

Prison Visitors' Centres: An Ongoing Debate

in brief

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Key points

- Prison Visitors' Centres have tremendous potential to support people visiting prisons and consequently to maintain family ties.
- Opinion is divided regarding the role and necessity of Visitors' Centres, as well as who is best placed to staff them.
- The quality of a Visitors' Centre depends on its provision of advocacy, support and information rather than on its fabric and location.
- Visitors need access to support before and after visits; effective visitors' services must take this into account in their location and staffing.

Background

Maintenance of family ties during custody reduces a prisoners' reoffending by up to six times. However, prison visits can place tremendous stress on families. The cost and logistics of travel, prison rules and regimes, institutional visiting environments, challenging attitudes of some prison staff, and fear of other prisoners all deter families from visiting someone in prison. Nearly half of prisoners lose contact with their families as a result of their imprisonment.

The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) recognises the importance of maintaining family ties where this is in the best interest of all parties and has developed a series of Strategic Objectives to meet this aim. The Scottish Government's National Offender Management Strategy also reflects the importance of this.

Research on behalf of the Prison Reform Trust and Action for Prisoners' Families (Loucks 2002) emphasised the key role that prison Visitors' Centres can play in encouraging family ties. The Prison Service in England and Wales now requires all new-build prisons to include a Visitors' Centre, and most prisons there have such a facility. In Scotland, only three prisons have Visitors' Centres, despite recommendations to the contrary, most recently from the Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland in 2010. Further, the SPS does not intend to create more unless facilities within the prison inhibit the provision of support and information to visitors.

This briefing paper outlines some of the debate surrounding the use of prison Visitors' Centres, drawing upon research and practice throughout the UK.

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"It took a lot of worries off me and put me at ease.... I felt a hundred times better after going up to the Visitors' Centre." (Visitor at Crossreach Visitors' Centre, HMP Perth)

What is a Visitors’ Centre?

At its most basic, a prison Visitors’ Centre is a facility in which visitors can wait for their visit prior to entering the main prison. These are usually outside the main prison and range from unstaffed rooms with a vending machine to fully staffed purpose-built resource centres serving hot and cold food and linking visitors to support and information on site as well as within the prison and wider community. Some carry out essential functions for the prison such as booking in visitors and providing lockers, while others have no operational role.

The Prison Service in England and Wales published good practice guidelines for Visitors’

Centres in 1998, and in 2007 Action for Prisoners’ Families produced an evaluation tool for measuring the quality of Visitors’ Centres. Costs for these Centres vary according to the facilities and staffing they provide, though few are funded solely by the relevant prison.

One couple said that visits to prison will always be difficult, but “that’s why your Visitors’ Centre is such a relief”. For them, the Centre offered “warmth, comfort, coffee, and people who are smiling at you”. (Loucks 2007)



Value for money

The research suggests that prison managers who have Visitors’ Centres at their establishments value them as a resource. One Governor stated:

The Visitors’ Centre provides good value because it: 1) reduces the tension of visiting; 2) prevents problems escalating; 3) provides a positive impression of the prison; 4) helps prisoners maintain family ties. These benefits are hard to quantify.

The research also shows that budgets for Visitors’ Centres ranged from expenses only to six-figure sums, and from portakabins to substantial purpose-built facilities. Prisons usually provide some funding or payment-in-kind, but most funding for Visitors’ Centres comes from charitable trusts. Centres with higher budgets can provide a broader range of services, but the focus of staff on the needs of families is far more important than the physical facilities. Regular praise for the Visitors’ Centre at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, operated from a portakabin by the Prison Advice and Care Trust (pact), is a clear example of this.

Also evident from the research was that a poor Visitors’ Centre could be more detrimental than not having one at all. One Governor commented:

Unfortunately the facility was not good and we received as many complaints about the inadequacy of the facilities as we did about the lack of one. Lesson – Visitors’ Centres should adhere to a minimum standard of comfort and convenience.

A report for New Philanthropy Capital in 2005 calculated that the average cost of running a prison Visitors’ Centre was about the same as the direct cost of keeping one prisoner in custody for a year. The report went on to say that, even if running costs of Visitors’ Centres were doubled, these costs remained significantly less than the cost to the public purse of the average offender reoffending after release.

The importance of staffing

Prison Visitors’ Centres vary from having no staff at all to a combination of dedicated paid staff and volunteers. Paid staff could be from independent voluntary organisations, from the prison itself, or a combination of the two. One debate focuses on which type of staffing is most appropriate. Independent organisations argue that they work specifically on behalf of visitors rather than for the prison, but others argue that staffing from prison officers works to ‘break down barriers’ and to enforce the responsibility that prison staff should take for visitors to the prison.

Evident from the research is that the staffing of a Centre directly influences its perceived purpose. Independent organisations tended to describe the purpose of a Centre in ways such as the following:

To meet the needs of all visiting relatives or friends in [prison] by providing: pleasant, safe welcoming environment, dignity, respect and the opportunity to discuss difficulties and worries, [and] to provide clear, full, and relevant information.

In marked contrast, Centres staffed solely by prison officers were – without fail – described primarily in operational terms, such as the following:

To provide a muster point for visitors to assemble, in the hope that visitors can be processed in a quick and efficient manner.

The research for the Prison Reform Trust and Action for Prisoners’ Families concluded that the debate between independent or prison-run Centres was less relevant than the ability of staff to inform, support, and advocate for visitors. The question is whether the onus on prison staff to prioritise security creates a dual role if they are also responsible to advocate for families.

Also of value is input from staff who work specifically to create links for families with the prison and with community-based supports. Following the employment of a development worker at the Visitors’ Centre at HMP Edinburgh, for example, use of information available within the Centre increased from 16% to 82% of visitors surveyed.

...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 prison. (Loucks 2002)

“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, cited in Loucks 2002)



The location and purpose of Visitors’ Centres

The research highlights a number of important criteria for Visitors’ Centres, namely that:

- Visitors’ Centres should act as a ‘bridge’ between prisons and the community, as a tool in building public relations, as a useful neutral venue for engagement with families, and as a ‘gateway’ for links with community-based supports;
- Uniformed staff and governors should act as a link between the prison and the Visitors’ Centre; and
- The advocacy role of Visitors’ Centres is crucial.

The extent to which Visitors’ Centres meet these criteria varies considerably, but these key aspects remain central to good practice. The location of a Visitors’ Centre relates directly to its ability to meet these criteria. Best practice is for dedicated

facilities next to but separate from the main prison so that families have their own space – a ‘neutral territory’ – prior to entering the prison. In theory this allows the opening hours of the Centre to operate independently from the visiting hours at the prison. This caters for families who arrive early or for those who, for example, provide transport but do not plan to visit. A separate facility also enables open interaction with community-based services and supports. In saying this, prison-based support can potentially offer these facilities as well. One example of a Visitors’ Centre attached to the main prison is the NIACRO Centre at HMYOC Hydebank Wood in Northern Ireland. This facility leads directly into the security area and visits hall in the prison. Importantly, access to this Centre is still directly from outside; visitors book in once they have entered the Centre, so any who do not attend a visit still have access to advocacy and support.

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Yet another option is for services for families to be available within the main prison, without the benefit of a Visitors' Centre. This is the current policy of the Scottish Prison Service:

SPS policy for new visit and visitors' facilities is to ensure, where possible, that they are integral to the prison as this accommodates joint engagement by families and offenders.

As the policy states, this would allow prisoners and their families to access services together. However, the model raises a number of questions. First, joint engagement with services gives prisoners control over access to support for their families: where abusive or coercive relationships exist, families may not get the support they need. Second, families need support in their own right with issues that may not relate directly to the prisoner – or indeed issues they do not want the prisoner to know (for example, families may not wish to cause additional anxiety for the prisoner, or they may be trying to leave the relationship). Additional concerns include the security implications for delivering this model in practice (for example, will prisoners and their families move about the visits hall in order to meet with service providers?).

Importantly, this internal 'Family Services' model misses the crucial element of advocacy for families. Support for families is often required before they enter a prison, such as if they are denied entry for being late or for not having necessary paperwork. They also need support after visits, as the visits themselves can be emotionally draining. A service based solely within the main prison may provide information and access to services, but it fails to address the essential need for advocacy before and after a visit.

...visitors to prisons are largely dependent on other people, such as Centre staff, to negotiate on their behalf and represent their concerns. (Loucks 2002)

Conclusions

Prison Visitors' Centres are a valuable means of supporting isolated and vulnerable families. People experience a range of deprivations as a direct result of their family member's imprisonment, but the stigma of that experience often prevents them from seeking help. Visitors' Centres therefore have the potential to provide a crucial link for families to community-based supports, to the prison, and ultimately to their family members in custody. Debate persists about the best model to provide support – but it is a debate that must be resolved.

References

Loucks, N. (2002) Just Visiting? A Review of the Role of Prison Visitors' Centres. London: Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups (now Action for Prisoners' Families) and the Prison Reform Trust.

Loucks, N. (2007) Crossreach Visitors' Centre at HMP Perth: Visitors' Survey and Progress Report. Glasgow: The Robertson Trust.

For additional information and references, please contact Families Outside.



Families Outside is the only national charity in Scotland that works solely to support the families of people involved in the criminal justice system. We work to mitigate the effects of imprisonment on children and families - and consequently to reduce the likelihood of reoffending - through support and information for families and for the people who work with them.

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