

Supporting children and families of prisoners in the North East: A case study of how the voluntary sector and research has driven the agenda

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Abstract

This is a reflective piece that explores how work to support children and families of prisoners in the North East of England developed from very limited provision 10 years ago to what is now a substantial and multifaceted programme. The success of the work has been driven by the voluntary sector, with one key agency in particular taking a lead, supported by research that has provided the evidence base to identify intervention points and to demonstrate effectiveness and impact. We see that the persistence and commitment of a key voluntary sector agency working in partnership with a research organisation, backed up by strategy and a supportive prison environment, has created strong children and families provision in the North East.

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Introduction

This paper commences with a brief overview of the importance of independent criminal justice research in supporting strategy and practice development and the building of effective partnerships. Consideration is then given to the historical development of rehabilitative work in the criminal justice system and the changing relationship between the voluntary sector and criminal justice agencies in providing such services, and particular attention is given to the role of the voluntary sector in providing support to prisoners, their children and families.

Individuals in the Quaker movement, such as Elizabeth Fry, began the support of prisoners and their families in the 1800s at Newgate Prison when all other services were absent. Since then, the care and support of those affected by prison has been predominantly provided by the voluntary sector. This continues today and this article takes a reflective look at the development of provision for children and families of prisoners in the North East of England over the last decade, which has been a combination of research, strategy and voluntary sector provision with charitable and government funding.

Traditionally, research has been considered an important element in the development of policy and practice and links between researchers and those who work in the criminal justice system have nourished and nurtured rehabilitative ideals and supported innovation (Fitzgibbon and Lea, 2014). According to Nellis (2007) for example, Radzinowicz's 1958 study on the effectiveness of probation increased the prestige of the probation service and ushered in a period of expansion and diversification. More recently, organisations have sought to demonstrate their effectiveness in terms of reducing reoffending in order to meet the requirements of the Payment by Results (PrB) agenda. The development and maintenance of good relationships between practitioners and researchers is essential in terms of shaping practice, informing theory, offering policy insights and accessing funding.

Early charitable work with children and families and with those defined as offenders largely came out of religious conviction and sentiment to deal with troubled and troubling families (Le Mesurier, 1935; Nellis, 2007; Whitehead and Statham, 2006). Although by 1935 it was no longer appropriate to refer to those providing voluntary philanthropic work as 'Ladies Bountiful bestowing indiscriminate charity' (Le Mesurier, 1935: 71), welfare work inside prisons continued to be provided by volunteers until 1961, when the National Association of Discharged Prisoners' Aid Societies¹ and the Home Office agreed that prison welfare officers should be paid for their work. Following long-standing concerns with the quality and ability of the Discharged Prisoners' Aid Societies to provide systematic aftercare services, a recommendation to merge the voluntary and statutory forms of aftercare support into a single service run by probation was implemented in 1965 and the Probation and Aftercare Service was formed.

As the probation service became increasingly professionalised so too did the voluntary sector, as payment of staff and better training came to be seen as important in working with offenders, prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families, no matter what the bureaucratic context was within which that work took place. Moreover, shared roots in private charity and engagement with the rehabilitative aspect of the criminal justice system facilitated close relations between the probation service and the voluntary sector, which frequently provided specialist services and support to those with whom the probation and prison services worked. Indeed, these forms of partnerships and relationships were seen as the crucial ingredients of desistance work, before the concept of desistance became popularised and then co-opted as part of the neo-liberal criminal justice agenda. Fitzgibbon and Lea (2014: 28) argue that such relationships are an example of an old form of privatisation that 'embodied the idea of "localism", as locally-delivered and locally-responsive services in tune with the demographics of particular areas'.²

Private charities and third sector, non-governmental organisations have long collaborated with criminal justice agencies to provide services that aid delivery of key criminal justice aims. Nonetheless, what Fitzgibbon and Lea (2014) have termed the current phase of neo-privatisation threatens not only the partnerships between those various organisations but also the organisations themselves. Where once there were relationships, now there is competition and, in a context of reduced resources, probation trusts, voluntary sector organisations and transnational corporations compete for contracts. This process involves 'killing off the *old privatisation* formed by the alliance between probation and the voluntary sector ... [and] will make both traditional probation and voluntary sector skills a distant memory' (Fitzgibbon and Lea, 2014: 28–29). The reduction and withdrawal of state funding to the voluntary sector, growing inequality and deprivation and prolonged economic recession has created an inhospitable environment for voluntary sector services, state agencies, such as the prison and probation services (as well as the Police), and for independent research. This paper, however, reflects on a locally specific case with which resistance can be made and effective services provided.

About the key organisations

Provision of services in the North East is relatively extensive. With its seven prisons, including female, young offenders and high security establishments, there are eight family support workers working in prisons, three family and parenting workers in the community, a small team of play workers, three youth workers, two advice and support workers and a team of volunteers in the courts, two family support advocates in the community and six visitor centres with managers and volunteers. These services are largely delivered by a single voluntary sector organisation, NEPACS, which has worked in partnership with a local social research organisation, Barefoot Research and Evaluation, responsible for mapping services, identifying need and evaluating delivery. This paper specifically considers the interplay between research, development and policy and the key role that has been taken by NEPACS in creating the landscape that we see today.

Table 1. NEPACS services and user numbers, 2014/15.

Services	Numbers
Visitor centres in HMP Deerbolt, Durham, Frankland, Holme House, Low Newton and Northumberland.	142,549 visits to North East prison visitor centres
Play services at routine and special visits in prisons	27,070 child visits took place
Family support service four prisons in HMP Deerbolt, Holme House, Kirklevington and Low Newton	760 prisoners and family members benefitted from family support
Special family and child friendly visits in prison	2410 children attended special family visits
Support to families at crown and magistrates courts in Teesside and Durham	782 received support at the courts and 213 people received telephone befriending support
Caravan Holidays for families of serving prisoners	34 free holidays provided
Small grants programme for prisoners and families	744 grants awarded
Tea Bar services in prison	At seven prison visits halls
Youth service to young people affected by imprisonment of a parent	83 young people enjoyed external activities

NEPACS, formerly known as North East Prisoner Aftercare Society, began in 1882 as the Durham Discharged Prisoners Aid Society, founded by a prison chaplain, a group of local clergy, magistrates and local notables. Their objectives then were to provide resettlement support for the men and women leaving the prison. In the 1970s the Society started providing caravan holidays for prisoners' families, running prison visitor centres and providing play facilities for children visiting prison. Today, it provides a number of services to prisoners and their families across the North East, shown in Table 1. These were delivered by a total of 70 staff (many of whom are sessional and part time) and 179 volunteers across the region.

Barefoot Research and Evaluation is a social research organisation that was born as a result of the restructure of Nacro, the national crime reduction charity, in 2003. Nacro had a very successful research and evaluation unit which was just starting to conduct research into children and families and prisons when a national restructure of the organisation signalled its demise. The lead of the North East division of the unit subsequently created Barefoot Research and Evaluation as a social research organisation, with a focus on social justice and disadvantaged groups, and carried on that research. Since then it has taken an active and prominent role working with the voluntary sector and NEPACS in particular, in researching need, identifying gaps in service and evaluating services for children and families of prisoners. It has carried out a considerable amount of research and evaluation to date and represents a centre of expertise in relation to children and families of offenders in the North East.

Development of the children and families work

The existence of the current landscape of children and families provision in the North East can be traced back to a single piece of research commissioned in 2003

by Northern Rock Foundation (NRF), a regional charitable funder,³ which considered how the region's prisons supported the maintenance of family ties (Hartworth, 2005). The research found poor and patchy provision for children and families in prisons and a difficult and unpleasant visits process which did little to support or maintain family relationships. The research also found that NEPACS, which was then running the four prison visitor centres and providing some play workers for visiting children, played an extremely important role in facilitating the visiting process and provided many valuable support services to visitors, including practical and emotional support. The research, therefore, located NEPACS very firmly in the centre of children and family provision in the North East.

Around this time more interest was being taken in the role that children and families played in recidivism. Although started by Ditchfield in 1994, who found that prisoners who received no family contact during their prison sentence were six times more likely to reoffend than those that did, the issue was really brought to the fore by the Social Exclusion Unit's (2002) report into factors that caused reoffending in the prison population. Joe Murray from the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University was also publishing research into the effects of prison on children and intergenerational offending (e.g. Murray, 2003, 2005) and it was not long before May et al. (2008) published the last significant piece of research into reoffending rates and family contact. They said that prisoners who received regular family contact were 39% less likely to reoffend than those who did not receive regular contact. Our research formed part of this new evidence base, and importantly it was located firmly in the North East of England. Murray also helped the regional service development process by sending us his articles as they were published, thereby providing a national peer-reviewed evidence base.

Our research (Hartworth, 2005) provided the foundation for the (at the time) new Children and Families Pathway that was part of the statutory Reducing Reoffending Strategy Groups started in 2006 by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). The Children and Families Pathway was one of seven regional Reducing Reoffending Pathways (which included Accommodation, Drugs and Alcohol, Employment, Finance Benefit and Debt, Health and Women's Pathway). The Children and Families Pathway was a very successful strategy group, chaired by a regional voluntary sector infrastructure organisation, Voluntary Organisations Network North East (VONNE), which brought together an enthusiastic group of voluntary and statutory agencies. NEPACS was a consistent and leading member of this group, which in many ways represented the needs and voices of families. During the lifetime of this group (which ended in 2011), research and reviews were commissioned by Northern Rock Foundation into the effectiveness of the group and its impact on improving provision for the children and families of offenders.

There were also important interjections and visits by Action for Prisoners Families (APF), which employed a regional trainer to deliver Family Matters training, a parenting programme for fathers in prison, during this time. At the time APF was considered the national voice for children and families of prisoners and its staff visited North East prisons to talk about the importance of families, to audit the visits procedures for levels of family and child friendliness and to provide Hidden

Sentence training in the North East. The prison estate in the North East has also been very supportive of the work over the last 10 years and has, among other things, enabled staff from the voluntary sector to hold keys and access prisoners. The voluntary sector, in turn, has had positive impacts on prison culture, which sometimes has been referred to as insular.

A year into the strategy groups, NRF commissioned us again to review the Children and Families Pathway and look at the work so far (Hartworth, 2007). Our research was saying that although the strategic environment was now conducive to family support work, provision was still inadequate. We said that: 'Support work and interventions around the support and maintenance of relationships needs to be available to all prisoners and not just the well behaved' (Hartworth, 2007: 58). The Pathway work was important as it not only provided a statutory mandate for the work but it directly linked the work in the North East, which was becoming an example of good practice, with the national policy agenda via the Ministry of Justice's Children and Families Unit in London.

The year 2010 marked an important moment in the development of children and families work in the North East as a result of another piece of research and policy development carried out by Barefoot Research and Evaluation (Hartworth, 2011) on behalf of NEPACS. The work was funded through VONNE's Policy and Representation Partnership Fund (a Big Lottery Fund aimed at supporting the voluntary sector's involvement in policy) and importantly supported by the Department for Education (DfE). This piece of regional research resulted in the development of a policy guide (known locally as the 'Green Guide') to support local authority agencies in their efforts to provide services to the children and families of offenders (Hartworth, 2011). The research process was instrumental in the development of the wider work stream as it created an awareness and openness amongst local agencies to the importance of working with the children and families of offenders. For the research we engaged agencies such as Children's Social Care, Sure Start and probation in critical discussions about this target group and asked 'What do you do to support the children and families of offenders?' and 'What do you think we should do?' After this work had taken place, there was a general readiness from community agencies for the work to start; the door was open, so to speak.

Not long after the publication of this guide (which had attracted national attention from agencies who wanted to know how to work with children and families in their local authority areas), the DfE and NOMS provided two-year funding for NEPACS and PACT (Prison Advice and Care Trust)⁴ to deliver family support work in 10 prisons across the country and family policy advocacy work in six geographical areas, including the North East. As a result of the links created during the Pathway, the national Children and Families Unit became aware of the innovative and pragmatic approach we were taking in the North East and this encouraged the DfE and NOMS's funding decision.

Not only did this funding fulfil the recommendations we had been making since 2007, but it also funded policy work in the form of family support advocates. These latter positions were intended to link up the work that was taking place in prisons, such as parenting courses or special family visits, with provision in the community,

such as family intervention work and children's centres. In the North East, this work was made easier because of the recommendations in the Green Guide and the awareness that the research had created throughout the statutory agencies about the importance of family support work (which was emphasised as a means to prevent intergenerational offending, improve outcomes for children and reduce adult reoffending). Indeed, the PACT advocates outside of the North East found the advocacy work more difficult as none of the preparatory, awareness raising/critical discussions had taken place. It became clear that this had been a very valuable and unexpected effect of the Green Guide research.

Complementary to this and an important means to raise the profile of the work was a programme of Hidden Sentence training delivered by NEPACS and PACT (although APF created the training and was delivering it on a small scale) and provided as part of the DfE project. The training shows the effect of a prison sentence on the family and is an effective means of creating awareness of the importance of children and families work amongst statutory agencies, such as schools and children's centres, but also amongst agencies like probation and prisons who would be expected to already be aware of the issues but often were not.

The DfE funded programme subsequently ended and was evaluated, found to be effective at promoting positive family relationships and a 'lessons learned' guide was produced (Farrant and Hartworth, 2012). As a result of the success of this programme and the evidence produced, in late 2012, NEPACS successfully applied for a three-year grant from the Big Lottery to continue this work in the North East. The PACT element was unable to find funding in its existing state and lost staff. Fortunately, a few years later, it was awarded the Family Engagement Work contract from the MoJ which enabled work to take place in the female, youth estate and a small number of prisons in the male estate.

In early 2013, four family support charities, Pact, POPS (Partners of Prisoners), Jigsaw and NEPACS, formed the *Prison Family Support Alliance* (PFSA). The aim was to share good practice and learning, and to encourage the government, local authorities, and the private and voluntary sectors, to focus on families as part of the wider strategy to reduce reoffending. In July 2013, the PFSA was selected by the Ministry of Justice to be 'framework providers' of prison-based family support work in England and Wales. In September 2014, NOMS funded the PFSA to provide custody-based Family Engagement Workers (FEWs) to specifically help and support prisoners in a total of 12 establishments. In 2014, Public Health England in the North East commissioned Lifeline, another voluntary sector organisation, to provide family support to prisoners who had substance misuse problems. This has added a further four family support workers to the North East total.

Currently, the two community rehabilitation companies (CRCs) in the region (there are two different providers in Durham Tees Valley and Northumbria) are engaging with NEPACS who form part of the 'supply chain'. For Durham Tees Valley, NEPACS runs the morning visitor centres at HMP Durham, HMP Low Newton and HMP Holme House to receive released prisoners, who can access support from staff and meet their CRC worker who will be supporting them in the community. For Northumbria, NEPACS has recruited three family and parenting

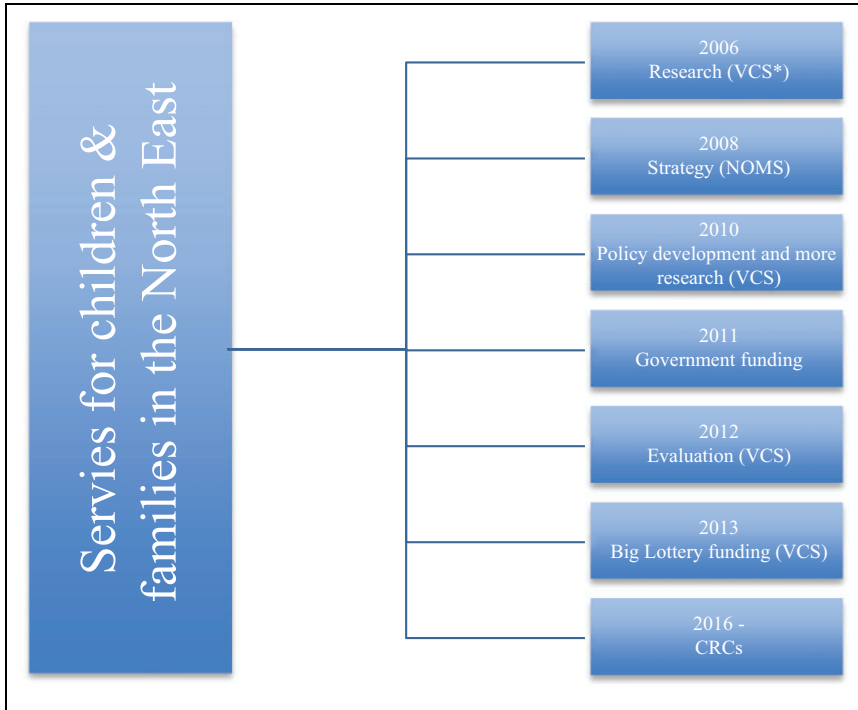


Figure 1. How we got where we are today.

*Voluntary and community sector.

workers who are community-based and support ex-offenders to resolve family issues. The workers also provide an 'inreach' service into HMP Durham, HMP Low Newton and HMP Northumberland, and will be supporting delivery of the Heading Home intervention (a NEPACS resettlement project). It is hoped in the future that they can take a more fundamental role in commissioning family support services in their efforts to reduce reoffending. An invaluable element to help this process would be evidence to indicate the impact of family support work on reducing reoffending rates.

Conclusion

The voluntary sector and NEPACS in particular has played a key role in the development of children and families services in the North East. They have created the current comprehensive level of provision; if you are a visitor to a prison in the region, you will almost certainly use or be offered one or more of NEPACS' family services. This carries on the long tradition of the voluntary sector supporting prisoners and their families in the absence of others. However, the voluntary sector has evolved into a sophisticated set of institutions and operations and now, the range of projects on offer means that people in need of support can be identified and provided with all the support they need, whether they are a partner, parent or child. For

example, a family identified at court can be given the information they need to visit, the parent can be visited in prison by a family support worker who can arrange for special visits, the youth project can engage with teenagers in the family and when the prisoner is released they can access support to negotiate the challenges faced when 'Heading Home'. Their differentiated services enable prisoners and families to receive an integrated service, at the beginning of sentence, during custody and upon resettlement. It is this wrap-around service provision that enables prisoners and families to make changes, live a life free from crime and perhaps, most importantly, give their children the support and understanding they need whilst their parent is in prison.

Research has played a key role, identifying gaps and providing a needs analysis, conducting reviews of projects and policy and carrying out evaluations. In the North East, research expertise has been used effectively by the implementing organisation; it has been action research. However, the need for research does not stop and now more than ever there needs to be a more fundamental investigation of the impact of family support work on prisoners and their children and families' lives, which goes beyond findings of improved behaviour and emotional well-being. There also needs to be a proper investigation of the impact of family support work on reoffending rates, something which NEPACS is just starting to do.

Finally, the statutory responsibilities driven by the CRCs can now play a more fundamental role through a commissioning approach. The voluntary sector has built up expertise and a reputation for providing excellent family support services in the North East. Much of this has and continues to rely upon charitable funding, with the exception of the historical DfE support, and as such rests on fragile foundations. Children and families work in the prisons and in the community needs to be given the recognition and security it deserves and be a permanent fixture in the CRCs' supply chain.

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Notes

1. The forerunner of Nacro, the crime reduction voluntary sector agency (which is incidentally where two of the authors of this paper (Farrant and Hartworth) met in 2002 whilst working for Nacro's Research and Evaluation Division).
2. This quote neatly encapsulates the ongoing context in the North East of England.
3. As well as the police.
4. NRF was an innovative and developmental charitable funder which took a special interest in issues related to offending. At its highpoint it was investing around £30 million in the region each year. It was a victim of the financial crisis and the collapse of the Northern Rock Bank and has recently closed.
5. See www.prisonadvice.org.uk.

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