

## A manifesto for families of prisoners in the north east

Nepacs is a long standing north east charity which works across the region to help support a positive future for prisoners and their families.

Staff and volunteers from Nepacs provide a number of services to support friends and families of prisoners, in seven prison and young offender establishments across the north east and within the community.

These services include prison visitors' centres and tea bars, play sessions for prisoners' children and youth projects, integrated family support, visitors' voice support groups and support within the Middlesbrough and Durham courts.

At a recent regional Nepacs Visitors' Voice event families of prisoners currently visiting north east prisons discussed how the government and prison service can change services for prison visitors for the better. 16 points for action were agreed and Nepacs agreed to communicate these views on their behalf to all prospective parliamentary candidates for the north east and Police and Crime Commissioners.

## At a glance - How many people are affected?

### In England and Wales:

- Approximately 200,000 children have a parent who is sent to prison each year
- More children are affected by parental imprisonment than divorce
- An offender is 39% less likely to re-offend following release if they have maintained family ties during their sentence

### In the north east:

- On average there are 10,500 visitors to the 6 closed north east prisons each month. This includes over 2,000 children, with repeat visits between 30-50%
- We estimate that 4,300 children in the north east are affected by parental imprisonment 'at any one time' *MOJ longitudinal cohort study March 2012 linked to NEPACS study Dec 2012*
- Around 9,000 children each year in the north east are affected by having a parent in prison
- During 2013/14 there were 26,391 child visits to our prisons visitor centres in the north east

## Why should we improve services for families of prisoners?

At Nepacs we recognise that families of prisoners, and especially children, may become the hidden victims of crime when a relative is imprisoned. The impact of imprisonment on families and friends of prisoners can be devastating, which is why our staff and volunteers provide friendship and support during this difficult time.

Every year thousands of families experience court proceedings and the impact of a custodial sentence despite never having been involved in or committed a crime. Many families affected by imprisonment are themselves in need. From the moment of arrest and throughout the court process families are at risk of social isolation and stigma which can affect their emotional, physical, financial and social wellbeing. Prisoners' families are also more than twice as likely to suffer or experience problems with their mental health.

Some people believe that supporting prisoners families and helping to maintain family ties throughout a prison service is a 'good thing' to do but it is also the 'right thing'. It may not be fashionable but it is essential for the families concerned, the prisoner and society as a whole.

Delivering services to these families will: improve outcomes for children, reduce the likelihood of intergenerational crime, and, ultimately, lead to the successful resettlement of ex-prisoners.

### Reducing offending

Maintaining contact and offering timely interventions to prisoners and their families can have a significant impact on offending. Recent evidence highlights families as being central and vital in helping to aid resettlement of prisoners back into the community on release and in reducing reoffending!

- Ministry of Justice figures tell us that prisoners are 39% less likely to reoffend if they have had visits throughout their prison sentence. That's a strong argument for keeping families together.
- "Offenders families are the most effective resettlement agency" *HM Inspectorate of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Probation and Ofsted (September, 2014)*

### Tackling inter-generational offending

Supporting and maintaining links between offenders and their families can help reduce reoffending but can also contribute to tackling inter-generational offending by addressing the poor outcomes faced by children of offenders. (Ministry of Justice 2012: 41)

By improving the outcomes for the children of prisoners the likelihood of future offending is reduced.

- Children who have a parent in prison are significantly more likely to get involved in offending and are three times more likely to engage in anti social behaviour (Murray and Farrington 2008).
- 65% of boys with a convicted father go on to offend themselves - we need to break the cycle

## Our manifesto

### 1. Government funded family support worker for every jail

In 2014 the government funded the Prison Family Support Alliance (consisting of Nepacs, PACT, POPS and Jigsaw) to provide family support in the women's estate and some young offender institutions in England and Wales. But at present not all male or young offender institutions have family support and if they do it tends to be funded from charitable sources.

Prison governors receive no specific funding to meet the costs of family support work or parenting courses.. 15% of prisoners stated that they needed help concerning problems related to family or children, with 8% requiring a lot of help. Women (27%) were more likely than men (13%) to report being in need of help with a problem concerning family or children.

### 2. Listen to families concerns about safer custody

Between 2000 and 2013 there were 2,488 deaths in prison custody. This includes 1,345 as a result of natural causes, 1,050 self-inflicted deaths and 20 homicides.

In the 12 months to March 2014, there were a total of 23,478 incidents of self-harm in prisons, 756 more than in the previous 12 months. 27% of self-harm incidents occurred within the first month of arriving in a prison—10% in the first week.

Families want to know that any concerns they raise about their loved one in custody are being listened to and actions are being taken, if necessary. They would also like someone to let them know what actions have been taken or at least reassurance that their loved one is safe.

### 3. Consistent rules for ID

Rules on ID requirements for prison visitors vary from prison to prison, which can be very confusing for visitors who often visit loved ones who have moved prisons. It can also lead to family members, including children, being turned away from visits due to having the wrong ID. This can have an emotional and psychological impact on the prisoner and families, particularly the children, who may have been looking forward to the visit, and in many cases may have had a long journey to reach the prison.

#### 4. More opportunities for contact between family members held in different prisons

Families asked if it would be possible to make it easier for family members, held in different prisons, to be able to have contact and better communication methods. This would mean that when they are released from prison they have maintained contact with their family members, no matter where they are.

#### 5. Involve families in sentence planning

A 2014 Criminal Justice Joint Inspection report confirmed the central importance of family and friends in enabling successful rehabilitation.

But at present families are rarely involved in sentence planning, even when a person said they were relying on them for support after release. We hope that with the involvement of the new Community Rehabilitation Companies there will be a greater importance placed on the involvement of families.

#### 6. Adequate staffing levels in prisons to maintain safety standards

Families expressed a great deal of concern about staffing levels within prisons and would like the prison estate to increase numbers of prison officers.

The Prison Reform Trust states that the public prison service has been cut by £263million in three years, is struggling to cope with the loss of more than 12,500 (28%) of its staff since 2010, high sickness levels amongst staff and an ever rising prison population.

#### 7. Inform families when their loved one is moved to a different prison

On occasion prisoners are moved to a different prison or to hospital at short notice for various reasons and families told us that the prison service does not always notify them of the move. This can lead to families, including children, arriving at the prison for a visit and not being able to see their loved one, and understandably being concerned, upset and angry.

#### 8. Ensure decent health care for prisoners

Families had reported that their loved ones had had medications withdrawn since entering prison and were particularly concerned about the impact this had on their physical or mental health. Health care generally in prison was a big concern for families who felt they were kept in the dark about their loved ones health and wellbeing.

#### 9. Prisoners to be placed as close to home as possible

Maintaining contact with families is made more difficult by the distance that many prisoners are held from their home area; in 2009 the average distance for men was 50 miles. The average distance adult women in prison are held from their home or committal court address is 60 miles.

Visiting prison is really tough for families who in many cases travel large distances, often to unfamiliar places. It's especially hard on those who don't have access to private transport and don't have knowledge of public transport services. Many families are unable to visit due to the cost of travelling to prison. In some cases, where families have to travel great distances they also need to pay for overnight accommodation.

#### 10. Better information on visiting for family members

Families have asked for better information on visiting prison including ID requirements, visiting times, visit entitlement etc. The information provided needs to be up to date, accessible (in various formats), timely and consistent across the prison estate. Families would also welcome useful information on services and support

available to them, particularly first time visitors. At present the information provided across the country is not of a consistently high quality.

## 11. Speed up decisions on releasing people held on indeterminate sentences who are over tariff

At the end of June 2014 there were 5,119 people in custody serving an IPP (Indeterminate Public Protection) sentence. 3,620 (71%) were over tariff??. As of 31 March 2014, 740 people were between two and four years past their tariff expiry date, 587 were between four and six years, 136 were between six and eight years, and three people were still in prison more than eight years beyond their tariff expiry.

Without a release date or decision on length of sentence it makes it difficult for the prisoner and families to prepare themselves and cope throughout the sentence – with it impacting on them emotionally, psychologically and practically. It would be particularly hard to explain to children about their loved one being in prison if the family do not know when they are due to be released.

## 12. Better access for visitors with a disability / sensory impairment

Families would like prisons to improve access for visitors with a disability/sensory impairment to the prison visitors' centres and visits halls.

## 13. Consistent visit entitlement across the prison estate

As already mentioned, there is a great deal of inconsistency across the prison estate in terms of their day to day regimes, visit arrangements, family services, ID requirements etc. Families have also asked for consistency in terms of visit entitlement for prisoners - including easier access to accumulated visits and evening visits.

## 14. Consistent Visitor Centre services across the country

Visitor centre services vary greatly across the country. Some prisons do not have a visitor centre at all and visitors stand outside the prison until they are allowed into the prison visits hall. Families/friends of visitors would like a consistent 'best practice' standard for all visitor centre services across the country.

## 15. Ensure facilities for prompt booking of visits at every prison

The biggest frustration for visitors is the prison visits booking system – generally a telephone and email system. Visitors can spend hours trying to get through to the prison booking line or wait many days for a response from the email system. In addition, in some prisons it is the prisoner themselves that books the visit which may not be convenient to the family members and in some cases, families are finding that the visits are not being booked as the prisoner is not sure about the process.

Families would like the prison visit booking system to be improved at all prisons.

## 16. Prisons to contact family members to confirm safe arrival of loved one in custody

At present, when an offender is sent to prison family members have to wait for a phone call from their loved one to tell them which prison they have been sent to and to provide details on visiting. This can sometimes take a number of days, during which time families are understandably concerned for their loved ones health and wellbeing.

Families would like a system to be put in place so that family members can be contacted (ideally by the prison) within 24 hours of sentencing to confirm safe arrival of their loved one in custody.

*With thanks to the Prison Reform Trust Bromley Briefing for many of the facts and figures used*