

# AT THE END OF THE LINE

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Independent Evaluation  
of the Pact Helpline  
January 2017

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[www.prisonadvice.org.uk/forms/contact-our-helpline](http://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/forms/contact-our-helpline)

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## **Acknowledgements**

This evaluation would not have been possible without the co-operation and support of the staff at the Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact), who helped facilitate aspects of this research.

I am particularly grateful to Dali Kaur and the Pact Helpline service users who completed the online survey and participated in interviews. Your time was greatly appreciated.



# FOREWORD

In 2014, a London-based community organisation called the Prisoners' Families & Friends Service (PFFS) was rescued from closure by Pact, thanks to generous grants from LHF (London Housing Foundation), an anonymous trust, and several smaller grants and donations. PFFS had been operating for many years out of premises they called The Swan Centre, on Trinity Street, in the Borough area of South London. Their work to support the families of prisoners took on several forms. They had set up an innovative volunteer-based support service for families of defendants in many of the London courts. In this way, they were on hand to make contact with families on the very day that they became 'prisoners' families'. Befriending volunteers were then on hand, to provide one-to-one support, over a coffee or on the phone, to families who found themselves struggling to cope with the multiple shocks and disadvantages of having a loved one sent to prison. There was a 'coffee morning', a regular drop in session, that took place in the homely room at the back of the Swan Centre. And there was a helpline, offering a listening ear, and sound information and advice.

Pact and PFFS had worked together, on and off, for many years. I had once put forward the suggestion that we merge, as it seemed self-evident that we were often supporting the same people. This was not well received at the time, and so instead, I proposed that we find ways of collaborating so that our limited resources could be combined to better effect.

Some time later, the PFFS Chair of Trustees, Mr Peter Droop, contacted me to ask for a meeting, at which he asked whether Pact would be prepared to take PFFS into management. He explained that the climate was simply too harsh for an organisation of their size to survive. The PFFS Board could also see that the best interests of prisoners' families would be served by bringing together prison and community based services into a single organisation.

At that time, Pact's services for prisoners' families were delivered entirely at or inside prisons, within prison visitors centres, visits halls, or through casework and courses. The possibility that we might reach the same people earlier in their struggles ( 'upstream' as it is now fashionable to describe it), via the courts, and also in the communities where they live, was very attractive. As was the idea of integrating prison and community-based services, to enable us to develop a uniquely coherent 'through the wall' model of service. Much less attractive was the financial burden of having to take on services for which funding was fast running out, and that were struggling through a lack of development and investment over many years.

Pact's trustees were clear. They could see that the idea of bringing these services together made perfect sense. But they could also see that without financial underpinning, adding an even bigger fundraising burden was simply too risky. And of course, they were right.

And so together, PFFS and Pact sought the support of a small number of charitable trusts and foundations which we knew could take decisions quickly and flexibly enough, before PFFS funds ran out. Following several meetings, papers, budget calculations and presentations, a small number of trusts, including LHF (London Housing Foundation) and the Tudor Trust, agreed to back us.

Thanks to their generous support, and their willingness to take decisive action in response to a unique emergency, the services developed by PFFS in the courts and community in London over several decades have survived. More than that, thanks to hard-working Pact staff and volunteers, and the support of our funders, they have grown and developed. At the time of writing, our volunteers work in 16 London courts, providing vital information and consolation to thousands of families a year. Our befrienders, who now work primarily via the telephone, support people in crisis well beyond London's borders, as trusted, confidential professional friends. But the biggest success of all has been the PFFS Helpline, which is now known simply as the Pact Helpline.

At the time of the *merger*, or to put it more transparently, the *acquisition* by Pact of the PFFS assets and liabilities, I was in two minds about whether the helpline was a service we should take on. I was of course aware that the Offenders Families Helpline had been commissioned by NOMS. I was conscious of the risk, or at least, the perception that we might be duplicating a service. However, having listened to service users, our staff and volunteers involved in service delivery, I came to the view that we should sustain the PFFS Helpline, at least for long enough to commission an independent review of whether it was meeting a need.

This is that review, and the answer is quite clear.

As this report shows, we were contacted over 4,000 times in 2016, by phone, email and through our website. What this study also shows is that as a result of families contacting us for support, our Helpline Co-ordinator and her volunteer team made over 3,000 follow on calls, including call backs, and many more calls to prisons on their behalf. For many of the desperately worried families who came to Pact for support, we were much more than the usual idea of what a helpline does. We provided information, advice, and emotional support, of course. For many families, we did much more. We acted as an advocate, and professional friend. We linked people to our services inside the prisons, to the services of other agencies with specialist expertise, and to hundreds of governors, prison staff, healthcare teams and prison chaplains. For families who simply couldn't get their concerns heard or taken seriously within the walls of the prisons where their loved ones were being kept, this has been vital. And in many cases, this advocacy was sustained for weeks or months. For many families of prisoners, Pact has been more than a helpline. We have been a lifeline, and in many cases, the only advocate and source of support who understands how to effectively navigate the troubled and complex prison system in which their loved ones are being held.

I am indebted to Dr Carlie Goldsmith for her thoughtful and balanced evaluation, and for the time she gave to it which has far exceeded what we had a right to expect. As well as the good news about the service, there are some very useful pointers for us on how we can develop. I am grateful to our wonderful staff team, particularly Dali Kaur, who we threw in the deep end, and who has achieved a small miracle. Most of all, I want to thank our amazing volunteers, including those who work with us on a RoTL basis (Release on Temporary License), and others who have survived the experience of being prisoners' families, and others who do this work out of a sense of compassion and a desire to make a difference. Our volunteers come from all walks of life, and they bring a diverse mix of life experiences and skills. But one skill they all share is that they know how to walk a mile in someone else's shoes – including the shoes of the mothers, partners and children of prisoners, prisoners themselves, and the beleaguered prison staff, chaplains, and others working in the justice system. As this report reveals, Pact Helpline Volunteers are not only effective in providing good information, advice and guidance. They also know how to give people hope, and sometimes, that means saving lives.

**Andy Keen-Downs,  
Chief Executive  
Pact**



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# INTRODUCTION

This report sets out the findings of an independent evaluation and review of the Pact (Prison Advice and Care Trust) Helpline that was conducted in January 2017.

The Pact Helpline is a national service that provides confidential advice and support to individuals affected by the imprisonment of a relative or friend. The helpline aims to:

- Reduce feelings of social isolation amongst callers by providing a service that provides the necessary support to prisoners' families.
- Provide callers with the information, support and guidance necessary to cope in a crisis.
- Develop callers' understanding of non-statutory sources of support and the terminology and processes used in the criminal justice system to empower and enable them to navigate it effectively.
- Encouraging callers to engage with statutory agencies, such as social services and probation, so they can access the full range of support services available to them.

The purpose of this evaluation is to:

- Independently verify project data collected between the 1<sup>st</sup> of January and the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2016.
- Provide analysis of caller and project data to examine who is using the service, what they are using the service for and what the outcomes of service use are.
- Evaluate the extent to which the helpline is meeting its stated aims and identify strengths and areas of potential improvement.
- Provide recommendations for the future development of the service.

# 1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Between 2003 and 2015, the PFFH was run by Prisoners Families and Friends Services (PFFS). In 2015, PFFS merged with the Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact) and the helpline was transferred as part of this process.

The Prison Advice and Care Trust is a registered charity that has worked with prisoners and their families in England and Wales since 1898. Alongside the Helpline, Pact delivers a range of other complimentary projects designed to support the needs of prisoners and their families. This includes:

- Befriending service for prisoners' families
- Prisoners' families peer support group
- Court service
- A network of family engagement workers (FEWs) in prisons who help support prisoners to establish and maintain contact with friends and family during their sentence.

## 1.2 Delivery and Management

The helpline is run from the Pact London office in Peckham and is managed by a Helpline Coordinator. This person is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the helpline, project reporting and promotion of the service, as well as the recruitment, training and supervision of the team of volunteers who respond to contacts and manage cases. In 2016, 20 volunteers worked on the helpline, providing advice and support to the friends and families of prisoners. Volunteers worked for a total of 2,496 hours over the year – an average of 125 hours per volunteer.

Overall responsibility for the helpline sits with the London services manager.

Friends and families of prisoners contact the helpline in four main ways:

- Call on a Freephone telephone number
- Online via email
- Online via a webform
- Via letter to the Pact office

People can contact the helpline anonymously and are not required to provide information that may identify them or their relative in prison, but they may choose themselves to disclose. A contact sheet is completed for each user of the service. This records basic information such as relationship to prisoner, contacts, concerns



and action taken. If a query or question is resolved in the call, the case is considered closed. If, however, follow-up activities are needed, the case remains live until all actions are completed to the satisfaction of the helpline coordinator and the service user. An established procedure is in place to identify and manage safeguarding issues as they arise.

All helpline volunteers attend a compulsory two-day training to help them prepare for the role. Volunteers also receive:

- One-to-one supervision with the helpline coordinator every six weeks
- Access to further training and development opportunities run by Pact.

### **1.3 Promoting the helpline**

In 2016, the Pact Helpline was promoted in the following ways:

- Via the Pact website and Pact Facebook and Twitter accounts
- By encouraging 'likes' and sharing of the Pact Facebook page
- By making helpline leaflets available in all prison visitors' centres
- By distributing helpline leaflets to local authorities' adults' and children's' service teams and the top 50 criminal law chambers
- Through a story on the BBC website and in Inside Times.
- By signposting families using Pact's other services for friends and family to the helpline.

### **1.4 Evaluation Methodology**

This evaluation utilised quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain the necessary insight to assess whether it had met its stated aims. The strands of work were:

1. Secondary analysis of all collected project data, including project database, monthly monitoring reports and other documentation.
2. An online survey that asked for callers' views and opinions of: the quality and delivery of the service; the impact of using the helpline on them and their relative in prison; areas in which the Pact Helpline could be developed and improved for future users (n119).
3. Semi-structured telephone interviews with a sample of Pact Helpline callers (n15).

After the data was generated, a statistical analysis was conducted on the survey data and all interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically.

#### 1.4 Research Ethics

This research was designed and conducted in adherence with the British Sociological Associations Statement of Ethical Practice. This included being clear about the aims and purpose of the evaluation, obtaining informed consent from all participants, and protecting confidentiality and privacy.



## 2. SERVICE USE

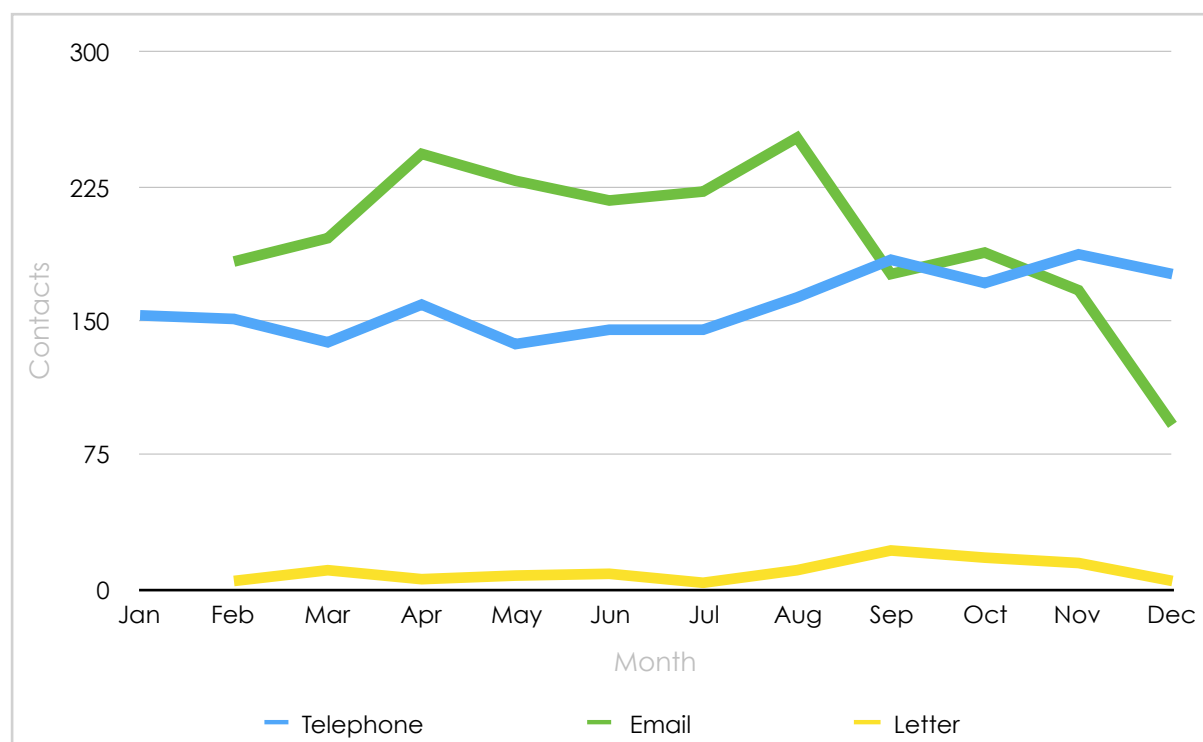
This section provides the findings from the secondary analysis of the project data to examine levels of service use, information on service users and service activity.

### 2.1 Number and forms of contact

Between the 1st January and 31st December 2016, the helpline was contacted 4,187 times. Of these,

- 2,164 contacts were made by email<sup>1</sup>
- 1,909 contacts were made by telephone<sup>2</sup>
- 114 contacts were made by letter<sup>3</sup>.

Figure 1. Number of contacts by telephone, email and letter by month, 2016



<sup>1</sup> The monthly figures were provided to the evaluator based on analysis conducted by the helpline coordinator of the contact sheets completed during each contact.

<sup>2</sup> A database giving full details of the telephone calls, recorded by month for 2016 was provided to the evaluator. This included a range of information including sex, relationship to prisoner, callers' concerns, follow-up activity.

<sup>3</sup> The monthly figures were provided to the evaluator based on analysis conducted by the helpline coordinator of the contact sheets completed for each contact.

As Figure 1 shows, email was the most popular way for service users to contact the service. The highest demand for the service via email was in August and the lowest demand was in December.

Telephone calls were the second most popular form of contact. The level of telephone contact remained relatively stable across 2016, and from the end of October until December more service users called than emailed the service.

In addition to email and telephone contact, a very small number of people contacted the service by letter. This too remained relatively stable across the year.

It is likely that the number of contacts provided in the project monitoring data is an underestimation of the total number of contacts to the helpline in 2016. This is because:

- Some of the data was not in the records, for example, the number of emails received in January were not recorded.
- Recording high numbers of contacts without an e-log system or other custom made database is likely to result in under-recording.

Analysis of the data recorded for telephone contacts shows that 80% of the contacts were first-time users of the service, 10% were repeat users and for the remaining 10% this information was unknown.

It would have been ideal if the system of data capture and recording for the telephone contacts had also been used for email and letter contacts as this would have enabled a more robust verification of service numbers and better understanding of service users. It is clear, however, that given the demand for the service and small staff and volunteer base, that this was unachievable. It has been recommended (see p32) that all information management systems and levels of



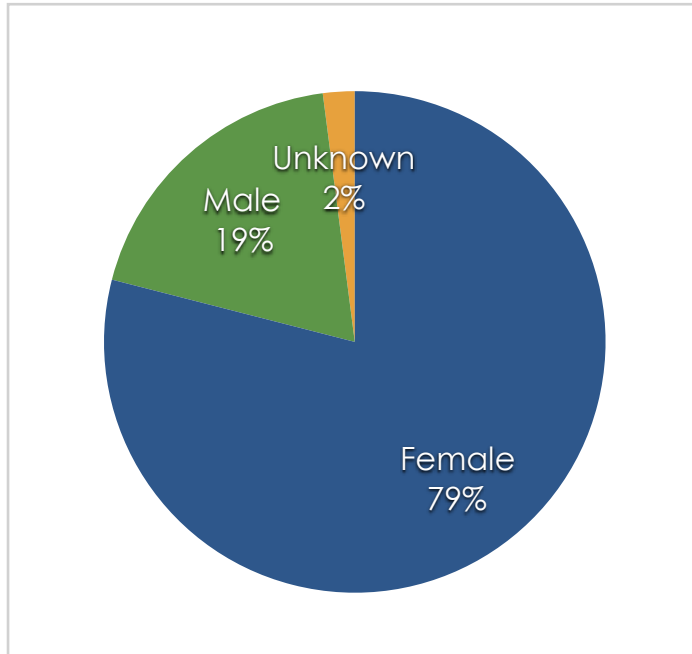
staffing are reviewed and updated as the service develops and expands. What is clear, however, is that this volume of contacts is an indication of the level of need amongst prisoners' families for a service of this kind and the value of the helpline to them.

## 2.2 Service users

The findings presented in this section of the report are based on analysis of the telephone caller data only.

### 2.2.1 Sex of service user

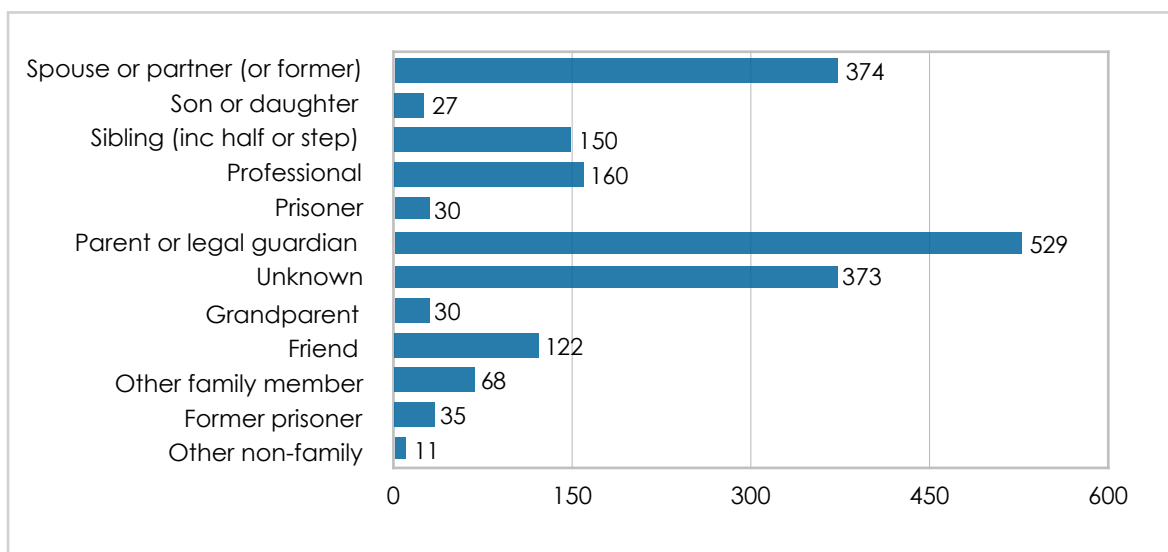
Figure 2. Sex of service users, 2016.



As Figure 2 shows, nearly 80% of people who called the service were women and just under 19% were men.

### 2.2.2 Relationship to prisoner

Figure 3. Service user's relationship to prisoner, 2016.





This data shows that of the 1,536 callers to the Pact helpline where the information was known, 77% (n1189) were from prisoners' families.

- Parents and legal guardians made 44% of all family calls and were the largest group to seek advice, information and support from the helpline.
- Spouses or partners (or ex-spouses or partners) were the second largest group making 31% of family member calls.
- 10% of total calls were from professionals working with prisoners' families.
- 4% of total calls received were from current or former prisoners.
- The 'Other non-family' category included employers and landlords.

### 2.2.3 Location of service user

Data on the location of the caller was collected and recorded from April 2016 onwards.

Table 1. Location of callers to the Pact helpline April – December, 2016.

<b>Area</b>	<b>N of calls</b>
London	579
South East	73
South West	84
Midlands	125
North	185
Scotland	4
Wales	54
RIO	2
Non-UK	6
Unknown	329

The table shows that the majority of phone users called the service from London in 2016. Excluding 'Unknowns', the second largest demand was in the North of England, followed by the Midlands.

Figure 4. % Location of helpline callers April to December, 2016.

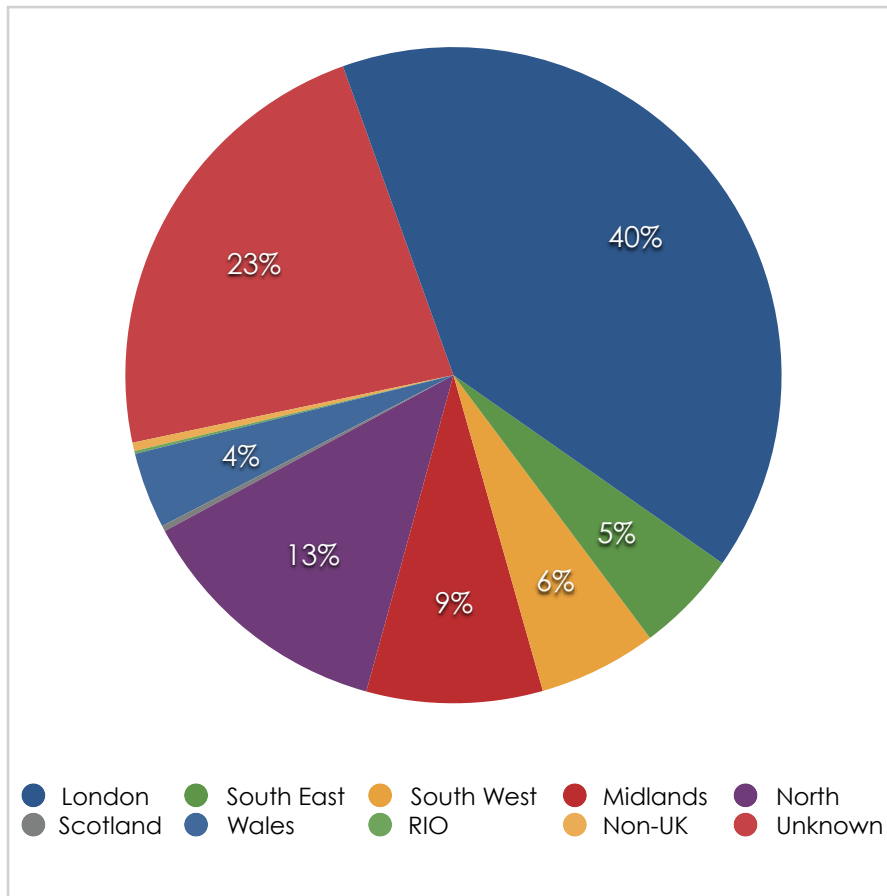
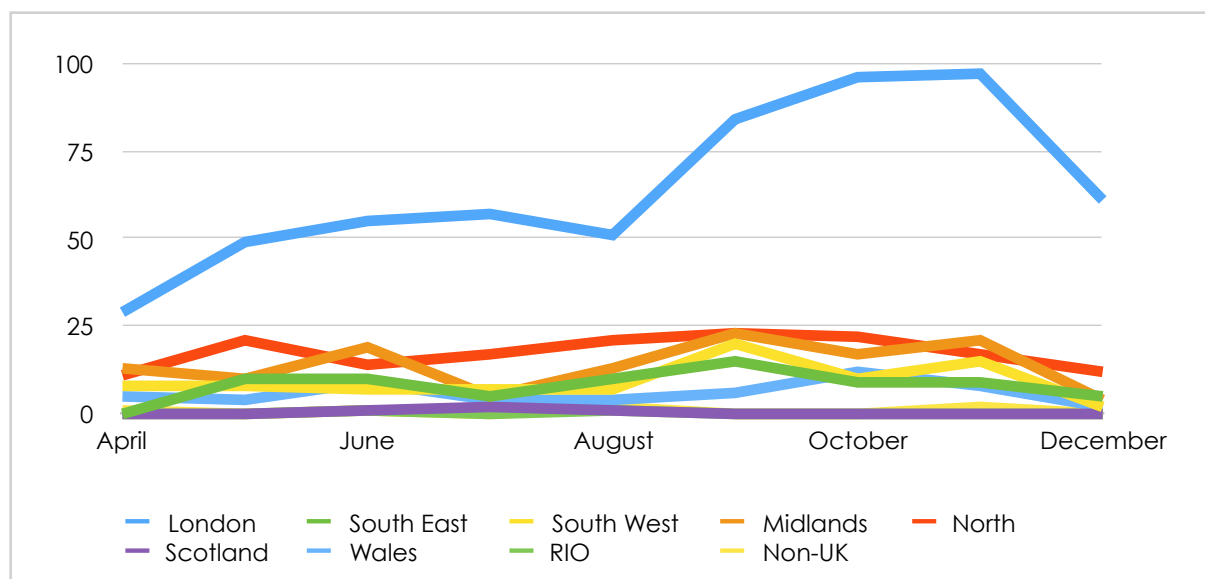


Figure 4 shows this information as a percentage. It shows 40% of all calls to the helpline were from London.

Figure 5. Location of caller by month, 2016.



Analysis of caller location over time shows that demand for the service remained relatively stable across all regions, but increased in London between April and August, when demand dropped back.

### 2.2.4 Reason for call

Figure 6. Callers concerns, 2016.

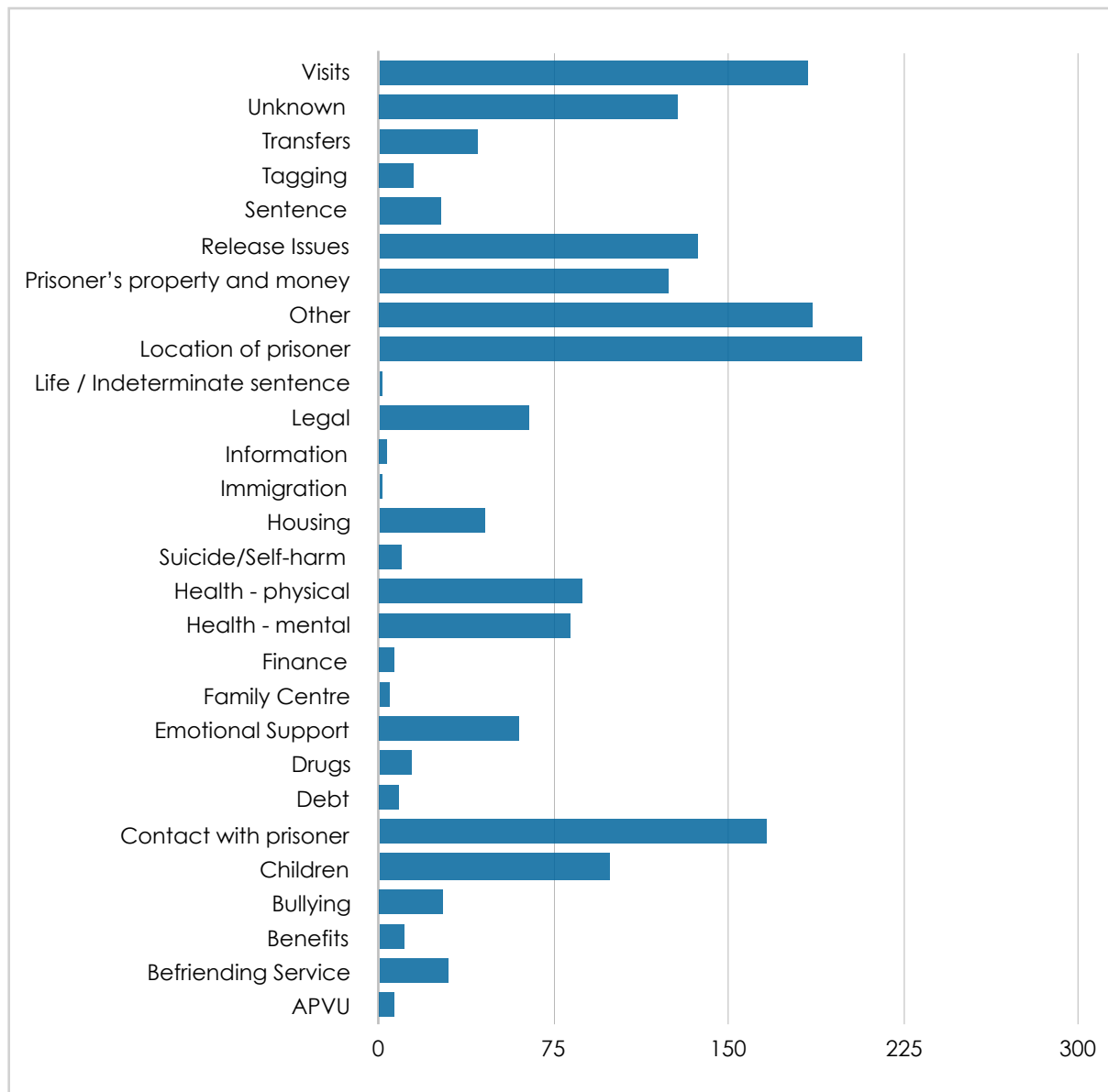


Figure 6 shows that people called the helpline for information, advice and support of a whole range of issues to do with the prisoner. As it shows, the three key areas of concern for callers were: i) location of prisoner; ii) prison visits; iii) contact with prisoner. This shows that callers to the service were keen to establish and maintain contact with their relative in prison. Following on from this, prisoner's property and money and release issues were also significant areas of concern for callers.

Getting advice, information and support on issues relating to children were another high priority. Analysis of the data, although details were not always available, shows that this included concerns about:

- Whether to inform children about the familial imprisonment
- Advice on how to tell children that a parent has gone to prison
- Information requests for resources to help children understand about parental imprisonment
- Concerns about the impact of imprisonment on a child/children.

In addition, callers contacted the helpline for advice and support for health and psychological issues. This included:

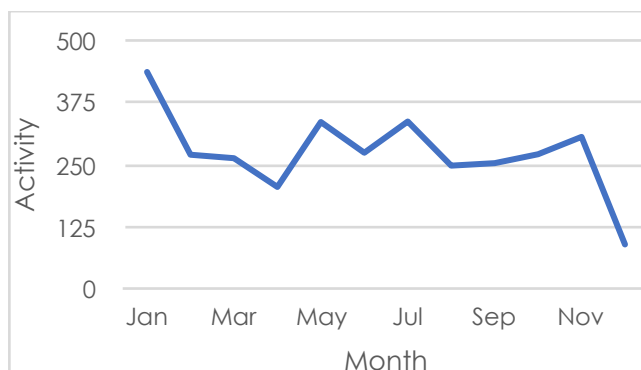
- Concerns about treatment for physical health conditions in prison and questions about healthcare in prison
- The need for emotional support to alleviate caller distress and access to befriending and other support services.
- Concerns about the mental health of prisoners and specific concerns about prisoners who were suicidal and/or self-harming.

### 2.3 Service activity

Helpline staff and volunteers recorded activity on contact sheets. The types of recorded activity included were: follow-up calls or emails to prisons, professionals, other voluntary and statutory services, Pact Family Engagement Workers (FEWs) and return calls to family and friends.

Collation of this data shows that between January and December 2016, helpline staff and volunteers made a total of 3,289 actions following on from initial contact from a family member.<sup>4</sup>

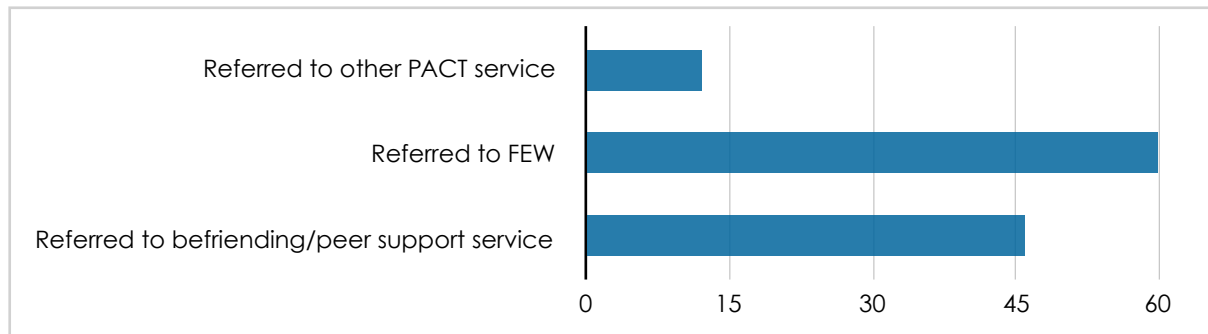
Figure 7. Helpline follow-up activity, 2016.



<sup>4</sup> Analysis of the contact sheets conducted by the helpline coordinator.

Again, it is likely that this under-represents the actual level of follow-up activity undertaken by helpline staff and volunteers.

Figure 8. Callers referred to other Pact services, 2016.



- Of the 1,909 callers in 2016, 118 were referred to other Pact services
- The highest number of referrals were to family engagement workers.

Figure 9. Callers signposted and referred to prison departments and other statutory services.

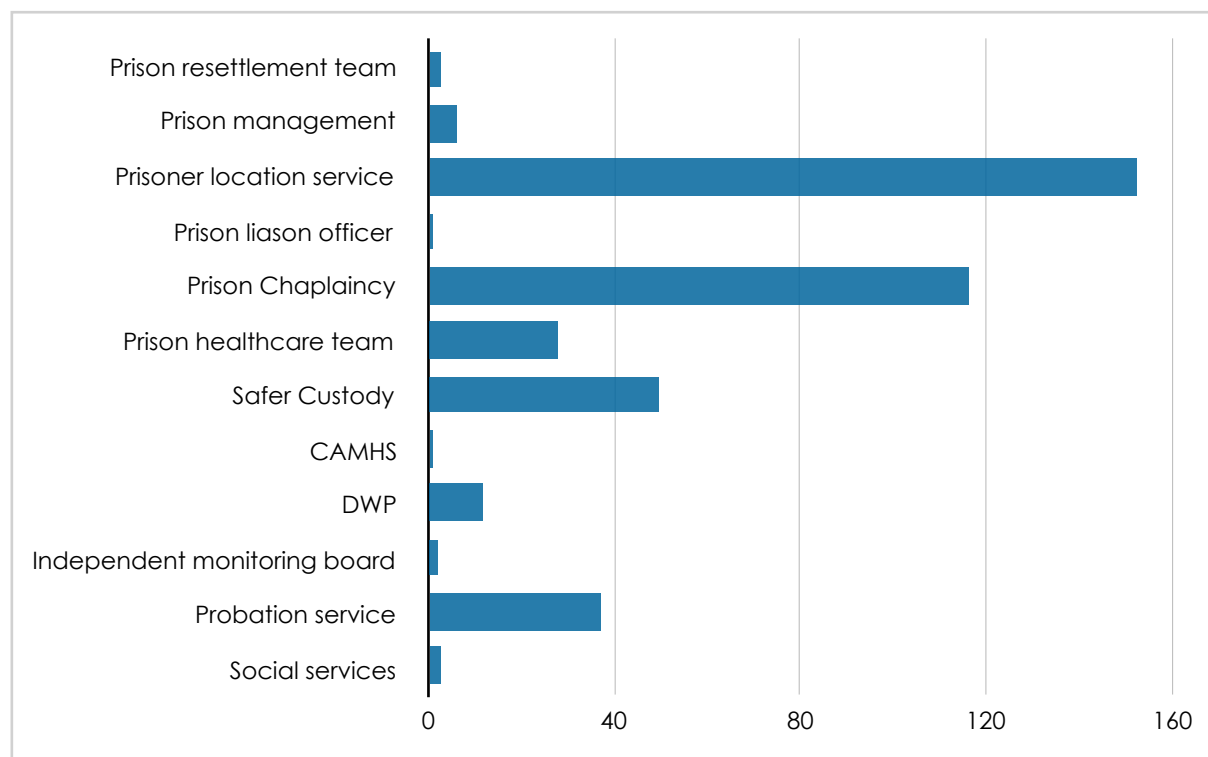
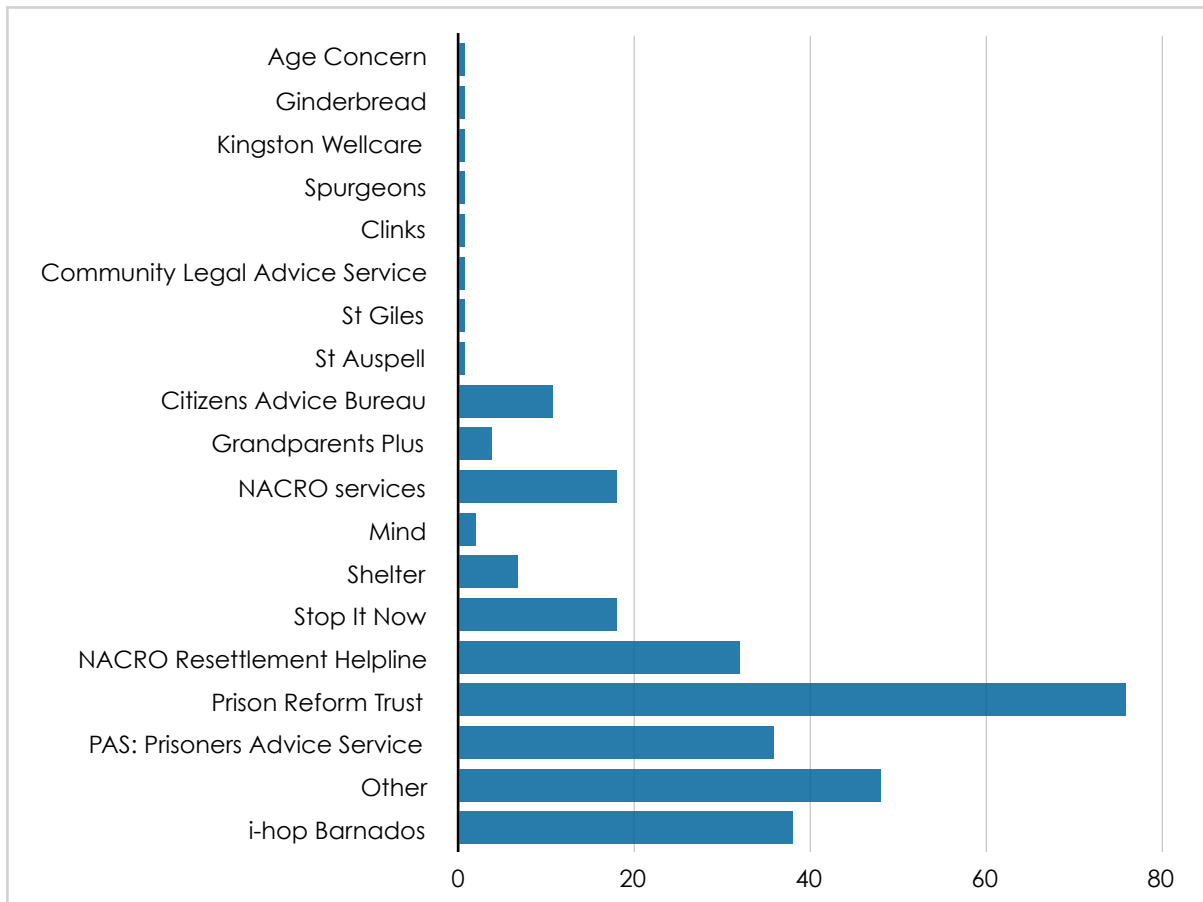




Figure 10. Callers signposted and referred to non-statutory organisations, 2016.



# 3. REVIEW AND EVALUATION FINDINGS

This section combines the findings from the in-depth review and analysis of project records with the primary data generated for this evaluation (interviews and online survey) to examine the extent to which the helpline provided a good service to its users and met its aims. It should be noted here that the data used for this section of the report was almost exclusively (133 out of 134 total participants) generated by service users who telephoned the service. There is no reason to suggest that had the data included those who contacted the service in other ways, by email and letter, that the findings in this section would have been different, however, there is no way this can be verified.

## 3.1 Views of the service

The survey asked for respondents' views on the accessibility of the service, how the service was delivered and the overall quality of the service they received from the PFFH. Analysis showed that:

- 100% of respondents who answered the question (n99) strongly agreed or agreed that that the helpline was easy to access
- 94% (n98) strongly agreed or agreed that Pact staff listened to them
- 94% (n98) strongly agreed or agreed that Pact staff treated them with respect
- Of those respondents who required a call back (n71) 92% strongly agreed or agreed that helpline staff or volunteers had called them back when they had agreed to
- 86% of respondents rated the service 4 or 5 on a scale where 5=excellent and 0 = poor
- 11 out of 15 interviewees were very positive about their experience of calling the helpline and rated the service very good or ou

In addition, survey respondents provided 60 positive comments (out of 68 comments in total) on the experiences and aspects of the service they had received from the helpline. Analysis of these responses shows that service users considered the helpline to be:

1. A professional service that provided very good advice and support
2. Staffed by people who treated them with empathy and care

3. More accessible because it provided a telephone service as well as other ways to contact.

## **A professional service**

Twenty-five positive survey comments focused on the quality of the service respondents they felt they had received when using the helpline.

**Excellent support. 5/5 for helping.** (Survey comment)

**Provided invaluable service.** (Survey comment)

**Very helpful in helping me find out about my son. Also, kept me informed about what was happening.** (Survey comment)

**Very happy with the helpline. I was treated with respect and called back numerous times and left messages.** (Survey comment)

**Brilliant service. Wish I'd known about you sooner.** (Survey comment)

This was echoed by 11 out of 15 of the interviewees, who were very positive about the helpline and the level of service they received.

"My son was in Pentonville but he wasn't receiving his mail, mail orders or clothes that we were sending him, so I contacted them to help me sort it out. They [the helpline] got involved and when I called the prison back it was all sorted. It all got sorted. I don't think it would have if I hadn't gone to them. It was good because they would call back when they said they would. It was important...you know some people, they are busy and have load of other things to do, but they did what they said." (*Interviewee three*)

"The prison staff themselves are appalling, they do not know the answers to questions even about their own prisons. There is a mountain of non-information – not mis-information, just non-information and the prisons are no help. For example, I didn't know how to get things to him, to help him, and the prison would not answer me...[name of volunteer] was able to tell me exactly what to do. It enabled me to cope with those first few weeks, to know that there were people out there who cared. It gave me that lifeline." (*Interviewee four*)

"She [helpline staff] understood what the problem was straight away. She asked me to read the letter out to her over the phone, which I did. The lady was most helpful." (*Interviewee one*)

## Being treated with empathy and care

Thirty-five survey respondents provided additional positive comments about the way helpline staff and volunteers treated them when they used the service. The comments show that helpline staff and volunteers struck the right balance between offering professional and impartial advice and helping callers to feel listened to and supported. This is a difficult balancing act, but one the data shows the helpline gets right on most occasions.

"[Name of volunteer] was very caring and gave me good advice. They reassured me about things I was concerned about and also followed up and called me to update me." *(Survey comment)*

"The helpline advisor was amazing and helpful." *(Survey comment)*

"[Name of volunteer] was fantastic; she called up the prison on my behalf and got back to me when she said she would. She really put my mind at ease." *(Survey comment)*

"[Name of volunteer] always called me back to see how I was doing, which was wonderful." *(Survey comment)*

What these comments also show is how important it was for callers that the helpline kept in touch and responded to queries as agreed.

Again, 11 out of 15 interviewees reported very positive experiences when talking to helpline staff and volunteers.

"She [volunteer] responded very, very gently. She was non-judgemental and easy-going, not breezy, not too pushy. Just the right attitude." *(Interviewee four)*

"They offer moral support; they are always there. There is no stigma. Sometimes, if you speak to friends who do not have anyone in prison, there is a judgement; they are judgmental and it's not what you need. They do not make you feel bad." *(Interviewee ten)*

"I didn't know what to expect...I was really nervous when I first phoned but I shouldn't have worried. [Name of volunteer] was just brilliant. She didn't say much at first, she just listened, but, I don't know what it was and this is going to sound stupid...[pause] she was on my side." *(Interviewee 12)*

As these quotes illustrate, prisoners' friends and family can feel judged and stigmatised by their experiences and this, in turn, can make them feel nervous, unsure and reluctant to seek help. It also highlights how important it is for the service to be available and consistent. Having staff and volunteers able to work in this challenging context is a real asset to the Pact helpline and this suggests that the training and supervision regime delivered by the Helpline Coordinator is successful, both at developing these skills in volunteers, and supporting them to deliver non-judgemental and caring support over time.

### **Being 'on the end of the line'**

Interviewees were asked why they chose to contact the service in the way that they did – either by telephone, email or letter. All the interviewees had telephoned the service and their answers provide an interesting insight into why having a number to call remains crucial to some prisoners' family and friends.

Four out of 15 interviewees did not have access to a computer and all described feeling cut-off from other sources of help because they were exclusively online services there were not accessible to them. Interviewee one was a lady in her early 70s who had terminal cancer. Her son had recently been moved from one prison to another over two hundred miles away from where she lived. This was incredibly stressful for them both and she wanted advice on whether there was anything they could do to have him transferred back. She was given a booklet containing lists of support services for prisoners' families when she last visited her son.

“Phoning was the easiest way for me. I don't have a computer and I'm not going to get one, pay for it and pay for the box to be connected to the internet. Not with what's going on; it's not worth it. In the booklet, it did have details of other places I could go for advice but they were all online, it was so frustrating and totally useless to me because I don't have a computer. The helpline was the only option.” *(Interviewee one)*

Six out of 15 interviewees said they had initially gone online to try and find answers to their questions, but that the information found was unclear and confusing. Interviewee seven, for example, initially looked online when she became concerned that her husband was not receiving his medication in prison.



"I Google-searched doctors in prison and there was a lot of information, none of it any help – I didn't understand it.... I went on the prison website, but again, nothing. I didn't know what to do [sigh] and by that point I wasn't sleeping, I was so worried he would have a stroke. I just needed to talk to someone and found the Pact website –the number is on it. I needed to speak to a human being." (*Interviewee seven*)

A minority of interviewees (n4) and survey respondents (n6) were less satisfied with the service they had received from the Pact helpline. One interviewee was very disappointed that the helpline had been unable to help her son find accommodation on release.

"The prison my son went to is the only one I know of that does not have an in-house social worker. There needs to be more help for prisoners or their families; my experience is that if you face does not fit there is no help. I had to do everything myself to help house my son; ringing round hostels, finding him somewhere to live. The helpline might help other people, but it didn't help me." (*Interviewee nine*)

Three interviewees were dissatisfied with the service because they had not received a call back when this had been agreed.

"They were useless. I needed someone on the day and by that time I'd sorted everything out for myself. I called and they said someone would get back to me the next day or the day after, and they didn't. The thing was, I had the number ready and I had it in my phone and at the time when everything was going on, and I said to my family, don't worry we'll get through it because there is help, but when I rang up no-one phoned back and it was really frustrating." (*Interviewee two*)

The remaining six out of 100 survey respondents rated the service 0 or 1 when 5=excellent and 0=poor. Examination of the individual survey responses shows that the primary reason for the four respondents who left additional comments to

explain the rating was that they felt the helpline had not contacted them after agreeing to do so.

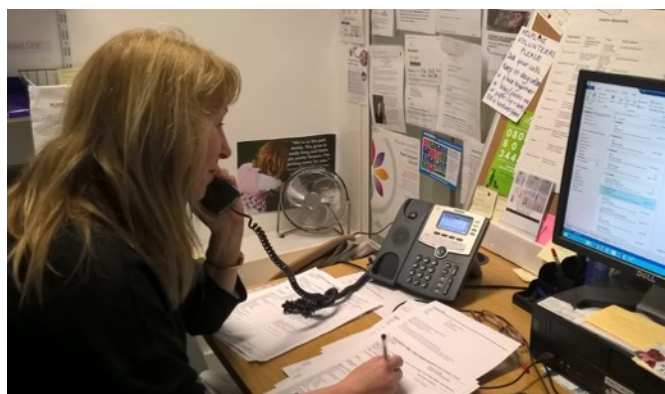
Both issues highlight the bigger challenges faced by a service that supports this group.

1. Some of the problems faced by prisoners and their families, such as housing, are extremely serious and cannot be solved by a helpline service, so managing expectations is crucial.
2. Not following up calls as agreed can leave service users feeling disappointed and frustrated.

In addition, a primary function of the helpline is to signpost and refer prisoners' family on to specialist support from other statutory and non-statutory services, to the prison service and to other services provided by Pact. The helpline coordinator was clear her aim was to ensure that all calls were followed up as agreed, but highlighted that this was sometimes difficult when referring callers on to other services and organisations. When referrals are made to organisations where there is a strong relationship, helpline staff do check that follow-up calls and actions have been taken. When that relationship is less established, this process is much patchier. Following up referrals made to prisons was viewed as particularly difficult, as prison service staff were unresponsive to attempts from helpline staff to ensure that issues were picked up and resolved. The helpline coordinator felt that tightening up this process should be a priority because of the risk that service users could feel let down. However, it was conceded that the level of high demand for the service combined with internal capacity and lack of responsiveness did make it difficult.

## Conclusion

This evidence shows that overall, the Pact Helpline provides an excellent service to the majority of its callers. Staff and volunteers offer a non-judgemental approach that avoids adding to the stigma and distress many service users feel because of their family member's imprisonment. The kindness, care and respect shown, as well as the efforts to ensure that issues are resolved satisfactorily, is commendable. Ensuring that the capacity and partnerships are there to make this the case for all service users should be a priority.



Pact Helpline Volunteer

# DID THE PACT HELPLINE MEET ITS AIMS?

## 3.2 Aim 1

### **Reduce feelings of social isolation amongst callers by providing a service that provides the necessary support to prisoners' families.**

Research consistently shows that people affected by familial imprisonment can feel socially isolated (Codd, 2013; Murray, 2005; Smith *et al*, 2007). Feeling socially isolated and emotionally distressed by the imprisonment of a relative was common amongst the helpline users interviewed for this evaluation.

Thirteen out of 15 interviewees, for example, described feeling isolated from other people when their family member was in prison. Furthermore, as the quote below illustrates, such feelings are not confined to the initial events but continued into the sentence and beyond.

“No-one in our family had ever been to prison before – this was a massive shock. I couldn't talk to our friends about it at the time because they wouldn't have understood. I felt ashamed; deeply ashamed – I still do. No-one wants to admit that their child is in prison.” *(Interviewee seven)*

Nine out of 11 of the interviewees who reported positive experiences of the helpline articulated that the existence of the Pact helpline helped to reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness in them. In addition, the data showed that even if they chose not to use the service again, the knowledge that they could provide a great deal of comfort.

“We were very, very upset [when family member was sent to prison] but knowing there was someone we could talk to made it easier for us. They are always there for us and it makes you feel less alone. Like there's someone on your side.” *(Interviewee five)*

“Pact made me feel like I was not alone and I could always speak to someone if needed.” *(Interviewee six)*

Two of the interviewees had been referred to other Pact services that support families in the community. Interviewee eight felt incredibly isolated when she called the helpline because her family member had a history of mental illness, which she believed is what caused the imprisonment. Part of the support she received from the helpline was being made aware of the coffee mornings Pact runs for prisoners' families. These, she said, have made her feel less isolated.

"I have been to some Pact coffee mornings; that was nice. Being with other families going through the same thing. We've been on days out, done things that you wouldn't think of if you were on your own and we all offer each other moral support. When someone you love is in prison, you serve the sentence, it's not just them."

Further insights into the significance of this for helpline users can be gleaned from the following case notes, extracted from the project monitoring data.

Caller rang the helpline very distressed and tearful. She explained that her son is in prison and she is struggling to cope. I listened to her and it became clear that she just wanted someone to talk to and time to express her feelings about his incarceration. I explained that we have a coffee morning that may be beneficial for her as she can meet other mothers in the same situation, she said that she would very much like that. I also explained our befriending service to her and she asked me to refer her. I said to her that she can call our helpline for advice and support and she can also email us. I have since received an email from the caller thanking me for my kindness and support.

*(Volunteer notes, monthly report)*

One hundred and eleven referrals were made into other Pact services in 2016. This included 46 referrals to the befriending service and peer support group.

The service also reduced social isolation by helping service users to stay in contact with their family member in prison. This was achieved in several ways:

- Sixty referrals were made to a Pact Family Engagement Worker (FEW) in 2016. The role of the FEW is to keep families together, strengthen relationships and work to reduce the risk of people re-offending when they leave prison.

- Supporting service users to visit their family member in prison by providing information on prison location and visiting processes, referring to assisted visiting schemes and family visiting days.
- Supporting and encouraging service users to maintain contact by telephone or letter.

The survey data illustrated the impact of this on respondents.

- 77% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the advice and support they received from the Pact helpline made them feel less socially isolated.
- 73% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the advice and support they received from the Pact helpline made them feel less lonely.
- 82% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the support received from the Pact helpline helped them maintain contact with their relative in prison.
- Furthermore, 35 respondents (out of 99) visited their family member in prison as a direct result of the advice and support provided by the helpline. One respondent contacted their family member by letter as direct result of the advice and support provided by the helpline.

It is important to recognise that reducing feelings of social isolation in service users and making it easier for the families and friends of prisoners to establish and maintain contact with their family member in prison can have a positive impact on prisoners and the wider family.

- 61% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the advice and support they received from the Pact helpline had made it easier for their family member to cope in prison.

Interviewee 14 provided some insight into this during her interview. She contacted the helpline when her husband started his sentence.

“They contacted the family worker in the prison and she was able to talk to my husband and let him know that we were okay. I knew he’d worry. It was such a weight off my mind that someone was there with him. He told me later that it made it easier for him too.” *(Interviewee 14)*



## Conclusion

The evidence shows that the Pact Helpline did provide advice and support that reduced feelings of social isolation in many of its callers. It did this by listening to people affected by familial imprisonment, encouraging them to maintain contact with their loved one where appropriate and by referring helpline users to other sources of support. It is a strength of the helpline that it has been able to draw on the other suite of services offered by Pact, including befriending, peer support and family engagement workers.



Pact Families Peer Support Group

### 3.3 Aim 2

**Provide callers with the information, support and guidance necessary to cope in a crisis.**

The data collected as part of this evaluation showed that users of the Pact helpline did see the imprisonment of a family member as a crisis. This was exacerbated by not having the knowledge needed to do basic things in that moment, such as know where their family member had been taken, establish and maintain contact, provide essential items such as clothes and money or assist with ongoing problems that their family member was coping with prior to imprisonment, such as mental or physical health problems and addiction.

It is clear from the interview data that the prison service was viewed as actively unhelpful, and at times obstructive when families made attempts to resolve their

concerns. Interviewees described making multiple attempts to contact prisons to discuss their concerns that were unsuccessful. Others described not having any idea how to start to deal with the issues they and their family member in prison faced. The emotional toll of families in this situation was considerable. It was described as 'an emotional rollercoaster' (Interviewee four); 'the worst time of my life' (Interviewee 13); and 'the most stressful thing we've had to deal with as a family' (Interviewee 14) in the data. Three interviewees reported that the imprisonment of their family member had resulted in their own mental health deteriorating significantly.

"I was already suffering from severe depression and then all that happened with [name of family member]. It all became too much and I just felt like I didn't want to be around anymore." (*Interviewee five*)

Further insight into the impact of imprisonment on users of the helpline, and what support and advice the helpline offered, can be taken from the following extract of volunteer notes taken from the project data.

Mrs. X called in quite a frantic state, late on a Friday afternoon. Her son-in-law had been sentenced a week previously and taken to HMP [name of prison]. It had been a shock; the family had been expecting a fine. She knew nothing about the prison system. She had booked a visit for next Wednesday, but was unsure if he might be transferred. Unable to get through to anyone at the prison, she had called the helpline after an internet search.

After a short period, Mrs. X burst in to tears. I let her know that she could take her time. She felt responsible for her daughter (five months pregnant), small grandchildren (who did not know where their father had gone) and the prisoner's own elderly parents. She was also worried about the state of her son-in-law's mental health. She had received no contact since the previous Friday and did not know if the postal order had got through.

After a period, I helped her clarify some short-term goals: first, to ensure that her son-in-law had her contact details to add to his pin; second, to contact the chaplaincy for peace of mind. She expressed a lot of gratitude, mainly just for having been listened to. I mentioned a range of reasons why he might have been unable to contact her and explained the role of the chaplaincy team.

I talked through options before emailing her a response. Following her request, I tried the prison switchboard myself (and was also unable to get through). As agreed, I sent her an email outlining the options we had talked through. I also signposted a children's charity which runs a visitor centre at the prison, suggesting she could get in contact with them in preparation for her visit.

On Monday, my supervisor was able to follow up the case from my notes, passing information to Pact's Family Engagement Worker at the prison and getting in contact with the prison chaplaincy herself. Prison systems are opaque and intractable, particularly late on a Friday afternoon. I think that she was just very happy to find a human being to speak to.

It was not just at the point of imprisonment, however, that crisis situations occurred for users of the helpline. The project monitoring and other data illustrates that families faced other crisis situations later during the sentence and when coming up to release. Examples include:

- Family members being the victims of bullying or violent attacks in prison
- Family members experiencing a mental health crisis or physical health problem in prison
- Family members being transferred from one prison to another, sometimes much further away from home
- Family members being released without accommodation
- Family members being incarcerated in prisons where there were disturbances.

The project monitoring data shows that 44 safeguarding investigations were triggered by the helpline after contact from families to the helpline. Analysis of the case notes available highlighted that helpline staff and volunteers responded quickly to serious cases by contacting prison departments and Pact Family Engagement Workers. As Family Engagement Workers are already embedded in the prison, this gives the helpline a direct link into the prison and a way to connect helpline callers to their family members in times of crisis.

A distressed father rang the helpline concerned about his son, who he has not had any contact with for the last week. The caller stated that the son tried to commit suicide and set fire to his cell three weeks previously. The helpline rang through to HMP [name of prison] and referred the case over to a family support worker. They advised to give the caller their contact details and the case was handed over to [name of prison].

In addition, families faced their own challenges on the outside. Coping with the impacts of parental imprisonment on children, housing and financial issues, and their own health issues. The following quote from Interviewee one illustrates how the toxic combination of imprisonment and a health crisis can impact on a family.

“I am terminally ill and my son is in prison. I got a letter from my doctor to request that because of my situation he was placed in prison nearby. It was agreed, but then at the beginning of March he was moved from [name of prison] to [name of prison]. There was no explanation; we don't know why he was moved; he wasn't in any trouble or anything. It wasn't explained to him. [Name of prison] is quite a way from here. To get there for 2.30 I have to leave here at 12 to book in for 1.30pm and I don't get back until 5.30/6 o'clock because getting out of the prison is such a performance. You get herded about like cattle. Last time all the people got locked into a long corridor and we all got wet because it was raining. I can't have that with my health. And then you leave and you hit the afternoon traffic. [Name of prison] is much closer. I could get there in half an hour and they do morning visits so my granddaughter or my brother could take me. Now, I can't do anything in the afternoon because I'm so worn out.”

As before, the helpline provided practical support and advice that enabled the service user to begin the process of having her son returned to his original prison.

There are many examples of this in the interview and survey data.

"They gave me the address of the prison and told me straight away how I could see her [daughter] and what to do to send her clothes and other bits. All she had was the clothes she'd worn to court. We panicked because she was very upset and she has depression. They [the helpline] told us about how the prison worked and Safer Custody with her mental state. We contacted the prison straight away and they assessed her." *(Interviewee 13)*

Helped my son access prison courses and supported me through my emotional rollercoaster. *(Survey comment)*

Contacted my family member through the family support worker. *(Survey comment)*

Helped me obtain more information about my son's release. *(Survey comment)*

Was advised to contact prison and speak to Safer Custody and Healthcare, which was helpful to know. A lot of things have been sorted out. *(Survey comment)*

The survey findings showed respondents considered the advice and support they received helped them solve the problem they faced, and furthermore, it also indicates that doing so reduced levels of anxiety and distress.

- 73% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the support they received from the helpline made them feel less anxious or distressed.
- 80% (n80) of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that that staff at Pact helpline provided the information or advice needed to help them solve the problem.

## Conclusion

The evidence shows that the Pact Helpline provided advice and support that helped callers cope in times of crisis. This included helping callers in the immediate hours, days and weeks after imprisonment; supporting them with crisis situations during the sentence and enabling them to cope with crises they themselves faced

during a period of familial imprisonment. To develop a deeper understanding of this, further work should be conducted to follow-up cases and examine the longer-term impacts of this work on helpline users and their wider family, including children.

### 3.4 Aim 3

#### **Develop callers' understanding of non-statutory sources of support and the terminology and processes used in the criminal justice system to empower and enable them to navigate it effectively.**

The project monitoring data shows that in 2016, callers to the helpline were referred or signposted to other external non-statutory support services nearly 298 times. The majority of these referrals were to other criminal justice-focused organisations who provide support for prisoners and prisoners' families. The data shows, however, there was also a high level of referral to organisations specialising in areas such as mental health, money advice and housing.

Organisations included:

Barnardo's	Nacro
Prison Reform Trust	Shelter
PAS :Prisoners Advice Service	Citizens Advice Bureau
Resettlement Plus Helpline	Clinks
Stop It Now	Visitors Centre Service Providers (VCS)

- The survey data shows that because of their contact with Pact helpline, 30% contacted a non-statutory organisation to seek additional support.
- In addition, 70% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the support received from the Pact helpline made them more likely to seek help from other services.

It is not the role of this evaluation to assess the quality of any support helpline callers received. However, the interview data shows that by signposting and referring in this way, the Pact helpline informed callers about sources of specialist support and gave the confidence to reach out and seek further help.

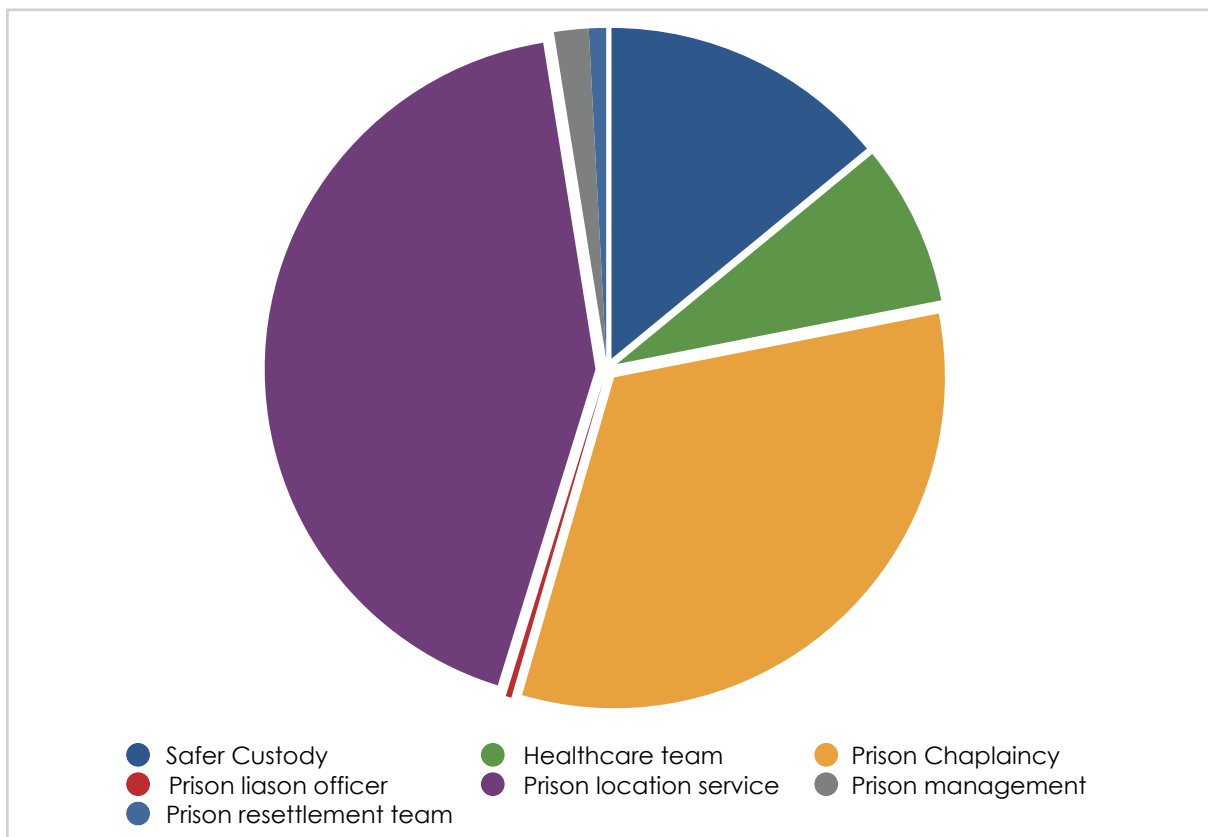
Interviewee 13 was referred to Barnardo's after the imprisonment of her daughter resulted in her being the primary carer to her two young grandchildren.



“I didn't know what do at the time. Whether to tell them [daughter's name] was in prison or not, how to tell them, what would happen, how we'd cope. It was endless, questions going around and round. I told [volunteer's name] everything and that took a great big weight off my shoulders. After, she recommended I look at the Barnardo's website and get some family support through them, and I did – we take the girls to a family group now.”

The project monitoring data shows that callers to the helpline were also referred and signposted directly to the prison service on 356 occasions. Most of these referrals were to the prison location service, chaplaincy, Safer Custody and the Healthcare team.

Figure 11. Referrals to prison departments, 2016.



The data shows that as well as signposting and referring helpline users, there was also an important exchange of knowledge between users and staff and volunteers that led to families establishing and maintaining contact and addressing other issues.

- 65% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the advice and support they received from the Pact helpline gave them a greater understanding of how the criminal justice system worked.
- 60% (n58) of survey respondents either contacted the prison service or arranged to visit their family member in prison because of the support and advice provided by the helpline.

Analysis of the project data shows that the helpline routinely did more than just signpost and refer. In case after case, it proactively reached out and connected families with prison departments. The impact of this should not be underestimated, as the following notes written by a volunteer show.

The mother of a prisoner on remand at [name of] prison phoned to express her concern about two main points:

- Her son has mental health issues, is not taking his medication and is very vulnerable. She wondered what was being done in prison to help him with this.

- He was taken to Crown Court on [date], but when asked, her son was incoherent and unable to let her know which Crown Court he would be taken to. She asked us to help her to find out this.

The helpline phoned the Mental Health Team in [name of] prison and shared with them the mother's concerns about his mental state and asked them what plan of action they have for him. Further, they left the mother's details with the prison for them to make contact. Later, the mother let us know, on the phone, that she had been contacted by the Mental Health Team and seemed satisfied with the outcome.

We informed the mother that if she contacted her son's solicitor, he would be able to inform her about what Crown Court he would be attending, but she said that due to his state her son was unable to recall who the solicitor is. She contacted another solicitor who said he would be supporting her son at the Crown Court on the [date].

The helpline further made a referral to the Family Engagement Worker in [name of] prison asking her to contact the prisoner in order to find out what mental state he was in and to ask him, or find out, which Crown Court he would be going to on the 6th October. [Name of FEW] sent a reply by e-mail saying she would call the mother and that she would see her son on the following Monday.

The mother was happy with the high level of support the helpline provided and that all professionals had made contact with her. (*Monthly monitoring*)

These notes show the value of having access to a network of FEWs in prisons to the helpline and its service users, because it demonstrates the importance of having a link directly into prisons that, because they are part of the same organisation, can be mobilised quickly. This is a particular strength of the work conducted by the helpline that makes it distinctive from other advice and support services offered to this group.

## Conclusion

The evidence confirms that the Pact Helpline met its aim of developing service users' access to and knowledge of non-statutory services. It also built helpline users' knowledge and understanding of the system in such a way that they could reach out and access the system, through prison visits and contacting prison departments. The helpline proactively connected families with prisons, and in doing so, supported families to address a range of serious and urgent issues, sometimes avoiding difficult and psychologically harmful situations worsening. The role of the Family Engagement Worker is key to this success, however, were the helpline to expand, issues of capacity should be carefully reviewed.



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Pact Family Engagement Worker in action

### 3.5 Aim 4

#### **Encouraging callers to engage with statutory agencies, such as social services and probation, so they can access the full range of support services available to them.**

The data shows that there were many fewer referrals to social services and probation than there were to non-statutory organisations and the prison service for callers to the service in 2016.

There are several potential reasons for this including:

- Prisoners accessing social workers in prison
- The volume of queries received by the helpline that do not require contact with either probation or social services
- Families already having established contact with social services or probation
- Community Rehabilitation Companies focused on offenders and not engaging with families.

None of the interviewees were referred to either social services or probation as a result of their contact with the helpline and no survey respondents reported contact with either service as a consequence of their contact.

### Conclusion

Lack of data on social services and probation referrals means that no definitive conclusion can be drawn about whether the service met this aim in 2016. If Pact considers that there are definite benefits for families of having a relationship with and accessing the support provided by these services, then this should be an area of development.

### 3.5 Service improvement

Participants were asked how the service could be improved for future users.

Fifty-one comments were made, of these:

- 46 - nothing further could be done to improve the service
- Two – the service should be advertised more widely
- Three – at lot, but no further details were added.

Interviewees were also asked this same question.

- 10 out of 15 said they felt that nothing else could be done to improve the service
- One interviewee suggested that the service should be better advertised

- Three suggested that the service should follow-up calls as agreed
- One suggested that it needed to provide better support for offenders facing homelessness.

## 4. CASE STUDIES

The following case studies were drawn from the project monitoring data. They provide vivid illustration of the complex and serious needs presented by callers. They also illustrate how helpline staff use their expert knowledge of the criminal justice system to provide tailored support to families that reduces levels of stress and anxiety and, very importantly, helps keep prisoners safe in custody.

### 4.1 Case Study A

#### **Service user needs**

A contacted the helpline because she was extremely concerned about her son's mental health and safety in prison. A said that her son, who was serving a sentence in a prison in the Midlands, was completely isolated and had not received a visit for five months because she was living in another country, was ill and could not travel and they had no other family in the UK.

A stated that her son was on a hunger strike and had spent time in the segregation unit. All future visits had been stopped because he was considered a risk to other prisoners and their families.

A was worried because her son had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, depression and anxiety, and was currently having suicidal thoughts. To her knowledge, A said that her son had not had a mental health assessment since being in prison.

A had written to the prison governor twice about the situation and had contacted the prison, but had received no response to her concerns.

#### **Pact helpline action**

Staff at the helpline told A that her son would most likely have had an assessment, but that this might not have been updated.

They then attempted to contact the Safer Custody team staff in the prison, but were unsuccessful. The helpline referred the case to the Family Engagement Worker at the prison who advised them that the prisoner had been moved to a different prison.

The helpline informed A that her son had been moved and gave her the contact details of the new prison.

### **Follow-on**

A called back the following week and stated that her son had been attacked by a prison officer and had been put on a basic regime because of the incident. She said that she was still concerned that he was having suicidal thoughts and that his mental health issues were still unaddressed.

The helpline contacted the new prison, and spoke to the Safer Custody team at great length about A's concerns. The prison Safer Custody manager called the helpline back later the same day and informed them that a welfare check and mental health assessment would be completed and that because the helpline had relayed the risk of suicide, the prisoner would be monitored.

### **Pact helpline follow-up**

The helpline contacted A and told her about the steps the Safer Custody team was taking. She was very happy and relieved that something was being done.

Two days later A contacted the helpline and informed them that her son was being monitored and she was happy with what the prison had put in place.

### **Outcomes and Impact**

A prisoner at risk of suicide and suffering mental health problems, which were having a serious impact on him, other prisoners and prison staff, were addressed due to the work done by the helpline. If the helpline had not intervened, the consequences for the prisoner could have been fatal.

Furthermore, the mother of the prisoner felt listened to and supported by the helpline after her first contact. This enabled her to call the helpline again when she re-established contact with her son. At the end of the work done by the helpline, the mother was reassured that the risk of harm to her son was reduced by the intervention made by the helpline on her behalf.

## **4.2 Case Study B**

### **Service user needs**

B contacted the helpline and said that her son was in debt in prison and was being bullied. B was so worried about her son's safety that she had put £1,000 into the accounts of various inmates over the preceding month but was receiving mobile phone calls from her son, who was telling her that other prisoners were threatening him and her family if further payments were not made.

### **Pact helpline action**

The helpline contacted the Pact Family Engagement Worker at the prison who advised who at the prison should be informed about this issue.

The helpline then contacted with the relevant team at the prison and highlighted *B*'s concerns. Contact was then made directly with the prison security team, who made a log and opened an investigation. The security team further gave a direct number for *B* to contact and took her details.

### **Follow-up**

The helpline contacted *B* and updated her. The helpline advised *B* to report the threats against her family to the police. *B* confirmed that as a result of the helpline's intervention she had spoken to the prison and they were now fully aware of the situation and were investigating it. *B* was very grateful for the support provided by the helpline.

### **Outcomes and Impact**

The prison started an investigation into an incident of bullying, debt and extortion happening in the institution. The prisoner and his family were made safer and action was taken to stop the situation happening again. The mother felt listened to and supported by the helpline and confident that there would be an improvement in the situation.

## **4.3 Case study C**

*C* called the helpline because she was concerned about her son, who was having suicidal thoughts in prison. *C* felt that this was because her son was not being given the correct medication by the prison Healthcare team. *C* stated that her son had ongoing mental health problems that the prison were aware of, but to her knowledge were not acting on.

### **Pact helpline action**

The helpline contacted the prison and spoke to the Prisoner Development Unit and told staff about *C*'s concerns about her son's suicidal thoughts, deteriorating mental health and lack of treatment. The PDU said they would look into the matter and call back. The prison called back and informed the helpline that *C*'s son had been put on twenty-hour-hour suicide watch and that Healthcare and Safer Custody were going to investigate the matter.

The helpline contacted *C* to update her and she confirmed that the prison had made contact.

### **Outcomes and Impact**

The intervention of the helpline prevented what might have been a suicide in custody by alerting the prison to the vulnerability of the prisoner and risk he posed to himself. It also triggered an investigation into the treatment and care of *C*'s son that



should have resulted in his mental health issues being better cared for and managed in the future.

#### 4.4 Case study D

*D*, who is a Pact befriender, had been supporting a mother whose son was in prison for the past two years. *D* called the helpline because they were concerned about the mother's mental health, which is being negatively affected because she was finding it difficult to maintain contact with her son in prison nearly two hundred miles away in the North East of England. *D* felt that the mother had become depressed and that this was making it hard to cope with her other children, who she parented alone.

##### **Pact helpline action**

The helpline made contact and referred the mother to NEPACS. This organisation said they would work closely with the mother and son to ensure that contact was maintained and that mum received support with her mental health and parenting issues.

##### **Outcome and Impact**

*D* subsequently contacted the helpline to say that the mother and son were being supported by NEPACS. This case gives an insight into the way the Pact helpline works with other outside organisations to ensure a positive outcome for prisoners and their families.

#### 4.5 Case study E

*E* was a professional working for a national children's mental health charity. *E* was working with a four-year-old child who was displaying emotional distress and behavioural problems. *E* said that after looking into what might be causing these issues for the child, she had discovered that his father was in prison for domestic violence offences against the mother, and that the child was being taken by the victim, his mother, to visit the father in prison. *E* wanted advice about what to do to protect the child in these circumstances.

##### **Pact helpline action**

The helpline told *E* that the child was also a victim of domestic abuse and that *E* should inform the child's mother about concerns about the impact of this, and the prison visits, on the child. In addition, *E* was advised to make a CAF referral to social services.

*E* called the helpline and said that the actions discussed in the call had been taken and that they were grateful for the advice provided.

## **Outcome and Impact**

The professional that contacted the helpline developed a better understanding of the issues the child was facing and the potential consequences of this situation for them. The child, and possibly the mother, was also protected from further harm and distress triggered by their exposure to domestic violence, potentially worsened by the ongoing contact with the perpetrator.

### **4.6 Case study F**

*F* was very distressed when she called the helpline. She was very low and depressed because her son, who had mental health issues, was struggling. *F* said that her son was displaying bad behaviour because his mental health was deteriorating and he was not being given any treatment from the prison, but had instead been put in segregation. *F* had contacted the prison but hadn't received a reply. She was so worried that she wasn't sleeping herself and felt completely abandoned and isolated.

### **Pact helpline action**

The helpline advised *F* to contact the prison chaplaincy department. The helpline contacted Safer Custody, Healthcare and the chaplain. The Healthcare team informed the helpline that they would investigate what was going on.

They subsequently informed the helpline that when the prisoner was transferred from a young offender's institution to the adult estate, that relevant information about the prisoner's mental health and medication was not transferred with him. This meant that he was not being treated. Healthcare said that an investigation would be done into the error, but that in the meantime a mental health assessment had been conducted, he was now on medication and was being monitored closely. In addition, the Healthcare team were to consider his health plan and would pass details onto mother.

### **Follow-up**

The helpline contacted *F* and updated her. She rang a week later and informed the helpline that the prison Healthcare team had phoned and she was very happy with the outcome. *F* felt that the attitude of the Healthcare team had changed completely towards her because of the helpline intervention.

### **Outcome and Impact**

It is unlikely that the failure in the duty of care to the prisoner would have been identified had it not been for the intervention of the helpline. This would have resulted in further deterioration of the prisoner's mental ill health and potential escalation of the disruptive behaviour he was displaying because he wasn't receiving any treatment for his illness.

Furthermore, *F* felt that she was listened to and was reassured by the intervention taken and the change in the way the prison Healthcare team communicated with

her. This would have prevented a deterioration in her own mental state and the possibility of a more productive and positive relationship with the prison in future.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Pact helpline provides callers with a high quality and professional service for people affected by familial imprisonment. Helpline staff and volunteers listen and understand the needs of helpline callers and take a proactive and sensitive approach to the support they provide, which includes giving emotional support, signposting and referring to other Prison Advice and Care Trust services, statutory and non-statutory services and liaising with prison teams and departments on a service user's behalf to resolve a range of serious and complex issues. The advice and support provided by the helpline supports families to establish and maintain contact with their relative in prison, and thus is likely to make an important contribution to strengthening family relationships, reducing psychological and emotional distress, better resettlement outcomes and reduced reoffending.



Pact Helpline Co-ordinator on a call

The advice and support provided by the Pact Helpline reduces service users' feelings of social isolation, loneliness, anxiety and distress and supports families to cope in crisis situations – both at the start of a prison sentence, during the sentence and on release. It also connects service users with a wider circle of support, which is likely to have a positive impact on psychological and emotional well-being.

The evaluation highlighted some particular strengths:

1. The professionalism of staff and volunteers and the way they provide support to people in crisis. The staff and volunteers should be commended for getting such positive feedback from callers in the evaluation.
2. The extensive knowledge displayed by staff and volunteers on the challenges faced by families affected by imprisonment, the landscape of support services that exist to help these families and the way the criminal justice system is structured and operated.
3. The ability of the Pact Helpline to reach in to prisons via the Pact Family Engagement Workers. This adds a distinctive dimension to this service that was routinely utilised in efforts to support prisoners and families, often in crisis situations.

## 5.1 Recommendations

It is customary to offer insights into potential areas of innovation or best practice when evaluating a project. These are offered to support organisations to further develop their provision in ways that produce even more positive outcomes for future service users. The following suggestions have emerged over the course of this evaluation process and it is recommended that:

- The findings from this evaluation should be disseminated to enable the service to continue and expand.
- All data collection, recording and information management processes are reviewed and updated. If necessary, the option of investing in an e-log system or other custom-designed database should be explored. It is vital that data is captured in a systematic way from all users of the service going forward.
- Until this has been taken forward, the quality and consistency of the data captured and recorded by the service should be reviewed at regular intervals. If this means that the service needs more staff capacity, this should be considered a priority.
- Attention should be paid to developing a better understanding of the 'other' and 'professional' callers accessing the helpline. This would be useful information for future development of the service, plus provide a clearer picture of exactly who requires what information, advice and support after someone else is sentenced to prison.
- The opportunities to publicise the service in areas of England and Wales where there are currently lower levels of use should be explored.
- Future evaluation should include volunteers in the service and be extended to examine the impact of the service on the wider family, and not just those who contacted it.
- Policies and procedures that ensure referrals are followed-up with helpline users should be developed and used.
- If it is considered that families would benefit from contact with social services and the probation service, and CRCs, then this should be made clearer to volunteers in training and the processes for achieving this established.

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