



Safer Custody Learning Bulletin

Issue 26: Promoting Safety in Prison by Strengthening Family Ties

Who needs to see this Bulletin?

All Senior Managers, Regional Safer Custody Leads, Safer Custody Teams, Security Managers, Reception / First Night / Induction Staff, Visits Staff and Healthcare Staff.

Support from a strong network of family and friends can make an enormous difference to an offender's prison experience, particularly for those who may be at risk of harm. Offenders may confide in their families or a significant other* if they have fears for their safety, or if they feel they are at risk of self-harm or suicide, and it is important that we facilitate the reporting of such information.

- Where appropriate staff should encourage those in prison to maintain positive contact with their family.
- Maintaining positive contact with the outside world is linked to reducing reoffending, as well as to lowering an individual's risk of suicide or self-harm.

Actions for Prisons

Reception / First Night / Induction

- Explain (and display notices about) how people can keep in contact with their family and friends while they are in prison. This is particularly important to someone who has never been to prison before.
- Explain how the PIN phone system works. Use peer support workers to reinforce these messages.
- Record next of kin / nominated emergency contact information for every new reception.
- New receptions may need the opportunity to retrieve contact details stored on a mobile phone before this is confiscated.
- For those without external support, explain that there are other avenues available to help, such as peer support workers, Listeners, Samaritans, and the Prisoner Penfriend scheme.

Visits / Safer Custody Staff

- Put in place a process for families to be able to share risk information about an offender, at any time, with a dedicated contact at the prison.
- Ensure that visitors are aware of the ways in which they can report concerns about an offender's well-being.

Safer Custody Staff

- If a concern is reported, record it, take appropriate action and record what you have done.
- Ensure that anybody (staff member, visitor or other offenders) who raises a concern receives an acknowledgement and reassurance that appropriate action has been taken.

Background

Lord Farmer's report on the '*Importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime*', and a number of recent PPO reports, have emphasised the importance of maintaining positive contact between offenders and their family and friends because of the links to reducing re-offending and the risk of suicide or self-harm.

Facilitating early contact on arrival

We all know that the first night in custody can be an extremely stressful time. For many, being separated from family and friends can be one of the most painful consequences of prison life. **Providing there are no safeguarding concerns, staff should allow offenders to make a telephone call to a friend or family member to tell them where they are being held or to address urgent issues such as child care arrangements.**

Encouraging ongoing contact with family and friends

The experience of being imprisoned can lead to feelings of loneliness, isolation, anxiousness and negative self-esteem, which can increase the risk of self-harm. Having a good network of support is really important. Where appropriate, staff should encourage offenders to maintain contact with those who are close to them by making sure that they know about the different ways they can keep in contact with family, and by supporting family-friendly events.

Case study:

Mr A has learning difficulties and was on medication for psychosis. He did not get this medication when he went into custody. His mother contacted the prison and healthcare provider, but was told that information could not be shared with her because of data protection.

Mr A was then transferred over two hundred miles from home. His mother continued to visit, but was sometimes turned away because he was not well enough to see her. On one occasion when she did visit, she was distressed by his filthy state and the cuts on his arms. She wrote to the prison about her concerns but received what she perceived to be an unsympathetic response. She engaged solicitors and her MP intervened on her behalf.

Mr A's condition declined and he needed in-patient healthcare. He was transferred again but was not well enough to go to the visits room. Instead, the Governor allowed his mother to visit him in the healthcare centre. Whilst distressed by the state that he was in, she was appreciative of the compassion that had been shown, and was able to discuss Mr A's history with staff.

Mr A was later diagnosed with schizophrenia, and transferred to a medium secure unit closer to home. He is now on the correct medication and doing well.

Supporting offenders without family involvement

For some offenders, encouraging contact with families is not appropriate because of safeguarding considerations or for other reasons, and there are some offenders with no support from their family. In these circumstances offenders can be encouraged to obtain support from alternative sources, such as Listeners, peer supporters, Samaritans, Prison Visitors and the Prisoner Penfriend scheme.

Supporting offenders who are terminally ill

Families can also provide essential support to those who are terminally or seriously ill. More information can be found in [Safer Custody Learning Bulletin Issue 25 – Palliative and End of Life Care](#).

Further information

[PSI 2011/64 - Management of Prisoners at Risk of Harm to Self, to Others and From Others](#)

[Lord Farmer's Report](#)

[Safer Custody Learning Bulletin Issue 14 - Receiving Emergency Calls: facilitating the sharing of risk information by families, Samaritans and others](#)

[Safer Custody Learning Bulletin Issue 25 - Palliative and End of Life Care](#)

Safer Custody Learning Bulletin Issue 27 - Engaging Families or Significant Others with ACCT Case Management (this can be found on the safety page [here](#) under the learning bulletins tab)

[Understanding Risk Guide](#)

[Family Liaison Guides](#)

**References to the word 'family' also includes the support of close friends and significant others.*

Safer Custody Policy & Learning Team

Safer Custody & Public Protection Group

More information on suicide and self-harm prevention is available [here](#) on our safety page and also on the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman's website, www.ppo.gov.uk

Contact us: SaferCustodyPolicyandLearning@noms.gsi.gov.uk