

October 2019



CLINKS
BRIEFING

Think Family briefing 1: Effective communication with families

A series of briefings developed as part of the 10 Prison Project family engagement programme

This series of briefings have been developed as part of the 10 Prison Project family engagement programme.

About the project

In 2018, the Prisons Minister launched a 12 month initiative in 10 prisons to reduce violence and substance misuse as part of his wider strategy to stabilise the prison estate. The family engagement programme, delivered in four of the 10 establishments across six months, was a key element in supporting the 10 Prison Project ambition.

Clinks was commissioned to deliver the project with the support of on-site family engagement workers from voluntary organisations: Pact, Lincolnshire Action Trust and Jigsaw.



It aimed to support prisons to ensure that the role of families and significant others was integrated into decision making and development processes in order to stabilise the population and support implementation of the wider 10 Prison Project. The project focused on three key areas of prison delivery: safer custody, visit provision and roll-out of the Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) key worker model.



About the briefings

These briefings draw on the key findings from the project as well as the learning gained from supporting prisons to establish a Think Family approach. They are practical briefings that provide insight into current family practice within the prison estate as well as guidance about how to develop a Think Family approach. The briefings cover the following 4 topics:

1. Effective Communication with families
2. Developing a Think Family approach for key workers
3. Gateway communication systems
4. Strategic development of a Think Family approach.

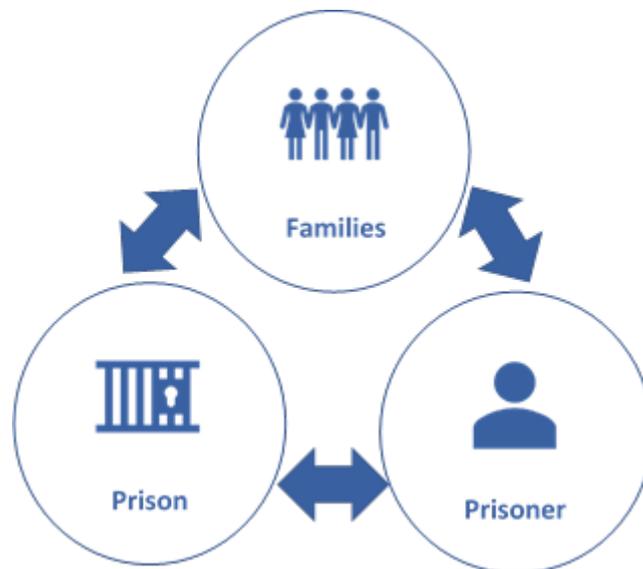
The briefings are accompanied by a series of resources which can be downloaded, adapted and used to support the development of Think Family working. Relevant resources are signposted to throughout the briefings.



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Effective communication with families

Communication is a key element of building effective relationships. Developing a Think Family approach relies on effective communication between all stakeholders:



Lord Farmer's review stated that "unless families are willing and able to engage with the rehabilitation process, imprisoned men will have far less incentive and motivation to reform their ways"¹. An understanding of how to engage with their family members' rehabilitation is essential in empowering families to motivate and support their loved ones in custody.

As part of this project, families were asked whether they felt they had sufficient information about the prison regime, support services and processes and who currently communicated this information with them.

Key Issues

The majority of families stated that they received information about prison regime, support and services via the prisoner or their own internet searches.

"Most of the information we found out from Google. I want them to tell me about his plan, what's going to happen when he comes out and how he is getting on." - Family member

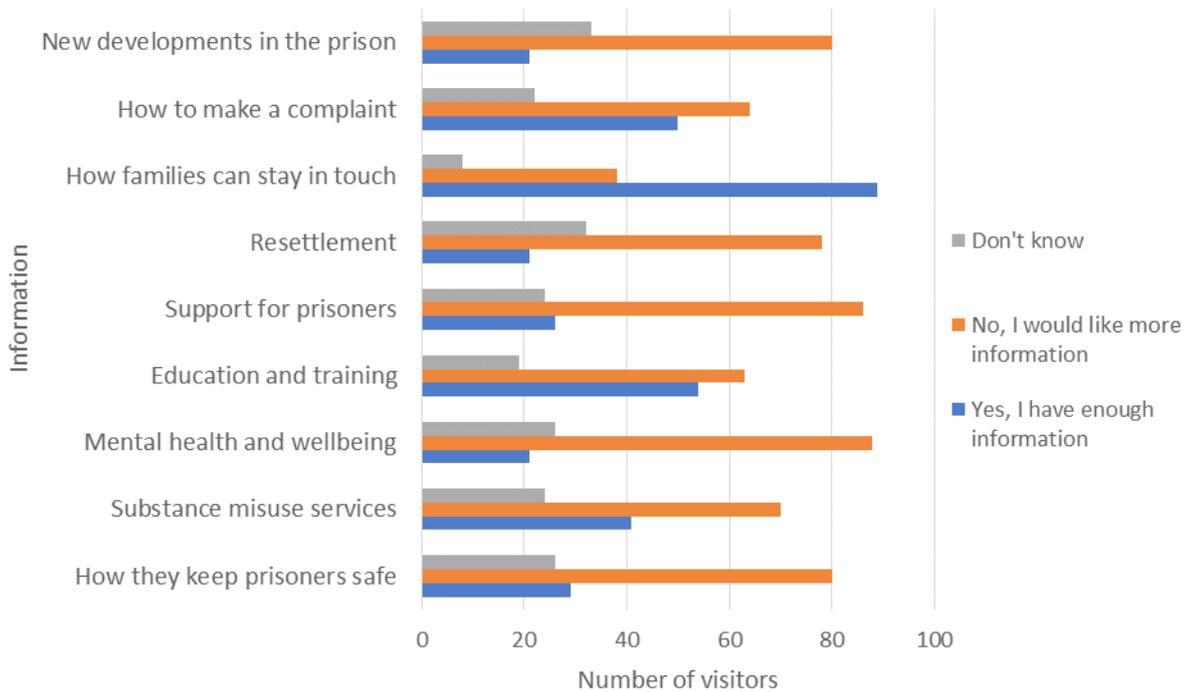
"Nothing is shared by the prison, it is all through my partner. An information pack of what's available/offered would be helpful. More explanation from the prison why things happen - dogs etc. and how they support mental health." - Family member

There was a general call for more information about all aspects of the prison service, with the greatest number of visitors requesting further information about: mental health provision, general support for prisoners, how prisoners are kept safe and new developments/initiatives within the prison.

"Yes - more of what goes on for them - what it is like in prison." - Family member

"Yes - we just want to know when they are going to make changes. Like the lockers moved and they changed the way you go in." - Family member

Do visitors feel that they have sufficient information from the prison?



Prison staff acknowledged that, while effective measures for sharing information with prisoners and prison staff existed (e.g. wing newsletters, bulletins, induction processes and information boards), there was less focus on how the same information could be shared with families.

“It would be really good if we gave families more information about what we do here. Just like when you have a family member in hospital and they give you information about the services available and what is going to happen – we should do the same in here.” - Prison staff member

Benefits of effective communication with families

Pro-actively responds to the concern and anxiety that many families feel

Losing a family member to the criminal justice system can lead to significant anxiety for many families. It may be the first time they have had to navigate the prison system. They may have no understanding of the prison regime, environment, programmes or support on offer. This can be particularly difficult for families who have previously been the primary carer for a prisoner or where prisoners have specific mental or physical health needs that require ongoing support. Providing families with accessible information as soon as possible may help to mitigate this anxiety and support families to positively engage with prisons.

“Families and first-time visitors need information. It is so difficult finding out what to do and how to do it.” - Family member

“Everything is in limbo - we have no plan or focus on what to expect or how to mentally prepare my children.” - Family member





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Encourages two-way communication

Families play a critical role in communicating valuable knowledge and insight to inform care, safety and support for individuals in custody. Where families feel that the prison communicates effectively with them, they are more likely to feel confident in communicating with the prison.

“All my experiences have been positive when dealing with prison staff - friendly, yet professional, understanding and helpful. So I expect that if I did have concerns they would be dealt with in that manner.” - Family member

Establishing an effective, two-way communication channel between prisons and families, that enables families to feel involved, informed and empowered, will encourage families to communicate more effectively with establishments.

Creates an improved understanding of prisons as centres of rehabilitation

The *White Paper on Prison Safety and Reform*² encouraged prisons to move towards defining themselves as “...disciplined and purposeful centres of reform where all prisoners get a second chance at leading a good life”. Local strategies for rehabilitative culture focus on developing this understanding not just within the prison walls but in the communities that surround them. Unfortunately, media representations of prisons, popular discourse, and experiences shared by prisoners themselves, will make it difficult for families to have any understanding of how prisons support, care for and rehabilitate individuals.

Effective communication about services, interventions and support provided in custodial settings will help to reframe community understanding of prison culture and ‘myth-bust’ some of the stories that families might hear.

Supports families to support prisoners

Families play an important role in supporting and motivating prisoners while in custody. They will be more able to do this if they understand what support is available to their family member, the roles of different members of staff and opportunities for family engagement – for example Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) reviews and the implications of schemes such as Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP). Helping families to understand prison jargon, know what a key worker is and what it means when a prisoner says he is enhanced, will also help them to understand and participate in informed conversations with their family member.

Helps to safeguarding families

Without having sufficient understanding of the prison system and awareness of what might constitute an ‘issue of concern’, families can become vulnerable. Prison staff, for example, identified prisoner finance and debt as a significant issue that families were impacted by. Improved communication from the prison about the financial support required by prisoners, how money can be spent and ‘signs of concern’ could help to safeguard families from financial manipulation and exploitation.





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Communication with families

Prison and MoJ websites

Up to date, accurate information about the prison regime, visits, staying in touch, contact details, new initiatives, available support and programmes.

Emails and e-newsletters

Families suggested that they could sign up to receive family newsletters in the visit centre that could be sent to them by email. Prisons could also use email to update them on news from the prison and to send them a family induction booklet.

Family forums and workshops

Face to face forums and workshops with prison staff for families to hear first-hand about what the prison is providing and ask direct questions. Targeted workshops for families focusing on issues such as resettlement, mental health and substance misuse.

Family induction booklets

Similar to prisoner induction packs, families could receive an induction booklet that provides details not just about visiting but about the prison regime, prison environment, prison staff roles and responsibilities, mental health support, prison contact details, IEP scheme, programmes, employment opportunities, prisoner finance etc. (See resource: [Family induction booklet³](#))

Social media

Families and staff suggested publicising existing prison twitter accounts amongst families or developing social media accounts to ensure that families are kept up to date with developments in the prison.

Visit centres and visit halls

Staff and families emphasised the importance of using visiting areas to promote work in the prison – notice boards, information on TV screens, posters, leaflets and pop-up information stalls. It was suggested that key workers could come down to the visit hall and speak to prisoners and their families about their progress.

Practice examples: developing improved communication with families

Adapting prison newsletters for families

At Prison A the incentivised substance free living wing published a monthly newsletter written by staff and prisoners to celebrate successes on the wing and publicise new developments and programmes. The newsletter was originally only shared within the prison. Following feedback from families that they wanted more information about the support, services and rehabilitation provided in the prison, the newsletter has now been adapted (for example, with prisoner names and photographs removed) and is made available to families in the visit centre every month.





Clinks supports, represents and advocates for the voluntary sector in criminal justice, enabling it to provide the best possible opportunities for individuals and their families.

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Family forums

Prison A had previously run family forums that were attended by the Head of Reducing Reoffending and offered opportunities for families to ask general questions. In response to feedback from families, these forums are now attended by prison staff from various functions e.g. healthcare, resettlement, education, so that families can receive information and ask questions about different aspects of the prison service.

Pop-up information stalls and events

Prison B is working with its Head of Operations to develop pop-up stalls next to the visit hall, where partner organisations and functions within the prison can take it in turns to be visible to families and provide information.

Family attendance at celebration events

At Prison C, families are now being involved in celebration events, held within the prison, to celebrate prisoner achievements. Families have been supported to attend an event for Listeners (a Samaritans peer support service which aims to reduce suicide and self-harm in prisons) and will also be invited to attend an art exhibition and auction for art created by residents.

Family involvement in resettlement

At Prison A, families are being invited to a resettlement fair so that they have an opportunity to accompany their family member in custody and learn about resettlement support and services.

Visit centre comment box

At Prison A, a comment box has been developed in the visit centre for families to share any suggestions or concerns. The box is emptied on a weekly basis and information is passed on to the prison to consider any necessary action. Once feedback is received there is a display board labelled 'you said we did' to keep families up to date with actions taken. A notice is on each table advising visitors about the comment box, which is updated with any questions that the prison wants to consult with families about when considering new developments.

End notes

1. Lord Farmer. (2017). *The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*. Online: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/642244/farmer-review-report.pdf (last accessed: 18/09/19)
2. Ministry of Justice. (2016). *Prison Safety and Reform*. Online: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/565014/cm-9350-prison-safety-and-reform-_web_.pdf (last accessed: 18/09/19)
3. Clinks. (2019). *Family induction booklet*. Online: <https://www.clinks.org/publication/10-prison-project-family-engagement-programme-resources> (last accessed: 04/10/19)