

Families Maintaining Contact

A briefing on Action for Prisoners' Families and National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) **Prison Journeys** project.

The separation of imprisonment has a considerable social cost

- It is estimated that there are 160,000 children with a parent in prison each year.
- More children are affected by imprisonment than by divorce each year.
- During their sentence 45% prisoners lose contact with their families and many separate from their partners.
- Only half of the women who had lived or were in contact with their children before imprisonment had received a visit during their sentence.
- Children of prisoners have three times the risk of mental health problems and the risk of anti-social behaviour compared with other children.
- Prisoners' families often experience increased financial, housing, emotional and health problems.
- Family ties can reduce the likelihood of re-offending by 39%
- Government support for elderly and disabled family members visiting prisoners was reduced in 2010.

History of the Prison Journeys project

Action for Prisoners' Families (APF) has worked throughout its 21 years to minimise the damage to families affected by imprisonment and to improve and support contact between prisoners and their families. In that time APF has: lobbied successfully to increase the number of visitors' centres; run the regular Family Friendly Prisons Challenge to increase special family visits; surveyed family members and service providers about the effectiveness of the government's Assisted Prison Visits Scheme that helps with the cost of travel to visit prisoners; challenged BT in the courts, with Prison Reform Trust, to provide cheaper phone calls. APF played an important part in the development of the new National Offender Management Service (NOMS) prison visits specifications and their accompanying guidance.

The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) has been actively working for criminal justice reform through its Care Not Custody campaign which calls for an end to the inappropriate detention of people with mental health problems. Through this campaign many WI members visited prisons to find out at firsthand how people with mental health problems are treated when they come into contact with the criminal justice system and more broadly, to gain an insight into the impact it has on the families of prisoners and wider society.

APF and the NFWI decided to work together to raise awareness of the difficulties families face in maintaining contact with relatives in prison, using the same approach of gaining firsthand knowledge by mirroring the experiences of relatives. WI members made contact with volunteer prisoners and wrote about the experience of travelling to visit them. The stories of their journeys have been reproduced in a special edition of APF's Action News magazine.

The accounts of WI members clearly articulate some of the challenges from the difficulties with public transport, or accessibility, to problems booking visits and navigating information systems.

As well as raising awareness of the challenges faced by families, we hope the findings will reinforce the guidance set out in the visits specifications and encourage prisons to develop visit systems that work better for prisoners and their families.

The importance of maintaining contact

Prison rules require prisons to actively encourage prisoners to maintain outside contacts and family ties. The NOMS *Providing Visits and Services to Visitors* specifications and guidance http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/guidance/prison-probation-and-rehabilitation/psipso/psi_2011_16_providing_visits_and_services_to_visitors.doc are designed to support this and were produced following consultation through APF with those who work with prisoners' families. It covers many of the issues which arose during the APF/NFWI collaboration including booking visits, the Assisted Prisons Visits Scheme, biometrics and searching/security procedures, visits starting on time, and the way the visits themselves are conducted – including the provision and staffing of play areas, seating and surveillance. Unfortunately the basic requirements fall short of what families really need and the enhanced provision laid out is often not implemented. It is tempting for prisons at a time of financial constraint to save money on visits provision. APF and NFWI would like to see the enhanced provision implemented in all prisons and further improvements made to minimise harm to families and support strong family ties.

Visits booking arrangements present considerable difficulties for families. In a survey of visitors' centres APF found that a third of respondents had had problems in getting through on the phone to book - 65% said they would like to book via the internet or email.

Visits are only one way that families can maintain contact with prisoners. Letters and phone contact are also important. HM Inspectorate of Prisons found that an average of 40% of prisoners in closed prisons reported difficulties in sending or receiving mail. A third of men in local prisoners reported difficulties accessing phones. Phone calls are still very expensive – 9 pence per minute to landlines and 20 pence to mobiles on weekdays and 8 pence per minute to landlines and 13 pence to mobiles at weekends. Some prisons have gone beyond the basic requirements e.g. in Lowdham Grange prisoners have phones in their cells. APF and NFWI would like to see quality provision in all prisons.

Research has shown that the maintenance of family links is an important factor in effective resettlement. NOMS acknowledges that good visits provision helps to reduce re-offending, contributes to tackling intergenerational offending and helps to address the poor outcomes faced by prisoners' families. Relatively modest expenditure to provide the means for prisoners and their families to maintain contact can have a far reaching impact and reduce the personal costs to families and the social costs to society as a whole by promoting family wellbeing and reducing offending.

Areas for improvement

Booking lines and alternative ways to book visits

These are often engaged and infrequently open. Phone lines need to be open in the evenings and at weekends to make it easier for families who work to book visits. All prisons should offer e-mail booking and prisoners should be able to book visits during visits.

Information for Visitors

Visitors should be given clear information in advance about how to get to the prison, its visiting hours as well as details on what to expect when they arrive. They should also be told about what can be brought in on a visit, what ID is needed, the fact that possessions usually have to be put in lockers, searching procedures (which may seem invasive), regularity of visits, how to book them, who to speak to on visits if there is a problem, and information on the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme.

Financial support for visits

Financial support for prison visitors (the Assisted Prisons Visits Scheme) should be well advertised, easy to claim, allow privacy when claiming, be paid promptly, be accessible, and the

means of transport which can be claimed for should meet the needs of the visitors e.g. taxis for elderly and disabled visitors.

Special transport

Special transport such as a prison minibus should be made available for families visiting prisons where public transport is inadequate. It should be reliable and keep to timetable.

The visit

Prisons should start visits at the advertised time. It is not acceptable when families have often made long or expensive visits, to keep them waiting thereby reducing their time with their families. Security procedures are of course necessary, but adequate allowance should be made for the additional time required to process visitors into the visits hall.

Late arrivals

Visitors arriving late should still be allowed to visit. If the visiting family member has phoned the prison to say they are late the message should be relayed to the prisoner.

Family Support Workers

Family support workers should be made available at every prison, their services well-publicised and contact details kept up to date.

Family Days

All prisons should hold family days, which should be available to prisoners on the basic privilege level as well as those on enhanced level as these days are for the families as well as prisoners. Access to family visits should not be restricted as a disciplinary measure. Family days should be arranged for families without children, as well as for those with children - many prisoners have elderly parents or adult siblings or other family members they would like to have extended visits.

The needs of teenage children and young adults

Prisons need to give more consideration to provision for teenage children on visits. Many teenage children are reluctant to visit and most provision is aimed at younger children. Young adult family members visiting on their own should be accorded the same respect as older adults.

Electronic contact

Whilst the service 'E-mail a Prisoner' allows families to e-mail in to prisoners, skype and video conferencing should also be used – particularly for those with families overseas. These should not be used in place of visits but to complement them.

Mail

Single stamps should be available for purchase – not just books. Prisons should provide a reliable postal service.

Cost of phone calls

BT should review the cost of prison phone calls. Phones should be provided in cells.

Contact details

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