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# Family Approach to Criminal Justice Services in Thames Valley

## *Executive Summary*

Dr Sam Wright

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### **1 The project**

In April 2011, Thames Valley Partnership was granted funding by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to implement a three year project: *the Family Approach to Criminal Justice Services*. The project was designed to achieve whole-system change through six key strands of activity:

1. Provision of support for families at court who have a member imprisoned;
2. Development and delivery of training to sentencers and court users;
3. Recruitment, training and development of volunteers to deliver the service;
4. Further provision of Family Matters training to practitioners;
5. Further development of referral pathways to Children's and Family Support services;
6. Development of family services into prisons to prepare families for release.

### **2 The evaluation**

In June 2011, this external evaluation was commissioned in order to help develop project performance monitoring and gather key project learning for dissemination and sustainability planning. The research entailed four main strands of work: information gathering; development and analysis of project monitoring data; interviews with staff, volunteers and stakeholders and case study reviews.

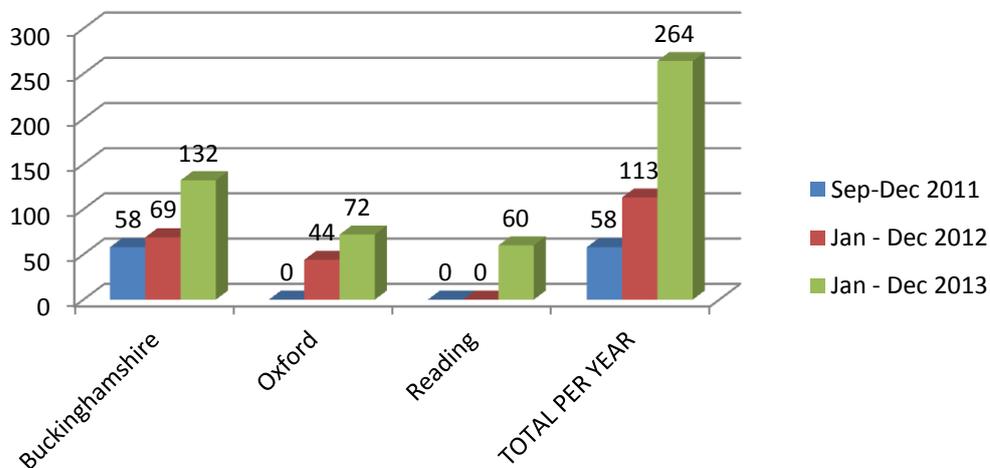
### **3 The court desk service**

One day a week two volunteers work within each crown court: reviewing court lists; identifying offenders' family members; explaining the Family Approaches service to them; and offering support and information. The volunteers signpost families onto specialist community services (e.g.: housing providers, Citizens' Advice, the benefits agency, Prisoners Families Helpline, and children's centres), and also refer them to the Family Approaches Coordinator for ongoing support.

#### **3.1 The scale of delivery**

The Court Desk service commenced in Aylesbury Crown Court in September 2011. In September 2012, the service was extended to Oxford Crown Court and in September 2013 the Reading Crown Court desk. The service made contact with 435 families over that period and the chart below summarises how those families were distributed over the three year period across the sites.

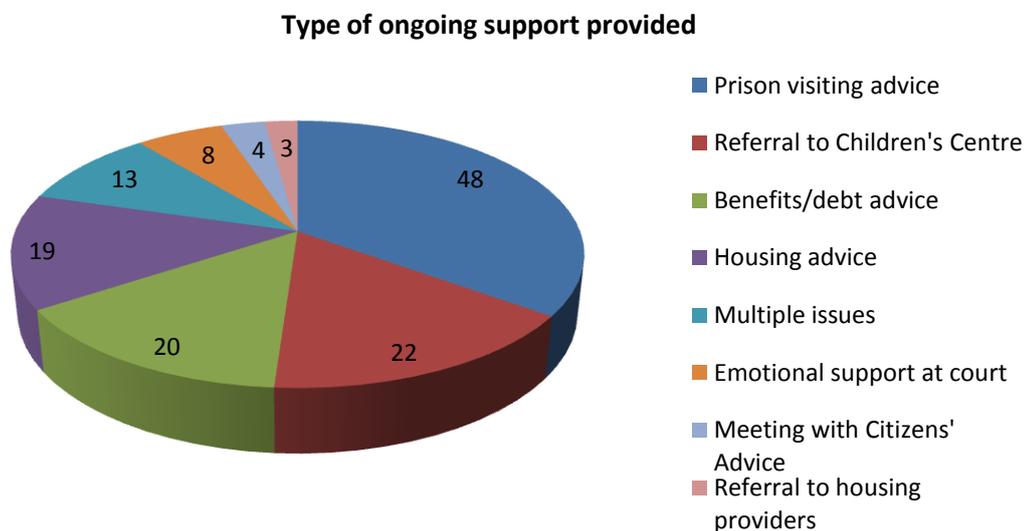
### Numbers of families supported at each court site over time



For 401 of those contacts at court, the project recorded the types of support received by the families: 120 families asked for specific advice from the Family Approaches volunteers, whilst 15 families went on to receive more intensive support from the project coordinator in the weeks and months following sentencing.

The types of support received by families can be summarized as follows:

### Breakdown of specific advice/support provided at court



### 3.2 Training for sentencers and court users

Alongside participation in existing Court Users and Probation team meetings, the Family Approaches programme also developed training for 35 local sentencers and other court users.

## **4 Overarching network development**

The Family Approaches programme was devised not only to provide a new court based service, but also to develop an integrated, multi-agency system to streamline access to service provision. This entailed a substantial amount of networking in order to further evolve partnership working across Thames Valley, including consultation with court users; training for sentencers, court staff and other practitioners; participation in court user group meetings and the provision of project updates to interested parties.

The range of networking and practice development has included:

- Better integration of family and offender services;
- Establishment of a working protocol with the local Family Conferencing Group;
- Primary research and awareness raising in Milton Keynes (Woodhill Visitors' Centre);
- Further development of early intervention hubs in Milton Keynes;
- Development of the Buckinghamshire Family Information Service;
- Networking with local prison Visitors' Centres;
- Implementation of the 'Fathers Inside' parenting course at Reading prison;
- Linking Huntercombe foreign nationals prison into local Children's Centres;
- Further development of multi-agency networks, including Troubled Families leads;
- Attendance at all Children and Family hub meetings to increase project referrals;
- The hosting of practitioner events in order to embed practice;
- Evolution of a 'virtual Family Approaches service' at Magistrates' courts;
- Development of the Maternity Pathway;
- Development of Reading Borough Council Offender Families Strategy;
- The launch of the Woodhill visitor centre information desk (February 2014).

Thus, there have been substantial improvements in collaborative working across Thames Valley, with Family Approaches contributing significantly to the further development of an integrated approach that has strengthened support for prisoners' families.

### **4.1 Family Matters training for practitioners**

The Family Approaches programme allowed for the further delivery of Family Matters training to 206 practitioners across the Thames Valley region.

### **4.2 Sustainability and potential for further development**

The Family Approaches programme has provided a new service for families, extended the reach of practitioner training and influenced change across the Thames Valley criminal justice system. However, the scale and longevity of work required to deliver this 'whole-system' approach is substantial. Whilst the project has undoubtedly achieved a shift of attitude and awareness across the region, its potential to be sustained is dependent upon the long-term provision of ongoing training to ensure that new staff are aware of the issues and that this work is mainstreamed, integrated and embedded in practice.

## 5 Key Findings

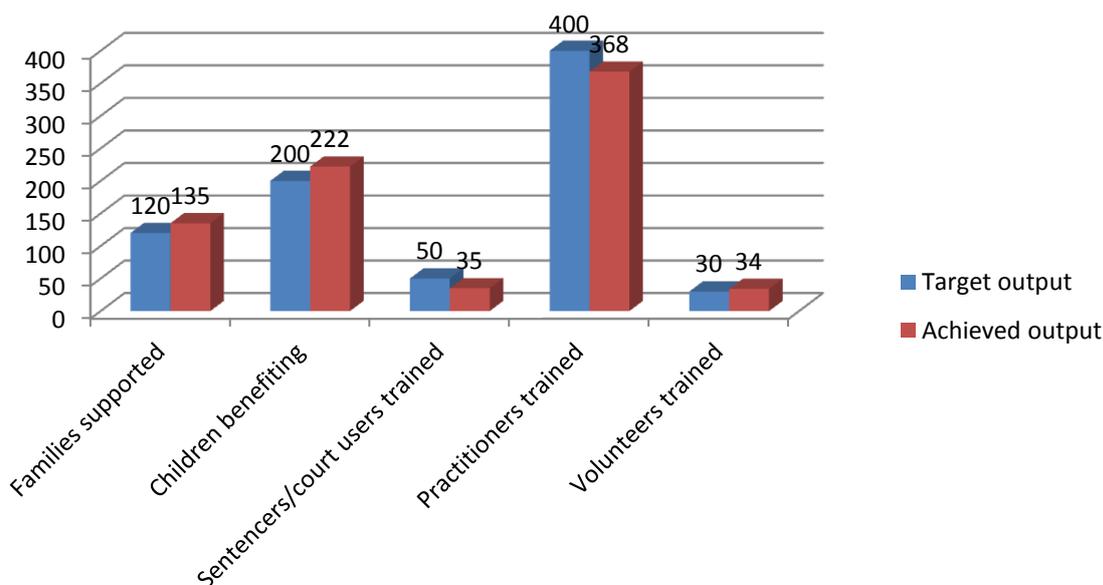
This is an extremely challenging time in which to be developing criminal justice services. Courts have undergone substantial streamlining and the probation service is facing radical changes including the introduction of private and voluntary sector provision of what have hitherto been core probation services. These changes have resulted in a huge degree of uncertainty, making it difficult to plan and develop services across the criminal justice system. Despite this, the Family Approaches programme has been highly successful and its achievements reflect a number of critical success factors:

- Strong and effective strategic relationships that have been built over time;
- Personal commitment obtained from sufficient individuals to progress delivery;
- Collective recognition that there is a need to improve support for prisoners' families;
- Unwavering persistence to raise awareness and develop practitioner networking.

### 5.1 Summary of project outputs and outcomes

The following chart compares these key outcomes against the programme's initial targets:

#### Project targets compared to outputs delivered



The above graph reveals how far the project's targets have been met. The only exceptions are in relation to the delivery of training to sentencers and practitioners where a shortfall exists - largely as a result of the public sector budget cuts and reductions in staff numbers, both of which drastically reduced agency capacity to send staff on training.

### 5.2 Facilitators of project development:

The Family Approaches Programme has an extremely strong design: providing not just a stand-alone service but also a programme of integrated activity to embed and sustain the work and to maximize its impact. Six key factors have facilitated the success of the project:

1. *The engagement and extension of key partners;*
2. *Growing sentencer involvement;*
3. *Successful volunteer engagement;*
4. *The development of wider awareness-raising across a range of practitioners;*
5. *Direct work with families including 'behind the gate' work.*

### 5.3 Continuing challenges for the project

There are also a number of factors that pose continuing challenges for attempts to the provision of support for families of offenders in Thames Valley:

1. **Recruitment and loss of volunteers:** Volunteer turnover can be unpredictable and volunteer exit at short notice poses challenges to the resourcing of the project.
2. **Court management:** It is difficult to coordinate the service around court listings, venues and logistics to ensure that the court desk is covered at key times.
3. **External agency resources:** Cuts to public sector budgets and the scale / rapidity of criminal justice within the sector have made partnership working very challenging.
4. **Development and delivery of services to families:** There is scope to develop more in-depth programmes for families but this potential requires resourcing.

### 5.4 Potential developments

The Family Approach programme has the potential to influence change throughout the criminal justice system and could establish a model with national influence and replicability. Its work should be mainstreamed, integrated and embedded in practice and service delivery. Potential areas for further project development fall into seven categories:

1. Work is required to further embed ownership within the criminal justice system: raising awareness among sentencers, defence solicitors/barristers, (Magistrates) court staff and policy makers and requesting that counsel alert their client's family to the service.
2. The probation service may also be able to play a more strategic role in identifying families who have a member recently sentenced to custody or remand (or approaching release from custody) who are in need of support.
3. More systematic engagement of practitioners is required to overcome 'patchy' service provision: such 'gap filling' needs to both focus on specific geographical locations and on improving awareness across particular sectors (e.g.: schools).
4. Ongoing training is required to equip frontline staff with the skills to broach sensitive issues with families. Key agencies should nominate staff to have explicit

responsibility for this work (e.g.: a designated offender family link in Children's Action Teams and a single point of contact for offender families within IOM).

5. Follow-on monitoring of families could ensure that support has been accessed and the recruitment of 'peer' volunteers or development of an ongoing peer support network for families of prisoners may be beneficial;
6. Volunteers could be offered the opportunity to access further training and perhaps take on more responsibility - including court desk coordination.
7. In-depth research is required to monitor a cohort of families in order to fully explore their support needs and the impact of early intervention.

## 6 Summary

*Family Approach* is an ambitious programme which developed in an extremely difficult financial climate where services are retrenching. This integrated approach delivered by volunteers provided excellent value for money and added considerable value to existing provision. The strong working relationships with partner agencies ensured that alongside improving outcomes for families of offenders, a whole new approach has been introduced to criminal justice services across Thames Valley.

The *Family Approach* project has revealed how the point of sentencing to custody provides a crucial early intervention point to reduce social exclusion among prisoners' families. There is an urgent need to break the intergenerational cycle of offending and more work is required to explore the potential for this type of support to contribute to the reducing re-offending agenda. Such knowledge is likely to provide an important driver for future strategic and operational development of this work. To that extent, the Family Approaches project is a trailblazing piece of work that deserves wider recognition. It merits careful examination as part of any strategy to address both re-offending and child welfare.

