Director McLaughlin, Sandy, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for inviting me here today. We have had a fascinating morning and I hope very much to continue in that vein.

Simon, thank you for that warm introduction.

Without your excellent staff and your own ongoing support, the Farmer Review would have been far less effective. The involvement of your team on the original task group ensured all our recommendations were realistic, workable but also ambitious. Since the Review was published I have met regularly with Richard Booty and Dr Angela Christopher whom I am very pleased to see here today. Together with Richard Nicholls from Clinks, my team holds MoJ and HMPPS to account.

On the subject of Richard Booty, I would have liked to embarrass him in person by singing his praises but unusually he was unable to make it today. He is retiring at the end of next month, but I wanted to take the time to acknowledge that he has given 33 years of his life to the prison service. He is deeply committed to the family agenda, largely I think because of his own frontline experience including as a No 1 governor.

Some of you will have met him at other events like this. He could fill his diary countless times over but when a prison or voluntary sector organisation puts on a family event and invites him, he prioritises it. He has also organised several HMPPS events to highlight the importance of families, since the Review was published.

I accepted Sandy’s kind invitation to speak today partly because I want to stay current with innovative work on the UK prison estate. A key aspect of my remit in the first Review was to glean good practice currently being delivered and bring it to the attention of other governors, to help address the inconsistency I found between establishments in family work.

One of the most frustrating parts of any Review is that the final report is always out of date as soon as it’s published. Farmer is meant to be a floor of good practice, not a ceiling. Constant evolution is the goal of the HMPPS implementation team, hence the new performance measures. These will encourage, and ‘reward’ positive and proactive work rather than overly determining what each prison does.

My goal is that the UK leads the world when it comes to strengthening family and other relationships to reduce reoffending and intergenerational crime. Learning from other countries and making the necessary cultural translation from their practice is important to that end.

So, I am going to structure my presentation today around the Danish concept of normalisation, and what I think it means for the UK context.

I will talk about:

* The normalisation of the expression of familial bonds – by prisoners and those who visit
* Normalisation of respect for visitors – what does it mean to treat family members with respect?

and finally

* Normalisation of support and therapy for families who have gone through imposed separation and are preparing for reintegration – a bit of a mouthful that one!

So first, **the normalisation of the expression of family** **ties**.

You will all be familiar with the 10 Prisons Project kicked off by Rory Stewart when he was Prisons Minister. Four of these prisons have been targeted for specific help to improve their families work. They might not yet be in the vanguard of cutting-edge practice, but I want to focus on the progress one of the four is making.

HMP Nottingham which has had severe problems with violence and self-harm told me they have become keenly aware that one of the most important ingredients of a settled regime is regular family contact. It helps resolve relational difficulties, so men have one less thing to worry about. When they installed in-cell phones the men said it was transformative: now they can talk to their partners when they are home from work, their children when they are home from school. Before, there were only a couple of hours a day when they could ring, and they would have to queue. The chance of violence because of a family issue has reduced.

They told me:

*As part of the 10 prisons project we bid for money to overhaul our visits hall. It was previously a bit austere but now it’s brightly coloured and the men sit with their families around a square table. This enables them to hold hands with their partners and hold their babies. This was a bit of a departure for our officers who had concerns that there would be more passing of contraband. but this has not been the case and they took the changes in their stride in a matter of weeks. It’s the new normal now and the feedback is that the atmosphere is far more relaxed including for children. Family contact has to be just that.*

I like that phrase, ‘family contact has to be just that’. It sums up ‘Normalisation of the expression of family ties’ very nicely.

In the female review I have just submitted to the Ministry of Justice I looked at the concept of halfway houses for women prisoners and their children. Whilst I cannot pre-empt the publication of my final report, I also found great *existing* examples of flats or units on prison grounds which facilitate what are called bonding visits. These are opportunities for trusted prisoners to spend long portions of the day typically with their children, grandchildren and an accompanying adult, in separate houses – or even family lounges – away from the bustle and noise of the visits hall. For example,

* Acorn House in Askham Grange, perhaps not too surprising as this is an open prison, but these also exist in closed conditions such as
* Luke House in Foston Hall and
* A portacabin in the grounds of HMP and YOI Hydebank Wood, the secure college where Northern Ireland’s female adult prisoners are held.

At Hydebank Wood women also skype their family members on dedicated tablets: one woman serving a very long sentence told me that her grandson was able to take his tablet around the house and show her his new bedroom. Such reminders of normality do not cosset prisoners: they bring home how much they have to lose if they are don’t go straight when they finish their stretch inside. Phones in cells and virtual visits would help the normalisation agenda take big strides.

I know for some the normalisation of family contact extends to sexual contact. I could have ignored the issue of what we rather prissily call ‘conjugal visits’ but decided to pluck up my courage and explain why I am cautious about this idea.

To set my concerns in a wider policy context, you may be aware that young people in schools are now being taught Relationships and Sex Education as opposed to Sex and Relationships Education. This is not just semantics: the Government is rightly keen to send the message that building relationships needs to come before the sex act. Imprisonment necessitates rebuilding the relationship every time a man’s partner comes through the door of the visits hall.

Intimacy is not conjured up in an instant. There is often a build-up to the moment and subtle emotional after-effects which need time and attention. This is a couple who have been separated for a relatively long stretch. I worry that rather than normalising family contact, providing private rooms with condoms decontextualizes and belittles the whole act: do we really want to make it possible for prisoners simply to have a ‘quickie’, to obtain sexual gratification regardless of the mood, or feelings of the other person?

I am deeply concerned that visitors who have undertaken a particularly unromantic journey will be expected to perform as willing sexual partners when they finally arrive at the prison. Consent is profoundly problematised given the pressure not to let one’s partner down.

Notwithstanding the availability of condoms, the possibility of a prisoner fathering a child whilst he is behind bars and with whom he might only have a long-distance relationship is concerning. For female prisoners conceiving under these conditions there are even more unsettling implications.

I have just spent the last year looking at the challenges of family contact in the female estate and the stand out message for me on women in prison is that their family relationships, particularly with romantic partners, are often fraught with abuse and ambiguity. How would we know that a woman has a healthy and supportive relationship with a man or other partner travelling to a female prison to share a conjugal visit?

I was saddened to hear that prison can be a refuge for many women, an escape from coercive and controlling relationships. Their very rehabilitation could be at stake given that relationships are the most frequent area of criminogenic need for women offenders – lack of healthy ones and the presence of exploitative ones.

I think you get the message – in a nutshell, normalising expressions of family ties cannot include ditching the healthy, respectful, loving before-and-after interaction that is so integral to consensual sexual relationships.

Moving on quickly,

2. **Normalisation of respect for visitors – what does it mean to treat family members with respect**?

When I and my team visit a prison, we are treated a bit like VIPs. But we are there to do a job and want to see ‘business as usual’.

In contrast, many family members I met said how difficult it was to meet very different conditions and attitudes in the different prisons they visited throughout a sentence – the inconsistency I mentioned earlier. Respect for them needs to be embedded in the culture of *all* prisons.

What would help to drive this is a common template, hence the five elements of what has become known as the Farmer family offer. These are required in each jail’s family and significant others strategy.

(a) Visitor base/centre and visiting services;

(b) Staffing structure to ensure family work is an operational priority;

(c) Extended visits;

(d) Family learning; and

(e) ‘Gateway’ communication system.

Touching briefly on the first, a visitor base/centre and visiting services, let me illustrate the lack of this with the carceral geography of one prison I visited.

Behind the very uninviting door in the prison wall was just a tiny holding room for visitors. It had inadequate seating, there were no hot drinks to sustain travellers, some of whom were very elderly. There was nothing to quell children’s fears, nowhere to change infants’ nappies. All were weary: they had come a long way to visit one of the country’s most inaccessible prisons.

Thoughtfulness, as HMP Nottingham found, can transform the visits experience for children and adults, both visitors and prisoners, and there is a deeper point here: a prison’s visits space can either be treated as a set of four walls that must be provided to fulfil men’s visiting rights, or somewhere shared between the prison and the community, where inside meets outside.

It doesn’t take much to brighten up visitor walk-through areas, so they are not unnecessarily bleak. There are low cost solutions such as giving artistic prisoners or organisations in the community the opportunity to demonstrate creative flair. When families come through security they should be treated with the same customer service mentality as they would if they were about to board a plane. Patience is required on both sides and thoroughness on the part of the officers doing searches but ultimately these families, like paying passengers, are needed. The majority are rehabilitation assets.

At the recent Governors’ conference, I was asked about the ones who are being coerced into bringing contraband: I visited prisons where the visits staff – both officers and voluntary sector partners – had built relationships with their regulars and could often sense when someone looked as if they had something to hide. With careful probing visitors could sometimes be prevented from criminalising themselves and contributing to a prison’s drugs problem. They might also have important intelligence about nefarious activity on the wings.

3. **Finally, normalisation of support and therapy for families who have gone through imposed separation and are preparing for reintegration**.

This naturally follows from my last point about seeing families as assets in rehabilitation, as this greatly helps in developing empathy for their circumstances.

Acknowledging their worth does not mean instrumentalising families and treating them as a free good. We cannot ignore the ***traumas*** they have gone through. Parental imprisonment and separation from primary carers are both adverse childhood experiences, as are witnessing domestic abuse and having a parent who has mental health, alcohol or drug problem. Many prisoners’ children will have grown up with a cocktail of such adversities.

Results from the first Welsh Adverse Childhood Experience (or ACE) study show that suffering **four** or more harmful experiences in childhood increases the chances of high-risk drinking in adulthood by **four** times and being involved in violence by around **14** times. The survey also found that around one in every seven adults aged 18-69 in Wales had experienced **four** or more ACEs during their childhood. I am sure these were not all children of prisoners.

Stepping back for a minute, the reason I was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice to carry out both Farmer Reviews was because, since I first got involved in politics almost 14 years ago, I have been urging the Government to develop policies to strengthen families.

Family and relationship breakdown have been devastating many communities for at least half a century. Whatever establishments do to improve family ties, you need to know that your efforts will be reinforced and not undermined by what happens elsewhere in society.

As one governor from the female estate told me:

*‘I am working with the third generation of offenders. Even if drugs and alcohol* **are** *being tackled, endemic issues in the community related to the backdrop of family and relationship breakdown are not*.*’*

So, whilst I am thrilled that every prison has been asked to develop a family strategy, for these to be fully effective that is precisely what the ***Government*** needs to do. In many ways you are at the forefront of the ‘strengthening families’ policy agenda in this country.

**This brings me to my conclusion**: I have talked about normalising the need for prisoners to have good quality contact with their families, normalising treating them with respect and normalising the fact that they will need support before and after the prisoner reintegrates, in the prison and in the community.

All this may seem completely obvious to many people here but it’s important to recognise that there are still political and cultural battles to be fought.

Earlier this week the Sun and the Daily Telegraph carried a story about Luke Jewitt serving a long sentence in another Midlands prison for large-scale drug dealing. Someone unhelpfully posted pictures on media of him relaxing with his mum in a spa on Mothers’ Day. He must have earned the day’s ROTL, but the media has had a field day, fulminating against allowing prisoners whose sentences are unspent to enjoy time with their families.

We need to hold our nerve and keep telling the story that normalising and constantly improving contact with families helps to reduce reoffending which results in fewer future victims, and more children growing up with their fathers and of course mothers in some cases. This in turn leads to lower criminal justice and welfare benefit costs, and more tax revenue when ex-prisoners find work.

So, ‘normalisation’ is ***not*** code for being soft on crime, it is indispensable to preventing future crime. But we have to keep making that case.

Thank you.