Families and Significant Others conference 28 February 2018

Speech by Phil Copple; Executive Director Prisons

I am very happy to be able to speak at this Families and Significant Others conference and to see so many colleagues and partners interested in learning and sharing more about effective approaches in this area.

I particularly wanted to take this opportunity to welcome Lord Farmer’s thoughtful report – ‘The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners’ Family Ties to prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime’. The publication of this report highlights an unequivocal government push to improve what we are doing and setting up the review is a most notable example of that. Lord Farmer’s review has helped us in HMPPS to increasingly focus on this critical area of work. I appreciate Lord Farmer’s commitment to ongoing engagement with us as we seek to progress those recommendations along with our commitment to work with partners to help us deliver those recommendations.

I would also like to draw attention to another publication from last summer - the HMIP expectations document, which sought to embed the importance of family throughout the whole expectations approach. This presents a similar challenge to us in terms of running prison establishments – it is about integrating family work across all aspects of the prison regime. . We will be helped to achieve this through partnerships with our family service providers, who have considerable expertise in working in this area, with both prison and community based services beyond prison.

 I should also make some comments on the definition of ‘Family’. Many of those in custody will have experienced a non-traditional upbringing; with a range of adults having cared for them. So, it is important to accommodate all ‘family’ arrangements where they provide a constructive and supportive relationship for the prisoner, – hence the term ‘Significant Other’. Families and Significant Other seems a useful way to summarise these relationships and to help focus our approach.

That leads me to mention the area of work that Teresa Clark is championing in on care leavers in custody. I know she recently brought together many colleagues in a conference at Stafford during the latter part of last year, as well as speaking at this conference. The support that we can give care leavers is vital to the effectiveness of this work.

I also acknowledge that not all family contact is good.

The recently published operating guidance notes that family members may sometimes be the direct or indirect victims of a prisoner’s offence such as domestic abuse; or that other family or significant others may be enablers of crime, contributing to their offending behaviour. We must therefore ensure that we work to prevent inappropriate contact.

However, this doesn’t mean we shy away from developing pro-active family and significant other approaches when we work in our challenging and sensitive environments. I wrote to Governors and Directors just before Christmas introducing a ‘*Delivering Effective Family Practice Operating Guidance’ document;* as well as introducing the date of this conference. I extract from the guidance the following quote:

*‘Family and significant relationships are considered as a key means by which we can prevent reoffending and reduce the likelihood of intergenerational crime. Supporting a prisoner in a meaningful and constructive relationship with his or her family or significant others, should be a primary focus for anyone caring for those in custody who hope to achieve positive change and transform lives. HMPPS therefore has a moral and ethical responsibility to assist any meaningful and constructive relationship in preparation for their release.’*

This reflects the professionally correct and morally fit approach which I think is key to having decency and respect in our establishments, and that’s decency and respect not just for the men and women in our care; but also, people who visit them. Some family and significant others may struggle to visit, but they are still important figures in prisoners’ lives. Our values as an organisation can clearly be demonstrated in how we treat people that come into our establishments.

When working in a prison many years ago, I came across the diary of a prisoner who was in distress. He described the importance of his interactions with a prison officer which was really important to him. He was writing in his diary about how important friendly gestures had become to him; that they made him feel like living a little, was one memorable phrase. I was thinking of some of that this morning – of the importance of being treated well – and applying that to the perspective of a family member visiting a prison. When I was listening to the powerful and rightly challenging experiences of Debbie and Danielle of being a visitor to a partner in prison. Positive treatment will make a huge difference. It also made me think about how easy it is to fall into the trap of administrative processes, which can become in a thoughtless way quite dehumanising, whatever our professed values are. Our values are, at end of the day, no good if there isn’t a practical application.

As a prison governor I remember very well one day watching some visitors coming through all the search procedures at the front of the prison. I was observing one of the operational support grade staff dealing so sensitively and so well with visitors with some very young children. The humanity and the humour used to help put people at ease was really impressive. I also reflect that it is quite right that we talk about training and development for managers and training for prison officers; but we also need to reflect on how important operational support grades are to the experience of family members also.

Research has indicated that children of prisoners are three times more at risk of anti-social or delinquent behaviour than their peers, and are a vulnerable group that needs targeted support. This means that our strategy must have a moral imperative to focus on building positive family relationships between those in custody and their children, to mitigate the risk of future offending by children, as well as reoffending by the adult. Desistance literature also cites the importance of families in encouraging a new identity and sense of purpose to encourage an offender to stop offending.

Positive family relationships are also likely to contribute to good order within an establishment. Anecdotal evidence from establishments with positive family engagement programmes indicate reduced incidents of disorder and anti-social behaviour. It is likely that having meaningful and constructive relationships with family and significant others while in custody may reduce anxiety, mitigate the frustration and isolation of imprisonment, and potentially reduce violence. Reducing anxiety and distress, is critical in helping us do better at reducing suicide and self-harm across our populations.

I was well aware when I sent my covering letter with the operating guidance before Christmas last year that I ‘required’ establishments to develop and have locally published strategies in place. I took care not to be too prescriptive but made comments about accessibility, readability and making reference to the Lord Farmer ‘Family Offer’ I am aware that our partners have offered some ideas around the family offer earlier this afternoon. So, this conference was very much set-in recognition of that ‘requirement’; to bring together establishment colleagues, providers and others, to learn and share experiences and reflections that will allow each of us to have clearer ideas of how we would want to progress our families’ approach over the next business year. We are going to reflect this priority within the Agency’s business Plan in 18/19 and in the prison’s directorate priorities and objectives for 18/19.

The operating guidance was framed to assist colleagues to draft their local strategies; by asking a series of questions that guide and direct colleagues. We obviously have a very clear steer in terms of inspectorate expectations and likewise in terms of Lord Farmer recommendations, and that was the backdrop to the guidance that was issued. There is an appropriately substantial measure of discretion locally for governors and their teams to tailor their approaches to their situations. There is plenty of material out there that I have just referred to and lots of good practice, pointers and ideas from partners about how we should develop the services; not least of which is the Lord Farmer report and its recommendations. Using that document as a critical friend and test of local approach and provision will produce a better understanding of strengths and weaknesses; forming a basis for planned developments.

We have had a long history of partnership in terms of provision of our family services. Many, but not all, of our establishments have had that experience of working with more specialist provision. Within the Public Sector, Family Services were re-competed with most establishments in England and Wales taking part in the process. After consultation we decided that all governors would be given the opportunity to work with providers and the new family contracts commenced in October 2017 across most of the public-sector estate. This enabled Governors and family service providers to work effectively together over a more stable 3-4-year period. We can increase the overall spend, in what is a very financially constrained environment. I acknowledge however, there are some weaknesses about how we went about that procurement and there are important lessons learnt, which again partners have been appropriately involved in, helping us identify what we need to do to improve services for the future. I think that there are important lessons in terms of pushing the responsibility down to Governors in the spirit of empowerment, to make sure that we have the appropriate capabilities and details in making sure they work. Nonetheless involving partners routinely in the fullest possible way and contributing to the development of local strategies has got to be at the heart of what we do. I want to encourage people in establishments to work with our partners closely, as they are excellent critical friends and help to improve our innovation and effective ideas.

 In prisons we tend to adopt a functional approach to our work. Subject areas that cut across a functional approach needs focus, to ensure effective collaborative outcomes; otherwise they risk becoming narrowly focussed or having a marginal perspective. At “headquarters” we may have been guilty of working in isolation on policy and practice that effects families. We have now established clear policy and operational leadership as well as running an overarching families group with cross MOJ/HMPPS membership; which also now forms our main vehicle for reviewing progress with the Lord Farmer recommendations. It seems to me that a lot of that is about trying to shift our mind set and approach, so that we are routinely thinking about family in what we are doing. Lord Farmer referred to the need of a ‘golden thread’, running through our policy and practice and I think that approach can apply in the establishment context. I also think that we should be reflective of the diversity of our service users and to be culturally competent with an understanding of the types of services that should be provided to meet their needs.

We all know that in our operating environment and resources that constraints are always prominent. There can also be policy constraints in establishing what it is our Ministers of the day will support and are content for us to progress. I guess something like proposing Video type opportunities for people, embody both of those types of constraints; policy and resources. It’s something what we are trying to progress to try and improve our capability in that area and create the opportunities for people.

Lord Farmer was right to refer to the fact that there is a significant amount of autonomy for governors to shape local arrangements and I would just like to finish by endorsing his call for people to be bold and ambitious. Let’s push this as far as current resources and policy constraints will allow. Think about championing the cultural changes that I am referring to; develop the practical application of improved processes; and humanise behaviours and attitudes that can be dehumanising. Try to help build that momentum that Lord Farmer was talking about, think what will move things on for you locally. This will help us build up a head of steam for us across the system in terms of establishing new norms and expectations as we go forward.

I would urge people to use the development of local strategies as a vehicle to achieve that progress and we’ll keep working at the centre on some of the trickier recommendations involving you and partners in some of that work. There is so much that you can do in our establishments; so many improved services; so many changed mind sets that you can start grappling with; that you don’t need my permission; ministerial approval or in some cases funding to deliver; and often you don’t need even more money to achieve some of that.

So, I would urge you all to seize this opportunity. Thank you.