

October 2019



CLINKS
BRIEFING

Think Family briefing 3: Gateway communication systems for families of prisoners

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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In 2017, the Farmer Review recommended that “each prison should establish a clear, auditable and responsive ‘gateway’ communication system for families”.¹ Building on this recommendation the *Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework* states that “Governors will establish a process that enables family members and/or other people with concerns about a prisoner’s safety to contact an identified member of staff without delay” and that “the process must include prompt feedback to the person who raised the concerns”.²

Both families and staff were consulted about safer custody line provision as part of the 10 Prison Project family engagement programme.

29% of the 150 families that were consulted had attempted to contact the prison to raise a concern about their family member. Concerns varied from questions about why letters or property had not reached a family member, to concerns about medication not being administered/taken, sharing information about a family members’ mental or physical health needs or raising concerns about not receiving phone calls from a family member.

“My partner had just gone into prison and he had depression, anxiety and ADHD. It took six weeks for me to be able to speak to him and him get his PIN sorted ... I was worried he was not getting meds ... It’s like you are doing a prison sentence on the outside.” - Family member

Families identified a number of reasons why they may not share concerns with the prison:

- Families unaware of how to share a concern with the prison
- Families fearful that sharing information with the prison may lead to negative repercussions for the prisoner
- Families’ lack of confidence in the prison responding to their concern
- Families for whom English is a second language
- Families’ previous negative experience of trying to share concerns with prison staff.

In addition, prison staff identified challenges to engaging with families through the safer custody line:

- The general switchboard may put inappropriate calls through, families can then get frustrated at not reaching the most appropriate department
- Prisoners have not always given their consent for information to be shared and this can make it difficult to respond to families
- Residents may not have given families accurate information (or may be manipulating them).



Key issues

Families share concerns via a number of different routes

During the project, families shared concerns via a number of different routes making it difficult for prisons to have consolidated data regarding the total number and nature of calls. There were at least four contact routes identified by families, these included: safer custody line, visit centre (voluntary sector provider), chaplaincy, general switchboard, governor and healthcare. This also had implications for ensuring consistent recording, responses and/or sharing of information across departments/functions (see below).

Numbers of calls received by safer custody varied

The number of calls received via the safer custody line varied from one month to another and across sites. Further understanding is needed about why calls are higher during specific periods or within certain establishments. In reviewing the figures, it is also important to remember that a significant number of concerns are received by other teams/departments (such as the visit centre or chaplaincy) and therefore should also be considered in the total number of calls received.

Recording systems

A number of issues were identified with regard to the recording of calls received by safer custody (and other routes):

- Systems for logging both the number and nature of calls was inconsistent across sites, with prison practice varying between not having any logging system in place, to only logging calls where actions were taken, to logging all calls with the reason for the call and the name of the prisoner.
- No collated logs about the nature of calls received via the safer custody line were kept by establishments, although concerns might be recorded individually on Prison National Offender Management Information System (p-NOMIS) entries or in safer custody log books.
- Staff identified a lack of guidance on when to record concerns on p-NOMIS and who had responsibility for doing this (particularly if calls were diverted to other departments such as healthcare or chaplaincy).
- There was no standard system in place for logging, responding to or following up calls that were diverted to other departments – such as healthcare or chaplaincy. No data was available as to the number of referrals made to other departments.

Call-back processes

- There was disconnect between what families and prisons report in relation to call-back. All prisons consulted said that they routinely ring families back who have left a message on the safer custody line. However, over half of the families who had raised a concern said that they had not received a response.
- Prison staff stated that on occasion, families may not receive a response due to:
 - » Families not leaving contact details on the answer machine
 - » Families asking for information which cannot be shared (e.g. whether an individual is in custody at that establishment or for healthcare records)
 - » Prisoners are asked to ring their families back.

Suggested areas for development

- Development of **consistent logging processes** to record:
 - » Number of calls
 - » Nature of calls
 - » Whether call was diverted to another department (and which department)
 - » Whether call-back to family was made
 - » Actions arising.
- Development of **clear guidance** as to what information should be recorded on p-NOMIS and by whom.





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- Development of a **clear flow-process (with associated timelines) for logging and responding to calls** including when calls are diverted to other departments.
- Development of **regular collation and review processes** to review the number and nature of safer custody calls and consider implications for development.

Potential benefits of logging calls

- **Logging calls can help inform local policy and practice and prisons can have greater awareness of the concerns held by families.** If a large proportion of calls relate to healthcare for example, it may be that additional information needs to be shared with families about healthcare provision to alleviate concerns. If there are a number of calls about debt or threatening behaviour, maybe this is an area for additional development within the establishment.
- **By understanding the nature and number of calls effective resources, processes and procedures can be put in place to respond to the nature of need.** Are there certain periods when more phone calls are taken? Are there high numbers of calls which are diverted to specific departments (e.g. healthcare), in which case can health related enquiries be dealt with through an alternative route? If a large proportion of calls are diverted – are there clear processes in place for logging and responding to these calls? Are there a large proportion of calls that are not relevant to the safer custody line? If so, how can this be addressed so that safer custody resources are used most effectively. Are a large number of calls related to specific groups of prisoners – such as young adults? If so, can interventions be put in place to support family engagement with those specific groups?
- **Helps to demonstrate engagement between families and prison.** By logging the number, nature and responses to calls, the prison is able to demonstrate how they are listening to and responding to families and enabling them to inform and support prisoners' care.
- **Helps the establishment to demonstrate that they are meeting the *Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework*³,** by collating the number of calls they are regularly taking and how these calls have helped to safeguard prisoners, inform support and engage families. It also demonstrates conformity to safer custody prison service instruction (PSI 64/2011) which requires staff who receive information from concerned family members to communicate those concerns to the relevant staff and consider using the Assessment Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) system.
- **Effective logging processes ensures that thorough records are held in case of an enquiry into an incident in custody.** Logs of how information has been shared and responded to provide evidence of a joined up, informed approach that responds to concerns as they arise.
- **Logging of calls on prisoner p-NOMIS files would enable accumulated data on concerns/issues raised by family members which could then feed into processes such as ACCT assessments** and reviews to ensure that family views/concerns are assimilated with information from prison departments. Effective recording on p-NOMIS also ensures that all prison staff engaged with the prisoner have access to records of concern and guarantees that those records follow the prisoner from one establish to another, supporting continuity of care.





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Practice example: HMP Parc supporting families helpline

Staffing: Office hours Mon- Fri 9-5 by a family support worker and supported by a team of volunteers.

Average number of calls received per month: 1000

Calls received via: Families ring the line directly or via main switchboard. The majority of calls from family members are put through to the helpline. However, there may be some family calls that are referred to the chaplaincy (for example where there is a bereavement) or safer custody.

Helpline promotion: 1-2-1 interviews are conducted with prisoners during their induction where all prisoners are provided with a leaflet detailing the family interventions/support available in HMP Parc. The helpline numbers are included on this information. Each new admission is also asked if they would like an information booklet sent out to a significant other, which is done on request.

Most frequent reasons for contact: Health and welfare, communication issues, property, security procedures and visits.

Logging processes: All calls are logged individually on paper logs, not on p-NOMIS, and kept for up to a year. A data sheet is also used to capture the nature of these calls and who they are referred to. This has recently been updated to better capture calls relating to suicide and self-harm, as opposed to grouping them with prisoner welfare calls (i.e. health concerns etc.). Figures are collated monthly and make up part of a monthly report on the achievements of the family interventions department as a whole.

Benefits of the logging process: The nature of the calls taken through the helpline has created positive links between other prison departments and the value of the information is recognised throughout the establishment. In addition, practice is regularly evaluated through bi-annual surveys for families, children and prisoners to ensure delivery of high quality services including helpline, visits interventions etc.

Processes and procedures: All staff and volunteers are trained to follow the correct procedures when receiving suicide and self-harm calls, which includes:

- Obtaining all relevant information from the caller - including personal details and the nature/reason for their concern
- Contacting the unit staff to pass on these concerns who will then speak to the prisoner and assess whether an ACCT needs to be opened
- Contacting the duty Oscar 1 or Victor 2 to update them with this information
- Contacting the safer custody team
- Contacting chaplaincy (e.g. bereavement) and healthcare (if concerns are relating to physical or mental health) if appropriate
- The person would then be called back to provide reassurance that their concerns have been passed on to all the relevant departments in order to put procedures in place to keep their loved one safe.





Think Family briefing 3: Developing a Think Family approach for key workers

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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, HM Prison and Probation Service. (2019). *Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strengthening-prisoners-family-ties-policy-framework> (last accessed: 18/09/19)
3. Ibid.



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