

## PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

### The children & families of prisoners: recommendations for government

*Action for Prisoners' Families, CLINKS, Prison Advice & Care Trust and the Prison Reform Trust working together to bring about positive change for children and families affected by imprisonment*

**Action for Prisoners' Families, CLINKS, Prison Advice & Care Trust and the Prison Reform Trust, believing that the maintenance of family ties is vital for the effective resettlement of prisoners and for the welfare of their children and families, ask the government to work with us on the following 'Agenda for Action', over the coming five years. We ask the Inter-Ministerial Group on Reducing Re-offending to commit to developing policy and practice to address the needs of children and families with a parent or close relative in prison.**

Government research has found that maintaining quality family contact has a significant impact on the successful resettlement of, and likelihood of re-offending by, ex-prisoners. Prisoners who received visits from their family were twice as likely to gain employment on release and three times more likely to have accommodation arranged as those who did not receive any visits. 7% of children will see a parent imprisoned during their school years and about 160,000 children a year have a parent sent to custody. This is around two and a half times the number of children in care and over six times the number of children on the child protection register. Each year fewer children experience their parents' divorce than those who experience the imprisonment of a parent.

Children of prisoners have about three times the risk of developing mental health problems compared to their peers and experience higher levels of social disadvantage. Based on the projected prison population growth this group of children is set to rise to around 200,000 within the next five years.

Despite these facts, there is no statutory support for either children or adults affected by imprisonment and little attention paid to their needs, contrasting starkly to other life-changing circumstances that impact on children's wellbeing.

## Agenda For Action

### Safeguarding children with a prisoner in the family

- Currently there is no reliable, routinely recorded information about children with a parent in prison. Demographic data must be collected and recorded on children with a parent in prison and consideration given to placing this on the proposed 'Contact Point' child information database.
- The Department for Children, Schools and Families must recognise children of prisoners as a potentially vulnerable group and ensure that its policies, practice and practitioner training reflect their needs.
- Grandparents and other relatives caring for prisoners' children on an unplanned basis must be offered accessible information, advice and guidance to ensure that they can cope in their role as temporary carers, and that children are safe, healthy and their educational needs are being met.

### Facilities in prison

- A welcoming family and visitors' centre must be available outside every prison as a place where families can wait in comfort and security and receive information and support. New standards should be set for existing visitors' centres, and priority for improvement should be given to women's prisons, young offender institutions and local prisons.
- Every prison visits hall should be a welcoming environment which must include a supervised play area so that children are safely cared for and partners have a chance to talk in private; a choice of healthy & affordable refreshments; and a calm welcoming atmosphere to reduce stress and anxiety.

### When people arrive in prison

- First night procedures and induction processes must provide an opportunity to identify family concerns and contact needs, particularly over the welfare of dependent children and vulnerable adults, linked to suicide prevention work and safer custody.
- The Prison Service Standard on prisoners' rights to phone calls on reception and to reception visits must be audited and reported on.
- Accurate information packs about visiting and transport facilities must be routinely sent out to families following a person's reception into prison and on transfer and the induction process must ensure that the assisted prison visits scheme and visits arrangements are fully explained to prisoners.

### Booking visits

- Minimum standards must be set and audited for prison booking lines. Prisons must also provide alternative means of booking visits, rather than relying solely on over-subscribed lines, including in person at the prison or online. Freephone numbers should be provided for all booking lines.

### Offender management

- Families must be given the opportunity to be involved in sentence planning from induction and especially pre-release.
- Opportunities must be provided for imprisoned parents to have a meaningful relationship with their children and to fulfil their parenting responsibilities including greater use of release on temporary licence.
- Family contact and distance from home (not sentencing court) must be the primary factor after security in deciding where a prisoner is held.

- Every prison must have a suitably trained and qualified family contact worker to support families with information, advice and guidance needs and concerns regarding prisoner welfare. Priority should be given to local and women's prisons.

### **Maintaining family ties through visits & other contact**

- Prisons must ensure that visitors receive their full visits time and make adequate allowance for the additional time required to process visitors into the visits hall.
- A review should be held of the practice of restricting prisoner movement within visits halls during social visits to ensure that adequate opportunity is provided for prisoners to interact with their families, commensurate with safety and security.
- Regular special children and family visits must be offered enabling quality family contact.
- Visits must be available at convenient times for families.
- There should be an annual audit of visits capacity and performance to ensure that prisoners can receive their mandatory visits entitlement.
- Books and games for children should be made available on normal domestic visits through a mobile library scheme or similar.
- Additional facilities must be offered for improving family contact such as a secure email system and video-conferencing, where visiting is too difficult for families.
- The cost of telephone calls from prison should be reduced in line with standard tariffs.

- The monthly free phone call allocation for foreign national prisoners must be increased from 5 to 15 minutes per month.
- Modelled on existing good practice, more opportunities should be developed for prisoners to send audio-visual stories and messages to their children.

### **Prison staff training**

All staff to undertake training in:

- understanding the impact on children and families of the imprisonment of a parent, carer or close relative
- treating families and the public with sensitivity and respect
- child protection procedures (visits and security staff only).

### **New prisons**

- Contracts for new prisons should require that the prison meets the minimum standards set out above.
- Where the location of the prison means that it is not easily accessible by public transport, the provision of adequate, alternative low-cost transport for visitors must be included as a contractual requirement.

### **Accountability**

- There must be transparent public accountability for prisons' performance in treating visitors, measured against enforceable standards.
- Prison governors must allocate sufficient funding to meet the required standards and their obligations to enable prisoners to maintain links with their family.

*It makes you feel horrible like you've done something too. They watch you and make you feel guilty for just being there. They search you and make you take your shoes off and you feel stupid, it's horrible. You sit there waiting for them to call you and you feel ashamed.*

14 year old girl, on visiting her brother in prison

*It meant so much for myself and the children to be able to have that extra time with Joe. It was brilliant to be able to sit and have a meal as a family and just relax together. We all miss Joe so much and for these kinds of visits to be available really makes a difference to families.*

partner on a family friendly visit

### **Action for Prisoners' Families**

Action for Prisoners' Families (APF) is the national charity representing the needs of families affected by imprisonment. We support the development of services, promote good practice, provide information and raise awareness to minimise the harm imprisonment causes to children and families.

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### **Prison Reform Trust**

The Prison Reform Trust is an independent charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. We provide information, conduct applied research and effect policy leverage.

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### **CLINKS**

Clinks is a membership body that supports and develops the work that voluntary organisations (NGOs) undertake within the criminal justice system in England and Wales. We believe that a strong voluntary sector is crucial to reducing offending and building safer communities.

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### **Prison Advice & Care Trust**

The Prison Advice & Care Trust (pact) is an independent charity which supports people affected by imprisonment. We work with children and families of prisoners, and with prisoners inside and on release.

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