having learned about her parental rights and engaged in the PRiP project:

I didn't like used to speak to social workers before, I didn't know what to say or what not to say, do you know what I mean? But... yeah, I feel confident enough now...I feel I can voice my opinion and yeah, if I don't like something that they're not saying or what they're saying I will question them.

(Justine)

Suzy also felt empowered because of her engagement with the PRiPC. In this extract Suzy speaks with confidence about her determination to exercise her parental rights once released;

I know when I get out I'm going to take everything she's given me... and I'm going to go back to court and fight it and I've got everything that I need to be able to actually. (Suzy)

Kali was serving her third prison sentence and had received support to re-establish letterbox contact with her two children who had been adopted. She reveals here that she had found engagement with the PRiP Project to be life changing;

"[PRiPC] got me thinking more like an adult, like I should, and it's not about me, it's about me kids. Everything now is about them. And that's why I want to start doing a detox off methadone because I'm doing everything for me' kids. I want to go out to work, I want to get a flat. With me' other prison sentences I'd be counting down the days just to go get off me' face and with PRiPC helping me get back in touch with me kids it's not about that, it's about me getting out to try and make a home for me' self. Get a job for if them kids want 'owt to do with me and that's because of PRiPC that. I wouldn't never of thought like that before." (Kali)

For Kali, like so many other mothers we interviewed, engaging with the PRiP Project was a crucial turning point, enabling her to re-establish contact with her children and with this, instil in her a sense of purpose and hope for the future. Mothers also described how engagement with the PRiP Project had positively impacted on their mental health and wellbeing. Rosie, for example, explains in this extract that she felt validated as a mother, and acknowledged as a woman who had endured significant trauma. This helped Rosie find renewed strength, and a goal to aim for:

The PRiPC just reminded me that, like, I have been through a lot. And like, it's okay not to be okay sometimes. But they've also reminded me what a brilliant job I've done with them kids. And like, it's not over, my life's not over. In fact, it's only just beginning. (Rosie)

Elisha told us that she felt calmer and less anxious as result of the support and advocacy she received. This outcome was significant for Elisha because of her history of self-harm and suicidality:

“I feel so much more calmer because I trust her. I trust her and her motives, and her ability and her role. Just her role alone makes me feel more comfortable because she’s here to inform me and help me exercise my rights.” (Elsiha)

In the final section we explore the importance of the support mothers received from the PRiPC establishing letterbox contact, writing letters and for some, accessing photographs of their children.

4.4 Letters, photographs and life-story books

Many mothers come to prison with no photographs, letters or mementos of their children; items that can mean a great deal to them. Living in and out of custody with no fixed address can mean that precious items can be easily lost. Furthermore, women in prison tend to have inconsistent or no access to mobile devices, which means that they are unlikely to own digital memories such as photographs or messages either. This was indeed the case for many of the women we interviewed. For example, during an Open Clasp workshop where the women created their character, they described the clothing and possessions she would have on entering the prison. This included a photo of her children, which would be her ***‘most precious possession’***. The women reflected on the grief they felt when a photo was lost or damaged during their prison experience. The PRiPC spent much of her time supporting mothers to establish and maintain contact with their children, and where possible, retrieve photographs.

Some of the mothers whose children had been adopted emphasised the huge importance to them of knowing what they were entitled to when it came to letterbox contact, accessing photographs and contributing to life story books and memory boxes. Amber, for example, received post-adoption support from the PRiPC which was vital for her and her son who had been adopted when he was two-and-a half years old. The PRiPC helped Amber exercise her parental right to have her voice heard in her son’s life story work. The life story book, which had been produced without her input when her son was placed for adoption, was “of concerning quality, contained inaccurate information and did not include any information directly from ‘Amber’, as the boy’s mother” (case-study). The PRiPC helped Amber have input into the life story book and correct inaccuracies about her family. This was very important to Amber. She went on to establish letterbox contact with her son.

Letter box contact is usually, but not always, included in the final care plan when a child is placed for adoption. It allows birth families and children who have been adopted to have indirect contact. In her research into the experiences of birth mothers living apart from their children, Lisa Morriss (2018) argues that it can be “both a positive and a profoundly difficult letter for the mothers to compose and to receive” (Morriss, 2018; 822). Echoing Morriss’ findings, we also found that writing and receiving letters from children was extremely important to mothers and the PRiPC played a crucial role in supporting the process. In many cases, the PRiPC helped mothers establish if letterbox contact was part of the final adoption plan as Carlie explains here:

“[PRiPC] has encouraged us to get in touch with the adopters and write a letter for (name of child). And obviously, I didn’t know what I’d been granted, she found that out for us. I’ve just received me’ first ever letter, to find out what she’s doing, at the age of four now. She’s doing really well. That was all through [PRiPC]” (Carlie)

Carlie went on to tell us that she had shared her letters with family and close friends in prison. She reveals feeling proud and empowered from realising her parental rights;

“They read it, a couple of me closer friends read it out as well.....they’re so proud of us, so happy. It’s so good that I’ve managed to, finally, after four year, get what I’ve deserved and entitled to. It was legalised, so...” (Carlie)

Kali also was also supported to write her first letters to her children because of the support she received from the PRiPC:

PRiPC had got in touch and set it up for me to send letters to the children. I found it quite hard to write the first letter, but [PRiPC] supported me in that. She gave me all the time I needed, she said she’d help me write it and that and then just with her support I managed to write on me’ own. She brought me little stickers to decorate letters with and then I sent a letter. I didn’t hear n’owt for about two or three weeks and I didn’t think ‘owt were happening but it were.... they’re letting me send more letters than I’m meant to at the minute because (name of daughter) is wanting to ask questions. So I’m normally only meant to send one letter a year and so far we’re up to two. (Kali)

The PRiPC supported mothers with literacy issues, and provided arts and crafts materials to decorate letters, photo-frames and make birthday cards. Being able to add personal touches to letters was appreciated by many of the women;

...there's letters waiting for me and all sorts, yeah. And she [PRiPC] give me some nice things to make two cards for my 14-year-old and my 4-year-old, and I haven't written in them yet, we're waiting for the four-year-old's letters to come back to see what they're saying. If I'm out Friday and they haven't come she's [PRiPC] is going to post them to my mum's for me. She's done all that for me in a month. That is like more than what they've done on the out, God's honest truth, they don't do nowt' on out. (Chelsea)

The PRiPC also took the time to help mothers at a pace that suited them, and this helped them find the confidence to put pen to paper for the first time, as Ellie illustrates here:

"[PRiPC] does a lot more than she even understands that she's doing because she's got me over that scare factor of these kids, these kids that I was petrified of writing to. I'm not scared no more of writing to 'em. And I often jot little things on tv that I think they might like, I jot 'em down and make notes for me next letters and stuff like that. And it's all what [PRiPC] showed me to do. So then the letters me' kids are reading, they might think, 'oh, well, she does care because she's took time to look into stuff.' Do you know what I mean? [PRiPC] has been a really big help. I've passed her on to quite a few of my friends, do you know what I mean?" (Ellie)

Mothers emphasised how valuable it was to receive practical help and guidance about what to include and leave out of letters. Referring to the help she had received from the PRiPC to write letters to her daughters, Rosie explained that;

She's bent over backwards, we've went through everything, every letter I've written, she's overseen them. Said, right, let's take this bit out and add this bit in. She has been really good like that. (Rosie)

Mothers benefited enormously from having letter contact with their children; it helped reinstate their 'motherhood identity', rather than simply a 'prison identity' and provided them with 'maternal self-esteem' and self-worth (Baldwin, 2022). Lexi explained that her '**mental health altogether is more settled**' after receiving a letter. Maya explained that when she receives letters from one of her children she feels, '**calmness I don't kick off, I sit and read my letters over and over again**'.

For some mothers, accessing photographs of their children was a high priority, and the PRiPC often worked hard to obtain photographs where this was permitted. The importance of

photographs is illustrated here by Zoe;

"[PRiPC] sorted the photos because that was one of my main big things because I wanted his photos round my room to keep me driving forwards towards seeing him, and driving towards seeing him would be me being clean, being a better person for him to say, 'Yes, that's my mum.' I didn't want him coming to see a junkie.."

Zoe went on to say;

"...if I'm thinking about taking drugs or if I'm thinking about kicking off, I see him (photo of son) and I think, 'If I kick off it's going to go bad in court, if I do this it's going to go bad in court,' because I can see him all the time". (Zoe)

Other women explained the positive impact of having photographs of their children, in Lexi's cases, photographs of her baby daughter;

"Oh, it's lovely. Just not knowing, do you know, she's reaching milestones and I wanted to know what was going on. More of seeing it, it was a bit comfort, you know. And just to have her there to look at, do you know, I've got plenty of photos now". (Lexi)

5. Next Steps

We asked the women to tell us what they felt were the most pressing needs for mothers in terms of support. Women drew on their own experiences but also reflected on what they had learned from other women in prison and shared their recommendations with us. For Chelsea, mothers knowing their parental rights was important preparation for release:

"...you need to know what your rights are because obviously if you don't know then you can't fight for them. And I think a lot of mums think, 'well, that's it now, I'm in prison' and whoever's got the child has got control. But you still have your parental rights. I think it's really important that you are told what your rights are when you come in.... and work towards making some sort of progress for when you get out, so you're not just getting out and trying to pick up the pieces yourself... the last thing you want to do when you get out is get into another battle of... 'I want to see my children.' (Chelsea)

Chelsea also reveals here that accurate knowledge about parental rights can give mothers agency and greater confidence and control. Other women felt that knowledge about legal rights were important, but this had to be tied to ongoing support once released.

For example, some of the women told us they felt they would need continuation of specialist support and advocacy around parenting once released or transferred to another prison or an approved premises. In some cases, the PRiPC had supported mothers who were transferring to another prison and this ongoing support was very important to them, as Demi explains here;

[PRiPC]’s already set up the family worker for me in Askham. She’s already contacted her and told her everything that I’d need and she’s told all the court dates coming up and the interviews coming up and everything. So she’s already done that and covered every base for me. She really has. (Demi)

Zoe felt that mothers needed specialist family support in the community, to provide emotional and practical support, as well as advocate and represent their interests as mothers, as she explains here;

I think there should be something in place for people what do have the kids took off them because they do go through breakdowns, and they do go through something psychological because you’re taking the child from them and it’s not a natural thing to take someone’s child. (Zoe)

Similarly, Jayden felt that:

‘Social workers should help mothers come to terms with losing their children if they get took off them and this doesn’t happen’ (Jayden).

Some of the women suggested that the PRiP should extend its service and facilitate group work for mothers who were separated from their children. Elisha illustrates below the rationale many of the women offered when they explained how and why a prison-based mother’s group would work. Elisha felt that mothers would benefit from peer-led group work in prison, because:

“Nobody, however, good people’s intentions are nobody understands...No one knows how you feel unless you’ve been in that situation”. (Elisha)

And went on to explain:

Because a lot of the time the emotions are so overwhelming. It knocks the wind out of you. And you can’t even describe the emotions. But if you’re talking to somebody that’s been through it you don’t have to describe it, you can just support. And that feels so important, and it feels like you’re not alone...It could be like a safe place, do you know what I mean?

As we outlined earlier, we found that the participatory theatre project, facilitated by Open Clasp Theatre Company provided mothers with the ‘safe space’ suggested by Elisha, to explore through theatre, the ‘indescribable emotions’ that come with having a child(ren) removed from a mother.

Findings: Prison-based staff

This section focuses on our findings with prison-based staff members and broadly reflects the key themes discussed above in relation to the findings with mothers. Interviews were undertaken with nine prison-based staff members who had knowledge of, or involvement with, the PRiP project. Prison-based staff members reflected on their own roles, the PRiP project, multi-agency partnership working and the experiences of the women whom they worked with. The value of the project and in particular the expertise and approach of the PRiP were well articulated. Whilst it is clear that the PRiP project makes a vital contribution in addressing the needs of an often unrecognised group of women in prison, there remain gaps in provision and unmet need.

1. Domestic violence and motherhood

All of the prison-based staff members we interviewed discussed the long histories and deep layers of multiple trauma that the women they work with have experienced. They were very clear that most women in the prison population have experienced some form of domestic abuse or sexual violence, often multiple times. They recognised and described the ways these histories of abuse had shaped women's lives and were integrally linked to both their involvement with the CJS and the loss of their children to the care system.

“So many incidents of sexual abuse and trauma that they've had...when you ask a woman how she is, it's always such a loaded answer to the question of unpicking how many traumas they've kind of experienced in their life.” (Prison-based staff 3)

“It's always amazed me how many women have been sexually assaulted since they've been children, in their life and abused. And I think it definitely is linked to the way they parent and the difficulties that they faced and usually why their mental health has declined, why they've turned to alcohol and drugs as cope or self-harm as coping kind of strategies.” (Prison-based staff 3)

Often mothers felt they had made decisions in the best interests of their children, which were then misunderstood and resulted in the thing they feared most anyway – having their children removed from their care. Echoing the recent findings of Fitzpatrick et al. (2022), many of the women had experienced complicated, and predominantly negative, interactions with Children's Services, often feeling let down by the services they came into contact with. This creates

further layers of trauma, which are compounded and revisited in the process of attempting to (re) engage with Social Workers once they are in prison. Recognising and working through these experiences was a key component of interaction for the PRiPPC in supporting women, and as we have described in earlier sections, all of whom had experienced domestic or sexual violence at some point in their lives, either as children or adults, or both. Working with these layers of trauma is challenging for prison-based staff, who recognise that building trust with the women is vital but fragile work.

“Some of them are probably serving the sentence for the male, and actually are innocent, but it was easier to do that, and probably safer. Sometimes they commit crimes to come to prison, cos it's safer...some of them have lost their children, their children are in care because of the DV...Some say “it wasn't a choice, but nobody believes us.” I say “I believe you, cos if he says if you ever leave me, it doesn't matter where you go, whatever, I'll kill the kids, kill the dog”, whatever... you know, what does she do? It's Catch Twenty-two.” (Prison-based staff 1)

“Seeing she had scars, she was covered in scars and broken bones and it was hard for her and obviously to trust someone because she didn't trust the authorities because she felt like she'd been let down by them over and over again...They find it hard to open up because they don't want to trust people because they think if they tell the truth it'll go against them.” (Prison-based staff 3)

As discussed earlier in the report, a tension exists in the use of prison for women. For some women, at some points in their life, prison can act as a place of safety and respite. However, even for these women, the experience of being in prison is a form trauma, which further adds to and complicates existing trauma. It is within this context that the complex and usually violent journeys into prison that mothers experience must be understood, as the following two extracts illustrate:

“I think for a lot of our women, I think one of the interesting things I think about the prison is actually sometimes this is a place where, you know, drugs, you can get clean, you can get some help with your mental health, and you've got a roof over your head, you've got food, you've got some canny lasses to have a good crack with. And you can make some nice friends in that sense and you know you're safe basically, which is, which is massive for some women.” (Prison-based staff 2)

“I mean, in one sense, sometimes this is a good place for women. But we always try and remember that actually being in prison is in itself a trauma. And because you are obviously away from family, friends, etcetera, children and all kinds of things, that is massive trauma... So I think that for women coming in when you are separated at the end of the day and that ultimately is the worst thing in the world I would imagine for any mother and child and cause however negative or you know bad that relationship is it's still your mum and you know it's still your child isn't it.” (Prison-based staff 2)

2. Mothering from prison

2.1 The lasting impacts of stigma and shame

The layers of trauma experienced by women in prison are compounded by the stigma that they are subjected to as a result of that trauma, in which they are rarely positioned as victims. In comparison to the interviews with mothers, prison-based staff members discussed in depth the ways in which the women are stigmatised, the lasting impacts of this stigma (most notably in the response of various services/organisations to the women) and the internalised shame experienced by the women. One participant explained how stigma added to the emotional intensity of the trauma experienced by the women, recognising the pain caused by repeated and multiple traumatic experiences:

“It's emotional, it's... I think it's more judgemental as well...there's still that stigma about women coming to prison. They're supposed to be seen as the carer and the provider for the children... but then, a lot of the trauma that the women have been through, you know, we can't judge. Yeah, they've had their children removed but actually, what they've been through themselves, I wonder they're still standing up, do you know what I mean? They're still alive...So a lot of it's past trauma, they've been in care themselves, just not had a positive experience of being parented.” (Prison-based staff 1)

Participants also despaired at the way stigmatising discourses are still employed by some organisations and by some practitioners. Some felt that this not only leads to poorer experiences and outcomes for the women (and their families) but also makes their work more difficult, as time is spent challenging and educating peers and advocating for the women.

Prison-based staff acknowledged that often the history of the women, in terms of their

behaviours and actions, were stacked against them; and many have already ‘burnt their bridges’ with families and services, particularly those who have been in and out of prison multiple times. They acknowledged the challenge of this work but remained committed to giving women another chance and upholding their (and other services) duty of care to those women. This finding is revealed in the following extract where emphasis is placed on how common it is for social services personnel to judge, stigmatise and fob off mothers in prison:

“I have been quite shocked as to how often I've had to advocate for women in here because of social services. You always have people who think “oh you're bad because you're in prison” and you know that “bad mum” kind of image. So there are times when I've had to intervene, which I think is quite sad for social services when they've not really given the right information to women. They're not keeping the woman informed of what's happening to her children and things like that. Sometimes I have had to intervene because I've been quite appalled at the way a woman is being treated.” (Prison-based staff 2)

Referring again to how stigma underpins how women in prison are treated by social services, another participant explained, “I think it's just sad when you've actually got to work with organisations that you think would know better... it's disappointing.” (Prison-based staff 2).

Echoing the testaments of mothers who discussed substance use, another participant reflected on the further stigma attached to mothers who use drugs by some social workers.

“There are some social workers that are really good. It's not all of them, but more often than not, they do have a negative attitude to women that have either used drugs or alcohol. But it's not like I haven't taken the circumstances into account and they [the women] don't understand how they've got there. But they [Social Services] have worked with them for longer than I have. So you would think that they would know that.” (Prison-based staff 3)

Stigma follows women upon release and acts as a significant barrier to re-engagement with the community and desistance. Community-based services often discriminate against women with a conviction, particularly those with a history of re-offending.

The structural consequences and operationalisation of stigma by service providers

can render desistance extremely difficult, leaving women feeling they have little choice but to re-offend. Prison-based staff expressed sadness and frustration at the situation and their inability to resolve it, as their jurisdiction ends upon release as illustrated in this extract:

“And housing providers just go “No, we’re not doing that”... I’ve got a young lady who went out the other day, literally homeless and it’s heart-breaking, really, because no one will touch her. And what do you do? I’m just waiting for her to come back in really, which is terrible. But without a roof over your head, what else can people do? You know what I mean?” (Prison-based staff 2)

2.2 Experiences of different groups

Prison-based staff members were aware of the differential experiences of women, particularly black and racially minoritised groups. This chimes with the minimal research and literature that has explored race and racism in women’s prisons and the additional layers of trauma experienced by black and racially minoritised women. Although there are a relatively small number of black and racially minoritised women detained in HMP Low Newton at any one time, there are challenges in meeting their needs, as seen throughout the women’s prison estate. At the time of the research (February 2022) data for the prison reveals that there were 227 women in HMP Low Newton, 21 of them were Black and racially minoritised, of whom 8 were foreign nationals (HMP Low Newton, March 2022). Although Black and racially minoritised women are overrepresented within the women’s prison population, at just 18% this equates to relatively small numbers spread across the 12 women’s prisons (Cox and Sacks-Jones, 2017). Such low numbers put those individual women at greater risk of being identifiable if they engage with services provided by/within the prison in which they are detained. Recognising that their anonymity, and thus guarantees of confidentiality, may be compromised, black and racially minoritised women may consequently be less likely to engage with support/services that they may need and may fear the repercussions of reporting any concerns, needs or experiences. In addition, given the minimal resources and training in relation to this nationally (Agenda Alliance/Hibiscus, 2023), staff may be unaware, or may not have given consideration to, the differential experiences that black and racially minoritised women may have in prison; they may also hold unconscious bias and even racist

views, which can lead to discrimination, poor relations with the women, inconsiderate design/delivery of services and inappropriate responses to their needs. Similarly, other women detained within prison will likely lack awareness and/or understanding of the differential experiences and needs of their fellow incarcerated peers.

The racialised and racist experiences of black and racially minoritised women, are not local to HMP Low Newton, they are ubiquitous across the CJS and embedded within the prison structure and apparatus (Agenda and WIP, 2017). Black and racially minoritised women are often homogenised, ignoring any distinct ethnic, cultural and/or religious needs. Foreign nationals, who may share some experiences and needs, are also homogenised. The issues may be less visible within prisons with relatively small numbers of Black and racially minoritised women leading to their de-prioritisation, but the harmful impacts upon them abound. Often drawing on their experience of having worked in multiple prisons, participants recognised that these women were likely to have more negative experiences of prison and also different needs. They were also aware that racism in prison is an issue that desperately requires addressing but has yet to be tackled at a systemic CJS level. Participants demonstrated a willingness to learn and improve services and experiences for these women and seek to do so in their daily interactions with them, despite their self-acknowledged limited skills and experience in this area:

“We have very few women from ethnic minorities in the prison and if I’m honest, I worry about the racism from other women and possibly some staff. I think that’s always gonna be an issue ...And I think we try our best here, but I think that it is quite hard...For some of our BAME women, I think it is much harder... I mean racism is always gonna come into it I think and plays a part and in people’s attitudes. It’s an added layer of trauma, isn’t it? You know, ultimately what black women have gone through, that kind of those issues as well as everything else that they’ve gone through.” (Prison-based staff 2)

“I think we try and do the best that we can, so I don’t think it’s an unwillingness on our part, I just think the services aren’t there yet to help people and, especially the refugees...So now probably the next thing is we need some more help for foreign nationals and things like that. So it’s one of those things that’s certainly an issue that we know that we don’t do well on and we need to do better.” (Prison-based staff 2)

“I think she [mother] would describe a lot of negative experiences [in various prisons and from various practitioners] based on race... [engagement with Social Workers] definitely negative experiences that were exacerbated by race.” (Prison-based staff 3)

Prison-based staff members also reflected on their experiences of supporting foreign nationals. Whilst there were similarities, such as not having family in the UK, not understanding UK criminal justice processes and systems, language and communication barriers, the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers were terrible. Participants shared their shock and concern at what these women were subjected to by the Home Office and the insurmountable challenges for them as professionals in supporting these women.

“Where I think women can’t speak very good English, I think that’s horrendous because if we use like difficult language or big words or something, we try our best but I think that a lot of issues [the women are experiencing] will go under the radar because the language barriers in particular are not helpful, and I think that we would struggle to get [identify], you know, unless it’s quite overt you know, modern day slavery or something. And I think there’s a lot of that, that probably doesn’t get touched because she’s [woman] too scared to say anything and we don’t have the right language skills to get some of that out. So I think that for those members in the prison, I think that is really difficult and it’s one of those things I suppose it’s kind of like one of our next things really is to look at in particular, look at foreign nationals. I think it’s an area that we don’t particularly do very well on and I think just because the communication is so hard and they may be too scared to tell us things and all of that, so that’s quite difficult.” (Prison-based staff 2)

Another participant discussed working with a traveller woman and the difficulty in identifying and addressing her additional/distinct needs. Investing in developing a relationship with the woman and taking the time to understand her experiences and needs, enabled her to provide important support:

“A traveller lady came in and she just didn’t understand processes at all. She didn’t really understand why she was in prison but she didn’t want to speak either, because it’s not their way. Eventually we had a really good working relationship and she opened up and I got her a lot of help.”

I got her the help she needed and she understood what was happening and why it was happening. They don’t understand why it’s happening, because why would you? Why would you understand that he [perpetrator], because somebody else has done something and you’ve reacted to that person. I mean, she’d been subject to domestic violence for many years and being very private about it, nobody had known about it. And so her opening up about that was really difficult for her.” (Prison-based staff 3)

3. The Parental Rights in Prison Project

The Parental Rights in Prison project has been enthusiastically received by prison staff and partner agencies as well as mothers themselves. The project was introduced during a period of change – despite being subjected to the impacts of COVID-19 regulations, it became quickly established within a burgeoning multi-disciplinary team of family support workers. This team has expanded following changes implemented as a result of the Farmer reviews, with increased staff specialisms, including a newly established Perinatal Pathway (though no MBU), DART, EDiC, whole family support and the PRiP. The project benefits the prison in a number of ways, in particular: supporting the prison regime and its stability; contributing to reducing incidents of self-harm; contributing towards successful completion of drug treatment programmes; ensuring women detained in prison receive support on key areas for rehabilitation; and feeding into multi-department forums within the prison, including Safer Custody, Chaplaincy, OMU and Key Workers:

“When I first started, we had nothing for family. So four years has seen a massive change in what we can provide for women. I think with Lord Farmer and everything and that’s made a massive difference...it’s great. It’s one of the areas that I think we do well here and I think it’s really positive. But I mean it’s literally taken off in the last couple of years and it’s a different place now compared to what it was.” (Prison-based staff 2)

The Farmer reviews have also resulted in procedural changes in women’s prisons, which participants recognise as improving the focus on support for mothers and families, although the impact of stigmatising discourses remain challenging:

“We are encouraged at court to write that this person is a mother and the adverse effects on children by sending someone to custody...”

obviously you are always up against the attitude of magistrates and judges because they may see the whole bad mother thing and whatever but we are encouraged now in court to make sure the judge and magistrates understand that there are children and because I think it's about their human rights as well, isn't it?" (Prison-based staff 2)

The introduction of the PRiP Project filled an important gap in the team in terms of specialist knowledge and support for women. As one participant explained:

"So I came here when we didn't have any family workers at all. So all of that work fell to the probation POMs, so any woman who was involved with children services or had any issues around contact with children, adoption care proceedings and post adoption letter writing. We were stumbling around in the dark for any of the legal rights, the parental rights and obviously it's a major source of distress for the majority of the women who are separated from their children, if not, have lost their children." (Prison-based staff 3)

The feedback on the PRiP Project and the PRiPC was wholly very positive. The project is highly valued and regarded as essential, as opposed to simply a helpful addition to existing provision. The project is complementary to the existing family support work, as opposed to a duplication of roles and goes beyond increasing capacity. The expertise, skills and knowledge of the PRiPC were consistently commented upon and the role played by the project's solicitor is also seen as indispensable. The PRiPC also plays an important role in supporting other members of staff, who are cognisant of the challenges of engaging in legal work and the emotional toll of supporting mothers who have experienced so much trauma.

A senior officer said:

"I've had lots of positives from the POMs about [PRiPC] role and I think also staff can ask her questions as well and feel a bit more like they're either doing the right thing or what do I need to do and get the advice...The understated part of [PRP Coordinator's] job really is the support she gives other people around their own jobs, so that's very positive as well." (Prison-based staff 2)

One officer explained how important the specialist support provided to women is, alongside their daily roles/provision:

"Because by the time you've come in here, you're pretty beat up, metaphorically speaking and you know, to have someone who can support you through some of that, because we can't, we're

not experts you know, I know nothing really about [parental rights] and so having someone who's more trained and knowledgeable in that area is really positive because it isn't something that we have skills in or knowledgeable about." (Prison-based staff 1)

The PRiPC It is not seen as a role, or intervention that can be subsumed into existing roles, such as other family support workers or POMs, who are already extremely busy and often find themselves only able to deal with the immediate issues presented to them. Rather, the PRiPC is seen as;

"something that fills that hole, if that makes sense, because we've got family workers and but hers [PRP Coordinator] is quite specific...it is specialist and niche, it's so important for women in here who are, you know just disempowered and all of that stuff. So to have that specific role is really important." (Prison-based staff 4)

Recognised as a specialist role, prison-based staff felt that the PRiPC had important expertise that they did not. One senior officer commented:

"I think I'm quite a well-qualified, experienced person, but I wouldn't touch it with a barge pole because you could so easily get it wrong and absolutely do the wrong thing. So I think it really has to be a specialist." (Prison-based staff 2)

Another Family Worker explained:

"Final contacts and legal work, they're hard things, sometimes the legal stuff is really hard, as a worker, so just having support as well, like you're not alone, dealing with that, somebody else has the expertise and can give it that different slant." (Prison-based staff 1)

Providing advice, support and guidance is an integral part of the PRiP Project, particularly specialist advice about women's parental rights, Family Court and related Children's Services processes.

The work is complex and emotionally difficult and requires the PRiPC to work with a high level of both subject knowledge and emotional sensitivity. This is made all the more challenging when guiding women through outcomes that they did not want to happen, particularly losing their children or having requests for contact rejected. These specialist skills are highlighted in the followed extract:

"Lot of complexities, it's perinatal, it's care proceedings, it's adoption...a lot of it is the care proceedings from start to finish... It's also being

realistic with them and setting real expectations; doing final contact visits; it's all heavy, emotional stuff... cos a lot of them, it's not the outcome that they want, or the outcome that they feel they deserve, but, as long as you're being honest with them and realistic all the way through, in that they've tried everything. (Prison-based staff 1)

As we have emphasised in previous sections, women's circumstances are often complex, and many do not actually know their legal parental status, having found the process of engaging with Children's Services and the Family Courts too difficult, overwhelming and painful. We have also emphasised earlier that advocacy and practical support, particularly helping mothers to establish or engage in letterbox contact with children, are important elements of the project. An important finding from our interviews with prison-based staff is that the PRiPC engages in specialist and highly sensitive work that requires skilled trauma-informed ways of working, as evidenced in this extract:

"Women often come in and their children have already been removed from their care, due to their chaotic lifestyles, often related to drug and alcohol; and they often, because they've been so disengaged and their life is so chaotic, they literally don't know what's happening. They know that there's some kind of order in place, the children are either with their Mum but they don't know if it's a Child Arrangement Order or a Special Guardianship Order, or "we're in some kind of proceedings, I've been told to get a solicitor, but I don't know what that means" so it's all that explaining by [PRP Coordinator]." (Prison-based staff 1)

And similarly:

"Contacting the social workers, solicitors, anybody who's with Cafcass, and saying that even though the women are in here and there's a wall there, they can still have involvement, they've still got their parental rights until that child's either adopted or whatever, so it's advocating that." (Prison-based staff 5)

Being independent of the prison is important for the PRiP Project and PRiPC, particularly for engaging with the women who often have a fear of adults in positions of responsibility, especially in relation to their parental status. The layers and years of trauma and stigma experienced by the women in prison make building relationships and establishing trust a slow and difficult process. Being open and honest about the role

of the project and coordinator and managing expectations are key. This helps to build relationships and develop trust with the women, which is particularly important when they receive unwelcome news or information. Being kept regularly informed of any communication or updates to their case demonstrates the reliability of the worker and helps to prevent them from feeling let down. Prison-based staff members providing family support described the importance of this within their roles also:

"Sometimes they're not ready and it's not worth pushing it. It takes a while, sometimes for a lot of the women to build up that trust, because they've been let down so many times by services. When you say 'Family Support' they automatically think you're Social Services, and not all of them, but there's a lot of them have such bad experiences, or they feel they've had bad experiences, badly done to. So it's about that trust and building it up." (Prison-based staff 1)

Another participant explained:

"[The PRiPC] has helped women feel better about where they're at and more able to kind of stand up for themselves. I think that's the important thing." (Prison-based staff 4)

Providing specialist emotional support to the women is fundamental to the project. Learning about and developing an understanding of their rights is empowering – knowledge is power. The reassurance, care and empathy displayed by the PRiPC also builds up women's confidence, helping them to feel listened to. This in turn has resulted in less anger and frustration, which can manifest as outbursts and volatility inside the prison.

"They've just got no self-worth so it's about building them up... this is where through the workshops and through, you know, liaising with the solicitor, she [PRiPC] actually can build up the women's confidence...I think that's really significant because they're empowered by the information they've heard on the workshops, and through the work [PRiPC] does...so that's been a big part of the project." (Prison-based staff 1)

An officer explained that women seem calmer, and less violent towards themselves and others because of the PRiPC's approach and feeling listened to:

"Women will always get frustrated and lash out if they feel you know that they've hit rock bottom, and no one's helping them... What I would say is

that because you feel listened to because you feel you're getting the right support, someone's gone away and actually done something for you and has come back to tell you what they've done that that all just helps calm you down, feel like somebody's doing something and probably even more so than in the community as well, to be honest...And that probably does make them feel hopefully less frustrated, less sort of feeling, you know, desolate about what's going on. So hopefully it reduces the self-harm too which is really important for us and reduces sort of you know, the women fighting each other or assaulting staff or whatever." (Prison-based staff 2)

Similarly, prison-based staff member 3 explains:

"I think it's definitely helped with confidence and feeling listened to, feeling heard and being acknowledged, I think was an absolutely massive thing for her [mother] and the practical support. I think [PRiPC] being there, the coming back each week, even when she's really difficult and she's really emotionally draining...she keeps going back to her and then offering that support even some weeks when it's declined if she's not in the right kind of headspace for it, she knows it's there, and then she set-up the practical kind of support for it, as well as the emotional support around that. So yeah, I definitely think it's had an impact upon confidence and belief that things will get better as well for her and she's not self-harmed, which I think is key." (Prison-based staff 3)

As recognised by prison-based staff members in these examples, engaging with the legal aspects of a woman's case, particularly in relation to parental rights, is difficult and complex. Following the substantial changes to Legal Aid in 2013, it has become increasingly difficult for incarcerated mothers to ascertain and/or exercise their legal parental rights, with little recourse to Legal Aid support. The PRP Project thus fills an incredibly important gap in provision and support for incarcerated mothers, despite the continued Legal Aid limitations. Whilst the mothers we interviewed were unanimous in describing feeling empowered by understanding their parental rights, even when they were unable to exercise them, they also described feeling a sense of hopelessness at times. This was echoed by the participants, who described the importance of working sensitively with the women.

"It is hard because they reach a point where they feel like they've lost and there's nothing else they can do. But it's that struggle because they are desperate to be part of their children's lives. But they don't know where else they can take it and it's horrible." (Prison-based staff 4)

4. Organisational Challenges - Partnership Working

One of the main challenges facing all of the prison-based staff members we interviewed, is engaging in multi-agency partnership working, particularly working with Social Services. In all of the interviews, staff reflected on the challenges of multi-agency partnership working, the ways they dealt with this and the impact upon incarcerated mothers in particular. They explained that, within the context of over a decade of austerity, all services are under-resourced and over-stretched, empathising with the challenges all services face as a result. They recognised how difficult the role of Social Worker is and the complications and obstacles for Social Workers of working with and navigating the prison system. Whilst they all expressed having worked with some excellent Social Workers, they all continue to experience what they consider to be unnecessary challenges in working with and unacceptable attitudes from, many Social Workers. Problems with information sharing, chasing Social Workers, calling out stigma and educating other services about women's rights in prison and advocating for those women takes up a lot of time for staff involved in any family support work. The impact of delays or lack of response by services outside can have dire consequences for the women inside prison, as the prison system is not able to operate within the same timescales. Within this context, the PRiP Project is a precious resource and the PRiPC is regularly called upon to liaise with Social Services.

"I spend a lot of my time with women who are going through care proceedings and my role is to act as an advocate and to support them. But most of the time I find that I'm fighting with Social Services just to make sure that their rights are heard." (Prison-based staff 4)

And in this example, another prison-based staff member provides further context about time-scales and how they are impacted by security imperatives that underpin prison bureaucracy:

"All services are stretched...But what you've got to remember as well is timescales. Things become urgent in here because there's a lot of tight timescales around care proceedings, or meetings, and things that need to be submitted, and it takes even longer in the prison, cos when post comes in; it has to go through censors, it has to be screened through security, before it gets to the women..." (Prison-based staff 1)

Social workers often hold misperceptions about women in prison and about the facilities and support available for families to be able to maintain contact with incarcerated women. It is often assumed that once in prison, women will disengage with care proceedings and thus social workers will not actively seek to engage women inside. This makes it even more difficult for prison-based staff to properly support the women they work with.

“People not returning calls, the lack of the understanding and knowledge [of women in prison] they are challenging; a lot of it is they’re saying prison’s no place for a child to come into. It’s saying ‘well, actually, it is okay if they come to the Visitor Centre; we’ve got play workers, there’s activities, we can offer support; it’s not as daunting as you think. Do you want to come in and have a look, first’?” (Prison-based staff 1)

And again here:

“I find social services expect that I will deliver bad news on their behalf and that’s not what I’m here for. I’m here for the woman, not for them. So it’s trying to get them [Social Workers] to understand that I’m not gonna do that. But then if I don’t they tend to think well, it doesn’t really matter, and they [the mother] will find out when we discuss it in the meeting. And it’s really out of order the first time that she is told something and it’s in a meeting full of a lot of other people who were already aware of. It’s just not fair.” (Prison-based staff 4)

It is unsurprising then, that prison-based staff members’ views about community-based social workers echoed those held by women, for example, having a lack of faith in social workers, and examples of difficult interactions with them. The quotes included in section 2.1 on stigma above also demonstrate the persistence of stigmatising discourses by some social workers, and cases in which prison-based staff members, including the PRiPC must intervene.

“A lot of them [women] have really not got many positive things to say about social workers... A lot of them are quite wary of social workers. They are very wary about what they tell them as well.” (Prison-based staff 2)

Internal challenges can also complicate partnership working, with prison-based staff members subjected to the demands of the prison and its regime and logistical difficulties, which are often at odds with the needs of the women. For example, this can include difficulties

in securing an appropriate room or time slot to meet with the women. Moving women around the prison places a strain on already stretched prison staffing, which can lead to missing appointments. Pre-COVID-19, a lack of technological facilities often prevented engagement in external meetings.

“I mean, the regime isn’t always the best. It doesn’t always work how we need it to. I mean, I’ve been asked to cut someone’s family court short because they wanted them [mother], and I don’t think that’s appropriate. Because they think if it’s Family Court and it’s not Criminal Court that they’ve got the right to pull the woman out of that. And I don’t think that’s appropriate because it’s no less important than a Criminal Court hearing. I mean, in fact, it might be even worse for the person involved because it is such an emotive subject when it’s their children and if they come away from it not knowing what’s happening and then they’re locked up and they don’t know what’s going on. So it’s difficult because I understand there’s a balance with staff and that there is a regime, but also there’s it’s people’s lives. Resources were withdrawn and it’s been a struggle and getting people into telephone calls when we need to, because we just don’t have the space available in the prison. Things have got a little bit easier that now we’ve all got laptops.” (Prison-based staff 4)

And prison-based staff 3 adds further understanding here:

“[with the regime] everything becomes more complicated than it needs to be. It’s just I need to get this person on the phone and trying to get an officer to get that, take that prisoner to where I need her to be and then back again because we can’t just discard them. Yeah, it does prove difficult. So I would like a dedicated space for family work that could be shared with the offender managers or something, but on the main corridor and then we can book appointments and they can come into those appointments and yeah, it’d make things a lot easier.” (Prison-based staff 3)

5. Challenges Upon Release

The PRiPC works alongside other prison-based staff members and outside practitioners in providing support for release from prison. This is fundamental to ensuring that women know what their parental rights are, what plans and orders are in place (e.g. in relation to contact with their children) and the steps and services involved in their case when they transition back into the community. However, although the PRiPC and other family support workers do everything within their power to prepare women for release, including liaising with external services, their reach is limited. The challenges that face women upon release into the community are well documented (PRT, 2019; APPG, 2022). For women navigating care proceedings, establishing contact with their children and/or guardian with parenting responsibility, transition brings added complexity and emotional distress.

All of the prison-based staff members we interviewed discussed the often-insurmountable issues that women are presented with upon release from prison, the most problematic of which they find to be securing accommodation. After over a decade of austerity, community-based services have been decimated resulting in huge unmet demand. The lack of services and provision available for women being released from prison, who are usually vulnerable, is highly problematic and concerning. Women are at risk of further abuse by their previous partners and historic perpetrators and lapsing into drug use. Added to this, prison-based staff members are limited in the practical support they can provide, as it is often not possible to secure appointments (e.g. GP, mental health, dentist etc) or access application systems (e.g. universal credit) from inside prison, due to restrictions on people in prison:

“It’s the going into the community which then falls down because the community teams are too overworked and can’t provide what we need for the women and that’s the same with a lot of the agencies. Actually there’s a lot of stuff that women need, but in the prison I think it’s quite positive because you get a lot of that support. But when you get out there, it’s very hard to keep away from your abuser or pimp or your drug dealer and all of those issues. So you kind of can very quickly, if you’re not given the right support, just go back to the kind of behaviour that occurred before you came into prison.” (Prison-based staff 3)

Similarly, prison-based staff member 2 explained:

“You don’t have a probation officer until about six months before release, and so we’ve got that kind of ‘now you’re getting this professional that you’ve never met.’ So you might have done five years in prison and suddenly you’ve got this probation officer...settlement is one of the big things really. It’s frustrating because you can’t get a mental health appointment. You can’t get a doctor’s appointment. You can’t get a signing on time. You’ve can’t do your benefits until you get out. You’re not allowed to start that process in here. I mean, the whole thing’s just very, very difficult, but it’s obviously one of our biggest problems. The biggest risk is you’re going out there to your pimp your domestic abuser or whatever it might be. And we’re just trying to get you accommodation, we’ve spent some time helping you look at alternatives and find alternatives, but you know it’s a nightmare, really.” (Prison-based staff 2)

The ongoing housing crisis in the UK has particular ramifications for people being released from prison and there is a dearth of appropriate accommodation. For women, in particular mothers, securing accommodation which is suitable for their children to visit and or live with them, is virtually impossible. There are very few Approved Premises for women and therefore those whose license conditions require they reside in such accommodation, such as those subject to a MAPPA, take priority. Securing accommodation for women with a history of repeat convictions (often referred to as ‘revolving door’), is also almost impossible, as housing providers are usually unwilling to accept them. These women often have histories of debt and rent accrual, often intertwined with histories of domestic abuse and / or drug use:

“We have lots of staff here trying to find women somewhere to live. It’s a nightmare. And I mean that’s always our biggest challenge is finding somewhere, not just somewhere to live, it’s somewhere appropriate to live, and that it’s appropriate. Appropriate is probably the biggest word I would like to use around accommodation because we can probably find a very grotty B&B in the middle of God knows where, but it’s not appropriate, it’s not safe. So accommodation is a massive issue for us.” (Prison-based staff 2)

And similarly:

“It’s about putting things in place for them going out of here...But it’s like a vicious cycle because if they don’t have the children, then they won’t get a

house that's appropriate. If they haven't got a home to go back to and they won't be given a home that the children can go back to because they don't have them in their care. But so then to try and get them back in their care they need to have a home that the children can go to. And it just doesn't work." (Prison-based staff 4)

As discussed in section 2.1 above, stigmatising discourses influence decision-making, further hampering the reintegration of women into the community and preventing access to the services, facilities and support that they need (and are entitled to). Prison-based staff members are affected by the impact of this work, feeling frustrated and upset at the barriers they are unable to overcome on behalf of the women that they are supporting:

"The social worker was very blunt about what was going to happen and I just didn't think it was very appropriate...some understand how difficult it's been for them [mothers] but they aren't on their side as much as I would be...But more often than not, they do have a very negative view. I mean this particular social worker... the mother that I'm working with in here feels like she's [social worker] holding a grudge against her because she used drugs and she says she feels like she makes her feel more rubbish, really because of her historic drug use. And she says, "I feel like she's written me off already" and it does come across even to me that she feels that way. I can see why she would feel that way." (Prison-based staff 4)

And referring to chronic problem prison-based staff face trying to find suitable and safe housing for mothers on release:

"Housing providers just go "No, we're not doing that." I've got a young woman who went out the other day, literally homeless and it's heart-breaking, really, because no one will touch her. And what do you do? I'm just waiting for her to come back in really, which is terrible. But without some roof over your head, what else can people do?" (Prison-based staff 5)

Prison-based staff are also aware that whilst they seek to arrange what appointments they can and establish logistical connections back into the community, this can be overwhelming for women facing release, on top of the difficulties and distress of the release transition process.

"It hardly ever works out the way that you wanted it to work, you can have as many appointments in the world as you want. But maybe sometimes that's the problem. We've got too many appointments that you have to keep when you get out with all the different agencies, it just becomes too much for people." (Prison-based staff 2).

Concluding comments

The PRiP project has achieved impressive success in a short period of time. Mothers accessing support from the PRiPC reported increased confidence, agency, and hope about the future. Crucially, they had their mothering identities recognised, respected and validated. The advice and support they received was accurate, informative and honest, enabling the women to feel empowered by understanding their rights. Importantly, the PRiPC performed the role with empathy and care, taking the time to connect and listen to mothers. The impact on women who were able to re-establish contact with their children was particularly profound. Similarly, mothers who received post-adoption support benefited enormously from the expertise and guidance that the PRiP provided them. For example, help with letter writing, accessing photographs when legally permitted, and engaging in life-story work led to women gaining in confidence, self-worth and having a purpose or goal to aim for.

We strongly recommend employing a specialist PRiPC to support women in prison through maternal separation and maternal trauma. However, the realities of successfully transitioning to life outside prison and back in the community, where statutory services have been subject to crippling austerity, and the charities sector has been woefully underfunded are bleak (Changing Lives, Agenda Alliance, 2023;5). Lack of specialist support, such as violence against women and girls' services, and drug and mental health services, lack of appropriate housing or positive social networks, can undermine progress women might have made emotionally. For women with histories of problematic substance use, returning to communities, families and partners with known drug use and/ or dealing, can significantly increase the likelihood of relapse into drug use and criminality (Grace, 2022). All the women who accessed the PRiP project had experienced domestic and or sexual violence and for most this had played a part in the removal of their children. This glaringly demonstrates women's experiences of gender inequality, it's relationship with the Criminal Justice System and the subsequent re-traumatisation that often takes place as a result of custody. Within this context, the double disadvantage and harmful experiences of Black and racially minoritised women within prison urgently need addressing (Agenda Alliance/Hibiscus, 2023).

Family support plays a vital role in prison and transitions out of prison. There is an urgent need for meaningful and long-term investment in specialist family support and advocacy for mothers in prison, including to support mothers to understand and exercise their parental rights. Mothers in prison, especially those who have lost children to the care system, experience stigma, shame and a disregard for the importance of their mothering identity. They are routinely misinformed, forgotten about or fobbed off by professionals, especially those working in communities, but in some cases within prisons too. When mothers are sent to prison, the harms ripple outwards, impacting upon children and other family members and at great social and economic cost to society. The stories and experiences that mothers shared with us have not substantively changed since Corston's landmark report sixteen years ago. Despite the success of the PRiP project, interventions such as this cannot address systemic gender inequalities and the harm caused to women and families by the prison system. We support the APPG's findings (2022) that emphasise the harms of prison for women, and we endorse the MoJ's Female Offender Strategy (2018) recommendation to redirect resources to Women's Centres and other specialist community-based women-centred services.

Appendix

Pre Project Engagement Evaluation Form

Pre Project Engagement Evaluation Form:

HMP Low Newton



Supporting a positive future
for prisoners and their families

Outcomes which must be evaluated using the feedback form

- Impact of project on resident's calmness and anxiety
- Impact of project on resident's confidence and empowerment
- Impact of project on resident's hopes and thoughts for the future
- Evidence an increase in engagement and improved relationships with family and significant others
- Evidence an increase in contact with external visitors or peer support

Resident's Name

Calmness:

On the scale 1-10 below (1 being not calm and 10 being extremely calm) how calm do you feel about the matter we will discuss in the workshop?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Anxiety:

On the scale 1-10 below (1 being extremely anxious and 10 being not anxious) how anxious do you feel about the matter we will discuss in the workshop?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Confidence:

On the scale 1-10 below (1 being not confident and 10 being extremely confident) how confident do you feel about dealing with the matter we will discuss in the workshop?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Empowerment:

On the scale 1-10 below (1 being not empowered and 10 being extremely empowered) how empowered do you feel about dealing with the matter we will discuss in the workshop?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Hopes for the future:

On the scale 1-10 below (1 being not hopeful and 10 being extremely hopeful) how hopeful do you feel about your future as a result of the matter we will discuss in the workshop?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Knowledge about parental rights:

On the scale 1-10 below (1 being not very informed and 10 being extremely well informed) how well informed do you feel about your legal rights as a parent in prison?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Further questions are needed either here in the pre-project engagement form OR the initial assessment form about the following:

1. Since being in prison, have you received any support specific to your role as a parent? This might be informal support from friends, or formal support from prison staff, or support you are getting from another project or programme you are involved in:

2. What is the most important thing you want to get out of participating in this project?

3. Thinking about your role as a parent, where do you want to be at the end of this intervention?

4. Thinking about your role as a parent, what is the main challenge for you to overcome?

Post Project Engagement Evaluation Form

Post Project Engagement Evaluation Form

HMP Low Newton



Outcomes which must be evaluated using the feedback form

- Impact of project on resident's calmness and anxiety
- Impact of project on resident's confidence and empowerment
- Impact of project on resident's hopes and thoughts for the future
- Evidence an increase in engagement and improved relationships with family and significant others
- Evidence an increase in contact with external visitors or peer support

Resident's Name

Were you happy with the support you received from Nepacs?

How did the support help you?

Did we help you to improve/resolve your family issue? (if applicable to the support we offered and not already answered in questions above)

Calmness:

On the scale 1-10 below (1 being not calm and 10 being extremely calm) how calm do you feel about the matter we addressed on the project?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Anxiety:

On the scale 1-10 below (1 being extremely anxious and 10 being not anxious) how anxious do you feel about the matter we addressed on the project?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Did the support effect your feeling of calm or anxiety? If <u>so</u> how?									

Confidence:

On the scale 1-10 below (1 being not confident and 10 being extremely confident) how confident do you feel about dealing with the matter we addressed on the project?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Did the support effect your feelings of confidence? If <u>so</u> how?									

Empowerment:

On the scale 1-10 below (1 being not empowered and 10 being extremely empowered) how empowered do you feel about dealing with the matter we addressed on the project?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Would you feel empowered to address this or a similar issue again in the future?									

Hopes for the future:

On the scale 1-10 below (1 being not hopeful and 10 being extremely hopeful) how hopeful do you feel about your future as a result of the matter we addressed on the project?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Did the support impact on your hopes and thoughts for the future? If <u>so</u> how?									
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Knowledge about parental rights:

On the scale 1-10 below (1 being not very informed and 10 being extremely well informed) how well informed do you feel about your legal rights as a parent in prison?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Did the support impact on your knowledge about parental rights? If <u>so</u> how?

Did the support assist in developing or increasing contact with family and significant others? If <u>so</u> how?

Did the support increase your contact with external support or internal peer support? If <u>so</u> how?

What support do you need moving forward? (consider if the person is staying in prison, being transferred to another establishment, being released)

What do you think are the biggest barriers for you in moving forward?

Would you be willing to engage in further discussion with the project evaluators about your experience with the project and the impact it may have had for you and your family?

Yes/No

Would you be willing for us to contact you in the future to follow up and see how you are doing?

Yes/No

Contact details: Tel:

Email:

Address:

Name	
Signature	
Date	

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