



# MUSLIM WOMEN IN PRISON

SECOND CHANCE  
FRESH HORIZONS

A STUDY INTO THE NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES OF  
MUSLIM WOMEN AT HMP & YOI NEW HALL & ASKHAM

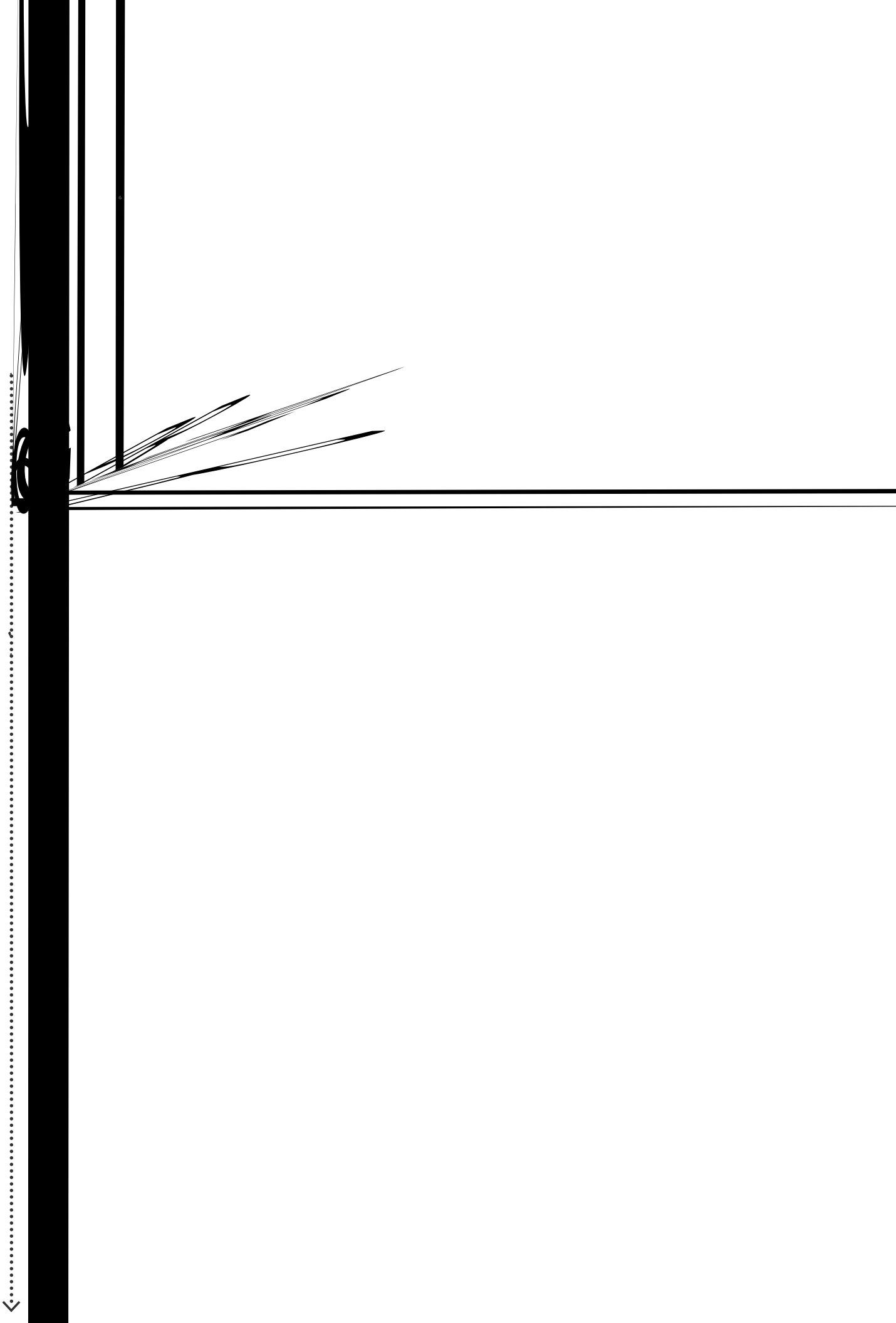


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# ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUNDS

MUSLIM  
HANDS

## MUSLIM HANDS

Muslim Hands is a UK registered charity (Charity Reg. No. 1105056) founded in 1993. The organisation is also an international NGO working in over 40 different countries worldwide with those affected by natural disaster, conflict and poverty. Internationally, Muslims Hands are committed to tackling the root cause of poverty around the world by giving relief from poverty, sickness and embedding educational provision worldwide. Some of their current projects involve establishing safe water schemes, healthcare programmes, food distribution schemes, making provisions for orphan care and livelihood creation schemes.

Muslim Hands' UK programmes support the public's right to a sustainable livelihood and the right to a life of dignity free from poverty, exploitation and oppression. This has been demonstrated through schemes such as educational GCSE booster classes, empowering women through leadership programmes, drug awareness and prisoner rehabilitation programmes, establishing UK food banks and responding to emergencies such as the Somerset floods.

## HUDDERSFIELD PAKISTANI COMMUNITY ALLIANCE

The Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance (Charity Reg No: 1140996) was formed in 1997 at the direction of the then Leader of Kirklees Council, Sir John Harman. This was following a report by the University of Huddersfield which highlighted the relative low presence of the Pakistani community in the town's civic life and ad hoc representation in the local decision making processes. Various notable members of the town's Pakistani community were duly invited to embrace the recommendations of the report and agree a way forward. Voluntary Action Kirklees was given resources to support the development process. Subsequently, HPCA was established as a broad based community organisation to 'bridge the gap'.

Under the constitution of the HPCA, the management committee is elected annually. Presently, there are a broad range of people on the committee from backgrounds such as youth work, social work, law, business and education as well as local parents and residents.

The core work of the HPCA falls in to three main categories:

1. Developing community facilities and services aimed at addressing disadvantage and the relief of poverty.
2. Nurturing new community leadership, particularly among young people and Pakistani females and supporting their active participation in designing facilities and services which meet their needs.
3. Addressing the issue of under-representation of the Pakistani community in decision making.

Our current delivery services include youth leadership programmes, junior activity schemes and adult education courses. We are also a director for the North Huddersfield Trust High School based in Huddersfield (further information on our services can be found on our website [www.hpca.org.uk](http://www.hpca.org.uk)).

HPCA has a no nonsense approach to community issues. No issue is too big or too difficult. We are always raising the bar by venturing into areas socially 'tabooed' by the community. The Second Chance-Fresh Horizons project falls into this category. Simply put, the plight of Muslim female prisoners is not recognised or acknowledged within the community or support agencies. For the community, the issue goes unacknowledged and for agencies, the number of Muslim women is too small to merit attention. Therefore, we warmly welcomed the suggestion from Muslim Hands for a pilot project to ascertain the needs of Muslim women in prisons. Particular emphasis was placed on prisoners leaving prisons and their post prison resettlement issues.





## PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The project methodology for the Muslim Women in Prison Project was based on an exploratory framework. Due to the lack of previous data and research on this target audience, there wasn't a great deal of clarity regarding the support required and the existing arrangements for engagement of Muslim women. Hence, the initial findings were applied to tailor a more structured support and rehabilitation programme.

The steps employed for engagement of the project were:

- Meeting with the Governor and her key officers:  
An initial meeting with the Governor of New Hall and Askham Grange Prisons, Diane Pellew was arranged to give information about the pilot project and to explore possibilities for mutually beneficial arrangements for the partnership work. The project's aims and aspirations were positively received - HPCA were greatly encouraged by this.

We were able to demonstrate HPCA's strong community development background as well as targeted work with Muslim women. On the Governor's part, there was recognition that cultural and religious factors do play a strong part in the lives of these prisoners and their rehabilitation. Contributions were also made by Susan Field (Reducing Reoffending Manager) and Jeanette Gagg (Equalities Officer). There was a note that another agency had attempted a similar project but this had not developed enough to make real impact or outcomes.

- Meetings with the Muslim prison Chaplain were arranged to discuss the best way forward in making contact with Muslim women as she already had some established contacts and rapport.
- The Chaplain and lead worker then proposed carrying out two focus groups at the Chaplain's Friday prayers in order to carry out a needs assessment. These were insightful. At first it appeared the females struggled to convey how they may require intervention specific to Muslim women. However, as conversations ensued, issues began to surface such as families not visiting the women in prison, cases of child abduction (sometimes abroad) by ex-spouses, threat of honour killings, and Sharia law issues such as divorce.
- A series of regular visits to New Hall prison for one-to-one case load issues then commenced as the worker was allocated a specific slot at the New Hall 'Drop In' centre for once a month sessions however this soon developed into a once weekly visit due to demand. This allocated space allowed for privacy without interrupting the Chaplain's services on Friday.
- The lead worker managed to mobilise and make contact with services both inside and outside the prison to address the queries of the clients. At New Hall, this meant working closely with the Equalities Officer to make contact with Offender Managers, the Bail and Legal Services Officer, and the mother and baby unit. The lead worker's expertise was also offered to the prison especially with her strong background of community development, cultural
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## SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK AND FINDINGS

Muslim women in prison most often have to overcome additional and exceptional challenges and hurdles in the form of rejection, cultural taboos and forced family/ community isolation. It appears that the Muslim community is more accepting of male prisoners but females are marginalised and labelled as bringing 'shame and dishonour' to the family and community.

Generally, there appears to be no structured support for Muslim women ex-prisoners within support agencies. This is not to say that there are not ad hoc examples of incidental good practice. This may be because Muslim women in prison are a relatively new wave and hence there is not a great deal of information on their particular/specialist needs. The pilot project has already established that some of the women leaving prison have a phenomenal amount of personal issues and feel cut off from their families and in some cases their children. They need dedicated one to one support on self esteem issues, and personal and life development skills. In most cases, there is fear of violence or reprisal from their families for 'shaming' the family name and going to prison.

Muslim women in any particular prison establishment do not come from a particular locality. For example, prisoners placed at New Hall come from all over the country making it more difficult to provide one to one support. Often agency funding criteria dictates who can and cannot be worked with in custody and post release. This was a barrier which we identified with the cohort. We also learned that other community organisations/agencies on the ground are hesitant to help as they lack the time/expertise/resources to provide support to Muslim women ex-offenders. We learned some of this hesitancy also includes the stigma associated with working with this type of client and any work with the offenders is viewed suspiciously and as discrediting to the organisation. More importantly, these organisations lack proper training and resources to make a lasting intervention.

We have found that Muslim women ex-prisoners have a multiple of additional needs with respect to Islamic divorce, inheritance, access to children, legal matters in countries of their origin and immigration status to mention a few. These are complex, sensitive and time consuming issues that require specialist intervention. There is a need for a pro-bono legal system to help give these women awareness of their rights and the support to move on with their lives. Particularly to banish anger and frustration and the feeling that they cannot move on. Ultimately the aim of the project is to reintegrate Muslim women back into society and minimise the risk of reoffending. For this, partnership and commitment is required from allied agencies.

Due to shame, embarrassment, pride and dignity the women are often disowned by their families or relationships are severely fractured and hence there is no or little link when they are in prison. Once they leave the prison, they are often not able to return to their families or their communities for fear of rejection and criticism. This can lead to settlement in areas away from their community and away from guidance and support, going back to loneliness and isolation or a life of crime be it theft or prostitution. In some cases it was discussed that periods of stay at a hostel have also had a negative impact on the Muslim women. They disclose being exposed to drugs, scrutiny and questioning by other residents and sometimes a restless environment where arguments often ensue.

Feedback which we have received from Muslim prisoners relating to their stay at HMP & YOI New Hall or Askham Grange is that overall the women feel safe from any immediate threat within the prison and are settled. Most are able to function on a daily basis. Those Muslim women that are less confident, unaware of the prison system or have poor English language skills are supported by those more able. However, there is fluidity and movement among the women so this support can be lost. The lead officer often received requests to enable facilitation of support via the Equalities Officer; this is understandable as there is only so much support one prisoner can give to another prisoner and in instances to protect breach of confidentiality. 'Language Line' is an interpreting service used by the prison and on

a functional aspect it may meet some basic needs. However, its adequacy and appropriateness can be questioned for mental health assessments, doctors consultations and ACCT\* reviews.

Our research also suggests there are particular and specific issues, concerns and needs for Muslim women in custody. Namely, a sense of isolation and self consciousness among the residents in the pilot scheme regarding their ethnicity and culture. In some cases, this is further reinforced by the lack of English speaking skills especially among the elder prisoners aged over 50 years. Some of them do not have a meaningful conversation with another person for days.

We have also found that the Muslim women are acutely aware of being a minority group. The residents have shared fear of rejection from other prisoners due to lack of understanding and empathy for their cultural and religious needs within the prison. For example some women have discussed that they are fearful to wear traditional shalwaar kameez (cultural clothing) and hijab (headscarf) due to name calling and a sense of drawing attention to themselves. This is as much about self esteem, self consciousness, changing identity as well as the prison culture. This points to the need for more one to one support and group work around identity, considering that some of these women have backgrounds of domestic violence, family control and a culture of gender manipulation and inequality.

The pilot research has discovered there are many hard hitting issues amongst Muslim women prisoners' past lives such as rape, domestic violence, grooming, emotional and physical abuse, and threat of deportation. There is hesitancy for them to discuss this openly with the male Muslim staff or with mainstream service providers. The only reason we can attribute to this is the strong cultural stigma and dishonour of 'the failure of them as a woman'. Feelings of inadequacy, self blame and failure are very prominent. This is symptomatic of the south Asian community where often there is a huge gender inequality. We fear that isolation, self doubt and fear of being marginalised will have dire consequences for the wellbeing of these women in and post prison release. There are examples where women are suffering from low self esteem and depression.

The situation would obviously improve if there were more female officers from the same social/cultural backgrounds or officers who have the necessary skills and understanding of religious, cultural and social norms of these prisoners. The cohort also felt that increased understanding of specific issues around Islam, immigration, child birth in prison and religious festivals and celebrations would be very helpful.

The lead worker's experience seems to suggest that there is a desire and willingness for change amongst the senior management. This may take some time and work to cascade further to ground level officers. The prison management understand the complexity of the issues surrounding Muslim prisoners and empathise that these are not easy to absorb and therefore they have supported this project to understand why there is hesitancy from Muslim women in accessing

## PARTICULAR ISSUES

We are of the opinion that the following issues are of importance and need addressing in some capacity. It should be noted that the list is not exhaustive and we have only listed those issues that arose more often than others:

- Rejection by family and breakdown of the family unit.
- Cultural taboos which make acceptance within the family and the community difficult.
- Isolation and rejection.
- English language barriers leading to a lack of basic understanding of prison regimes and systems. This is particularly apparent amongst the older residents and new arrivals. Even very simple things such as how to access the phone, recognition of how to order food and fill in canteen sheets is a mammoth task for some of the women.
- Immigration issues: self and children.
- The majority of cases demonstrate the need for relocation, ultimately leading to unfamiliarity with surroundings.
- Rebuilding self esteem, confidence, re-socialising them as parents, active citizens and as future employees.
- A number of women we worked with were new Muslim converts hence they required support and harnessing in their new found faith and morality in order to remain steadfast and reduce reoffending.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There is already some good work happening in our prisons and our aim is to reinforce and add value to existing good practice. Therefore the following recommended framework is based on feedback from Muslim women in prison, the work undertaken by the project lead officer, and soundings from the prison and other providers:

1. One to one support around facilities and services, rights and entitlements, support with religious and cultural issues and needs and support with building a positive self identity.
2. Arrangements, where possible for mediation intervention for women and their families to reconnect.
3. Strengthening of three way information and communication between the prisoner, the prison and the family. Considering that in many instances the family or the prisoner may not understand the existing arrangements and protocol on or post release, acknowledging that language barriers could be a significant issue in this.
4. Putting in place support structures in different towns and cities so that women moving into these areas can be linked into, welcomed and received in order to reduce isolation and vulnerability.
5. Supporting women to access existing providers and services whilst in prison and then signposting them to local support agencies on release.
6. Helping to establish links within the community and developing social support and social networking.
7. Support with religious and cultural needs.
8. Legal support on a range of issues such as Islamic divorce, immigration matters, child custody/visitation rights, and financial entitlement.
9. Post prison work opportunities for Muslim women. This may mean transferring skills learnt in prison to achieve employability, for example work placement, training and job search/cv development.
10. Explore the possibility of employment for these women within the emerging and growing Muslim business sector.



## SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRISONS

- Information, guidance and training for existing prison staff to enhance their understanding of the complex and often daunting religious, cultural and social norms for Muslim women in prisons.
- For management to give attention to the recruitment of female Asian officers in prisons. These individuals must however be aware of community issues, and at least be bilingual and possess sound community links and partnerships. This will enable the prison to have in-house resources and knowledge on particular sensitive issues and conduct.
- For targeted work to be carried out with the Muslim community to banish stereotypes, negativity and myths about prison life.
- For a long term project to be embedded into several co-operating prisons around Muslim women and their rehabilitation.

# APPENDICIES







## TESTIMONIES FROM MUSLIM WOMEN PRISONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Being pregnant and in prison has been so challenging. I have family on the outside and I know







# CLIENT CASE STUDY 1

PA

PA

BA

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Prisoner Z was imprisoned following a sham marriage charge. She claims one of her cousins from Pakistan tried to submit a case as her spouse and forge documents to this effect.

Overall Prisoner Z's case is very complicated. Her husband was murdered a year ago in Pakistan. She had separated from him long before due to an abusive and controlling relationship. She claims to have been physically abused, starved and confined over several years in Pakistan while with him. The husband's mother actively aided and abetted violence against her too.

Prisoner Z comes from a strict Pathaan family background where the family code required her to stay with her husband to make this arranged marriage work in order to avoid shame and dishonour. No longer able to suffer the abuse, she came back to England and her children - a male now aged 10 and female now aged 11 were abducted from her. Prisoner Z says the last time she saw them was at ages four and five years. She has asked for assistance from various local MPs and Councillors. The progression with the case is very slow. To exacerbate the situation, the children's British passports have expired.

Generally, the case is riddled with complications such as no death certificate for the Prisoner Z's husband. Both children are kept at separate locations in Pakistan and previous attempts to transfer them to the British Embassy have failed due to police being 'paid off' by her now demised husband and his family. Occupationally, Prisoner Z's husband was a freelance assassin, not uncommon in Pakistan, and inevitably he had powerful links in the crime world and the law fraternity.

The state of play in the UK is Prisoner Z is based in Yorkshire and has no contact with her parents. This stems from her shaming the family name by leaving her husband. There is tokenistic contact with one of her siblings. Overall, she professes she would like her children back to the UK so she can begin her life and move on.

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Post release the lead officer failed to make successful contact with prisoner Z on the three separate mobile numbers or the email she gave while in custody. The officer sought confirmation from Prison Chaplaincy that she had in fact been released. There was concern from the officer's part as the resident appeared desperate for help hence giving three separate mobile numbers. After discussions with management the officer went escorted with another colleague to prisoner Z's house. It appeared the lack of mobile phone credit and inability to afford internet meant that prisoner Z was uncontactable. She was genuinely overwhelmed that the project officers had come to look for her. She was alone, unsupported and despite approaching local women's organisations had limited success in addressing her personal issues.

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To date seven home visits have been carried out to the client's residence over the 10 months since release. During this period we have achieved the following:

1. Assisted in helping the client fill in and achieve a home carer as she had an operation soon after release. She currently resides alone and the operation has induced mobility issues.
2. Renewed the client's British passport at the cost of Mus5 TD(-)76y0 0 cfQq 1 0 0 1 65.113 557.657 cm 0 0 n

## CLIENT CASE STUDY 2

PIBA

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Prisoner S was a pregnant resident who was in the early stages of her pregnancy when she first starting accessing our service. Her concern was that she did not want her baby to be born in the prison and kept at the Mother and Baby unit after delivery. Her reasons for this were she did not want the baby to carry the stigma, shame and dishonour of being a 'prison baby'. She emphasised that she did not mind being punished for a crime, but it would be totally unfair for her baby to suffer from bullying and taunts from the wider community for the rest of the child's life. Prisoner S emphasised that her Pakistani community would never forget the mistake of being in prison and even worse, having a prison baby. The thinking behind this is that a prison is an immoral place which houses undesirable elements of society and any association with this also stains your character. Any amount of time spent in this environment will have a lasting impact and stain on ones character. i.e once bad, always bad.

For these reasons, Prisoner S wanted her baby to be born outside of the prison and immediately given to her mother who would then take care of the child until the resident's release. The Offender Manager genuinely had concerns about the ability and the motivation of the grandmother assuming the role of guardianship. It was felt that the prisoner's decision was greatly influenced by her mother and she was more of a controlling influence. Another concern was if the child was removed from the mother this would prevent an effective mother-baby bond from developing. At the time of the lead officer's intervention, these discussions were ongoing but the resident felt that she was not being listened to and her points about cultural stigma and religious requirements were not being understood.

Taking on board the complexity of agency concerns and residents needs the lead officer

- The lead officer was kindly shown around the prison's Mother and Baby unit by the Equalities Manager at the prison. The resident was also shown this facility on a separate occasion to put her mind at ease regarding the quality of the facility. The offer to be 'shown around' was also given to the resident's mother.
- The resident declined the facility not on the basis of the service but because her own anxiety and concerns stated above proved to be an overriding factor. The lead officer supported the resident in her preparation to present her reasons and her case to the Mother and Baby unit Manager. Facilitated by the Equalities Officer she was able to do this.
- As further conversations ensued, it came to light that the resident may be eligible to transfer to an open prison facility where she might feel more relaxed and different towards having her baby placed with her. It also gave other options such as if the baby was placed with the prisoner's mother then there was the option that the child could have overnight stays with the mother and their bonding could be facilitated without the baby being a permanent resident at the prison.
- The resident was apprehensive about the move. She did not understand the motivation behind it and was suspicious about what was being suggested. The lead officer worked with the resident to alleviate her concerns regarding prison transfer, and the fact that this was not designed to side step her request. Following this a successful transfer took place once the resident and her mother understood the bigger picture.
- Whilst at the open prison, the lead officer was able to engage the support of the Barnardos family worker, the Mother and Baby unit Manager to convey Prisoner S's concerns. A wider meeting was organised which was attended by the afore mentioned, the Assistant Governor, lead officer and colleague as well as the project link officer from Muslim Hands who was formally the Senior Government Advisor for Muslim Chaplaincy at the HM Prison Service. The meeting gave the resident the opportunity to share her concerns but also seek guidance









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