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## HM Prison Service Styal



Mother and baby in MBU, Styal Prison, copyright Andrew Aitchison

## Mother and Baby Unit

An appreciative inquiry

## Research Brief

*as long as it takes*

## Executive summary

### 1 Historical context

- 1.1 Prior to the arrival of Action for Children at Styal Prison, Anne Owers reporting for the Chief Inspector of Prisons (2004) described Styal's MBU as 'unacceptably dirty' where 'filthy, stained mattresses were in evidence' and where there was a complete lack of posters on nursing, parenting or health issues. A subsequent 2006 report continued to paint a grim picture. The environment still remained unsuitable with no age-specific, age-appropriate stimulating décor at low level for children (HMIP, 2006). At this time, Styal only had crèche facilities, which were run by the Primary Care Trust (PCT). Action for Children were beginning to have a very minor presence at Styal, having applied for a grant to offer mediation services for women in prison with family members. It was recognised at this time that the PCT had run the crèche down and were using agency staff who were being managed by the prison service rather than the PCT, which gave a significantly different value-base to the core of the work being offered in the crèche. However, with a new, progressive Governor in 2006, it was recognised that the needs of the women would need to be met in order for them to be rehabilitated properly and therefore less likely to re-offend.
- 1.2 In a meeting between Cheshire Local Authority, Styal Prison, the PCT and Action for Children, it was acknowledged that one aspect of improving rehabilitation and reducing reoffending would be to focus on developing the Mother and Baby Unit (MBU). It was decided that Styal needed more than a crèche and to be working with the women to develop their parenting skills with qualified staff to run the mother and baby board. The right decisions about risk and about the women coming on to the unit needed to be made with a wider strategy for families around contact issues, visitors' centre, mediation remit – all of the issues for women and families. There needed to be a family services manager to oversee the implementation of a strategy.
- 1.3 Even though these broader services in support of wider MBU provision began to be acknowledged at Styal, the main prison services found the value of this changing provision difficult to understand. General attitudes and behaviours took rather longer to shift, with comments like, 'You're just a crèche worker', being commonplace. The changing services started small, with lots of demands being placed on one or two individuals. At these early stages there were prison officers allocated to the unit but they were changed quite regularly. There was also the mother and baby liaison role who co-ordinated all of the board, all of the admissions, had responsibility for each woman coming into prison who was pregnant and/or had a child under 18 months old. They would be responsible for informing them that they could apply for a place in the mother and baby unit, assist them through that process, collect all the paperwork for probation, social services and all the relevant parties and present that to the board.
- 1.4 In 2006 Action for Children were successful in establishing the MBU provision in Styal. They became the first organisation to provide wider health, care and education services on mother and baby units (MBU) in prison. When the unit was temporarily shut down they had the opportunity to re-organise things. It was re-opened, starting with two babies and then they built the provision up slowly. That was when the new Action for Children Project Manager

came on board. At that point they began working towards a more radical position where there were no prison officers. This provision has flourished exponentially over the last forty-two months. They currently offer different kinds of provision in two prisons, Styal and New Hall. Action for Children works in partnership with both prisons to provide high-quality services that meet the needs of babies and their mothers, and the prison's requirements. They always put children at the centre of their work and their goal is to nurture the mother and baby relationship, which they see as crucial for infant development.

- 1.5 Action for Children's mother and baby units provide:
  - A safe and secure environment for mothers and babies
  - High-quality parenting and childcare support, managed by a team of experienced, qualified and committed staff
  - Effective procedures for emergency situations
  - Staff cover for 24 hours a day, 365 days a year
  - Crèche facilities
  - Fully trained staff to support and promote breastfeeding
  - Close relationships with healthcare providers and links with oral health hygienists
- 1.6 The most recent Ofsted Report asserts that the 'overall quality of the provision is outstanding' (2010: 4). Such a comment besides exorcising previous negative descriptions of Styal MBU also points to a key term that has deep significance with early years education and care. That is 'quality'. The issue over what constitutes quality has and undoubtedly will continue to be the subject of debate (Moss and Pence, 1994; Dahlberg et al., 1999). Pence and Pacini-Ketchabow (2010) make the succinct point that the debate concerning 'quality' within early childhood education and care never quite escapes the notion of 'failed motherhood'. In other words it's the persistence of this stigma that underpins and drives a great number of early intervention programmes that are directed at supporting the young child and her family. The quality or success of the programme turns on materialising the 'good' or successful mother who in turn will nurture and educate the 'good' or successful child. As the Ofsted report notes 'partnership with parents is superb' (p. 5). It would seem moreover that rather than perceiving the mothers on the MBU as 'failed' the team both recognize and importantly act from the premise of shared partnership where the mother is understood as equal rather than deficit (p. 5).
- 1.7 The return to custody rate for the main women's prison population in general is around 77%, whereas the return rate specifically for the MBU is around 12.5%. As far as Action for Children can ascertain, of a total of 48 women who have been on the MBU, only 6 have returned.

## **2 The research**

- 2.1 This appreciative inquiry was commissioned by Action for Children and carried out by the Education & Social Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University. The research was undertaken at HM Prison Styal over a four-month period, between February and June 2010.

- 2.2 Research project aim:  
*To conduct an inquiry which identifies aspects of the mother and baby unit that appear to be working well, and consider ways these can be further developed to meet the best interests of children and families.*
- 2.3 We found that many aspects of the MBU at Styal appeared to be working well, some of which are identified below.
- 2.4 Parent support and nursery teams working in tandem in the best interests of the babies
- There is a multi-professional and fully active lead from the Project Manager
  - There is an effective system of a 'Key Person' working with both the mother and baby whilst on the MBU
  - There is evidence of a thorough working knowledge of Early Years Foundation Stage and Every Child Matters and the ability to locate, access and provide appropriate resources for babies and mothers
  - Action for Children staff place a clear focus on the physical, social and emotional development of the babies that underpinned the more general progress made
  - Parent support workers ensure Sentence Plans are fulfilled, which ultimately support the rehabilitation of women during their time in Styal and also creates a greater chance for post-release mothers and their babies to build positive lives together with their wider families outside prison
  - There are rigorous documents in place, with contributions by parent support and nursery staff that maintain mothers' and babies' records, policies and procedures such as safeguarding issues, complaints and emergency procedures
- 2.5 Professional sense of working as an effective team
- Senior staff are committed to self-evaluation and self-improvement to take the MBU provision forward
  - Action for Children staff have clear and articulated aspirations to keep working toward the highest possible standards in all the provision they make available
  - Staff are working towards creating an inclusive environment where culture, religion and dietary preferences are balanced with policy mandates and government directives.
- 2.6 Multi-professional and inter-agency partnership working
- There are effective relationships between Action for Children and Prison Services such as probation, translation services, education, other prison staff such as offending officers;
  - Action for Children have developed a wealth of inter-agency working relationships with Children's Services, Immigration, Sure Start Children's Centres and health services. Their portfolio of partners develops with every new admission on to the MBU
  - The range of relationships with partners and services enables richer in and out-of-prison experiences for the babies, for example, to the prison chapel, the library, journeys on the bus, visits to the Children's Centre, taking babies on trips to the zoo etc.

## 2.7 Family cohesion and community working

- Action for Children has built up relationships with the mothers and babies wider families. For example Action for Children secured the agreement to have, and appropriately furnish a portacabin on the grounds of the MBU to facilitate Admissions and Separation Boards when family members might attend and the implementation of family visit days as a more appropriate context for family visiting
- Action for Children are constantly nurturing relationships with communities outside of prison in support of the cultural diversity of the mothers and babies they are working with, e.g. Vietnamese and Polish communities
- If mothers are in touch with their partners, Action for Children have a tireless commitment to liaise with the babies' biological or sociological father, even if this is via video link with another prison

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

- Action for Children work towards bespoke handing out and shared care arrangements that are in the best interests of the babies. At times this requires hours of time and emotional investment liaising with a range of services to make it happen in ways that are conducive to the specific needs of the baby and her/his mother.
- Work invested in preparing for Admissions and Separation Boards is considerable. The Boards usually include an Independent Chair, the mother's and baby's key worker(s), the Project Manager, a representative from children's Services, a health visitor and the Governor. These members all require copious documents to be prepared so that information needed is easily accessible at the time of the board.

## 2.9 Across all the observations made, as well as interviews and the scrutiny of documents undertaken, there were examples of excellent practice and also possibilities for further developing provision in the best interests of children and families. These possibilities are discussed below.

## 3 **Objective 1**

*To enrich the evidence base for women in custody and their children to strengthen the voice of Action for Children within other prison settings*

### 3.1 This project has gathered data to contribute to a broader evidence base, which will strengthen the voice of Action for Children in communication with a range of audiences, including other prison settings. The data and subsequent analysis demonstrates that the team in Styal have a wealth of skills, a solid knowledge base and a range of complex understandings around the care and education of babies and their mothers in a prison context. The outcome of their recent 'outstanding' Ofsted report (2010) and the honour awarded to them by the Butler Trust (2010) concur with our research findings, in that the team work tirelessly, and for 'as long as it takes' to find solutions to complex dilemmas they are confronted with on a daily basis.

- 3.2 When analysing the extent of Action for Children's provision on the MBU and in the wider prison setting, the key principle that makes Action for Children distinct in the prison work they do is that they ensure the pre- and post-natal baby is always at the centre of their provision, intervention and facilitation. With the baby at the centre and being mindful that s/he is not a prisoner, Action for Children galvanise inter-agency and multi-professional working, deployed on the MBU and amongst the wider prison population in pursuit of meeting the needs of the pre- and post-natal babies and their mothers at Styal. They utilise their experienced and well-trained staff in parent support, early years and business support to mobilise a range of services both inside and outside the prison to offer diverse and bespoke MBU and outreach work as and when necessary. There were numerous examples where Action for Children's extensive work both on the MBU, but also with a number of women in the main prison who are pregnant or have just delivered babies but who, for various reasons were not able to be admitted onto the MBU, demonstrated their outstanding ability to create partnerships with a range of services such as social and health services, local Children's Centres, immigration and child benefit services in support of the babies and mothers.
- 3.3 The potential for growth within this area lies in the extent to which senior members of the team are able to: champion the voice of Action for Children in a range of services elsewhere, such as in local community services e.g. children's centres, in FE and HE training institutions where new early years education, health and social care practitioners are being educated and in other prisons where an MBU might be established; develop a dedicated web resource that foregrounds the work of Action for Children MBUs and wider pre- and post-natal services in prisons; and support the further development of staff through supervision and training so that a more fluid sense of professionalism can be developed without it becoming an obstacle for finding new creative relationships between theory and practice.
- 3.4 **Objective 2**  
*To develop 'best practice' approach for Action for Children services, which improve outcomes for children and mothers within this target group*
- 3.5 A definition of 'best practice' is, of course, very complex and shifts. However, Action for Children staff consistently re-define their own understandings of what they deem 'best practice' as they aim for the highest (multi-) professional standards. They are led by a group of senior staff who are thoughtful and reflective practitioners. They understand the policy and statutory demands made on them from the early years workforce and the prison services, whilst manoeuvring between a range of legislation, policies, languages and practices of early years and other services. Staff work to achieve the best outcomes for the babies and mothers given their difficult, challenging and sometimes frustrating context. They try to develop a sense of wider family cohesion by offering family visit days, video links with the baby's father if he is in prison or mediation services for mother and father where a breakdown in their relationship has occurred, as well as bespoke hand out and shared care arrangements.
- 3.6 In addition, the staff team works to reduce the possibility of mothers re-offending by having regular parent key worker sessions, encouraging mothers to engage with education and

other aspects of their Sentence Plans and developing continuity of services such as Sure Start Children's Centres to support their post-release experiences. These factors are always in circulation as Action for Children undertake their daily practices. Over the research period, there was ample evidence of staff discussing, behaving and reflecting in ways that made these aspects of 'best practice' come alive in every decision, every conversation and every encounter.

- 3.7 As a point of future development, Action for Children could rethink ways the unit is able to shift the support/surveillance and parent/prisoner ambiguities that sometimes seem apparent in discussion with the mothers and staff. This may be facilitated by re-thinking 'best practice' in terms of ways to critique the directives, mandates and frameworks that are used to guide practice. Action for Children staff have already negotiated some of the rules and regulations that the prison service impose in order to tailor their provision in more conducive ways for the development of both baby and mother. So it seems useful to continue this critique by pushing professional boundaries as appropriate across their early years, health and social care practices.

3.8 **Objective 3**

*To develop recommendations for others in planning and commissioning similar services*

- 3.9 It seems important that recommendations for others in planning and commissioning similar MBU prison services would need to pay attention to:
- The make-up, education, training and continued professional development of the team
  - The Action for Children managerial structures necessary to support multi-professional and inter-agency working on the MBU and in the wider prison community;
  - The development of a national MBU network to share 'best practice' and work through wider dilemmas faced by organisations working alongside a whole range of diverse agencies to meet the needs of pre- and post-natal babies and their mothers whilst in prison
- 3.10 Action for Children need to articulate the difficulties, successes and challenges of their partnership working with the prison services. As a wider organisation, Action for Children state, 'We're only as effective as the relationships we build. Improving outcomes and achieving more equal life chances happens when we work in partnership, for a better future, for all children and young people, for as long as it takes' ([www.actionforchildren.org.uk](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk)). Recommendations for others in planning and commissioning similar services would need to pay close attention to the learning that has clearly occurred over the time Action for Children have been developing their services at Styal.
- 3.11 Their work seems to hinge around the senior staff's ability to forge and sustain workable and flexible relationships that draw in services to support the needs of babies and mothers. These, often bespoke partnerships are difficult to plan for and commission, which places heavy demands on the leadership team at Styal to subject themselves to further critical and ongoing self-reflection and self-evaluation. Action for Children need to attend to how they currently and may further develop ways to locally and more nationally disseminate their good practice across staff education / training / CPD opportunities; critiquing



managerial structures; developing opportunities to lead and contribute to the MBU network and finding ways to describe and characterise the complex relationship engendered between themselves and the wider prison services.

- 3.12 In 2009 Social Information Systems Ltd (SIS) was commissioned by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) to conduct a research study on the Team Around the Child (TAC) in the 11–14 year age group. TAC is a multi-agency service delivery model, which coordinates services at the level of each individual child/young person and family and signifies particular elements of good professional practice. SIS's survey showed that although TAC was widely used there was considerable variation in its application, but for the purposes of this appreciative inquiry for Action for Children, it is useful to examine how their prison-based MBU provision galvanizes multi-agency teams to work as a good model of service delivery, that involves:

- Joined-up assessment, usually a common assessment framework (CAF)
- Action for Children's Project Manager as the lead professional who coordinates the work
- A model that has the baby at the centre of the process
- A flexible multi-agency team that changes as the identified needs change
- Coordination at the point of delivery
- The development of an informal TAC support plan for the baby, mother and wider family

- 3.13 If Action for Children were to 'advise' in the planning and commissioning of similar services that would require bespoke provision, for example the individualised handout and shared care arrangements that are being constantly negotiated at Styal MBU. They would need to articulate the painstaking processes that invoke staff's knowledge and understanding of a young baby's PSE needs, their ability to mobilise this TAC-like provision of inter-agency working to put necessary systems in place to facilitate assessment of family members in the community and they would require the experience and confidence to work collaboratively with the prison service to ensure the smooth and unhindered hand-out of babies.

- 3.14 In considering the planning and commissioning of similar services, Action for Children would need to consider the make-up of the team - whether or not this team could be replicated elsewhere, given the mix of education / training and diverse skills-base and/or whether the personality mix contributes significantly to how it operates. The idea of TAC's Lead Professional (a role we would argue is very effectively undertaken by Action for Children's Mother and Baby Unit Project Manager) would need to be established in all similar services being commissioned, 'to provide a seamless and coordinated, coherent service and where services achieve the intended outcomes' (CWDC, 2009).

- 3.15 It would be imperative to unpack how the wider Action for Children and inter-agency team work in collaboration as well as independently on the MBU, which can sometimes involve difficult conversations. For example, throughout the research there were some aspects of effective teamwork that seemed resistant to analysis, such as ways emotionality moved between staff, mothers and babies and the mix of vibrant, confident, quieter and calm personalities. Other aspects were discussed but remained difficult to pin down, such as shared notions of professionalism, resilience and personal catharsis within the team.

- 3.16 The current team provides a strong base for the work Action for Children are able to undertake at Styal, but perhaps most importantly, the ways the team are managed seem to be of overriding significance. The Project Manager had a very determined vision for the MBU, which gives clear focus to the whole team. As recommended by the SIS/CWDC study (2009), perhaps looking to develop a model of unit-based as well as multi-agency training would help practitioners overcome their fears and address the discomfort of transgressing personal comfort zones. It could help them understand their own, as well as the roles of different agencies and services by bringing practitioners from different agencies together to build shared goals, a more consistent approach to the work on an MBU and would allow practitioners to network with agencies with which there is no history of partnership work.
- 3.17 **Objective 4**  
*To explore the possible link between services provided by Action for Children and the impact this may have on the reduction of re-offending and recidivism*
- 3.18 The MBU admits women with a range of minor but also more serious offences, which include those with relatively short sentences or those who have made a life-changing mistake and are perhaps less likely to reoffend. Action for Children recognise that their services are costly to the prison, but there could be a significant social return on investment on this cost in the form of shorter and longer term aspirations for the mothers and babies who have spent time on the MBU.
- 3.19 Firstly, the mothers and babies are given opportunities to work with a range of experienced Action for Children staff and related services, which will support them in developing their confidence as mothers, their attachments with their babies and older children, and their ability to sustain and develop their relationships with wider family members and other community services post-release. In the longer term, Action for Children hope that these opportunities for mothers and babies on the MBU will mean less re-offending because mothers have changed their aspirations for themselves and for their children. Consequently, although the services are costly to the prison service, Action for Children would hope that the initial statistics indicating that the percentage of women reoffending after having been in the MBU is significantly less than the percentage of those reoffending in the main prison, would indicate a noteworthy social return on the prison's initial investment.
- 3.20 The report pulls out the plethora of work that Action for Children currently undertakes that contributes to their aim to reduce re-offending and recidivism. For example, the close working relationships with Children Centres worker and health visitor, both of whom have wide networks of professionals who could support mothers and babies in various local communities post-release. They also work closely with the prison service to ensure the women follow their sentence plans, as these are deemed important in addressing the women's offending behaviours. Action for Children promote social justice by lobbying and campaigning for change and the staff on the MBU have a strong vision for and drive towards the eventual development of community-based MBUs, which informs the ways they are continuing to develop their services within prison.

- 3.21 A phase 2 and possible phase 3 of this initial appreciative inquiry have already been envisaged, which will enable more longitudinal post-release work to be examined. In order to create phases 2 and 3 that can demonstrate the impact of the mothers experiences on the MBU on their potential re-offending behaviours, it will be important to also follow a range of women with babies / young children who were not offered places on the MBU. Their stories may offer different post-release experiences.

#### **4 Research Project Management**

- 4.1 The nominated research project manager for Action for Children is Jill Thorburn. The research project manager for Manchester Metropolitan University was Karen Browne<sup>1</sup> and the management team later included Rachel Holmes and Liz Jones.
- 4.2 Project Participants\_(all names, with the exception of researchers, are pseudonyms)

##### *MBU Staff*

Action for Children Project Manager  
Community Children's Centre worker  
Mother and Baby Crèche Worker  
Senior Mother and Baby Unit Nursery Nurse  
Local Health Visitor  
Senior Mother and Baby Unit Parent Support Worker  
HM Prison Service Styal Governor

##### *Mothers and babies on the MBU*

Thien and Mai  
Stephanie and Eden (with older children Nathaniel and Chrissy outside)  
Ruby and Anna  
Violet and Carl (with an older child Ryva outside)  
Kay and Dillon  
Rebecca and Bobby  
Sara and Ben  
Alison with twins Kyle and Lucy (Darren is the twin's father)

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge the contributions of John Powell in supporting the initiative at the outset and in the negotiations with Action for Children to bring in the wider MMU research team.