

Improving Practice in Prison Establishments

Chair: Mary Faux, Area Resettlement Advisor, HM Prison Service

Mary Faux introduced the workshop, explaining that it has been in the last twelve to eighteen months that the Prison Service has started to focus on the area of children and families. The workshop brings together examples of good practice in promoting the welfare of prisoners' families both in and outside the prison setting.

Annetta Bennett, Training and Development Manager, Kids VIP, told the workshop that her role since 1989 has been to raise awareness of how imprisonment impacts on children, to challenge attitudes, and to make people stop and think about the family's journey. Her role is to help prison staff to recognise what it is like for the family, and to enable the prison service to meet their duty of care. She looks with prison staff at the experience of children visiting the prison from the gate onwards, and explores staff attitudes and how visitors are treated. She conducts face to face surveys and training programmes for individual establishments. Although a very small organisation, the impact of the work of Kids VIP reaches very wide.

Currently Annetta is highlighting the need for Officer Support Grade staff training as well as Officer grades on the impact of imprisonment on prisoners' families, and the importance of safeguarding children in the prison environment. Children are sentenced by association and it important to recognise that the children are first and foremost children rather than prisoners' children.

Annetta highlighted the need for a visitors' centre in every prison, for adequate facilities for children in visitors' centres, and for a supervised area in each visits' hall for purposeful activity for children. She raised the importance of child-centred visits and of family days at weekends.

Graham Naylor, Visitors Centre Manager, HMP Downview and HMP Highdown, told the group that the visitors' centres are run as an independent charity with a board of trustees. Funding comes from the prison service (30%), Children in Need and income generated from the canteen, which provides snacks and lunches for visitors. There are two purpose-built centres, which provide a welcoming environment for visitors, a play area, and staff whose aim is to ensure that visitors understand the visits process, to facilitate visits and try and resolve problems. The visitors' centre hosts outreach services, including the presence of The Samaritans, Shelter, and the Citizens' Advice Bureau, and is planning for a presence for Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and/or Al Anon representatives. Graham sees the visitors' centre as a conduit for signposting to relevant sources of support.

Graham attends Resettlement meetings, Drug Strategy meetings, and Safer Custody meetings in the prison, and as a result is able to give the visitors' centres a profile within the establishments.

As well as the visitors' centres themselves, the charity provides qualified playworkers and volunteers for the play areas in each visits hall, and organises structured children's days seven times a year. There are as yet no facilities for family visits.

Colin Martin, Principal Officer, HMP Kingston, explained that HMP Kingston is a lifer establishment, and that he is responsible for the areas of children and families, visits and the drug strategy. He said that, in previous roles, he had not thought about the experience of families on visits, and that the Thames Valley Partnership had been the catalyst for him for doing things differently and for promoting the needs of families in the prison setting.

HMP Kingston has a visits' area and play area supervised by the Mothers' Union at weekends. Sure Start have been involved in assisting with family days, providing activities such as face painting, diaries, and simple cooking, and families have had lunch together. The family days have been themed and work has gone in to structuring prisoners' expectations. Feedback has been very positive. The organisation of family days has involved 'a fine line with security'.

HMP Kingston are hoping to be able to build a visitors' centre in conjunction with Sure Start, which would have a dual use, both for prisoners' families and for members of the local community.

Tim Edge, Chaplain, Bullingdon Community Prison, explained that the resettlement group has taken on the work of addressing the issues of the families of prisoners, and a Bullingdon Family Partnership Group has been set up with outside agencies. Current initiatives include monthly family days for 8 families at a time, when prison officers participate in civilian clothes. Initially families were able to cook their own food, but this is no longer possible, and instead lunch is provided for the families, an important part of the day, as conversation tends to relax over food.

A teenage playbus was tried, but there was little uptake.

The Family Links nurturing programme will be delivered both outside and within the prison for parents in 2008, and will involve Offender Supervisors being trained to run the programme in the prison.

An aspirational aim is to develop a community chaplaincy.

Mary Faux highlighted the importance of personalising resettlement, of acknowledging that families are different, and of the importance of work with volunteers in this area.

Participant officers from HMP Maidstone said that both Officers and Officer Support Grades had learnt the benefits of family days for the prisoners and staff, and said that they have an Officer Support Grade who attends family days in their own time, and who has been put forward for Performance Recognition as a result.

There was discussion about family days for convicted sex offenders, and mixed family days for both sex offenders and other prisoners.

At HMP Swaleside the Dads' Pack is used, which is a prisoners' writing pack. A Dads' Pack Day was held, which involved an extended visit, a sports competition in the gym with certificates, a juicing machine, buffet and the taking of photographs.

Mary Faux concluded the workshop by acknowledging these excellent examples of good practice. She emphasised that there is still a long way to go in ensuring the needs of prisoners' families are met, and that we need to work with partnership agencies, particularly with Sure Start, and encourage outreach.