

The Powerful Story of a Friend of Families Outside

Mother and son...and prison

Part 1 – Coming to terms with a son in prison

I was invited to visit by my youngest son, who had supported his brother throughout. He broke the law. At the jail my son checks he had ID. “You coming”, he says. I get out of the car. But **I could not go through the door**. I spent half an hour talking to the ladies in the visitors’ centre, run by Crossreach. I thought I had never felt so empty. But I had, when I would leave this tiny baby in the neonatal unit, every night for three months, until he was big enough to come home.

My son Joe had been sentenced for three years. I spent three weeks in **total shock**. Although he lives nearly 200 miles away, I made the decision to visit every two weeks, once I got my head round getting through the door.

Joe was 35. He would spend his birthday and Christmas in jail. But hey, I am ahead of myself! He had to get over his shame and invite me to visit. The first time was by no means the worst, but it was a steep learning curve. I found nothing untoward about the staff, the visitors, or even the prisoners in the visit room, but there was a **sense of dispossession** as you were asked to remove your outer clothing and leave it in a locker with your phone and bag. You sat there for an hour with no pen, no photos, no conversation point. I could not list the things Joe wanted me to bring, or send. I had to remember. But so did he!

Outside the family, **I told three close friends**. Not that they needed to know, but I needed to tell them. They were supportive, likening it to a temporary bereavement. I decided I didn’t need to tell anyone else, and that included my younger son’s in-laws and children. Imagine the shame if it came out in the playground! **And so it was kept secret**.

Joe rang me each week, and said he would serve half the sentence. The fog lifted slightly. Heading for winter, Joe’s house would need attention, so I stayed there for a weekend, so the journey was easier. There was no electricity, and I spent a cold couple of days with candles and cold water. It is a tied farm cottage and to get the work done, the farmer had to employ temporary workers to do Joe’s job. They would be moving into the cottage on Monday for six months.

We have a large family. Joe has two brothers and three sisters, and his dad, who is no longer married to me. Joe is single. He has six nephews and three nieces. **Questions would be asked in the family**.

During our visits I learned about the admission procedure, how they decide whether a prisoner is at risk, whether he is to have a cell-mate or not. Joe tried both, and ended up in a single cell when they decided he was low risk.

As a family we do not underestimate suicide. As the children have grown, I have not shielded them from the real world, and we lived in one of the toughest parts of Aberdeen for their formative years. Stuff happens. But there was a day, probably after Christmas, when there was **a feeling of positivity**. There was a release date. And so we could plan, but not become complacent.

Then there was the incident with the sniffer dog: I was picked out. It was an evening visit, my dog was in the car. Simple explanation. But, no. According to procedure there was the full search, and the upshot of this was that instead of spending an hour with Joe, my visit was cut to eight minutes. **He was devastated. I was angry.** So angry that I could not drive home, and spent the night in a hotel.

I complained to SPS, who redirected me to Police Scotland. I got a result. They listened, replied, and restored my confidence. The next visit the sniffer dog was there again, and the same thing happened.

In my letter of complaint I had outlined the need to ensure that visitors know the procedure should they be picked by the dog. This, I found, had been done, and I also pointed out that my son's visit had been cut short through no fault of his, and that this should also be addressed. It was. I spoke with the Governor about a lot of issues, and his explanations were all backed by policy.

A couple of weeks later I noticed an advert in the Big Issue for Independent Prison Monitors. I took the ad home and did not look at it again for a couple of months. Then I filled it in and sent it, carefully wording the Conflict of Interest.

I was **surprised to be welcomed** onto this pilot scheme, but they had picked up on my professional qualities and so I began training a year ago, when Joe was transferred to Castle Huntly, prior to release on HDC. Life was looking up. He could have more visitors, and come out to the car. Not long to wait.

The tag, however, was a pest. The cottage had been left in a mess, damp and cold, but easily cleaned. Joe's employers were sympathetic but the dairy farm had almost collapsed with the milk marketing crisis, and they could only pay him half his salary.

Part 2 – The stress of release and system failures

There is a watershed when serving time. In Joe's case it was the half-way mark, and for a longer sentence, from my experience as an Independent Prison Monitor, it is the last few months before the release date.

Prisoners begin to feel uneasy, more vulnerable, towards the end of their sentence. Prison has become a safe environment, and on **the cusp of their liberation, their anxiety begins to mount.** There is a set pre-release agenda and in some cases opportunity to be accommodated on an open estate. But there are hurdles...

...Prison is a process, a journey, from the day the sentence is passed, to the day of release.

Joe served the last three months of his sentence on an open estate, during which time he spent three weekends on home leave. This was not a success because during this time he discovered the reality of the economic demise of the farm he worked on, and his cottage had been occupied by itinerant workers. He did not have enough money to re-establish his electricity supply and his hot water boiler had burst, causing damage to the property.

On release, he had been told he could apply for various grants but only if he signed on at the Job Centre. This is twenty miles away and there is no bus. He could not sign on because he had a job. And so he had to find money for repairs and new clothes, because he had put on weight in prison. He could also not work his usual 12 hour day due to the **constraints of the tag.** His employer rang G4S (who deal with the tag) and his time was extended by two hours a day.

But there was no-one to ask about stuff like this. He felt that this was a failure in the process of throughcare and resettlement, and in some ways was **worse than being sentenced, because he was on his own, and afraid.**

He realised how safe he had been in prison. He commented on **the number of prisoners who re-offend for the security they feel inside.** The outside is cold and comes with a responsibility that a lot of people are not equipped to deal with...

...That release date is a challenge which warrants serious anxiety.

Joe was badgered for council tax payments until his wages were arrested. Both myself and his employer tried to sort it all out, and I went back to source information from Castle Huntly about where this had gone wrong. **The prison were less than helpful, and reinforced the fact that because Joe was on the outside he was no longer their responsibility.**

I went to Social Work and they passed me to the Criminal Justice Team, and Joe had someone phone him with a view to a visit within the week. **The professional did not seem to understand his remit.** He made a visit to discuss Joe's situation with the council tax and promised to sort it out. That was in November 2016 and the demand letters still kept coming. His wages are still being arrested, and this is now mid-January 2017.

Four months after release...

Throughcare is an option for those leaving prison (with sentences under four years) but it would appear it needs a lot of work before it becomes successful for everyone.

The Scottish Prison Service is actively positive, but **if resettlement is to work, the transition should be seamless.** My family experience has sadly been on the negative side, and in my work as an Independent Prison Monitor I find that **stress levels in prisoners do rise considerably when prisoners are nearing their release date; tempers are short and such a climate is likely to induce issues which might lead to reassessment of the liberation date.**

Joe continues his work, reduced to 25 hours a week, not because of his detention, but because of the economics of dairy farming. He has restored his bank account, receives no benefits, and over Christmas ran out of money and electric until his fortnightly payday. **My 36 year old son had to ask to borrow money from his family: a humiliating step backwards.**

...This is life back in the real world.