



JUST VISITING?

A REVIEW OF THE ROLE OF PRISON VISITORS' CENTRES



Although the prison population is at an all-time high, (68,088 prisoners, 14 December 2001) the number of visitors has declined significantly over the last five years. Factors contributing to this decrease include the distance visitors have to travel to the prison (around 26,000 prisoners are held over 50 miles from their committal court town, and 5,000 over 150 miles away), difficulties in booking visits, and the stress and exhaustion many visitors suffer when visiting prison.

"A stable, supportive family throughout the sentence is a key factor in preventing re-offending on release... I firmly believe that we should do as much as possible to sustain family relationships at what for many will be an especially traumatic time in their lives."

Martin Narey, Director General of HM Prison Service

Research has found that good family ties can significantly reduce a prisoner's risk of re-offending. The Prison Service in England and Wales acknowledges the importance of helping prisoners maintain family ties and the likely benefit such ties have for successful reintegration and rehabilitation. The Scottish Prison Service places considerable emphasis on the value of contact with families and there are encouraging developments in Northern Ireland.

Prison Visitors' Centres are one way of improving the visits experience and increasing the support available to prisoners' families, who have often been described as the 'forgotten victims' of imprisonment. Visitors' Centres

play a variety of roles, from little more than a waiting room with toilets and refreshments to fully staffed centres providing information, support and advocacy for visitors to prisons.

In this context, the Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups (FPFSG) and the Prison Reform Trust (PRT) commissioned research into Prison Visitors' Centres in the UK, supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The research, carried out by Dr Nancy Loucks, explored the role Centres play in the maintenance of family ties and the rehabilitation of offenders. It also sought to identify models of good practice and gaps in provision, with the overall aim of securing increased support and realistic funding for the work of Visitors' Centres.

Fifty-six out of a possible 75 Centre managers responded to this postal survey (75%) and 100 out of a possible 138 governors responded (72.5%). The researcher visited six Visitors' Centres for in-depth discussions. The findings should be treated as an audit or overview of existing practice rather than an evaluation of their effectiveness. The main themes from the research and the recommendations are presented here. More detailed results are available in the full report: *Just Visiting? A Review of the Role of Prison Visitors' Centres*, price £6.

Copies of this summary can be downloaded from the FPFSG and PRT websites, or obtained free of charge from both offices. See below for details.

CONTACT DETAILS

Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups, c/o SCF, Cambridge House, Cambridge Grove, London W6 0LE
Tel: 020 8741 4578 Fax: 020 8748 5867 E-mail: info@fpfsg.org.uk Web: www.fpfsg.org.uk

Registered Charity No. 267879 Company Limited by Guarantee No. 1168459

Prison Reform Trust, 15 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0JR

Tel: 020 7251 5070 Fax: 020 7251 5076 E-mail: info@prisonreformtrust.org.uk Web: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Registered Charity No. 1035525 Company Limited by Guarantee No. 2906362

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

Profile

Visitors’ Centres often have an extremely low profile. The efforts some Centre staff had to make for prison staff and management to recognise the existence of the Visitors’ Centre, let alone its work, were a great source of frustration. A likely contributor to this problem is the regular turnover of staff and governors with responsibility for visits, combined with the limited use of staff and prisoner induction to raise the profile of the Centre and establish good relations.

“Visitors often comment that they wouldn’t be able to cope without the staff at the Visitors’ Centre. The Centre and crèche take some of the stress out of coming to the prison.”

Visitors’ Centre Manager

The low priority accorded to Visitors’ Centres and to visits generally suggests a lack of recognition of the importance visits can play. Family and friends often have to overcome many difficulties to visit people in custody: long distances, short visit times, expense, an unfamiliar and daunting environment, stigma, indignity and bureaucracy. They are likely to receive little encouragement to visit. Supporting visitors through providing a Visitors’ Centre is a useful means of maintaining a prisoner’s family ties or other links with the outside world.

“Hopefully by helping reduce the stress of visiting, we encourage family members to persevere with what can be a very difficult commitment. We therefore hope to contribute to the maintenance of relationships through the trauma of separation.”

Visitors’ Centre Manager

Some Centres had difficulty in communicating and liaising with prisons. Many had no input whatsoever into decisions which affected them, and those which had managed to establish lines of communication fought a constant battle to maintain them. Even basic communication such as keeping information for visitors up to date was

not taking place effectively at many establishments.

“The Visitors’ Centre creates an impression that the Service cares about members of the public who visit prisons. A good link between Visitors’ Centre workers and visits staff can resolve many problems and enquiries.”

Governor

Less obvious but also evident from the findings was the low profile of visitors themselves and the importance of staff attitudes. This was apparent not only from respondents’ comments that staff were generally unaware of the needs of prisoners’ families, but also from the perceived lack of demand for Visitors’ Centres in establishments which did not have them. Visitors are unlikely to demand a service such as a Visitors’ Centre, but lack of demand does not equate to lack of need. On the contrary, visitors to prisons are largely dependent on other people, such as Centre staff, to negotiate on their behalf and represent their concerns.

Numbers of visitors passing through the Visitors’ Centres of individual prisons per year range from 700 to 209,000

Variation in resources and services
There is a wide variation in facilities, funding and practice in Visitors’ Centres across the UK. The classification of Centres ranged from unstaffed waiting areas to fully staffed and funded services for counselling, support and advocacy for visitors, staff, and prisoners. The actual role of Centres may vary, but their potential is very great.

The extent of support Visitors’ Centres would like to provide or develop further was a continuing theme throughout the research. Many members of staff put in extra hours of their own time, to attend meetings in the prison and improve the service they offered. Even with the devotion of extra time and energy, many felt they were not able to make the most of their role. The potential contribution of Visitors’ Centres was

undervalued and often unrecognised. Adequate physical facilities were certainly useful, but what appeared to be more important were qualified and motivated staff, ideally with the support of a stable base of volunteers, backed by adequate and secure funding and the support and respect of prison staff and management. The findings also suggest that, while Visitors’ Centres could be run with very limited funding and a small number of paid staff, increased funding generally enabled more staff hours, which led to better quality and extent of services.

Visitors’ Centres’ budgets range from expenses only to a projected expenditure of £185,000.

Centres which had no paid staff and in particular no designated manager with the Centre as his or her primary (or preferably only) responsibility were less likely to provide meaningful support to visitors or to the prison on a consistent basis. If prisons want good quality service, value for money, and a genuine contribution from Visitors’ Centres to the visits process and maintenance of prisoners’ family ties, then they must provide adequate, stable resources to enable the Centres to work effectively. The definition of ‘adequacy’ will vary according to the type of prison.

“The Visitors’ Centre supports prisoners’ families and therefore indirectly the prisoners. Families are often the forgotten victims.”

Governor

Funding should be negotiated in consultation with the Centre staff and, where applicable, the management committee, ideally with the backing of a Service Level Agreement. Some element of quality control of Centres would be useful. The Prison Service has published guidelines for good practice for Visitors’ Centres (Prison Service 1998), but these do not set out minimum standards.

Variation in organisational structure and priorities
Another theme from the research was the distinction between Centres run by outside organisations and those run with uniformed staff from the prison.

In general, the findings suggest that Centres run with uniformed staff were more likely to see efficient management of visits as their main purpose. They were less likely to collect feedback from visitors or to have management committees of any kind, or use volunteers. They were also less likely to see any role for the Visitors’ Centre in family ties or prisoner rehabilitation, or to say anything needed to be changed about the Centre or the way it was run. There were exceptions, but a trend was apparent.

“Because the Centre is not a completely separate entity we can present visitors with a welcome and support that they can see comes from the prison itself. This in turn increases their confidence in the rest of the prison. We represent the prison well and help foster good relationships.”

Visitors’ Centre Manager

Also clear from the responses was a debate between which type of staffing - uniformed or civilian - was more appropriate for a Visitors’ Centre. Some governors and managers commented that the independence of the Centre from the prison was “vital”. In contrast, others commented that having uniformed staff in the Centre was an important means of breaking down barriers between visitors, Centre staff and the prison. Some findings suggested that uniformed staff in Visitors’ Centres did not gain the depth of information and concerns from visitors that may be shared with civilian staff. However, a strict or even an informal ‘exclusion’ of uniformed staff from Centres risks reinforcing or increasing a ‘them and us’ division between visitors, Visitors’ Centres and prisons.

Regardless of philosophy, a risk is that strict adherence to one side of the debate or the other clouds the purpose of a Visitors’ Centre, namely to provide the best possible support to visitors. More than the existence or not of a uniform, the current research suggests that the important characteristics for staff in Visitors’ Centres are a consistent and dedicated team of staff with a thorough understanding of the needs of visitors to prisons.

“To give the information/support required to families in a remote geographical area would be almost impossible without the Visitors’ Centre.”

Governor

Visits processes and bookings
The research found that a constant source of frustration for visitors, and consequently for staff in Visitors’ Centres, is the difficulty visitors have in making bookings for visits. Each prison had different opening hours for booking lines, different paperwork and often different local rules and practices for visits. The potential difficulties for visitors in figuring out and successfully using the bookings system and processing procedures in different prisons appeared to create a source of stress above and beyond the actual experience of visiting someone in prison.

The stresses and delays in getting from the prison gate to the visits hall could also on occasion overshadow the benefits a Visitors’ Centre was able to provide to visitors. Such problems were not, however, the experience at all establishments, nor were they insurmountable. The findings of the current research suggest that an

advocacy role for issues such as the booking and processing of visits could be useful, and indeed some Visitors’ Centres were already working toward such improvements.

Overall value

86% of governors who responded said their Visitors’ Centre provided good value for money

The overriding impression from the research is the valuable contribution Visitors’ Centres make in easing the visits process for visitors and prison staff alike, and so improving visits for prisoners. Almost all prison governors with Visitors’ Centres at their establishments or with past experience of them were positive about the overall benefits of Centres for most prisons. Services did not necessarily need to be expensive or overly time-consuming, but the role of support for an otherwise neglected group appeared to be beyond value.

“The Visitors’ Centre provides good value, because it:

- 1) reduces the tension of visiting;
- 2) prevents problems escalating;
- 3) provides a positive impression of prison;
- 4) helps prisoners maintain family ties.

These benefits are hard to quantify.”

Governor

The findings of this research suggest that the contribution of Visitors’ Centres, when backed up with sufficient and stable funding, recognition, and support, is one which is likely to be of great advantage to prisons as a whole and to the successful reintegration of prisoners into the community following release.

The range of services some Visitors’ Centres provide includes:

- basic facilities such as toilets, refreshments, payphones, baby changing and feeding areas, and lockers
- support and information for visitors on a wide range of issues, from booking visits to prisoners’ welfare
- liaison with the prison on behalf of visitors e.g. through representation on prison committees, participation in prisoner induction, courses and pre-release projects
- refreshments and child care in the visits room
- opportunities for visitors to hand in prisoners’ property and order newspapers for prisoners
- facilities for children such as toys, books, games, arts and crafts, playground equipment and videos
- surgeries with health visitors, community nurses, counsellors, drugs workers, mental health workers and Citizens Advice Bureaux
- taking bookings for visits, reception of property, provision of transport for visitors and record-keeping
- hosting representatives of outside agencies such as prisoners’ families support groups, religious representatives, the Benefits Agency, the Workers Educational Association and local agencies for volunteering.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of recommendations regarding the development of prison Visitors' Centres stem from the research. These include:

Accessibility for visitors

- Every prison which has visitors should have a properly resourced and managed Visitors' Centre.
- Prisons which do not have visitors (e.g. some open prisons) and have no Visitors' Centre should have a formal means of liaising with families and for providing information and support to them.
- Prisons should be located in areas which are readily accessible to visitors and at the least possible distance from prisoners' homes.

Funding

- Secure and realistic funding is vital for the day to day running and long-term planning of a prison Visitors' Centre.
- Government needs to address the critical funding issues facing Visitors' Centres as a matter of urgency.

Standards

- A Service Level Agreement between the Centre and the prison should be recognised as essential rather than optional. The agreement should include a breakdown of funding for service provided, reviewed at least annually, and signed by the Governor.
- The development of Quality Standards for Visitors' Centres would be of value to define the purpose of Centres, set minimum standards, and provide the basis for Service Level Agreements.
- Evaluation of service, including feedback from visitors, should be conducted regularly.
- Appropriate and adequate induction and ongoing training, particularly on issues that affect families of prisoners, should be available for staff and volunteers in Visitors' Centres and for prison staff, and funding should be made available to support this.

Recognition and support

- Individual prisons as well as the Prison Service should make optimum use of Visitors' Centres as a bridge between prisons and the community, as a tool in building public relations, and as a useful neutral venue for prisoners and their families (e.g. for extended family visits and pre-release work). Visitors' Centres could also be used as a gateway for families and prisoners to

voluntary sector organisations in their local communities.

- The network of national support for Visitors' Centres provided through the Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups should be strengthened. Equally, regional networks should continue to be supported by the Federation and, where necessary, this support should be strengthened.
- These national and local networks should work to increase the accessibility of information through the creation of templates, standardised training, and guidance on issues for certain types of Centres (e.g. those in prisons for women or young people).

Liaison between Centres and prisons

- A specific uniformed member of staff as well as a governor should act as a link between the prison and the Visitors' Centre.
- Regular attendance at the Centre's management or liaison meetings by both a member of uniformed staff and a governor is vital.
- Staff from Visitors' Centres should be included on relevant committees in the prison, and funding should be made available to cover the time of at least one member of Centre staff for this purpose.
- Visitors' Centres should work closely with their prison's voluntary sector coordinator.

Information for prisoners and families

- A Centre's role, ideally in conjunction with the prison, should include raising prisoners' awareness of the effects of imprisonment on the whole family.
- Information for prisoners' families should be available in plain English, as well as in different languages, following a local review of which languages may be relevant.
- Information should be as accessible to all visitors as possible. This should include options such as cassette tapes or videos for people with literacy needs or other difficulties.
- Information on prisoners' daily life should be readily available, such as photographs of cells, family induction, and Family Days.
- The role of Visitors' Centres as

advocates for prisoners' families should be recognised and developed.

- Visitors' Centres' policies on safety issues and confidentiality should be displayed in the Centre.
- Government funded information for children with a parent in prison should be made available as an extension to the information already provided by the Lord Chancellor's Department regarding separation of parents.
- Families should be recognised as a primary source of feedback for prison staff regarding a prisoner's risk of suicidal behaviour, mental health, and other concerns.
- Opportunities should be developed for increased positive, constructive interaction between uniformed staff and visitors.

Booking system

- An appropriately resourced system of booking visits must be a priority for every prison. Minimum standards for the booking of visits are essential.
- A standardised system should exist for all prisons regarding acceptable identification for visitors, especially children.

Record keeping

- Accurate records should be kept of the number, age, gender and ethnicity of visitors to prisons.
- Records should be kept of the number of people refused visits and the reason for each refusal.
- Records should be kept of inquiries made to Visitors' Centres.

Further research

- Research should be conducted into the unexplored potential of Visitors' Centres and the role they can play.
- The potential benefits of mutual support between prisoners' families should be investigated.
- Opportunities for Visitors' Centres to access resources and support relating to health, and in particular mental health, should be investigated and developed.
- More in-depth research to evaluate the effectiveness of Visitors' Centres should be conducted, including feedback from prisoners, families and staff.