



Footprints to Understanding

An evaluation of Mothers Living Apart from their Children
June 2013–May 2014

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1.0 Introduction

Mothers Living Apart from their Children (Mothers Apart) is a service delivered by WomenCentre, that forms part of their Mental Health and Wellbeing Service funding by Kirklees Council and the two Kirklees NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups. Mothers Apart, which began in 2008, is one of a suite of services delivered by WomenCentre. Over the past six years Mothers Apart has extended its reach from Huddersfield to Dewsbury, engaging over 120 women in its core activities, which combine group-based activities with individualised case work.

An evaluation of the Dewsbury-based service in 2012/13, entitled *Anywhere else you can't say it*, explored its contribution to the health and wellbeing of mothers living apart from their children. A series of interviews revealed that involvement in the mothers group brought the mothers valued opportunities to talk openly about their experiences within a supportive and judgment-free environment. Not only did the group help to overcome the sense of stigma and isolation that accompanies the mothers' situations but it also provided a safe space to think about the choices they can make and explore their ability to instigate change in their own lives.

The report discussed important features of the service and noted WomenCentre's local credibility and extensive track record within this area of work. Similarly, the skilled and consistent input of the Coordinator was identified as central to mothers' positive experiences of the service. Noted in the report was WomenCentre's ambition, at the end of 2012/13, to enter into a new phase of delivery that would involve the consolidation and evolution of some activities through closer collaboration with a range of other professionals and services.

Service activities in 2013/14

Confirmation of continued funding in 2013/14, albeit at a lower level than anticipated, has enabled Mothers Apart to pursue these ambitions. New initiatives have emerged that build on the service's core work of group meetings and individualised case work. In addition, other aspects of the service have been consolidated and strengthened. These are briefly summarised below:

- **The creation of In Our Hearts:** Two creative workers were recruited to work alongside the mothers and produce a book about their experiences of living apart from their children
- **Professional development of social workers:** Mothers have continued to provide input to the training of social work students at the University of Huddersfield and are now also contributing to professional development of post-qualified social workers
- **Adoption preparation training:** Regular, structured input into pre-adoption preparation sessions, organised by Kirklees Council adoption team

- **Peer support:** A sharper focus on peer support through the introduction of a new support role within the group work sessions and closer links with other services in WomenCentre
- **Music therapy input:** Introduction of a music therapist to the service to enhance group work sessions and offer a new strand of support associated with contact sessions
- **International Women's Day Event:** Speaking at an event in London to raise awareness of how domestic violence is often associated with mothers living apart from their children

The evaluation of Mothers Apart in 2013/14 has focused on the new service developments with the aim of understanding their contribution and impact. It is intended that this report is viewed as a 'sister report' to *Anywhere else you can't say it*. Combined together, the two evaluation reports explore all aspects of the Mothers Apart service, highlighting key achievements and opportunities for further development.

Section 2 summarises the evaluation methods.

Section 3 presents information about levels of activity and general contextual influences.

Section 4 draws on the evaluation evidence to present what has been learnt about each strand of activity.

Section 5 of this report summarises the key messages emerging from the evaluation and presents some recommendations concerning service development.

2.0 About the evaluation

Focusing on activities that are additional to the service's core work, the 2013/14 evaluation has explored:

- What each strand of activity entailed and how it evolved
- The significance of the activity for the mothers and the service
- Outcomes for other services and implications for the future
- The conditions that are necessary for effective delivery/implementation

The evaluation methods are summarised below:

Telephone interviews with external agencies	<p>1 interview with Pre-adoption training Coordinator, Kirklees Council</p> <p>1 interview with MSc Advanced Safeguarding Course Leader, University of Huddersfield</p> <p>1 interview with a Social Work Consultant working with University of Huddersfield</p>
Face to face and telephone interviews with creative practitioners	<p>1 interview with Music Therapist</p> <p>1 interview with Creative Worker</p>
Face to face and telephone interviews with 5 mothers	<p>5 interviews with 5 mothers in September/October 2013</p> <p>3 interviews with 3 mothers in January/February 2014</p> <p>3 interviews with 3 mothers in May/June 2014</p>
Face to face interview with the Mothers Apart Coordinator	<p>1 interview in May 2014</p>
Review of pre-adoption training evaluation feedback	<p>Desk review of 57 completed evaluation forms from 4 courses in 2013/14</p>

3.0 Context and levels of activity

The context within which the Mothers Apart service operates is a complex one. Influences exist on many levels and have presented both challenges and opportunities to the services over the past year as highlighted below:

Uncertainty about the long term financial position of the service has accelerated the development of some strands of activity, most notably the creation of the book which, it is hoped, will open the door to new service development opportunities.

At the same time, **well-established professional relationships** with other services within WomenCentre and with external service providers have brought many new women to the service over the past year.

The vulnerable situations of many women involved in the service means that their lives can be characterised by turbulence and unpredictability. Inevitably this has required the approach to delivery to be sensitive, flexible and accommodating of different levels of confidence and engagement.

Changes in the benefits system and legal aid has brought uncertainty and heightened anxiety for some women, which has affected their ability to engage with the service. The 'bedroom tax', for example, has meant that some mothers have faced the risk of losing a property that they hoped their children would return to. Changes in legal aid mean that some women are facing the prospect of representing themselves in court and therefore require additional support and advice around this.

Levels of activity 2013/14

A review of WomenCentre's tracking information indicates that 149 women had contact with the Mothers Apart service in the 12 months up to 30th June 2014. Of these 94 actively engaged with the service and 55 were recipients of the newsletter only (many of these had accessed the service in previous years).

A closer analysis reveals that mothers have been involved in Mothers Apart activities for a total of 1380 hours over the reporting period. Approximately two-thirds of this time has been dedicated to groupwork in Huddersfield and Dewsbury, and the remaining one-third of the hours have been distributed equally across casework and the additional Mothers Apart activities which are the focus of this report. This reveals that whilst groupwork continues to play a substantial role within the service, other activities feature significantly, and this becomes even more apparent when the quality of the experience they offer is taken into account.

One of the other interesting findings emerging from WomenCentre's tracking information concerns the migration of mothers across different WomenCentre groups, activities and services. As noted previously, WomenCentre offer a range of activities that complement the work of Mothers Apart, and women have been referred from these to Mothers Apart and vice versa. As the chart below illustrates, many mothers involved in Mothers Apart are actively engaging with other parts of WomenCentre.

4.0 About the strands of activity – what has been learnt

4.1 The creation of *In Our Hearts* – a book written by mothers who live apart from their children

Arguably the most significant achievement of the service over the past year has been the creation of *In Our Hearts* – a book that, using the mediums of stories and artwork, describes (in their own words) the experiences of mothers living apart from their children. Different aspects of the mothers' lives are reflected in the book, from the pain and trauma of initial separation through to court proceedings and their ongoing relationships with their children.

Although the idea of producing a book was first mooted some time ago, the process of creating material began in earnest this year after a group of mothers interviewed and appointed two Creative Workers. Over the course of the past nine months, the two workers have participated in the group sessions and supported the mothers to tell their stories through writing and artwork. Interviews with these workers, the Mothers Apart Coordinator and some of the women involved have shown that the book has been a galvanising force this year. It has provided a focus for group activities and it brought a sense of purpose to the writing process. A number of key messages about the process of creating *In Our Hearts* are summarised below.

The opportunity to be heard

Mothers living apart from their children typically feel that their experiences have been trivialised, not listened to and not believed. In creating the book, the mothers have been able to say 'this is what I feel and this is what I think'. That their words are uncensored and captured within an end product, which could prove helpful or informative to others, brings credibility and value to their experience.

"It's about saying I'm moving on and developing and learning and I'm also using that to produce something that will benefit others." (Creative Worker)

By situating their experiences within a context, the women have been able to challenge many of the perceptions about mothers who live apart from their children. The sense of wanting to influence others by bringing their own voices to the fore, has been prominent throughout the process of creating the book.

“I think it’s good because it points out to people that there isn’t a stereotype person ... things can happen to different people for different reasons. I hope people will read it and think ‘I never thought of that’... There’s a letter from one woman to a social worker in there thanking her social worker for removing her child. And I don’t think many people appreciate that you can think like that. So I think it’s quite useful on a number of levels.” (A mother involved in the creation of *In Our Hearts*)

A process and symbol of growth

For some mothers, the book is an illustration of how they are moving on, developing and learning. The significance of this cannot be underestimated – in creating material for the book the mothers have explored and expressed different aspects of their lives and their personal insights are a demonstration of their growing strength.

The process of creating material for the book has been difficult for some mothers and the workers have encountered an element of resistance at times. Allowing the women to articulate their fears, handling these sensitively and offering them different means of telling their story has been important.

“I have seen some women really move on in their lives. They have gone from not talking about their experience, to talking in an edited way, to speaking in their own words and feeling secure about this. One of the women was very reluctant to talk at the beginning. But as she started to feel more comfortable, bits of her story started to come out. She is now supporting others and is realising that she has got skills and an ability to work with other people in a way that is not only beneficial to herself but to them too.”

Mothers Apart service

That so many mothers have felt able to contribute to the book and produce such deeply personal material is revealing of the abilities of the Creative Workers. At the same time, this work could not happen unless it was embedded within the Mothers Apart service which, after five years, has established an ethos and way of working that is respectful, sensitive and empowering.

“Before any of this could happen the women need to feel safe. They need to feel valued and they need to feel that their knowledge and insights are important. The permanence of the service, the space, the staff - they all keep pulling the women back in. It’s about the women feeling a sense of place - all of this is necessary for them to feel safe enough to take risks” (Creative Worker)

4.2 Professional development of Social Workers

Training of social work students

Mothers Apart has been working with the University of Huddersfield, contributing to the training of Social Work students since 2010. The work continued this year and followed a process that is now well established, whereby the mothers provide case studies for the students to work on before they all come together at the University to discuss the students' responses. The main focus of the work with students is to explore how values influence the judgements that are made by social workers and to increase understanding of the mother's perspective.

The longevity of this arrangement is important and it is clear that the relationship between the tutor and the Coordinator is very strong. The contribution of mothers to the social work training is much valued by the University (WomenCentre are awarded a visiting lecture fee for their involvement). There is a firm commitment to ensuring that students are fully supported in their learning and the experience is positive for the mothers. There is awareness of the kinds of issues that are likely to be raised during the exchange between students and mothers and the facilitators have confidence in their ability to handle this respectfully.

Training of post-qualified social workers

Discussions began in Autumn 2013 between Mothers Apart and the University of Huddersfield about the possibility of mothers contributing to the professional development of practicing social workers. This work marks a further development of WomenCentre's role in promoting the safeguarding of women and children with whom they work. Understanding and educating others about safeguarding, through the voice of the women and children they work with, is a core part of the organisation's work across all of its services. A series of planning and preparation sessions with the University of Huddersfield culminated in a one-day pilot session in January 2014, which brought together a small group of students completing an MA in Advanced Safeguarding and 9 women from the service.

Interviews with the Course Leader from the University of Huddersfield and women involved in the training, highlight the significance of the training for everyone involved.

A challenging and fruitful learning experience for social workers

This was a challenging experience for the social workers and there was anxiety before the session because this was something new, different and unknown. From the perspective of the University, this sense of unease was anticipated and it was considered to be an important part of their professional development.

"When you sit in a comfort zone, you are very limited in what you learn. It's really important for us to stretch that and put people in situations where they are uncomfortable because that's where the learning takes place..."

“I said to the students, ‘I won’t apologise for making you feel uncomfortable. I want you to sit in it and I want you to listen because you’ve got an opportunity that not many people get, so grasp it and learn from it.” (Course Leader, University of Huddersfield)

The experience of working on tasks alongside the mothers and entering into conversations with them, provided the students with opportunities to reflect on how, as professionals, they conducted themselves, the language they use and the way they listen. Listening to the stories of the women and having an opportunity to reflect on their professional practice, from an opposite perspective, was very powerful for many of the students. The students reported back afterwards that that they had gained an understanding of the grief that mothers feel and how social workers can be unrealistic in their demands on mothers during such a traumatic time. They were angry and disturbed by reports of social workers not being open and honest and they were more aware of the impact of domestic violence.

“It was an absolutely wonderful day in terms of learning. The stark reality of some of the lives of the women and the absolute pain that was still ongoing. It was tangible. The students were able to link what they heard to their practice... and every one of them said they will definitely be different.”

Respect and gratitude for the mothers’ contribution

The university staff and the students are very appreciative of the huge contribution of the mothers during the day and have expressed gratitude for the way the mothers conducted themselves. The mothers’ involvement is interpreted as generous and selfless – they were not aiming to benefit their own situation, but they hoped to influence the way social workers worked with other mothers. Their strength and courage is much admired.

“I am absolutely in awe of the women. Not only were they able to articulate and connect with their feelings so beautifully without raging (because you could almost forgive that), but they were so giving of their time, of their emotion and energy....They were an absolute joy to work with. What surprised me was their reflectiveness, their generosity of spirit, their dedication to the cause and their politeness. Allowing us to do what we did was very gracious of them.”

An opportunity to challenge assumptions

One mother described it as a very worthwhile day – it offered an opportunity to educate the social workers about the impact for mothers of being apart from their children and challenge some of the assumptions that were being articulated in the group.

“A lot of people got a lot out of it. Social workers don’t grasp what people go through – the multi-agency thing. They don’t get that in addition to being apart from your child you’ve got all this other stuff. One of them brought up the idea of ‘you and us’ and I said ‘It could be you’... A lot of professionals have breakdowns – this perception that it’s only a certain type of person that runs into problems is wrong. We told them that nobody sets out when they have a baby to think this is how it’s going to go.”

Inevitably, the day was also very tiring. The two case studies that were discussed in depth brought up a lot of painful feelings and frustrations as the mothers revisited their experiences (“It’s like going through 18 months in one hour”) and it was suggested that a shorter day would be preferable.

Conditions for effective delivery

Factors that are critical to the success of the partnership work with the University of Huddersfield have been identified during evaluation interviews with mothers, tutors and the Mothers Apart Coordinator. The key points that were raised are summarised below:

Remaining mindful of the well-being of the mothers throughout the process

- *Building in opportunities for the mothers to meet the course organisers early on and contribute to the planning process*
- *Ensuring the mothers have opportunities to participate in different ways (for example some helped to produce the case studies but didn’t attend the sessions whilst others attended sessions and took full part in the discussions)*
- *Considering the location of the training and ensuring the mothers feel comfortable and in the space*

Preparing students

- *Encouraging them to articulate and explore their fears or anxieties in advance and consider how they might manage their feelings in the session*
- *Discussing how they will engage with the mothers and ensure that communication is respectful*
- *Ensuring the students are mindful of how they conduct themselves outside of the structured group work, for example at break time*

Skilled facilitation

- *Collaborative approach involving WomenCentre and the University of Huddersfield*
- *Presence of someone that knows the women well and is trusted by them*
- *Confidence at dealing with conflict and resistance*
- *An ability to challenge*

Linking experience back to practice

- *Using de-brief sessions to reflect on how the students conducted themselves during the session and the implications for practice*
- *Relating the material that was discussed to their professional roles and, in the case of post-qualified students, discussing any changes they might make in light of this*
- *Encouraging qualified social workers to articulate this, perhaps in the form of a pledge and then revisit and review this at a later point*

4.3 Pre-adoption training

Since June 2013, the service has contributed to pre-adoption training sessions led by Kirklees Council's Family Placement Unit. In 2013/14 five sessions were delivered, involving up to seven mothers and over 60 prospective adopters. The sessions aim to encourage adopters to use letterbox contact and meet with the birth relatives when they adopt a child. To achieve this, three aspects of the birth mothers' experiences are discussed:

- *Contact between adopters and the birth mother*
- *The birth mothers' experiences of court*
- *The sense the birth mothers have of being observed by many different agencies – an experience that is analogous to being in a 'goldfish bowl'*

The significance of the sessions for mothers

One mother, who has contributed to all the training sessions in the past year spoke about her motivations for being involved:

"Hopefully I can get over that contact, even if it's letter box or yearly, that it's one day out of their lives. They have them 364 days a year and it's one day out of a year to write a letter. It makes you feel part of them still. If you don't get a letter you start worrying. You're wondering if they're still alive or if there's been an accident or if your child's ill."

The training therefore presents mothers with a much-valued opportunity to emphasise the importance of letter box contact from their perspective and challenge some of the pre-conceptions that prospective adopters might have about birth mothers. Reflections from two mothers illustrates this well:

"I just want to say that what they read on paper about the birth mums is not what they are like in person. What they [Social Services] write down is likely to be really bad because they need to say this to take the children."

"I love doing it. I've got a couple of things that I always want to say. One is that you don't have to send photographs and stuff but you could send footprints or handprints. The other thing I say is that if I read about me on a piece of paper in black and white I wouldn't want to meet myself down a dark ally. But actually I'm a good person. I know I'm a good person. I'm telling them to meet the birth mum."

The two-way exchange during the sessions means there is scope for mothers to learn something from adopters and it clear from interviewing the mothers that they welcome this. Far from being fixed in their opinions of people that want to adopt, the mothers are curious to understand peoples' motivations. They can feel empathy for some peoples' situations and they are reflective of new insights that the exchange can bring.

"I felt so bad for two women last time because they've had multiple miscarriages and they couldn't go through that again. Then there is me with a daughter and two perfectly healthy children, and it must be really hard either side."

“Last time we went there was actually a girl that wanted to adopt that had been adopted when she was a kid. She was telling us what it was like when she was a kid and what she felt towards her birth mother when she first met her birth mother and what she would tell her children about their birth mother. It was quite... eye opening”

“We get mums, dads and gay couples. One of the questions we ask at the end is, ‘Why do you want to adopt?’ People say, ‘We’ve got so much love to give’ which is lovely to hear. It’s lovely to hear that they’ve all got good intentions.”

The significance of the sessions for prospective adopters

Analysis of the 57 completed evaluation forms reveals the significance of the training for prospective adopters. There are a number of recurring themes:

- Many adopters were nervous about the training. They anticipated hostility and feared that the mothers might be resentful or angry towards adopters.
- There was surprise at the composure shown by the mothers and their lack of bitterness. The openness of the mothers was appreciated and interpreted as very courageous.
- The training challenged the perception of some that the mother is always ‘at fault.’

“It put a human face to the 3rd part of the adoption triangle – I realised that birth mums are ordinary human beings who may have had misfortunes in life.”

- The adopters gained a sense of the mothers as humans who feel love for their children. Some gained an insight into the trauma associated with losing a child and expressed empathy towards the mothers.

“I was emotional because you could clearly see how these ladies loved their children and how they had moved on.”

“I learnt that they still care for and love their children but were comforted by the fact that their children were cared for.”

- The adopters came away with much more awareness of why letterbox contact is important for birth parents. Many felt more positive about contact and resolved to have regular contact with the birth mother.

“I now understand the needs of the mother. She needed contact and re-assurance to know that her children were safe and with nice people.”

“I have learnt the importance of contact from the mum’s perspective and will start to ensure we meet our child’s birth mum and maintain contact. It was apparent how important that is for them.”

“I was a little unsure about the letter box scheme but today really drove home its importance.”

Conditions for effective delivery

The feedback highlights the important contribution of the Mothers Apart Coordinator. Her relationship with the mothers and her knowledge of their situations meant that she was a source of support for the mothers, drawing them into the conversation at appropriate times and helping them put their point across.

Although the general feeling is that the sessions were well run, adopters have identified ways in which the training could be improved. Some said they would have liked more information about how the mothers have moved on and what their life is like now. There are a number of references in the feedback to not feeling able to ask personal questions yet some people were clearly concerned or curious about how the mothers' lives have unfolded. Related to this, a number of adopters reflected that a smaller and more intimate group would be more conducive to a two-way discussion with the mothers. A core group of three confident presenters have emerged from the service and, in response to the feedback from adopters, they now show a digital story about a mother's reasons for being separated.

Some people said they were interested to know how the mothers felt about having contact with their children later in their lives and how they felt about sibling contact. It was also suggested that it would be useful to talk about the kind of information that could be covered in letters to mothers. Finally, there was curiosity about the support services offered by WomenCentre.

Reviewing the feedback and thinking particularly about the unease that some adopters felt in advance of the session, it would seem that they might benefit from a structured opportunity to prepare for the training. This is a deeply emotive subject for everyone and, as the feedback suggests, the opportunity to meet birth parents has the potential to be hugely impactful. Optimising the opportunity for everyone to fully engage in the discussion is therefore critical.

4.4 Peer Support

Peer support has always been a strong feature of Mothers Apart and, over the past five years, the main mechanism for fostering supportive relationships has been the weekly/bi-weekly group meetings in Huddersfield and Dewsbury.

This year the service sought to expand peer support opportunities in a number of ways – the role of a peer mentor within the Making Sense group has been established, more mothers are now involved in the production of the Mothers Apart newsletter and links with other WomenCentre services have been cemented.

Peer mentoring

With the introduction of Making Sense (a programme of group activities for mothers that are new to the Mothers Apart service) came an opportunity to create a peer-mentoring role for more established group members. Over the course of this year, two mothers were invited to take on this peer support role. Initially it was intended that this would entail weekly phone conversations with the group participants to support and encourage their involvement, but WomenCentre have evolved their thinking about this and the role of peer mentor is focused around the group activities.

This includes preparing the room, welcoming mothers and identifying opportunities to improve the experience for those participating. Although it is still early days, there are some valuable lessons already emerging from this work.

Utilising and developing skills and confidence

One mother has already made a valuable contribution by suggesting some changes to the way the sessions begin and its clear from talking to her that she is very thoughtful about how the sessions could be developed:

“We had a meeting to discuss how we would take it [Making Sense] forward and how we could improve on what happened last time. I just brought up a few things like keeping it tight and not letting it go off on too many tangents. S has now incorporated an icebreaker at the beginning, which we didn’t have before, and I think that has worked better. It gives people time to ‘get into’ the space.”

Clarifying roles and boundaries

WomenCentre has a long tradition of involving volunteers in service activities but the role of peer support is relatively new. This year there has been an element of the organisation ‘finding its way’ as it tries to clarify the boundaries between the two roles. There are a number of important questions to consider:

- *Should training be offered to peer mentors?*
- *Are expenses covered?*
- *Is the role open to all service users?*
- *Can peer mentors access the office phones/use computers?*
- *How is the role reviewed/supervised?*

As Mothers Apart goes forward it will be important to address these questions so that mothers that do step up to take on additional responsibilities fully understand their role and are appropriately supported.

Mothers Apart Newsletter

This is now a more prominent feature of the service than it was in previous years and more mothers are involved in producing material for the newsletter that is sent out to all mothers involved with the service.

Links with other services

A small group of mothers went to Halifax to speak with women from WomenCentre’s Evolve team who were going to have their children adopted.

4.5 Music therapy

This year, Mothers Apart formed a partnership with the Contact Team within Kirklees in order to pilot a new initiative involving a qualified music therapist from WomenCentre in contact sessions. The music therapist worked alongside families within supervised contact sessions and used music improvisation, singing, song writing, learning songs together, the learning of new musical skills and recording to promote a positive contact session. Sessions have taken place within WomenCentre's base in Huddersfield and have to date involved two different families. The first family to take part included a mother and her three boys who produced some improvised music together.

"I had a guitar and a keyboard and I was able to show the boys the instruments. This gave an extra element because it meant the boys could be happily occupied and there were opportunities for the mum to work with just one of her sons. This was unexpected but a real pleasure to see." (Music Therapist)

The second family to be involved was a mother and her son who had autism. The mother has embraced the opportunity to bring music into her sessions with her son and has become visibly more confident during the contact sessions.

"Really I'm there to facilitate her relationship with her son. She might be singing nursery rhymes and I'm playing the guitar in the background, which helps her to feel more confident to sing. Her son is engaging a little bit – playing the drums. And I'm also modelling a certain way of communicating with him. I know that she really values the time." (Music Therapist)

Conditions for effective delivery

The location of the contact sessions within WomenCentre

This is seen as a very positive feature of this work. The space is informal, friendly and comfortable. As the Music Therapist points out 'there are sofas to snuggle up on with your child'. The mothers have the option to come in early and help to get the room ready which gives them some ownership of the session. The location of the contact sessions within WomenCentre means that the mothers have the opportunity to find out about other activities that might benefit them. One mother, for example, has now joined the Making Sense programme and may in the future join one of the singing groups.

Involving a skilled and experienced music therapist

Trained in music therapy at the Royal Northern College of Music and with over 10 years experience of working musically with a range of people, the music therapist has the skills to work in a facilitative, flexible and personalised way.

"As a music therapist, I'm really aware of what a powerful connector music is, so it seems a really appropriate medium for this work. When you've got a short time, it's a natural way of allowing positive connections to form and it's such a flexible tool."

The Music Therapist's involvement with Mothers Apart has also extended to the group in Dewsbury. Over the course of three sessions, she has helped to create a song based on a poem produced by one of the mothers, which will be recorded and sung at the launch of *In Our Hearts*.

4.6 International Women's Day event

This year five mothers accompanied the Mothers Apart Coordinator to London to take part in a national event to raise awareness of domestic violence. This was a new experience for some of the mothers involved:

- *they travelled to London on a coach with poverty action groups from Leeds;*
- *they displayed banners to draw attention to the needs of mothers living apart from their children and the link to domestic abuse;*
- *they talked about the linked domestic violence to so many of their situations;*
- *they had an opportunity to read a poem in front of hundreds of campaigners and onlookers.*

The Mothers Apart Coordinator now has ambitions to make the trip to London a regular part of the calendar:

“This was an important part of the year for some mums and we would like to build on this. Perhaps the choir will go to Trafalgar Square and some mums might be able to become stewards and take on other roles.”

5.0 Summary of key messages and recommendations

Key messages

2013/14 has been a year of considerable growth for the Mothers Apart Service. This growth can be measured not just in the increasing number of mothers that are accessing the service but, more significantly, in the development of new strands of work which bring with them opportunities for mothers to engage in new ways. At the centre of these activities are group work and case work – core areas of work that are critical for drawing mothers into the service, connecting them with each other, building relationships and growing confidence and skills.

“If I hadn’t gone to the mothers living apart group, I wouldn’t have done this [adoption preparation] training. S makes it like you can open up. You don’t have to sit there thinking that you are going to be judged. The thing is I don’t like getting close to people. I keep myself with barriers up. With S, it didn’t take it long to trust her and now I can chat for England. She were like ‘wow’ after the first meeting with adoptive parents.”

This combination of multiple strands of activity, underpinned by group work and case work, means that there are many routes into the service and there are many opportunities for growth and development once mothers are involved. It also means there are different ways in which mothers can retain contact with the service once they have moved on.

“There is a place for people once they have moved on to stay connected even if it’s just by a little thread” (Mothers Apart Coordinator)

It is clear from this evaluation that what drives this service forward is a desire to **build deeper understanding** amongst mothers that live apart from their children and the many people that can impact on their lives. In seeking to build this understanding, Mothers Apart has worked in way that is **innovative, creative** and **highly collaborative**.

Characteristics of Mothers Apart

For example...

1. Innovation

In Our Hearts, the first book written by mothers living apart from their children is about to be launched

A music therapist is supporting contact sessions for the first time in Kirklees

Mothers living apart from their children are involved in the continual professional development of qualified social workers for the first time in Kirklees

A new role of 'peer mentor' has been created within the service

2. Creativity

Two creative workers have introduced a new set of skills to the service and demonstrated how to use journals, stories, poems and artwork to explore mothers' experiences

A music therapist has engaged one group of mothers in song-writing

3. Collaboration

Links with the Contact Team have been strengthened

Relationships with Evolve team in WomenCentre have been strengthened

New relationships with the University of Huddersfield have been formed and further training courses have been jointly developed and delivered

Recommendations

The creation of *In Our Hearts*

- **Maximising the book's impact:** The potential reach and impact of *In Our Hearts* is considerable. Not only will it raise the profile of WomenCentre and the work of Mothers Apart but, by bringing mothers voices to the fore, it offers new insights (and challenges) to the vast range of practitioners and organisations working with vulnerable families. It is also a valuable resource for adopters and, crucially, other mothers living apart from their children. It is imperative that WomenCentre take time after the formal launch of the book to develop a strategy to maximise the book's impact.
- **Integrating creativity into the service:** It is clear that The Mothers Apart service has benefited hugely from the input of the two creative workers that helped to produce *In Our Hearts*. After the book is launched, it will be important that there are continued opportunities for creative expression within the service.

Training with post qualified social workers

- **Longer term impact evaluation of the sessions:** Any ongoing evaluation of this work could incorporate feedback from the social workers who are involved. This could include both post session feedback plus a 3-6 month follow up to understand how their interactions with the mothers have impacted upon their practice.

Training with adopters

- **Preparation time for adopters:** In order to optimise the opportunity for everyone to fully engage in the sessions, more time could be spent with adopters to prepare them for the sessions and identify questions that they would like to discuss with the mothers.
- **Long term impact evaluation of the sessions:** The evaluation feedback from these sessions suggests that the experience of meeting birth parents has the potential to be hugely impactful for adopters. Longer term follow up of some adopters would reveal the extent to which they take forward their intentions to meet birth parents or maintain letter box contact.

Peer contact

- **Reviewing the role of Peer Support:** As the role of Peer Support is new, it will be important to regularly review how well it is working, from the perspectives of those taking on this role, other mothers accessing the service and WomenCentre staff. Some aspects of the role may need further clarification such as training requirements, who is eligible for the role, how they are identified, access to office phones/use computers and ongoing supervision.

General

- **Understanding the relationship between the different service activities:** As the Mothers Apart service expands and new strands of activity evolve, the service may benefit from considering how this impacts upon the mothers and their engagement with the service. Not all mothers that attend the weekly group sessions are opting to take part in the additional activities discussed in this report. Conversely, some of the mothers involved in the additional activities are no longer attending the weekly sessions. Understanding how the different activities relate to each other and being able to articulate to commissioners and funders what each strand contributes to the core aims of the service, will be important.

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