

# 'Anywhere else you can't say it'

## Evaluation of Mothers Living Apart from their Children North Kirklees Pilot Service: April 2012-March 2013

### 1.0 About the Pilot Service

WomenCentre has offered a service for mothers living apart from their children in Huddersfield since September 2008. In 2012 they secured funding to pilot a sister service in North Kirklees for one year, located within their facilities in Dewsbury. Over the past 12 months, the Mothers Apart service in Dewsbury has provided a space for mothers to come together every two weeks within a facilitated group environment to explore their experience of living apart from their children through discussion and group-based activities. In addition, the group facilitator, also the Coordinator of the service, meets with many of the mothers outside of the group, offering them individualised 'case-work' support. The service is primarily concerned with fostering the health and wellbeing of the mothers, which, for many, also means promoting healthy relationships with their children. During the pilot year, 29 mothers accessed the service in Dewsbury.

### 2.0 About the evaluation

At the beginning of the pilot year, an independent Evaluator was engaged to carry out a formative evaluation of the Mothers Apart service, which would:

- Understand what has changed for the mothers because of their involvement in the service.
- Learn about the aspects of the service or features of the approach that have contributed to the changes.
- Apply a return on investment methodology to reveal potential savings associated with delivery of the service.

In order to frame the evaluation process, the Coordinator and Evaluator mapped out a crude 'theory of change'<sup>1</sup>. This showed the path of the Mothers Apart service from inputs to activities to outcomes and long term goals, and revealed the key aspects of the service that would be considered and reviewed as part of the evaluation (See Appendix 1).

The evaluation methods are summarised below.

<b>Service review diary</b>	Completed weekly by Coordinator
<b>Initial interviews with the mothers</b>	Completed when new mothers were referred to the service by the Project Coordinator
<b>Face to face and telephone interviews with mothers</b>	4 interviews with 4 mothers in October 2012 6 interviews with 6 mothers in February 2013 All conducted by the Evaluator, involving 7 different mothers in total
<b>Project Coordinator interview</b>	Conducted by the Evaluator in February 2013
<b>Task tracking</b>	Spreadsheets completed weekly by the Coordinator

The evidence was collated and reviewed at two points over the course of the pilot: in October 2012, in order to contribute to a seminar with Service Providers, and in March 2013, to inform this report and the Return on Investment analysis. The Return on Investment analysis is presented separately; it adopts a case study approach to demonstrate how the impact of the service can be quantified using return on investment calculations. By contrast, this report seeks to explore the mothers' experience of the service and review the features that have been integral to the delivery model during the pilot year.

<sup>1</sup> Theory Of Change is an approach that has become increasingly popular across the UK Third Sector. For more information see <http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/theory-of-change/>

This report is structured as follows:

**Section 3.0** provides information about the mothers that have accessed the service

**Section 4.0** discusses what has been learnt about the service outcomes

**Section 5.0** highlights the learning about the critical features of the service

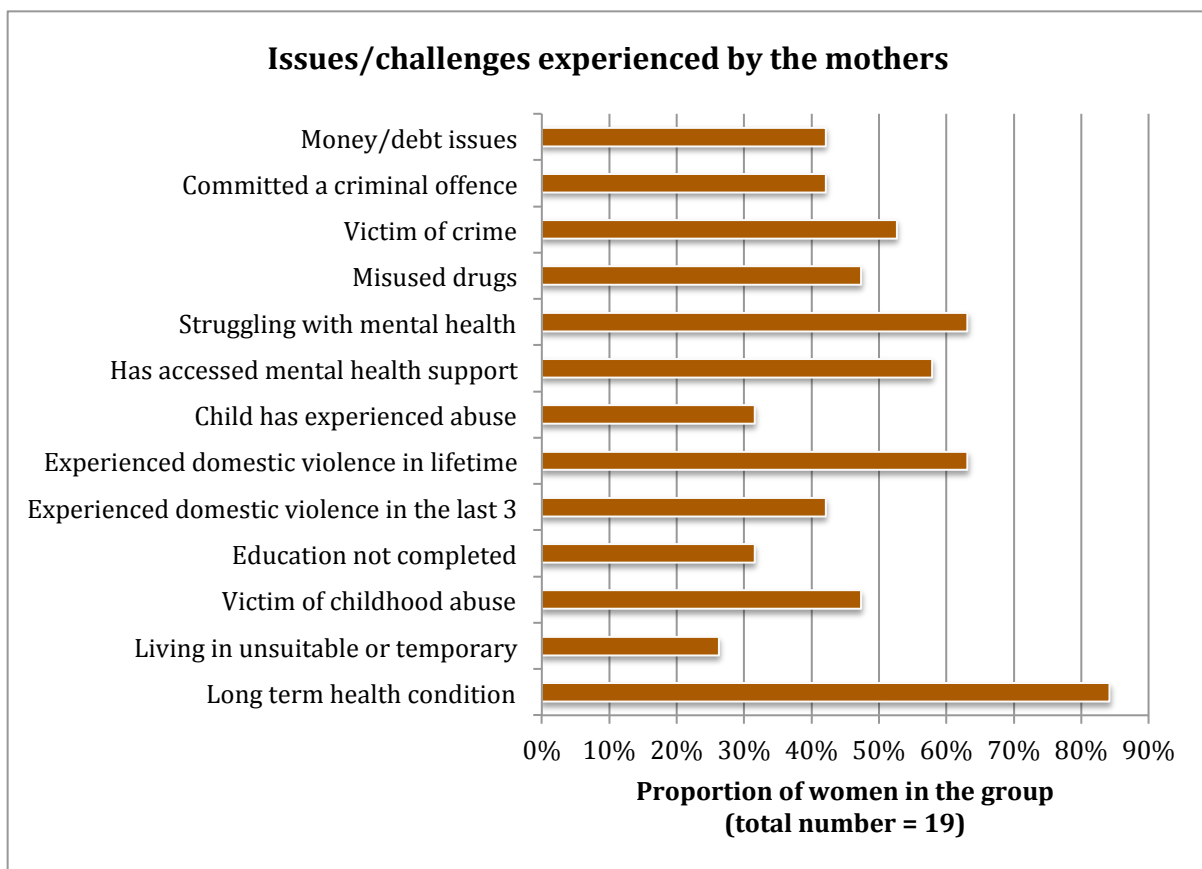
**Section 6.0** outlines the key messages about each of the different service activities

### 3.0 About the mothers

One third of the 29 mothers that accessed the Mothers Apart service, joined at the late stages of the pilot year. Information about their circumstances have therefore not been included within this evaluation. Entry point information was collected from 19 mothers and this is summarised below (see Appendix 2 for graphical representation of the data):

- There is a varied age range, although the majority of mothers (over 70%) are over 30 years
- Most of the mothers have 2 or more children that they are living apart from (46 children across the 19 mothers)
- The length of time that the mothers have been living apart from their children varies considerably from less than one year to over ten years
- Contact arrangements also vary for different children: no contact was reported with around one third of the children and regular contact was reported with just less than half of the children.
- Two thirds of the children were reported as living with an ex-partner or with family member; just less than one third are living in residential, foster care or are adopted.

On joining the service, the mothers were asked about their personal circumstances. Their responses, which are likely to ‘under-report’ the complexity of their situation, highlight the significant challenges that the mothers are experiencing. Whilst each situation is unique, the difficulties and issues they are encountering are typical of many of the women that access WomenCentre services<sup>2</sup>.



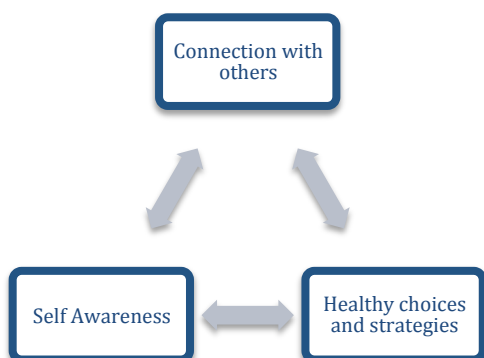
<sup>2</sup> Duffy, S. and Hyde, C. (2011) *Women at the Centre: Innovation in Community*, The Centre of Welfare Reform, Sheffield.

That the mothers experience multiple challenges has had implications for their ability to engage with the Mothers Apart service. Whilst a core group of 5-6 mothers have attended most of the Dewsbury group sessions, a similar number have been intermittent attenders and over a third have attended only one group session, or none at all. Reasons for non-attendance include ill-health, pregnancy, poor mental health, family commitments and competing appointments. The Coordinator has maintained contact with most of the mothers that have been unable to attend the group sessions, and she has continued to offer them case-work support. Nevertheless, the group attendance records suggest that the current delivery model has not fully engaged a proportion of mothers. The extent to which this constrained the achievement of outcomes is unclear, however this is perhaps an area that would benefit from more consideration in future evaluations.

## 4.0 Understanding outcomes

This section of the report presents key messages from an analysis of the ten interviews that were conducted with seven mothers during the pilot phase. Of the seven mothers that were interviewed, five could be described as regular attenders of the Dewsbury group. Two of the mothers were unable to attend the group for a number of months due to their personal circumstances. Despite their non-attendance, both mothers have a strong allegiance to the Mothers Apart service, and have had involvement in both the Huddersfield and Dewsbury groups.

The interviews with the mothers suggest that the Mothers Apart service has contributed to three broad impacts, which relate closely to the outcomes that were identified when the pilot service was designed.



### 1) Connections with other mothers

All of the mothers spoke in their interviews about the stigma and judgement that they felt as mothers living apart from their children. Some talked about 'bottling things up' because they didn't want to disclose their feelings or situation, others described how they sometimes deny having children in order to avoid uncomfortable questions from strangers. Mothers referred to the sense of guilt and shame associated with their situation and the powerful feelings of isolation that accompany this.

In stark contrast to this, The Mothers Apart service is perceived as a space in which the mothers can talk about their experiences and acknowledge their emotions in the company of other women. This is hugely significant for the mothers, who referred time and again in their interviews to the lack of 'judgement' in the group, the sense of 'acceptance' by others and the reassurance that comes with knowing that there are other people 'in the same boat.'

*"It was nice to talk about things yesterday rather than just holding it in...whenever I try and speak about it I cry. Yesterday, in the group, because they're all in the same sort of boat there was no judgement or anything. Everyone understood. Everyone was nodding their heads. Anywhere else you can't say it. I can't even speak to my mum or my sister because they've got their views about me using drugs and I don't want to upset them. So I managed to speak*

yesterday. I'd just got a few tears in my eyes but I didn't actually burst into tears so I felt I could talk and explain things without losing breath and not being able to speak because I'm crying so much."

"It gives you strength. It makes you feel more accepted. The fact that you can go into a group and there are other women there. You know that you're not on your own."

"I can come to the group and I know I am not being judged. Nobody is going to judge me. Nobody's going to tell me I'm stupid. Nobody's going to blame me. Everyone's got different circumstances, but I don't judge anybody else as well."

Some mothers spoke about the sense of relief that comes with being honest about their situation; others described how it had impacted on their confidence and ability to trust others. One mother spoke about how she is now more prepared to speak openly with some people outside of the group:

"Before I came here, I found it really hard to trust anyone. I'd never open up so it's helped me a lot with that. I mean now I attend a SureStart centre with my daughter and if anyone asks me there 'do you have other children?' I used to say 'no' but now I tell them all about it. That's how the mothers group has helped me. I am able to trust people more easily. It's made me able to speak to people outside of the group."

The facilitator has observed a very positive and healthy dynamic develop within the group, and despite some changes in the group's membership from session to session, there is a strong sense from the mothers that it represents a consistent and reliable presence in their lives:

"It gives me something to do, something to look forward to and concentrate on."

The group has also acted as a conduit to other supportive networks, particularly those that are hosted and promoted by WomenCentre. One mother spoke about joining the Confidence Classes as a result of her involvement in the Mothers Apart service, and another mother, who has taken part in positive activities outside of the group, described it as the 'central base' which she can return to when-ever she wants.

## **2) Self-awareness**

Through the guided exercises in the group sessions, mothers have explored the thought patterns, feelings and behaviours associated with living apart from their children. Over the year, the mothers have fostered a culture that is mutually supportive and respectful, as observed by the Coordinator:

"I noticed an immense ability to listen to each other, take turns and show respect for others' experiences."

The format of the group sessions, which begins with the sharing of news before moving on to some more structured group activities, offers the mothers different means of exploring their experiences. One mother spoke in her interview about how this has affected her:

"We had to write down our fears and I found that really really hard to do. But I'm so glad I did. And also, she made us aware of our inner critics and I'd never really thought about that for a long long time so it's made me aware of mine and I'm now aware of how to try and avoid that sort of thing".

Another mother commented on how she valued the opportunity to do activities in the group that were focused on her own well-being and not just her relationship with her child:

*"At some of the sessions you'd have a coffee and a chat. Others you'd do some craft. It helps to be doing something and not always focusing on getting your child back. You're looking after yourself first."*

The group discussions and guided exercises have helped to build the self-confidence of some mothers. This was articulated by one mother in the group when she described how her contact sessions with her children had changed:

*"My confidence seems to have grown with it. Coming to it, I feel as if I've got a lot of confidence back. I'm more chilled out with my children as well. I'm not so worried and because I'm calmer in myself he will come to me more, just for a cuddle....My eldest daughter comes to me now. She wouldn't have done that before."*

### **3) Healthy choices and strategies**

Some mothers have used the group to discuss strategies or approaches to address relationship difficulties that they are experiencing with their children or with other family members. One mother described how the group had supported her to maintain contact with her teenage son:

*"I told them what happened, that I had been in touch with my son for the first time for a year. And everyone sits and listens and you don't feel that you can't talk and you don't feel that you've got to hurry.... And they helped me to be able to put an email together to send him. It was just brilliant. Absolutely brilliant."*

Another mother talked about how her contact sessions with her 5 year-old son have improved because she is now more aware of how her behaviour affects him, and she is able to try out ideas that the other mothers have passed on to her:

*"He is behaving totally different - he is coming out more of his shell. He talks when he gets upset but I won't pressurize him. If he doesn't tell me I say, 'Do you want to go and do this?' and I get him playing."*

On a very practical level, a number of mothers have enrolled on other courses or joined other groups that support their personal growth or promote their wellbeing. Examples include signing up for a parenting course, attending counselling sessions and producing a digital diary. Two mothers spoke about the significance of this for their personal growth:

*"It's made me want to go out more and experience other things. At one point I wouldn't have referred myself to counselling but I've done that now."*

*"I was taking time for myself and not just attending things to tick the boxes."*

## **Summary**

The interviews with the mothers suggest that the Mothers Apart service has been a very positive influence in their lives over the past year. It has offered an important antidote to the sense of stigma and isolation that accompanies their situation whilst also creating valued opportunities for self-awareness and growth. All the mothers spoke about how the group has provided a safe space to think about the choices they can make and explore their ability to instigate change in their own lives. Some mothers were able to cite examples to illustrate how their relationships with their children had benefitted from this. The complexity of the mothers' situations inevitably means that the Mothers Apart service is just one amongst a suite of services or interventions that touch their lives, a reality that makes it impossible to differentiate the outcomes achieved by the pilot service. Given this, the notion of contribution, rather than attribution, is far more helpful for understanding the impact of the

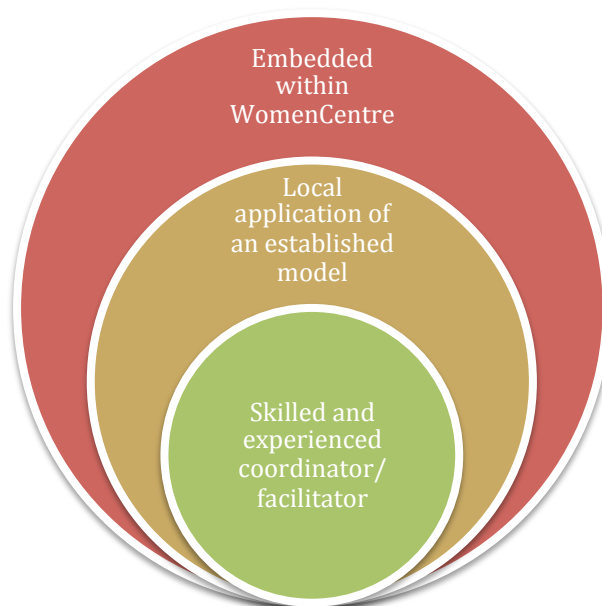
pilot on the well-being of the mothers involved. Even then there are 'health warnings' that need to accompany any discussion about outcomes in the context of this service, namely:

- The term 'outcome' implies a destination yet it is perhaps more helpful and realistic to think about 'change' as a journey.
- The narrative of 'achievement and failure' is already prominent in the lives of the mothers and there is a danger that any approach to outcomes measurement simply reinforces this further.
- 'Outcomes' are subject to many influences, which are not all within the mothers' control. The pilot has revealed how social workers, solicitors, GPs, counselling services and family members all make a contribution, sometimes helpful and sometimes not so helpful, to the choices that mothers make and the directions their lives take.

In light of this discussion, it would be worthwhile to consider how 'outcomes' are framed if the service is extended. A model of change that acknowledges that it is a complex and non-linear process would be an important starting point. This evaluation has suggested some of the themes that could feature in the model, such as: Connection and Sharing; Awareness and Understanding and Making Healthy Choices.

## 5.0 Enabling features

This section of the report presents the learning about the features of the Mothers Apart service that have been critical to the achievement of the outcomes discussed above. The evaluation has highlighted three critical features, which are discussed below.



### **A service that is embedded within WomenCentre**

The Mothers Apart service is one of a suite of services provided by WomenCentre. The evaluation has revealed that the hosting of the service by WomenCentre has brought a number of benefits:

**Credibility:** WomenCentre is a credible organisation, with a long history in the District. Relationships with many local agencies are therefore well-established, a situation which is conducive to appropriate and timely referrals.

**Safe communities:** WomenCentre offers a range of other complementary services and groups, and women have been referred from these to the Mothers Apart group and vice versa: "The small communities that are created by the different groups are key - they are safe communities. So you can be referred from one group to another without the whole fear thing. It's a bit like a one stop shop." (Project Coordinator)



**Expertise:** The Coordinator has benefitted from the expertise of staff employed to deliver other services such as the Domestic Violence Support Team and Evolve, a service providing support to women that offend or are at risk of offending. There is a firm commitment to the promotion of mental health across WomenCentre; the organisation has developed a strong philosophy associated with well-being that threads through the services it provides.

**Non-statutory:** As a non statutory service, WomenCentre is perceived by the Mothers as a service that they can exercise 'choice' around: they can attend/not attend; they can take part in discussion/be quiet; influence what happens in the group/leave this to others. In particular the informality of the venue is valued by the mothers and is seen as an important contributor to the welcoming and relaxed tone of the group: *"It's really really comfy. It feels like you're just sitting in someone's sitting room. I could go to sleep sometimes."* *"I just feel so comfortable in this environment. It just seems really warm, open and friendly, especially in these premises."*

### Local application of an established model

WomenCentre has been providing a service in Huddersfield for mothers living apart from their children for the past 5 years. The North Kirklees pilot benefitted from this experience in a number of ways:

- It was able to apply a tried and tested model of delivery, which combined regular group activities with one to one case work.
- It benefitted from relationships that the South Kirklees group had already established with key partners, such as the University of Huddersfield.
- It drew on models or tools that had been developed in the Huddersfield Group
- The Co-ordinator brought with her the skills and expertise that she had gained as facilitator of the Huddersfield group

Local application of the model was important for most of the mothers that were interviewed as the time, effort and costs associated with travelling to Huddersfield were considered to be prohibitive. One mother who had been involved in the Huddersfield group pointed out the impact on friendships when travel is involved. She had found it difficult to maintain contact with other women outside of the group because of the distance. A local group was much preferred because it brought new possibilities for friendships and the potential to 'bump into' other mothers within the local community and have a sense of not being alone.

### A service with a skilled and experienced coordinator/facilitator

There were consistent messages across the mothers that were interviewed about the contribution of the Coordinator/facilitator. There is no doubt that they value her skills, knowledge and style of working and see her role as critical to their positive experience of the service. In particular, the mothers spoke about:

- **The knowledge and experience she brings to the role.** The Coordinator has a good understanding of the procedures and practice that surround this work, in particular the range of agencies that can be involved in the mothers lives or may have something to offer. In one mothers words *"She understands a lot about the system and what we go through. She's heard a lot from other women, she understands what's going to happen or what might happen."*
- **The different perspective that she brings as an 'outsider'** who does not share the same experiences as them but has the skills to bring both support and challenge to the group and help them to explore their situation in different ways: *"She gives you ideas and involves you in ideas and involves you in ideas about what you want to do."*
- **The fact that she is a stable, reliable presence in their lives** The mothers talked about how different professionals frequently moved in and out of their lives. As this happens, it becomes necessary for the mothers to retell their story again and again, with the possibility that it can stir up very powerful emotions that they then have to deal with. The mothers described a sense of

relief that they don't have to do this within the Mothers Apart service - that as one mother said "you don't have to keep delving in deep into that history and explaining everything."

- **The active interest she takes in their wellbeing.** She is not there out of a statutory duty or responsibility; she is there to enable the mothers to focus on their own well-being: "She is genuinely interested in what you're going through." As well as facilitating the group, the coordinator provides one to one case-work support. For some mothers this is very important because this gives them an opportunity to reflect on some of the things that they have been talking about in the group and the feelings and emotions that have been associated with this.

## 6.0 Key messages about the service activities

The following table presents a brief appraisal of the different methods and activities that have been applied, drawing on feedback from the Mothers and the Coordinator.

Activity	Key messages from the pilot
Group work	<p>Mothers value</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal, local venue</li> <li>• The format of the sessions - a 'sharing of news' followed by guided activities</li> <li>• Consistent presence of facilitator</li> <li>• Style of facilitation</li> <li>• Regular opportunities to spend time with other mothers living apart from their children</li> </ul> <p>There was a difference of opinion about the frequency of sessions: some mothers felt they should be weekly; others were happy with a fortnightly arrangement.</p> <p>Attendance levels vary considerably and although there has been a core group of regular attenders, there is a sizeable proportion (about one third) who are intermittent attenders. This dynamic, combined with the ongoing recruitment of new mothers, has presented challenges to the flow and evolution of the group. An alternative delivery model is now being explored which will offer a 12-week syllabus to new women, whilst those that have been involved in the service for some time, can attend a regular and more loosely structured forum.</p>
Case work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An essential part of the delivery model: the coordinator has provided case-work support to two thirds of the mothers.</li> <li>• Case work has included: building a trusting relationship so that mothers feel comfortable attending the group sessions; helping mothers to process thoughts and feelings arising from group sessions; supporting mothers with their contact arrangements; referring mothers to other support agencies; accompanying mothers to meetings.</li> <li>• One third of the coordinator's time has been dedicated to case-work support</li> <li>• In most cases, there have been 3-10 interventions from the coordinator but a very small number of mothers have required/requested a higher level of input (around 20 interventions).</li> </ul>
Journal writing /DIGITAL DIARY production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although it was anticipated at the outset that diary-writing would be integrated into the service delivery model, only a small number of mothers have chosen to produce a diary.</li> <li>• The Coordinator is now considering whether a creative writing specialist could be introduced to the group to capture the interest of the mothers and engage them in writing.</li> <li>• There were opportunities for the mothers to attend workshops in Huddersfield to produce a Digital Diary to tell their stories. The newness of the Dewsbury group combined with the location of the Digital Diary work in Huddersfield meant that it wasn't easy for the mothers to engage with this. One mother did produce a Digital Diary and found it a very positive experience.</li> </ul>
Mentoring/ Buddying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was an intention to introduce buddying to the pilot service in Dewsbury but this has not materialized, largely because the mothers that were interested in taking on this role have been unavailable due to their own personal circumstances.</li> <li>• This has prompted the co-ordinator to think about other ways of promoting a 'co-creation' philosophy within the service. For example, by involving mothers in 'spin-off' projects such as</li> </ul>



	the training sessions with Social Work students at the University of Huddersfield.
Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A relationship has been established with Hope Daniels, author of 'Hackney Child' and she was invited to WomenCentre in the Autumn to talk to mothers living apart from their children. Although only one mother attended the session, more read the book and found different aspects of it both moving and challenging.</li> <li>• This experience highlighted the benefits of working with authors, particularly those that have stories that resonate with the experience of mothers in the group.</li> </ul>
Training for Social Work Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One mother from the Dewsbury group joined other mothers from Huddersfield at two workshops involving Social Work students at University of Huddersfield. This was a very positive experience, although daunting initially.</li> <li>• As with other Huddersfield-based activities, it would seem that the location presents challenges for the Dewsbury-based mothers.</li> </ul>
Newsletters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limitations in capacity have meant that it has been difficult for the Coordinator to devote time to newsletter production and there is a recognition that this will require more resources in the future.</li> <li>• Communication channels have been maintained with mothers through other means such as texting and telephoning. This has enabled the Coordinator to stay in contact with some mothers who have felt unable to attend the group sessions.</li> <li>• There is an intention to make 'text-outs' a regular feature of the service in the future.</li> </ul>
Seminars for service providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 16 people from 13 services attended a seminar about the Mothers Apart Service in Dewsbury on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2012.</li> <li>• The session was well received and there were firm indications of support for more collaborative work with the service.</li> <li>• Some services were not represented, such as Health Visitors and Social Workers, suggesting that an alternative approach might be necessary to encourage attendance from a wide range of providers in the future.</li> </ul>

## 7.0 Concluding comments

Many of the mothers that access the Mother's Apart service experience multiple challenges, which inevitably mean that they have contact with different service providers on a day to day basis. Unlike most of these services, Mothers Apart is focused primarily on their well-being and provides opportunities for group interaction and one to one support which is not available anywhere else. Mothers that regularly attend the group sessions greatly value the opportunity to talk openly about their experiences in a space that is supportive and, in their words, judgement-free. Through the group discussions and guided exercises, mothers have been able to explore different aspects of their lives and, for some, this has brought new insights that they been able to apply positively.

Not all mothers have been regular attenders of the group – a fairly large proportion have attended intermittently or only once. If the service is extended, it will be important to explore in more detail why this is the case and determine whether proposed changes in the model of delivery (co-existence of a curriculum group and forum) will help to rectify this. Some of the mothers that have only been occasional attenders of group sessions have maintained regular contact with the Coordinator and it has been interesting to note the significant role that one to one case work has played during the pilot year. It has brought the Coordinator into contact with many different agencies and organisations and elicited some valuable learning about the challenges and gains that arise from working across different professional boundaries. Joint working and collaboration is recognized as an aspect of the Mothers Apart service that could be further developed in the future particularly given the positive reception that the service received in the Autumn seminar.

There are lots of advantages associated with the hosting of the Mothers Apart service by WomenCentre – not least the skills and knowledge that the organisation bring to the management and delivery of the service because of its extensive track record. The embedding of the Mothers Apart service within the suite of WomenCentre activities is especially significant; in a sense it represents a ‘community amongst communities’ opening doors to other new experiences, relationships and networks.

What is particularly striking about this service is the extent to which it has benefitted from the highly skilled and consistent input of the Coordinator. She is, without doubt, one of its biggest assets – her contribution was highly praised by all the mothers that were interviewed for this evaluation. Yet at the same time this raises questions about the long term resilience of a service which is heavily reliant on the exceptional contribution of one individual. This is not unusual, particularly in the community and voluntary sector, yet it does suggest that as the service prepares for the next stage of delivery, it may want to consider how aspects of delivery could be shared with others. One way of doing this is to involve other talented, inspiring and skilled people in the group who can engage the mothers in different ways. The potential of this approach was demonstrated by the Hope Daniels’ visit and it is very good that there is a commitment from the Mothers Apart service to build on this experience.

As the service moves into the next phase, it is clear that there is a strong desire to build on the lessons of the pilot year, extending and developing aspects that have worked well whilst also making adjustments to the delivery model to ensure that it can accommodate the range of experiences that mothers bring with them. Any evaluation of the service will need to explore the contribution of these service adjustments and developments, whilst also retaining a firm focus on the changes that mothers experience. A more detailed case study approach might be warranted, particularly in light of the Return on Investment analysis, which accompanies this report.