

Justice minister Simon Hughes has announced that women in custody will be given help to maintain vital ties with their families through the introduction of family engagement workers in prisons.

The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) is working with charities in the Prison Family Support Alliance to provide trained family engagement workers in all public sector women's prisons, as well as some young offender institutions.

The family engagement workers act as caseworkers and provide emotional and practical support to women or young adults in custody. They co-ordinate support for prisoners' family members in the community and train prison staff in engaging with them.

John Hewitson, governor of Styal Prison, said: "We now have two family engagement workers who play a really important role in helping female offenders keep their ties to their family and children.

#### Self-harm

"We know this is a vital factor in reducing reoffending. Many of the prisoners are primary carers, which means this support is vital not just for the prisoners but for their children and family too."

Entering prison and being separated from their families and children can have an impact on the wellbeing of female offenders.

Giving them emotional and practical support to deal with the impact of their actions on their families can reduce the risk of self-harm and help them to turn their lives around and move away from committing further crimes in the future.

The rate of females self-harming, at 265 per 1,000 prisoners, is significantly higher than the 74 males per 1,000 prisoners who self-harm.

The charity Partners of Prisoners provides the family engagement workers at Styal.

Debbie Hayes, Partners of Prisoners operations manager, said: "Given the cutbacks, most prison and agency staff have been restricted to focus on what is within their contract and



Styal family engagement workers Lucy Smith and Gill Kelly

## New support for women prisoners and their families

that is entirely offender based. In order to reduce reoffending the offender's family needs to be involved from the point of reception and not just on the point of release."

#### Support

She said that the family engagement workers could provide a bridge for families and female offenders by sharing information with all of the support services because the consent had been granted.

"By listening to the needs of the women who want to maintain family ties and rebuild fractured relationships we are here to assist and support," she said.

A family engagement worker

at Styal said that women would now have support they did not have before.

"This reduces anxiety and promotes wellbeing on both sides of the prison wall," she said. "We act as a vital link between the offender and her family or the offender and her children through a social services worker.

"My role gives me immense job satisfaction knowing that I am helping in a positive and encouraging way those women who have been overlooked by society for whatever reason. We all deserve a chance or two but that will only happen if we take the time to build self-esteem."

KELLY MATTISON



### NEWS IN BRIEF

#### ROADSIDE TRANSFUSIONS

Roadside blood transfusions will be available in the north for the first time. The Great North Air Ambulance Service (GNAAS), which covers Cumbria, North Yorkshire and the North East, will become one of a few air ambulances in the world to perform the procedure from January. The charity Blood Bikes will transport the blood from the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle to GNAAS bases in Durham and Langwathby, near Penrith.

#### MANCHESTER CYCLING

Campaigners have slammed council plans for cycle routes in Greater Manchester. The council claims the plans for seven major cycle paths spanning 37 miles and costing £20 million will revolutionise cycling in the region – making it a more natural part of people's day – but campaign group Love Your Bike has said they don't meet the standard. A council spokesperson said it will continue to develop the plans.

#### CAMPAIGNERS HONOURED

Two Hillsborough campaigners have been appointed CBE in the New Year's Honours. Margaret Aspinall and Trevor Hicks both lost teenage children in the disaster and have campaigned for more than 20 years to secure fresh inquests into the deaths of the 96 killed. Hicks is president of the Hillsborough Family Support Group and Aspinall is the chair. She said she would accept the honour on behalf of the families.

#### MERSEYSIDE DEBT

A welfare charity has warned that poor families in Merseyside are facing unprecedented levels of debt in 2015. A spokesperson for the Liverpool Central Citizens Advice Bureau said it expects combined debts to reach £11 million in 2015 – above the annual average of £8-10 million. It added that the worst of the public sector cuts are yet to hit and that they will also drive debt up.

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