

The Closure of BABIES IN PRISON After 25 years

MARCH 2018

After 25 years of work on behalf of babies living in prison mother and baby units, the Trustees believed the charity's aims had largely been met. They therefore decided to close Babies In Prison in Spring 2018. This final newsletter was produced to provide a short account of the charity.

History

In 1988, while her husband was the Chaplain at HMP Holloway, Beatrice Burgess, a former Inspector of schools, was invited into their mother and baby unit (MBU) to assess the babies' situation. She had been a scientist studying aspects of learning and brain function and had worked as a Schools' Inspector as well as having experience teaching male serious offenders in prison.

After several visits to the babies' accommodation, in what was described as a semi-basement, Beatrice took her concerns to the Governor but she was told that no money was allocated to the prison for the babies. The prison provided only for basic necessities like cots and food, out of its allowance for the women, who themselves had very little money for their children's needs, for example for toiletries, nappies and clothes, and many of them had no support outside the prison.

The Prison Administration of the Home Office told Beatrice that no money could be allocated for these children as its legal responsibility was confined to the prisoners who were not required to bring their children in with them. If they chose to do so it was their own responsibility to look after their children just as it would be outside.

Whilst exploring ways of getting the physical, intellectual, social and emotional needs of these children recognised and met, Beatrice closely observed and monitored the progress of two girls in the prison who were born within days of her granddaughter. These babies became further and further delayed in their development. This was not due to inherent intellectual differences but because of the lack of the wide variety of experiences normal daily life offers, but which were not available to these children. After all, how could a baby learn to crawl if there was not a safe, clean place for the child to explore?

Funds were raised through friends, people associated with prisons, and by giving talks to women's and church groups. Businesses however, said that they would only donate to registered charities and so Babies In Prison was registered with the Charity Commission in July 1992.

A new charity

Since its beginning, the charity's aims had been to encourage the development of a child centred environment and a high standard of care for the babies. It also aimed to foster healthy mother/baby relationships and to provide a wide range of developmental experiences, both inside and outside the prisons. It provided educational toys and equipment within the MBUs to stimulate the babies.

Beatrice was highly respected within the Prison Service and was invited to sit on the MBU Policy Group and to advise the National MBU Co-ordinator who was drafting key policy on MBUs. She also contributed towards the Munby Judgement which from 2003 enabled the Prison Service to bring about sweeping and beneficial changes to the MBUs.

Achievements

In its 25 years, Babies in Prison worked collaboratively with the Prison Service to encourage and improve the quality and provision of facilities for mothers and their babies in the units. They:

- Campaigned to protect unborn children by ensuring that pregnant prisoners were transported by taxi rather than in vans with bench seats.
- Successfully campaigned for each MBU to have a nursery area, staffed by qualified nursery nurses.
- Financed activities for babies so they could experience life outside the prisons including swimming, visits to zoos, bird parks, shops, the countryside, travelling on buses; visits to Sure Start centres to meet other children and adults etc, all activities which most children living in the community experience as part of normal life.
- Funded resources for individual MBUs, such as outdoor play equipment, including sail shades and play houses, also role play kitchens, sensory playthings, plants for their gardens, sets of steps to enable toddlers to learn to use stairs safely etc.
- Supported MBU nursery staff in setting up and sharing a regular newsletter which staff found useful for sharing good practice and information.
- Provided sewing machines for mothers to make clothes for their children and also encouraged them to make sensory toys. This was another example of increasing mothers' skills and self-esteem, hopefully an asset for life.
- Financed music/singing sessions, which, in turn encourage mothers to sing and communicate with their children.
- Advocated for the babies with university researchers, policy makers and other interested parties.

They also ran three annual projects:

- **Quilt project**, where beautiful hand-made quilts/play mats, provided by WI members and other organisations, were given to each baby to take home. Over many years the mothers valued them highly, but unfortunately this project was stopped in 2011 as they were considered a fire risk by the Prison Service.
- **Book project** when every baby was given an individually chosen book. This also provided mothers who had limited literacy skills with an opportunity to ask for help in learning to read.
- **Christmas gift project**. Each baby was given an individually chosen and wrapped present at Christmas, all items offering opportunities for learning through play.

The gifts provided through these annual projects became the personal property of each child to take home. In many cases, at the beginning, these were the only gifts many of the children received.

Trustees

Trustees included educationalists, retired prison governors and others appointed for the particular skills and experiences they could bring to the board. They have been privileged to be welcomed during regular visits to the MBUs and, with their knowledge of activities and practices which worked well in other units, enabled the involvement of community and prison librarians, for example, in activities in the MBUs.

Reactions from mothers

Over the years many mothers wrote to the charity expressing their appreciation for the support offered. It was clear that the feeling that people outside the prisons were thinking of these children had a significant effect on many of them.

“I am writing to thank you sincerely for the support your organisation is giving my daughter”

“I am writing on behalf of He would like to say a big thank you for the wall hanging you sent to himIt will take pride of place in his new bedroom on my release”.

“I am writing to say thank you for the books and quilt for my five-month-old daughter”.

“I am a first-time prisoner and as I have no family or friends here the thing I used to worry about was how I will be able to get a gift for my baby for Christmas. Thank you so much...thank you for caring”

What has changed?

Before 1992, the babies had few toys, little space to explore their environment, and no or few visits outside the prisons. Ten years ago there were ten MBUs in total while today there are six. All have nurseries with well-trained staff and good living accommodation. They are well provided with educational toys and equipment and offer opportunities for the development of parenting skills. Three of the MBUs are run by Barnardo's and Action for Children and Family Lives, while the other three are run directly by the prisons who employ trained nursery nurses in the nurseries.

Babies In Prison achieved a great deal in a short time and conditions for the babies and their mothers have improved hugely since 1992. Many activities, which in the early days, only Babies In Prison carried out, became replicated by other organisations. The charity itself had become smaller, eventually with three trustees plus the continued support of their valued adviser, Mary Richards, who had been with the charity almost from the beginning and to whom all the trustees, over the years, owe a debt of gratitude.

Like many smaller charities in the UK at present, the Trustees were taking stock. Their main focus was now achieved, which is why they decided to bring the work to an end. The MBUs overseen by child centred charities were in good hands and they trusted that the prison managed MBUs would continue to maintain their good practice.

Thank you

The Trustees thanked the Charitable Trusts and Foundations, which, over the years provided necessary funds, in particular the Tudor Trust which gave support for a number of years. They also extended a special thanks to the many committed fundraisers, in particular the late Mrs Val Brown, Mrs Rita Bourne, Mr Raye Wilkinson, several church groups, and many other supporters, without whom the charity would not have been able to help the large number of babies it supported, over 25 years. They also extended gratitude to the Treasurers who have helped the charity manage donations well and also the Patrons who have supported Babies In Prison.