

THE GOLDEN THREAD

Evaluation of the Pact Helpline for the families of prisoners and people with convictions

July 2018

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FOREWORD

In January 2017, Pact published 'At the end of the line', by Dr Carlie Goldsmith. This was the first independent evaluation of the charitably-funded Pact Helpline service. The report shone a light on the struggles of over 4,000 people who called, emailed or wrote to Pact, seeking support with regards to loved ones who were in prison, or who had convictions and were living in the community. The report highlighted the strengths and quality of the service, as well as providing a series of recommendations.

The report is available online: <https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/research>

The previous September, Lord Michael Farmer, in partnership with Clinks, was commissioned by the government to investigate how connecting prisoners with their families can improve prisoners' wellbeing, assist in keeping the public safe and reduce reoffending.

In August 2017, we warmly welcomed the publication of what has become known as 'The Farmer Report', or, to give the correct title, 'The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime'. I was honoured to serve as a member of Lord Farmer's Task Group on this report, which was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Justice. The report was welcomed by the Ministry of Justice as a 'Landmark Review' to strengthen family ties to help offenders turn their lives around and protect public safety' which rightly 'places family ties at the heart of prison reform.'

The Ministry of Justice cited its own research which has shown that close ties between prisoners and key family members can significantly reduce the risk of reoffending – which costs society £15 billion every year.

Launching the report, Lord Farmer said:

'My report is not sentimental about prisoners' families, as if they can, simply by their presence, alchemise a disposition to commit crime into one that is law abiding. However, I do want to hammer home a very simple principle of reform that needs to be a *golden thread* running through the prison system and the agencies that surround it. That principle is that relationships are fundamentally important if people are to change.'

The Ministry of Justice has started developing a strategy which will take forward recommendations from the review. Meanwhile, the media continues to report on the staff shortages, prevalence of drugs and the violence, suicide and self-harm within some prisons. The Prison Reform Trust continue to draw attention to the record levels of self-harming; record levels of assaults on prisoners; and record levels of assaults on staff' which 'show that violence and fear is the daily reality for many people in prison.'

So, nearly a year after the publication of excellent Farmer Report, we publish 'The Golden Thread', using the visual image so powerfully used by Lord Farmer to describe the vital importance of family ties. We have opened ourselves to independent scrutiny, and I am extremely grateful to Dr Lucy Wainwright and Paula Harriott, and to the team at Prison Reform Trust for this excellent and brief report. I also want to thank the family members who have shared their painful and personal stories. And I want to thank Dali Kaur and her Helpline team for their dedication, professionalism, and endless compassion.

This report shows that the need for our support has grown exponentially. It shows that the risks have increased, not only to prisoners but their families too, and that thousands of prisoners' families are living in fear. It shows that the 'golden thread' is all too often tied up in knots, or stretched to breaking point, by the lack of a systemic approach to engaging with families by far too many prisons, and that the consequences are all too often horrific both for prisoners and for families. We now invite the Ministry of Justice, Officials, Governors and prison staff, to read this report, and consider how we can ensure that prisoners' families can be heard, respected, understood and supported. This report highlights the daily nightmare in which so many families are trapped, and their struggles to be heard and taken seriously. Progress is being made, and families are being spoken about within the justice system like never before. But it is too slow. As Lord Farmer says, families should be 'the golden thread' of prison reform. But in the absence of serious prison reform, where does that leave us? I offer another analogy. For us human beings, our families are 'the basics'. They are as important as our jobs, and our homes. So let's get back to basics, and to the things that work and matter to people in prison. Working together with families, we can make prisons safer for those who live in them and those who work in them. And we can hope to break the vicious cycle of inter-generational offending. But as this report shows, we urgently need to get a grip.

Andy Keen-Downs

CEO, Pact



1. INTRODUCTION

In Spring 2018, Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact) commissioned a short follow-up to the previous independent evaluation of their national helpline (Goldsmith, 2017). This follow-up evaluation was driven by those working on the helpline experiencing not only a higher call demand throughout 2017, but importantly a hike in the severity of calls received.

This report goes some way to evidence this growing concern; comparing all available data from 2017 with that collected in 2016 and considering what this means for the helpline service (and indeed the wider system). We were also fortunate enough to be able to speak with six women and men who had used the helpline since the last evaluation took place and their stories can be seen throughout.

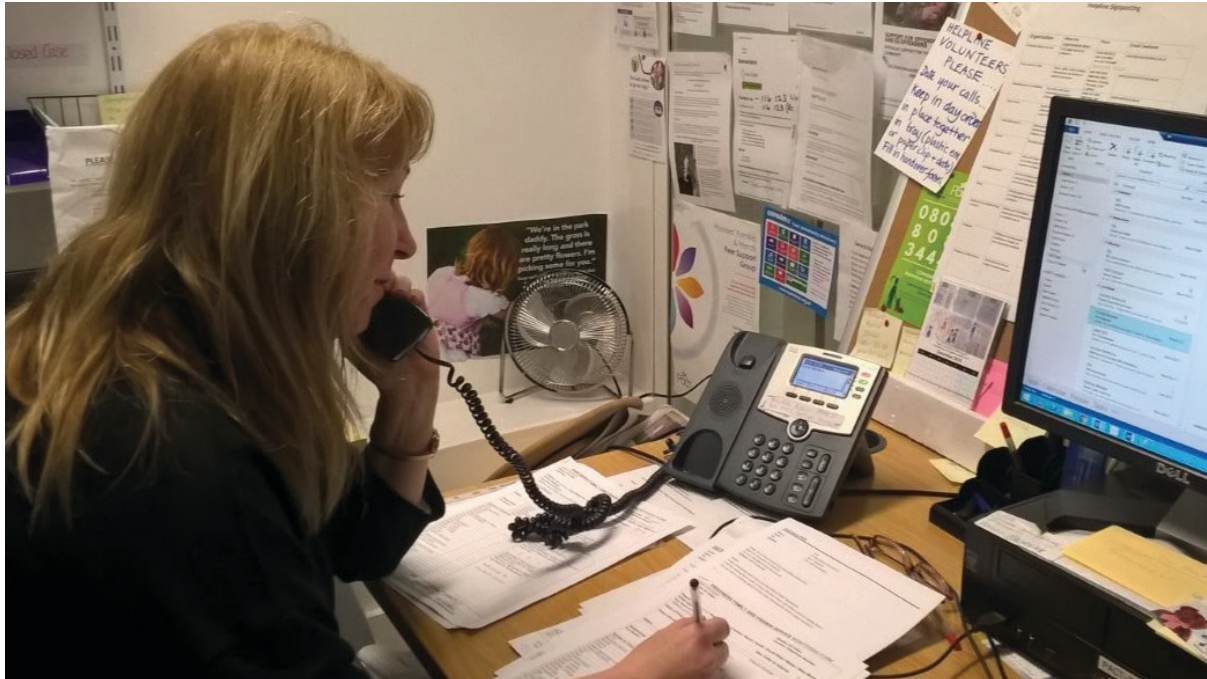
A little about the helpline

The Pact helpline provides confidential advice and support to individuals affected by the imprisonment of a relative or friend. It has now been operating since 2014 under Pact management but it operated previously via the Prisoners' Families and Friends Service (PFFS). The two services merged in 2014. At the current time, the helpline is managed and run by the Gateway Services Manager, a trainee helpline operator and a team of 12 volunteers. Importantly for the service, there are five current volunteers who work with Pact while on Release on Temporary Licence (RoTL), ensuring not only current knowledge of the system is shared but callers can talk to someone who has "been there". Volunteers gave 2,852 hours to the Pact helpline throughout 2017 and supported an average of 670 service users per month.

The helpline's aims remain as they have always been;

- Reduce feelings of social isolation amongst callers by providing a service that provides the necessary support to prisoners' families.
- Provide callers with the information, support and guidance necessary to cope in a crisis.
- Develop callers' understanding of non-statutory sources of support and the terminology and processes used in the criminal justice system to empower and enable them to navigate it effectively.
- Encouraging callers to engage with statutory agencies, such as social services and probation, so they can access the full range of support services available to them.

The purpose of this follow-up evaluation is not to assess the extent to which these aims are being met, as this was undertaken in 2017, but to explore the shifting landscape in which Pact strives to meet them.



2. METHODS

As with the 2016 evaluation, we used both quantitative and qualitative data to explore how things had changed over time.

Pact provided all data collected during the period, which included monthly monitoring reports covering the whole year from January to December 2017 and a project database, which began in May 2017, following Goldsmith's recommendation that "*all data collection, recording and information management processes are reviewed and updated*". Accordingly, some data in this report covers the whole year, while other data covers a seven-month period. This is always made clear in the text.

We also conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with a sample of Pact Helpline callers who had contacted the helpline during the time period under review ($n = 6$). Interviews lasted between 22 and 50 minutes. Short profiles of the six cases are given throughout the report and a summary of the key themes and recommendations can be found in section 4.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Number and forms of contact

It is clear that there has been an unprecedented increase in the number of times the helpline has been contacted since the last report was written. Using monthly performance data, there were a total 8,085 contacts made in 2017, of which there were;

- 5,398 calls
- 2,469 emails
- 110 letters
- 108 referrals

The average number of emails rose slightly in 2017 compared to 2016, which is an increase of 4.6%. The number of letters per month remained fairly static. **However, the number of calls per month rose by (182.8%)**. Indeed, a decision was made by September that another handset and desktop were required to manage the growing demand. Figure 1 shows the comparison of monthly averages of calls, emails and letters received.

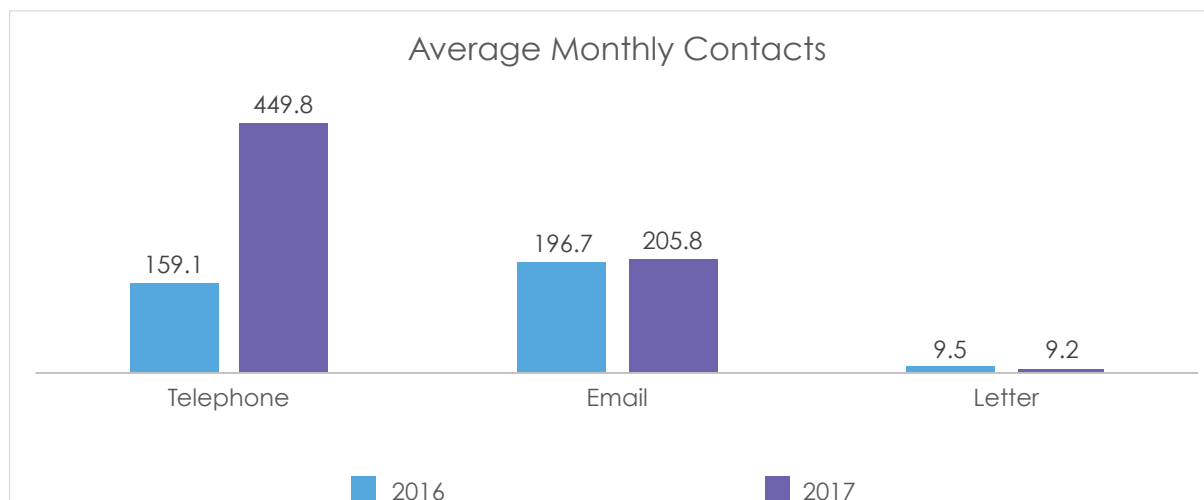


Figure 1

Calls received can be singular or can be the start of a series of calls between the service user and the helpline. The range of calls exchanged is 1 – 8, with the average per month shown on figure 2 below. This gradually went up between July and November but fell again in December.

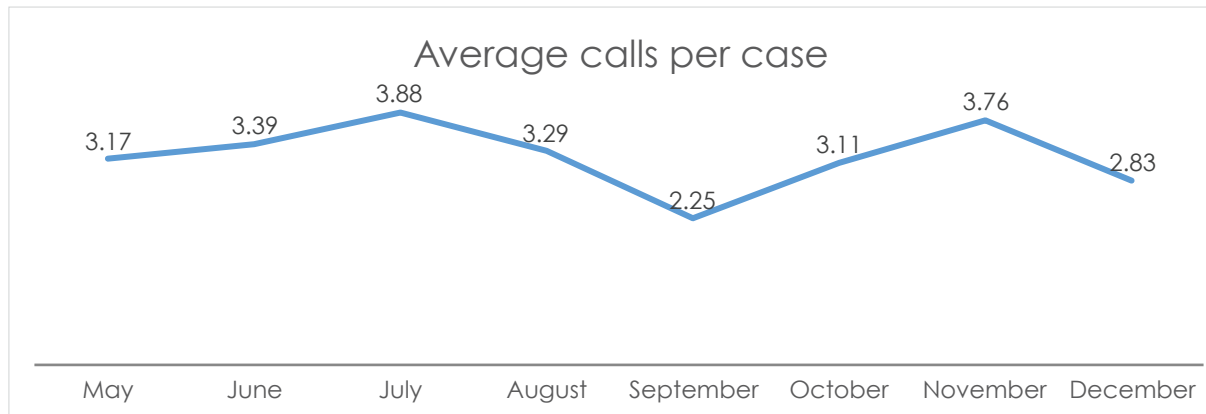


Figure 2

CASE STUDY

Mrs A had not come into direct personal contact with the Criminal Justice System until the imprisonment of her husband, who was in his 70s. She telephoned three alternative sources of support before she found the Pact helpline. She was looking both for hard information and understanding of the reality of prison life, so that this could be conveyed to her husband in the early days of his sentence. She expressed frustration at her experience with the call handler at National Offenders' Family Helpline who had been unwilling or unable to give opinions on a particular prison or details from inspection reports, stating that prisoners were individually experienced. She described her experience with Pact as notably different. She rang at a time of immense emotional turbulence within a week of her husband being sentenced. The Pact volunteer explained what the likely process would be for him, the prisons he would be likely to go to and crucially gave advice regarding "how to survive" in prison.

She felt that not only was the volunteer "a font of knowledge" regarding the prison system but she also described the importance of having "a friendly person there". At the time, Mrs A had not spoken to anyone other than her close family about her husband's imprisonment, so the Pact helpline provided a much needed outlet for her to talk confidentially. Despite the truth not always being palatable, Mrs A welcomed the helpline staff member's honesty. She said; "It's the affirmation that he gives. Its psychologically incredibly important for him to be so honest. He never says prisons are good, it's just relative. I like that". It was also important to Mrs A that Pact staff provided advice on an equal footing; without bureaucracy, red tape or any power dynamics. Indeed, she received a call back from Pact to acknowledge a mistake made within a call, which reinforced the value she placed in their honesty and trustworthiness.

She describes the advice as being “invaluable” and “well received” to both her and her husband. Six months into his sentence, he is more settled, understands the system and its culture, and Mrs A continues to find Pact a reassuring source of support in an unfurling new world; “I dread to think about what might have happened had we not have had that information”.

3.2 Service users

Using the dataset for May – December 2017, it is evident that there has been little change in those using the service (see figure 3) Callers in 2017 were 80% female and 20% male, which represents a swing of 0.5% to female callers since 2016.

Additionally, while London remained the most common location of callers, there was a slight fall in percentage, with callers from the South East increasing proportionally (see figure 4).

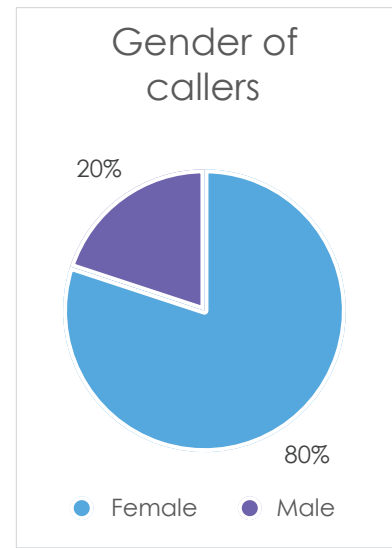


Figure 3

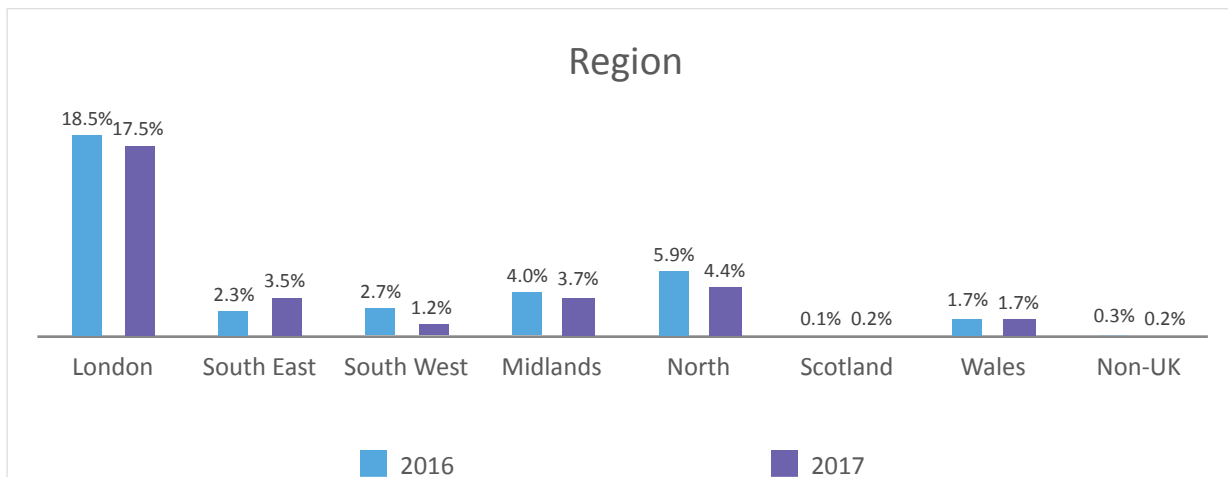


Figure 4

The proportion of callers by relationship to the prisoner remained largely stable as seen in figure 5 below, with the proportion of parents showing the greatest decrease. It is also worth noting the large fall in unknown data between 2016 and 2017 which indicates positive changes to data collection.

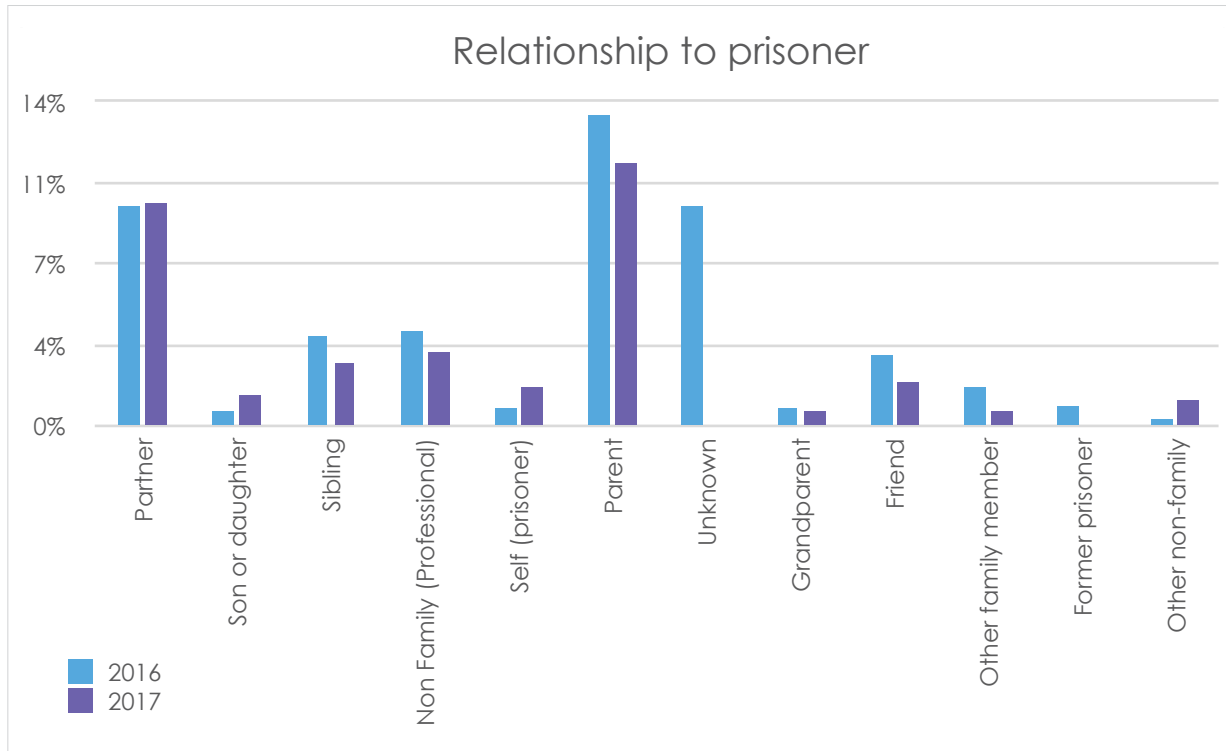


Figure 5

CASE STUDY

Mrs B explained how she was given the telephone number for the Pact helpline by her counsellor, during her son's remand period. It was the first time anyone in her family had been in prison and she was not only struggling with the stress of her son being arrested and awaiting trial, but also with the way the police were collecting evidence from her home. She described herself as *"depressed, nearly suicidal ... I couldn't cope with it."*

She hadn't wanted to speak to many people at that time, stating that people she knew weren't offering helpful advice, only stories of poor support or negative experiences with the Criminal Justice System. She therefore had low expectations of the helpline. After leaving her details on the Pact helpline answering service, she was phoned back, supported, and referred to the befriending service.

Mrs B has since been given weekly support and advice for almost a year from Pact following her initial call to the helpline. She was supported with her emotional wellbeing and encouraged to deal with matters one at a time. She explains how Pact helped her realise that she is not alone in this situation and many others have faced similar situations and have not only coped but thrived. She was helped to recognise that *"If I give up on the system, I am*

giving up on my kids". Pact also provided practical support to the family, such as guidance on how to book visits and how to send money into prison.

Mrs B talks about the impact Pact's support has had on her whole family. She has four other children who rely on her for support and a husband who she says was becoming equally depressed as a result of her own low mood. She explains that Pact became the outlet she needed to prevent this, and that they showed her how putting herself first can help her other children.

Without the support, Mrs B laughs wryly and says *"Maybe I would have been on medication or maybe jump off a cliff"*. Today, while she still has some difficult days, she is managing, receiving weekly calls from Pact and is looking forward to her son's release;

"I don't know how long it will last but I thank God for the help I've been given"



3.3 Reasons for call

It is interesting that while the overall demographics of callers have not seen much change, both the number of calls has gone up and the reason for those calls has shifted. Figure 6 shows the reason for calls made from May – December 2017. The table below shows the most common reasons for calling in 2016 compared to 2017.

	2016	2017
1 st	location of a prisoner	contact with prisoners
2 nd	advice on visits	mental health
3 rd	contact with prisoners	emotional support / release

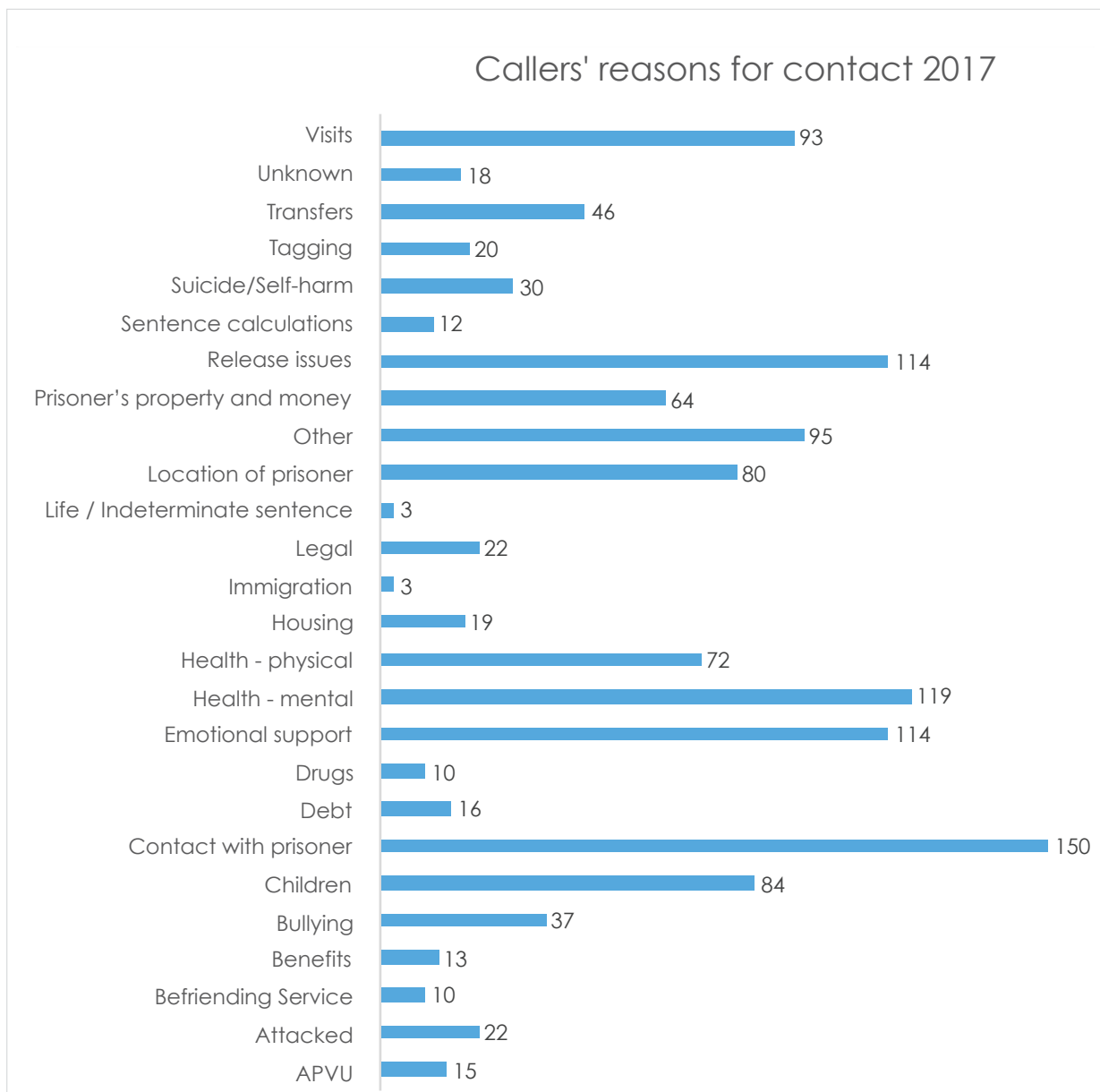


Figure 6 – Reasons for service user calls

The monthly monitoring reports do reflect a change in call content with entries within the 'issues' section such as;

"The length and depth of calls is becoming demanding for some volunteers" (August 2017)

"High number of challenging calls is having an impact on the working environment" (February 2018)

It was possible to look at how many calls from May to December appeared to fit into these descriptions and therefore present possible safeguarding issues. We included anything categorised in the following way as presenting this risk;

- Attacked
- Bullying
- Debt
- Drugs
- Emotional support
- Health - mental
- Health - physical
- Suicide/Self-harm

Figure 7 shows the percentage of calls that were taken per month that would be classed as 'possible safeguarding issues'. The graph shows that staff and volunteers at the helpline are handling calls of a very serious nature on average a third of the time.

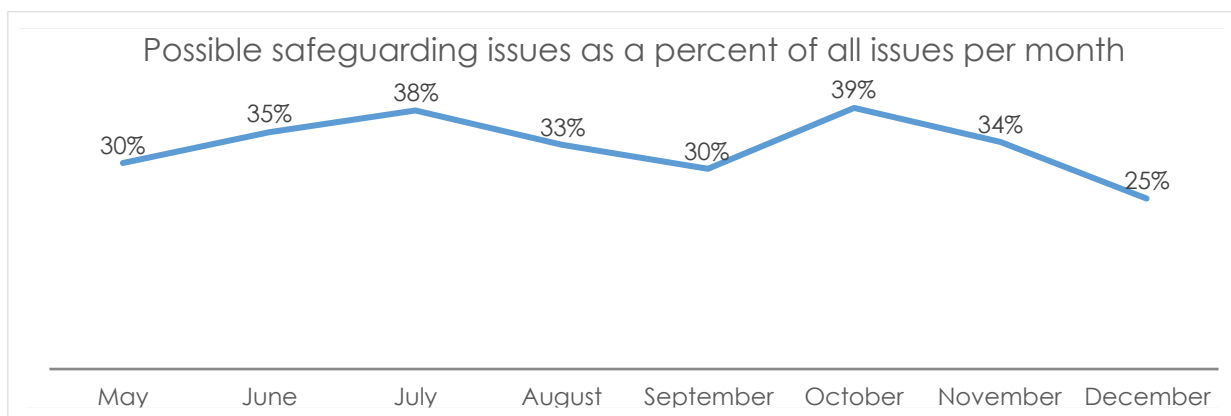


Figure 7

CASE STUDY

Ms C found herself highly anxious and frustrated following a series of calls from her partner expressing that he felt mentally unwell and that he was scared of these unfamiliar feelings. He had been relocated back to a prison he had been to 20 years previously and was struggling with returning to a place where he had been a troubled young man, and also with the staff who he felt were still treating him like that troubled young man.

Ms C tried to speak directly to a safeguarding lead in the prison but was told this was not possible; she would need to write a letter outlining the situation to the safer custody team. On another call, she was put through to Chaplaincy, but nothing came of the voicemail she left for them.

Ms C explained that she knew of Pact from a visitors' centre so felt comfortable straight away in calling them. She spoke highly of the Pact helpline staff, saying they *"listened carefully, summarising so I knew she had heard me"*. Further, she said *"they understood the responsibility I felt to help him not come to harm"*. The opportunity to offload onto another individual who recognised this pressure was crucially important to Ms C.

She describes the empathic nature of the staff, stating that she knew that someone did care about the outcome because Pact telephoned her to inform her that they had made contact, and called again later that week to check the progress. She compares this to wider society, stating that the public narrative is that no one really cares if a prisoner self-harms or has a fight. As a family member, there are few outlets whereby you can talk about your concerns without worrying about this public perception too: *"who wants to battle that as well as the pressure you're feeling"*

The outcome for Ms C's partner was a visit from a mental health nurse, which was what he needed at the time to help him manage his increasing psychological distress.

3.4 Safeguarding

As per section 3.3, the helpline receives many calls of a serious nature. It was noted from the monthly performance forms that the staff have reacted to this by changing the way safeguarding concerns are logged and through training; all staff and volunteers have received training in *safeguarding*, *'how to handle emotional callers'* and *'sexual offenders'*

The number of safeguarding logs has increased over the course of the year, peaking between June and August. The average safeguarding logs for the first 5 months of the year was 5.4 per month, which increased to an average of 11.6 for the final 7 months. Figure 8 shows the number of monthly safeguarding logs made by the helpline team, along with a trend line which indicates a continual upward trend.

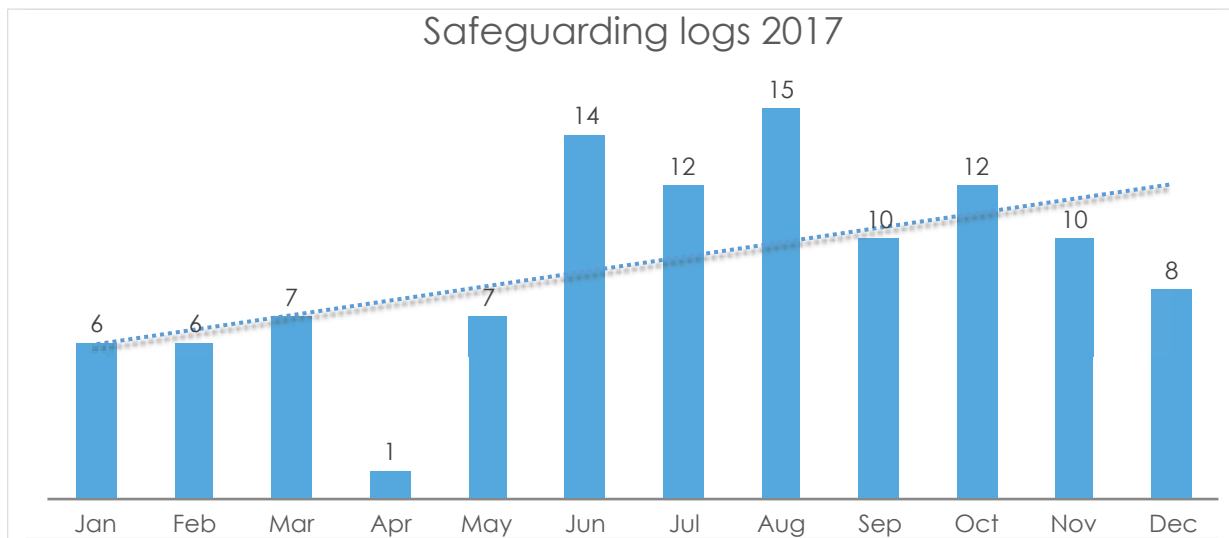
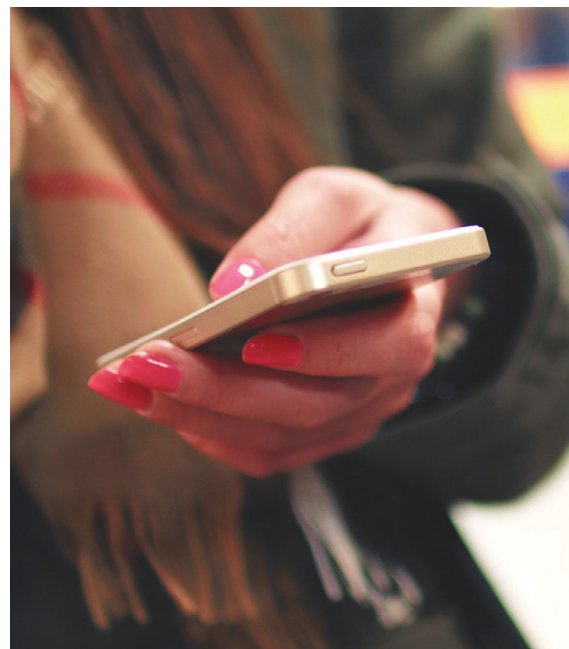


Figure 8

The safeguarding logs from 2017 show the variety of problems dealt with through the helpline. In every month of the year there were calls regarding concerns of self-harm and mental ill-health, and in most months there were calls regarding prisoners being threatened due to accruing debt, prisoners struggling with historic or emerging substance misuse, attacks from staff or other prisoners and ongoing bullying. There have also been calls regarding prisoners' physical health; the majority of which relate to prisoners not being given medication or not accessing assessment or treatment. One of these resulted in an external investigation from an NHS Trust. Also noted in the safeguarding logs are instances of bereavement following deaths in custody or in one case, the expectation of a loved one's death following an attempted suicide and subsequent life support.



Of course, many of these more serious calls concern multiple, interacting needs, such as mental ill-health, substance misuse, debt, and bullying, rather than any one issue in isolation. This means the action needed can be multifaceted and complex. The following paragraph is taken from the monthly performance report from March 2017.

"For the month of March, there has been 3 deaths, two of which have been suicides. In addition, 2 threats to families on the outside concerning money related issues. This has become a challenge, as a member of staff does need to be in the office at all times to help and support the volunteers. In addition, this has meant that a lot of time and phone calls are being made by staff".

CASE STUDY

To date, Ms D has called the Pact helpline for two separate reasons, both regarding her son's imprisonment. Her first reason for calling was concerning the death of his grandmother within two weeks of his imprisonment. Ms D's son was his grandmother's carer and they were immensely close. She knew he would find the bereavement difficult so called the prison to ask them to support him. Her son advised her that they had done nothing they had said they would in terms of support. This is when she contacted Pact, to ask them to support her in making contact with the prison; *"They were brilliant – lovely"*.

The second issue was one of a safeguarding nature, where her son had testified against another prisoner but they were placed in the same prison. Her son was attacked and was fearful of his safety. Mrs D again called the prison to raise her worries but felt *"I wasn't getting anywhere with the prison again"* so contacted Pact who advocated on her son's behalf and a transfer was secured. Both her and her son are now getting on with the sentence he has to serve and she stated that she would call Pact again should she need the support.

Mrs D said that she was "a mess" from the moment her son was arrested and felt that on both occasions Pact has provided her with emotional support as well as practical support. She said that in both situations she; *"didn't know who to turn to"*. She said that without them, she would have been; *"Suicidal, probably dead by now...I don't know what I would have done without them"*.

3.5 Follow up calls and referrals

As mentioned, calls to the helpline often result in further work for staff and volunteers to ensure that the enquiry is dealt with in the most thorough way.

In 2017, 1781 follow up calls were made and 1055 follow up calls were taken, shown in the graphs below (figures 9 & 10). Despite some fluctuations, there is no clear upward trend over the year.

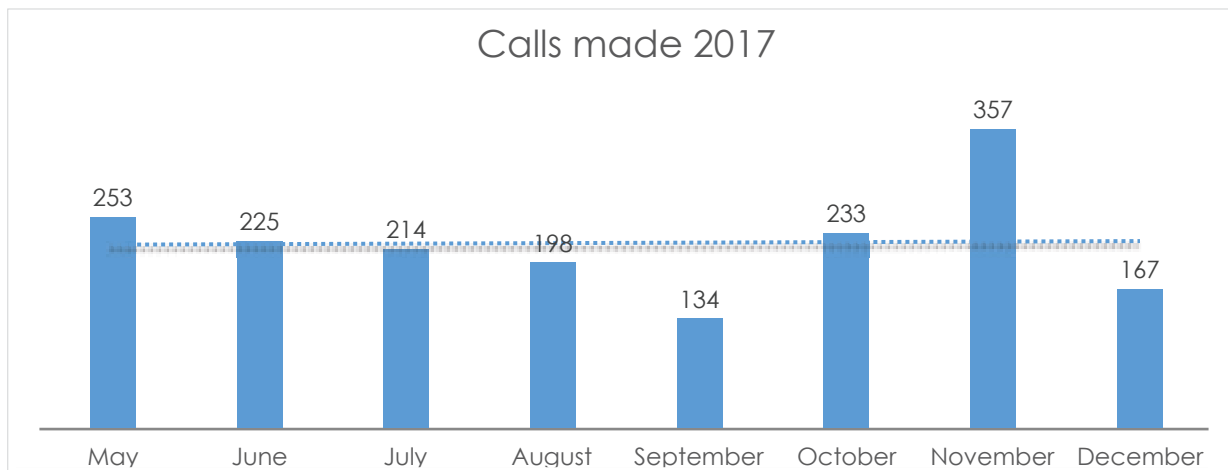


Figure 9

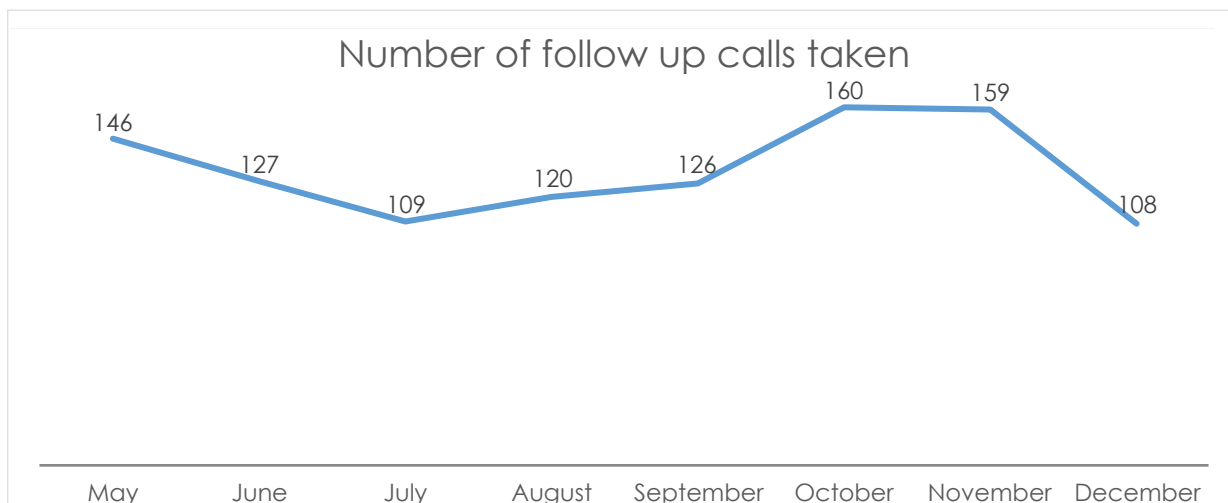


Figure 10

Many referrals are made by helpline staff, both to internal and external services. Of the 1,909 callers in 2016, 118 were referred to other Pact services (6.2%). In comparison, in 2017, of the 1055 callers for which this data is available, 65 were referred to other Pact services (6.2%). A breakdown of which service is shown in figure 11 below.

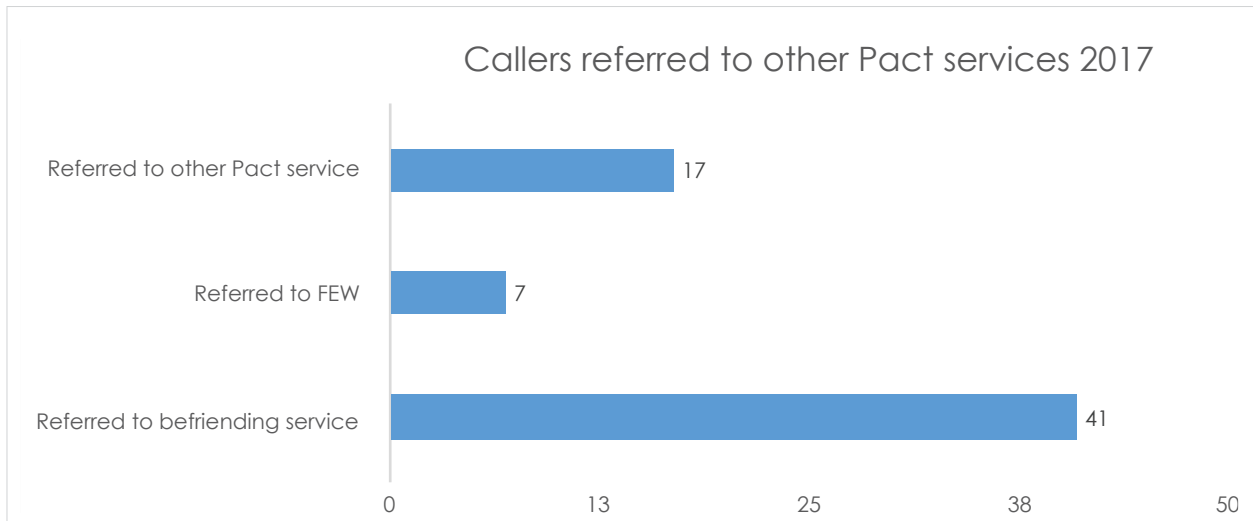


Figure 11

In 2017, 503 cases were signposted to another organisation throughout the year (47.7%) of all cases, with this peaking in November. Pact staff and volunteers signposted callers to one or more of the 14 non-statutory organisations shown in figure 12. The most frequent referrals were for PLS (Prisoner Location Service), Prison Reform Trust and Prisoners Advice Service.

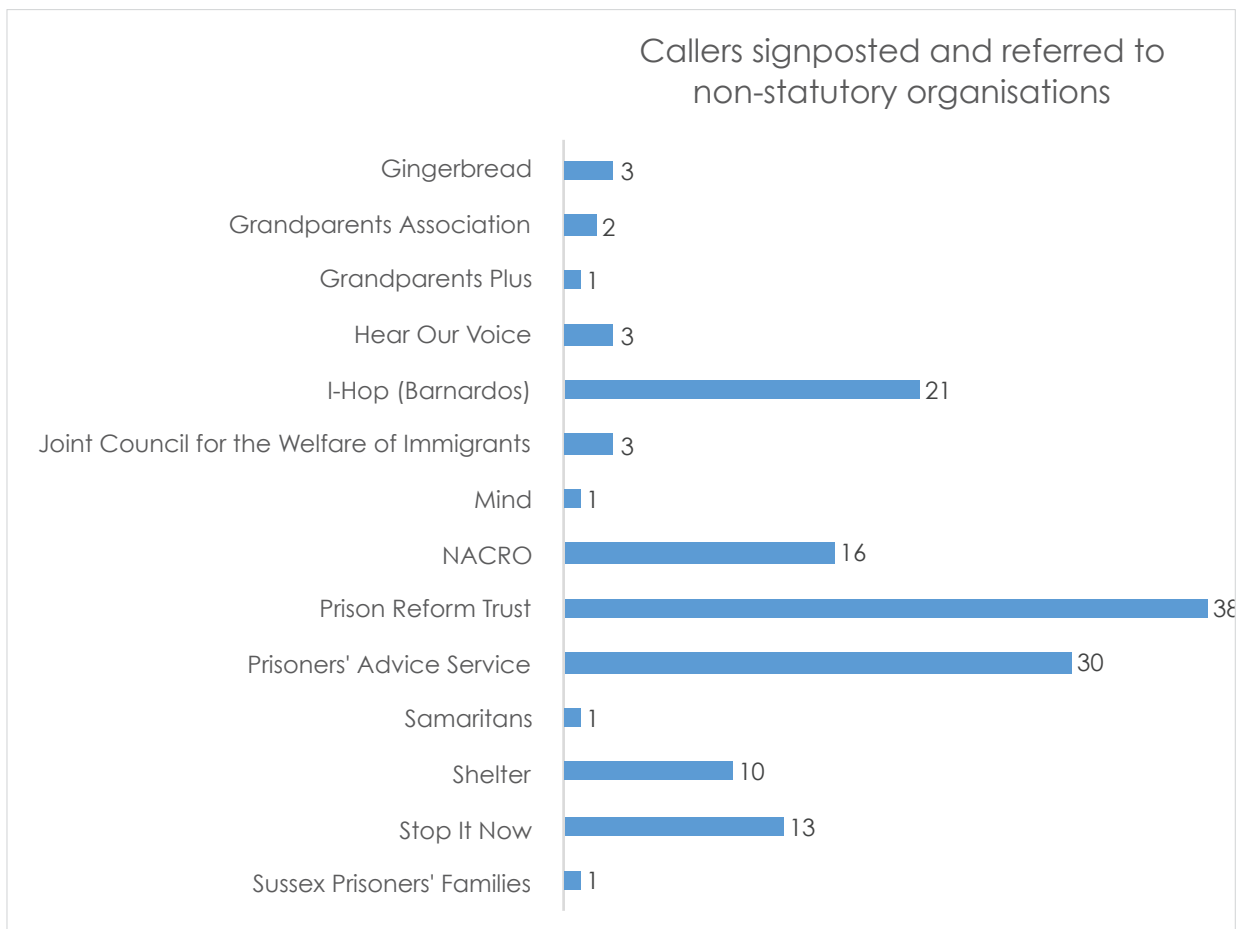


Figure 12

Calls are also made to statutory services, as seen in figure 13, with the most popular referrals made to individual prisons. This is particularly the case when calls relate to prisoners' safety.

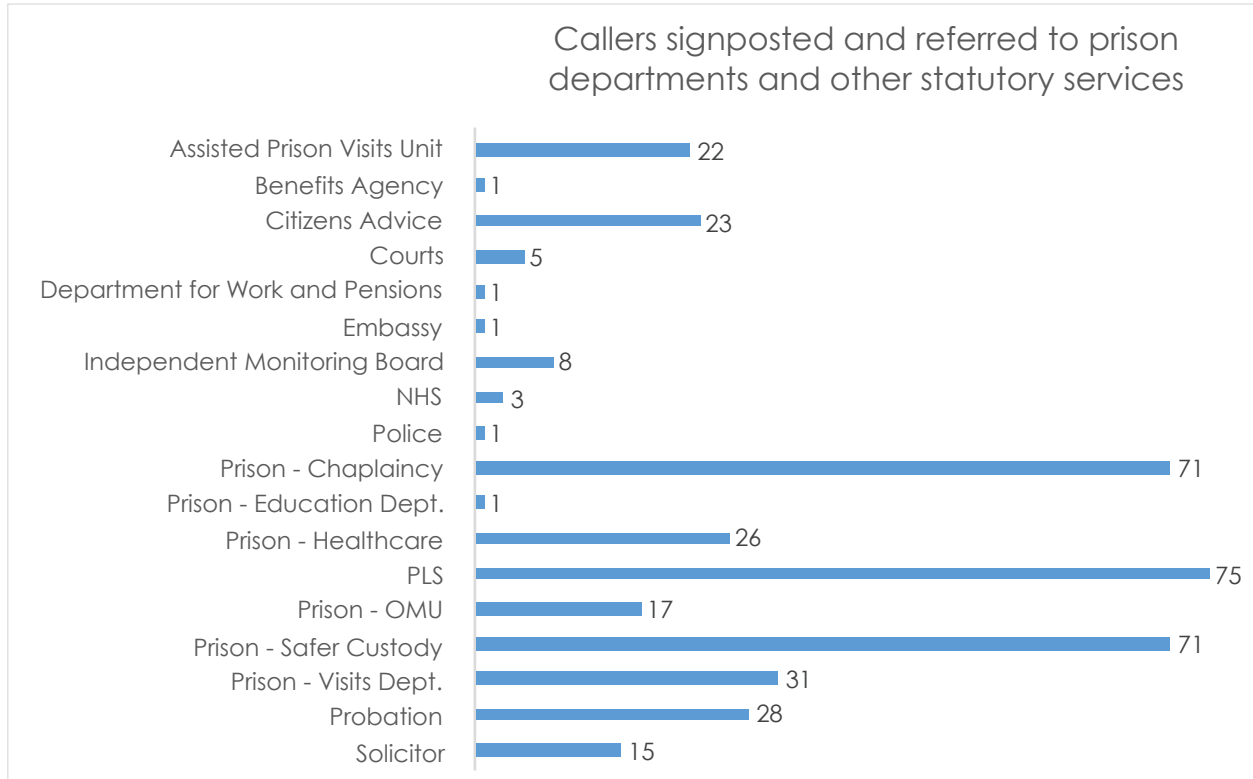


Figure 13

The calls to prisons have been broken down further into the following graph for clarity, with the most calls being made to chaplaincy and safer custody.

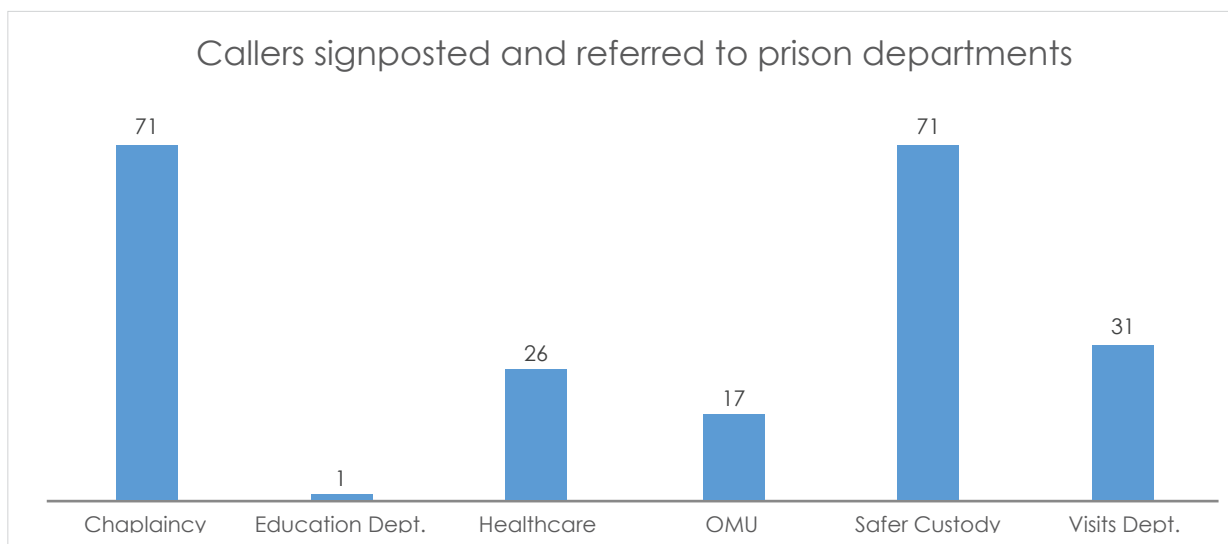


Figure 14

Reading the safeguarding logs highlighted a common thread, that members of the public are finding it difficult to connect to establishments, which is leading to increasing anxiety and frustration for families and loved ones. However, this extends to Pact workers who are also finding it difficult to work alongside prisons, despite the evident need. This paragraph was printed on a monthly performance record (November 2017);

"The helpline is having issues and concerns with leaving messages on prisons safer custody hotline. Over 90% of the calls are not being responded to by the prison".

CASE STUDY

Ms E was in the middle of an open case at the time of interview regarding her son. Over some time, her son had been asking for escalating amounts of money to be sent to him via the accounts of unknown contacts, and she had become concerned that he was not being truthful about the reason for these transfers; *"I mean, how much money does he need for canteen?"* She described feeling worried and contacting the prison to express her concerns but that she wasn't getting any response. Since that time, her son had disclosed that he was using drugs and he started to call every day for money. Her concerns turned to panic. She had become aware of Pact from advertisements in Visitors' Centres and thought they might be able to offer her advice.

Initially, Ms E felt frustrated by the advice offered, to "keep calling the prison" or to write them a letter. She felt confused by the fact that the Prison Service wouldn't act on this information at the first mention of it, given that they shouldn't want drugs and bullying to be happening inside their walls. She then contacted her local MP who agreed to write a letter to the prison regarding these matters.

Ms E's case was escalated to the Helpline Manager at the Pact helpline due to the fact her calls to the prison were not resulting in a positive outcome for her son. Ms E felt a sense of relief at speaking with the Helpline Manager, in part because she had a named contact at her son's prison. The manager also advised speaking to the police and continued to support Ms E when the police said it wasn't something they could act on.

Her son has since written a letter to explain he is now £1000 in debt, has been damaging prison property, has cut himself and is terrified of leaving his cell. Ms E's worries are palpable; *"I want him to come out of that prison alive"*.

She has had no contact with statutory services to reassure her and feels that “the prison don't want to know”. Despite the issue being unresolved at the moment, Pact remain her only link with the prison. The ultimate goal is for him to be moved into another prison where he feels safe, and Ms E will continue to use Pact services to support her in achieving this.

4. SERVICE USER INTERVIEWS

We spoke to six people who had used the service over the previous year to get a more personal picture of helpline use. All interviewees were telephoned and gave consent to take part. Their stories have been summarised throughout this report.

There were two clear and distinct themes emerging from the interviews;

- Connection
- Communication

Connection

There was a sense across all interviews that Pact provided a much needed source of support for family members of an individual in prison. Most discussed some unease talking about their family member with the general public, whether this be for fear of judgement, negative advice or because they didn't want to make the case public.

It was important for these callers to feel that someone understands their situation, and empathises with it. One interviewee refers to the “*public narrative....no one really cares if a prisoner self-harms or gets in a fight. As family members, we are vulnerable in terms of being immersed in that narrative. You're on your guard about how much you share. Who wants to battle with that narrative as well as the pressure*”. To all interviewees, Pact conversed without judgement and without power dynamics.

Importantly, they understood the layers of anxiety being felt by those who call, meaning that the callers are managing the anxiety of their family member but also managing their own; “*I am managing his anxiety, he's off-loading onto me, but who's managing mine? Pact understood that*”.

It appears to be that level connection which enables the relationship to unfold and become more open and productive. Further, several interviewees talked about the importance of follow up calls as cementing trust in the relationship, as the follow up calls became evidence that the call handler had been thinking of them in-between calls.

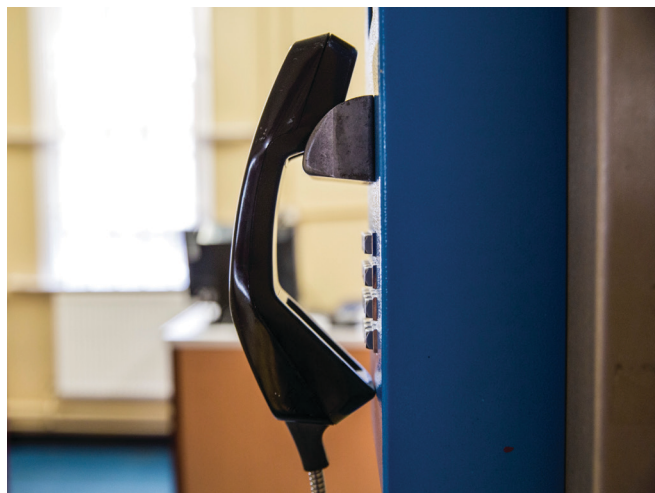
All interviewees were asked if they trusted Pact to help them. All but one said that they did, with one interviewee saying she had had different relationships with different call handlers so couldn't give a comment on trust with Pact as a whole.

Communication

Another clear message from the interviews was regarding channels of communication being blocked for families looking to speak to prison staff. All but one of the interviewees in this review came to the Pact helpline after they felt they had exhausted their options with the prison directly. All of these family members actively wanted to communicate with the prison but "*I just could not get past reception*" was a common problem.

Pact was, for several people, a last resort. Their frustrations and anxieties had often mounted to a point where they felt exhausted. Several stated they couldn't understand why the prisons would not want to hear families' concerns, as they expected the care of prisoners to be a primary concern. Another stated; "*They don't trust family. I'm an extension of the problem*". This is despite Lord Farmer's clear assertion in 2017 that families are indeed the "golden thread" that run through the prison system and beyond. This is where Pact has another means of connecting to callers, as they work for families and "*have the back of the family*".

Many interviewees found it virtually impossible as a family member to penetrate the prison system, and there is no structure by which the family can engage with professions in certain prisons. In these cases, the provision of a service like the Pact helpline is quite literally lifesaving. However, it is clear from the performance reports that Pact staff and volunteers also have difficulty communicating with some prisons, and data protection is cited as a reason for non-return of calls.



CASE STUDY

Mr F telephoned the helpline after his brother's health had deteriorated so much in prison that he was crying in pain on the end of the phone on a daily basis. Mr F said that prior to calling Pact, he had tried numerous other sources of support, as well as the prison itself, but all had been unsuccessful.

He wanted someone to see his brother and investigate the cause of the pains he was feeling in his hands, arm, and eventually his legs. There was a complication in the communication between Mr F and the prison in that although the prison acknowledged his brother's distress, they explained that 'healthcare' was run by a separate provider and they were not able to speak on their behalf.

Mr F found the Pact helpline to be very kind, compassionate and willing to help; *"I knew she wanted to help me to help him"*. The call receiver made contact with the prison and was assured that healthcare were going to visit Mr F's brother on more than one occasion. Mr F was contacted by Pact to inform him of this progression but he was told by his brother each evening that this had not happened. He said in his heart, he knew that Pact were *"being fed the same lies"*.

After his brother collapsed and was taken to hospital, it was found that he had lung cancer which had spread to the spine. He died shortly after.

Mr F reflects on Pact and states that it's an essential service for families as it is impossible to get prisons to react and work together. However, he also affectionately calls Pact *"a guard dog with no teeth"*. While desperately wanting to stand up for families and prisoners, it is currently powerless against the prison system if the prison system does not want to work collaboratively. He argues that Pact needs greater powers to check that prisons are telling them the correct information and hopes to see this happen to prevent further tragic incidences.

Looking forward

Those who work in and alongside the Criminal Justice System know that prisons are not always safe places, but this can come as a surprise to families encountering the system for the first time. Many are already traumatised by the arrest and trial process, then by the early days of a sentence. The shock that a family member should then be at risk in prison can cause further trauma. The Bromley Briefings states

that "People in prison, prisoners and staff, are less safe than they have been at any other point since records began, with more self-harm and assaults than ever before." The increase and content of calls seen by Pact and evidenced within this report reflects this.

The government have made a commitment to prison reform with a focus on safety and we believe effective communication gateways are an essential part of this. In a world where digital communication is the norm, relying on handwritten letters is no longer needed or indeed sufficient, particularly where there is an emergency situation. Families often hold key information which can contribute to making our prisons safer, but prisons do not have the systems for listening to them.

Pact provides an essential service, not least for supporting families emotionally through what can be an unsettled and often lonely journey. But they also exist as the only means by which some families can get a message to Safer Custody, although in many cases this line of communication is also blocked. This should not be the case, for families or for Pact staff or volunteers.

Research has shown that the ties between prisoners and their families are intrinsic to desistance from crime. Prisons so often exist as eco systems within the perimeter fence with little interaction with the outside. However, to be places of true safety and rehabilitation, this fence at the very least needs to be permeable with regards to information sharing and family relationships.

5. SUMMARY

We end this report with a breakdown of the main findings.

Key issues emerging

- There has been an unprecedented rise in the number of calls received by the Pact helpline since the last evaluation covering January – December 2016.
- The nature of the calls has changed since this time and have become more about prisoner safety than ever before.
- There are higher numbers of safeguarding logs being generated by Pact staff and volunteers - and the trend line suggests the rise will continue.

- Evidence from the performance reports and the service user interviews point towards a major barrier in communication between families and the Prison System, either in terms of getting a message through initially or in terms of knowing what happens once the message has been passed on.
- Family members appear not to speak to many people about their loved ones in prison, for fear of judgement. The Pact helpline therefore represents an important source of connection and trust for those who desperately need it.

Key strengths of the service

- Staff and volunteers were consistently described as kind, friendly and compassionate.
- Pact staff and volunteers are described as being factually accurate regarding particular prisons and the advice they offer. The honesty of the dialogue is important to many callers.
- All callers felt listened to and that Pact genuinely wanted to help them. The fact that staff and volunteers call back is particularly well regarded as it indicates effort and care in their individual cases.
- Pact staff and volunteers recognise the limits of their abilities and are eager to work alongside other organisations wherever possible.
- Pact offers both emotional and practical support. Some interviewees credited the Pact helpline as being central in helping them manage the emotional turmoil and stress of having a loved one in prison.

Gaps in the service

- Although it is clear that staff and volunteers provide a much valued service, it would be unreasonable to think that the changes to the volume and content of the calls will not affect them vicariously.
- It is noted that Pact has provided increased training for staff and volunteers over the last year to reflect these changes. Ongoing support or reflective practice would be valuable to these individuals to ensure their well-being is protected so that they can continue to help others.

- While Pact has clearly made genuine impact for many family members in prison, the scope of their reach can be limited by the same difficulties as those felt by family members. If the prison is not able or willing to communicate, there is little Pact can do directly except signposting further.
- There is a clear and rational argument here for Family Engagement Workers within all prisons. Prisoners' families need a means by which they can communicate; to safeguard their loved ones and reduce their own anxieties and stress. The current system is doing neither. It is failing to allow family members to raise the alarm and share information, which simultaneously raises their frustrations and concerns. This ultimately creates further tension between families and the system, the very thing Lord Farmer would like to see improved if we are to see safer and more effective prisons.



The Prison Reform Trust is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system.

www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk



Pact is a national charity that provides support to prisoners, people with convictions and their families.

www.prisnadvice.org.uk

