

**Keeping Families Together: Maintaining Positive Relationships Between
Children and Parents in Prison**

A Study in the North East of England

This research was funded by the Northern Rock Foundation

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October 2005

'On the one hand there is the need for retribution and punishment of lawbreakers, coupled with the protection of the community and justice for victims. On the other hand, there are the rights and needs of children to sustain contact and, by that means, loving, meaningful relationships with their incarcerated fathers' (Boswell and Wedge, 2003:157).

'I cannot overestimate the important role that families play in helping to achieve effective rehabilitation and consequently reducing re-offending' (Martin Narey, HM Prison Service Briefing, 2000:1).

'There are three highlights to my day ... phone, letters and visits' (inmate, HMP Holme House).

Table of Contents

1.0	Introduction to the Research	3
1.1	Introduction to the Research Topic	5
1.2	The Regional Context	8
1.3	Methodology	9
2.0	Literature and Research Review	11
3.0	Policy Review	27
4.0	Case Studies	40
4.1	HMP Acklington	40
4.2	HMP YOI Castington	51
4.3	HMP Holme House	60
4.4	HMP Low Newton and HMP YOI Low Newton	70
5.0	Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations	81
5.1	Findings	81
5.2	Conclusions	82
5.3	Recommendations	83
	References	85

1.0 Introduction to the Research

This research was carried out by Barefoot Research and Evaluation on behalf of Nacro by Christopher Hartworth and Joanne Hartworth and was funded by the Northern Rock Foundation.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research is to identify what prisons in the North East of England can do to improve the ways in which constructive family relationships are maintained or developed whilst a parent is in prison.

The objectives of the research include:

- To understand, from parents in prison in the North East of England, and the families that visit them, what they consider is of key importance in ensuring constructive family relationships take place within a prison environment.
- To examine the different approaches adopted for family visits across the range of prison types in the North East.
- To identify good practice within these prisons in encouraging constructive family relationships.
- To identify the role of visitors centres in these prisons in creating a positive family visit, especially for young children.
- To influence local, regional and national policy and practice to ensure that, where appropriate, family relationships are actively supported by the Prison Service.

Why This Work is Needed

Where it is appropriate, the maintenance of contact with a parent, whilst they are in prison, can have a positive impact on the child. This research builds on the emerging evidence base on the importance of the family in two key ways: firstly, recognition will be given to the fact that constructive family relationships can improve the life chances for children. Young people's involvement in offending as well as the development of substance misuse or mental health problems have all been linked to poor family relationships. Secondly, the maintenance of family relationships can dramatically reduce the likelihood of re-offending by the parent. Research shows that the existence and maintenance of good family relationships helps to reduce re-offending, and that the support of families and friends on release can help successful reintegration back into the community (Ditchfield, 1994, Boswell and Wedge 2003, among many others).

If prisons can be encouraged to take the role of families seriously, expected outcomes for both the parent in prison, and the child whose parent is in prison will be improved. This, in turn, will have wider positive impact on families and

communities. Creating positive family relationships whilst a parent is in prison could form part of effective crime prevention and community safety initiatives.

Structure of the Report

This report is structured in the following way:

- An introduction to the research topic and a presentation of the regional context;
- A presentation of the methodology used in this research;
- A review of the current research and literature associated with prisons and families;
- A review of current and relevant policy legislation;
- A presentation of five case studies; HMP Acklington, HMP YOI Castington, HMP Holme House, HMP Low Newton and HMP YOI Low Newton. These case studies present the views of the prison service, the administrators of the visitor centres, the prisoners and visitors.
- The findings of the research;
- Conclusions in light of the research; and
- Recommendations.

1.1 Introduction to the Research Topic

In October 2005, the prison population rose to 77,622 - 30,000 above the level 10 years ago and just 527 short of the system's operational capacity (Travis, 2005). The crime reduction and reduction of re-offending agenda has therefore never been so important.

The maintenance of family ties has been identified as a major influence on whether an ex-offender chooses to re-offend. There are also other positive outcomes of maintaining family contact including positive impacts on children, reducing future offending and re-offending, reducing social exclusion and decreasing the likelihood of self-harm or suicides amongst prisoners.

However, the numbers of visitors to prisoners is falling, despite the increasing prison population.

Box 1.1 Key Facts as Identified by the Social Exclusion Unit

55% of male prisoners describe themselves as living with a partner before imprisonment.

35% of women prisoners describe themselves as living with a husband or partner before imprisonment and 66% have dependent children under 18 (40% under 10).

Around 125,000 children are affected by the imprisonment of a parent each year (The Home Office (2004b) estimate that this figure is 150,000). These estimates do not include children affected by the male young offender estate where an estimated 35 to 40% of male young offenders are fathers¹.

39% of female young offenders are mothers.

43% of sentenced prisoners and 48% of remand prisoners say they have lost contact with their families since entering prison.

22% of the prisoners who were married on entering prison are now divorced or separated.

In 2001 prisoners were held an average of 53 miles away from home.

11% of imprisoned mothers had one or more of their children taken into care, fostered or adopted.

Source: SEU, 2002.

¹ Boswell and Wedge, 2003.

There is and has been significant policy support for the maintenance of family links whilst a prisoner is in custody. The Home Office's 1993 National Framework for the Throughcare of Offenders identified that support was necessary in order to prepare the prisoner for safer release. Similarly, the HM Inspectorate of Probation's Strategies for Effective Offender Supervision (1998) identified the importance of encouraging positive family relationships and/or support when working with offenders.

There are a number of areas of prison policy and statute which relate to visiting. These include the following.

Prison Rules state that:

'Special attention shall be paid to the maintenance of such relationships between a prisoner and his family as are desirable and in the best interests of both' (4-1).

'A prisoner shall be encouraged and assisted to establish and maintain such relationships with persons and agencies outside the prison as may, in the opinion of the Governor, best promote the interests of his family and his own family relationships' (4-2).

Prison Service Performance Standard no. 44 states:

'Establishments enable prisoners to maintain close and meaningful relationships with family and friends, whilst taking account of security needs'.

Prison Service Standing Order no. 5 states:

'It is one of the roles of the Prison Service to ensure that the socially harmful effects of an inmate's removal from normal life are as far as possible minimised and that his contacts with the outside world are maintained. Outside contacts are therefore encouraged especially between an inmate and his family and friends'.

These policy and statute guidelines demonstrate the importance that the prison estate attaches to maintaining family ties. Despite this however, the minimum requirement under the Prison Rules for visits is only two per month and the minimum duration of a visit is only 30 minutes (Cheney, 2002).

On a national level it does not seem that many prisons make the effort to provide additional provision for maintaining family contact over and above these statutory requirements (HIP, 2001).

Despite this meagre statutory rationing on visits, not all prisoners receive their statutory allocation for visits. For example, over half of prisoners held in prisons other than local prisons who claim to live more than 50 miles away from their home area do not receive two visits per month (Cheney, 2001). In addition to

this, only two thirds of prisoners in local prisons and half of prisoners in training prisons receive their statutory entitlement to visits (see table 1.1) (*ibid*, 2001).

Table 1.1 The Percentage of Prisoners Receiving Less Than Two or More Visits per Month

Prisons	Percentage
Locals	64
Category B/C	47
Open/Resettlement	84

Source: HIP, 2001.

The fact that many prisoners often do not receive many visits should not cause any consternation to the external observer, was it not for the case that research shows that visits are rated as extremely important to the majority of prisoners. Research by APF showed that although family contact was extremely important to prisoners, many men were never visited (55% of prisoners had not received a single visit and only 16% had received two visits a month) and many had difficulty maintaining contact via telephone or letters (Murray, 2003a).

Similarly, research with women prisoners at HMP Cookham Wood showed that although 95% of inmates said that family contact was extremely important to them, 20% had never received a visit and 33% with children had not received a visit from their children (BBC, 2003).

At this point, it must be noted that: the prison service recognises the importance of maintaining family contact; the statutory visiting requirements appear to be inadequate; a significant proportion of prisoners do not receive their statutory quota of visits; maintaining contact appears to be extremely important to prisoners. The question needs to be asked - why do prisoners not get their quota of visits?

The research indicated that the reasons why people are not visiting relatives in prison is that they experience difficulties doing so. A prisoners' survey (in HIP, 2001:90) indicated that 29% of men and 47% of women in prison experienced difficulties staying in touch with their friends and families. The most common difficulties were:

- Distance from home and difficulty travelling to prison;
- Difficulty accessing or using telephones;
- Inefficient booking system;
- Restrictive visiting times; and
- The length of visits curtailed (HIP, 2001).

All of these difficulties are corroborated by the case studies used in this report. Other difficulties were also raised. These included: the detrimental impact the

visit has on children, caused by attitudes and behaviour of Prison Officers; the level of waiting involved; the psychological problems caused when leaving; and the cost involved.

Research in the female estate showed that 81% of prisoners said it was not easy for family and friends to visit (Murray, 2003a).

This research examines what efforts a selection of prisons in the North East of England are doing to help maintain and support family relationships and what difficulties visitors' experience.

1.2 The Regional Context

There are eight prisons in the North East. Their classification and numbers of prisoners held are shown in table 1.2.

Table 1.2 North East Prisons, Categories, Prisoner Numbers 2003 and 2004

Prison	Category	Prisoner Numbers 2003	Prisoner Numbers 2004
Acklington	Cat C Training	771	881
Castington	Close Juvenile and YOI	326	406
Deerbolt	Closed YOI	446	518
Durham	Community (previously Cat A Core, Local, Women)	706	746
Frankland	Dispersal	649	653
Holme House	Cat B Local	978	995
Kirklevington	Cat D Resettlement	181	223
Low Newton	Female Local and YOI	275	396

Source: Prison Service Monitoring System Statistics 2003-04 and GONE, 2004.

Table 1.2 also shows the increases in prison numbers in regional prisons from 2003 to 2004.

Approximately, 3000 to 3500 of these prisoners are discharged into the North East region (GONE, 2004).

In line with national trends, the number of visitors to the North East's prisons is decreasing (see table 1.3) despite a rise in the regional prison population. There is one exception to this, at HMP Acklington, where there has been an increase in the number of visitors.

Table 1.3 Prisons and Visitor Numbers 2002 to 2004

Prison	Total 2002-03	Total 2003-04
Acklington	23,881	27,854
Castington	1,952	1,237
Durham	30,240	29,072
Frankland	14,543	13,785
Holme House	24,605	22,402
Low Newton	10,313	9,180

1.3 Methodology

The methods that were used in this research include:

- Review of existing research;
- Review of relevant policy;
- Semi-structured interviews with professionals, including: prison staff in five establishments in the North East, including Governors; visitor centre staff (paid and unpaid) and key policy makers; and
- Semi-structured interviews with prisoners and visitors.

Interviews With Prisoners

Each establishment was asked to provide four prisoners for the research to interview in relation to visits and family contact. Before the interviews took place, each prisoner received information about the research, confidentiality and what was expected of them.

All interviews were voluntary. The research complied with confidentiality and disclosure of serious harm or risk requirements, data protection.

Interviews took place on a one-to-one basis in a private room within the prison.

A total of four prisoners were interviewed per establishment, giving a total of 20 prisoners in total.

Interviews With Visitors

NEPACS and Holme House Visitor Centre were approached in order to gain access to visitors, whilst they waited at the centre before visits. They were approached to gain both permission and also to identify which times would be the most appropriate to talk to them.

A leaflet was produced that was given to the visitors as they arrived at the visitor centre explaining the presence of the researcher and the objective of the

research. Visitors were then approached as they were sat down to take refreshments in the visitor centre before they visited their relatives.

The researcher took an informal approach, asking the visitors politely if they could spare a few minutes to answer some questions about visiting. It was explained that the researcher was independent and not associated with the prison service. The aim of the research was explained to them, as were issues of confidentiality and disclosure of serious harm or risk, and its voluntary nature. Some visitors refused to be spoken to and in these cases, the researcher apologised for the inconvenience.

A total of 106 visitors were interviewed (25 in HMP Acklington, 20 in HMP YO1 Castington, 33 in HMP Low Newton and HMP YO1 Low Newton and 28 in HMP Holme House).

Reflections on Methodology

The researchers recognise that sensitive and emotional issues were often broached during the questioning of the prisoners and visitors. This included issues relating to relationships with partners and children, separation, anxiety, emotional struggles and day-to-day hardships. Whilst the research accepted and noted these discussions (and they are included in this report), sensitive and emotional issues were not pursued if raised by the interviewee. This research is a structural piece of research intended to determine problems and identify solutions to difficulties that prisoners and their families experience. It is not a piece of psycho-social research intended to determine psycho-social impacts of separation and its effects. The research was largely successful at maintaining discussions to achieve its objectives.

The researchers also recognise that the prisoner samples are small. However, the objectives of the research were to gain indicative insights from both groups in North East prisons. The findings from the research with both prisoners are presented, not as statistically significant data, but as testimonies and conclusions from interviews from a selection of individuals. Their comments are concurrent with other research in this field and are therefore taken to be representative and valid.

It also needs to be noted that during the early stages of the research, the researchers became parents. It is felt that this gave the research additional pertinence as the researchers shared the relationship that was the subject of the research (i.e. the one between parent and child). Experiencing the bond of parent-child is an important factor in being able to understand the implications of what it means to be separated from that child/children for any length of time.

2.0 Literature and Research Review

This research review draws upon project evidence, regional academic research and national research to provide a background to the research. It was initially thought that, although there has been much research carried out in relation to the effects of separation of child and parent in a psycho-social sense, there was little research on the maintenance of family relations whilst a parent is in prison. Boswell and Wedge (2003) noted specifically that research on fathers is scarce because a male prisoner's parental status is not recorded. They also note that an additional reason is that prisoners are an unpopular group in society, rendering the position of their children and partners anomalous and uncomfortable for the outside world (Boswell and Wedge, 2003). However, during the research period much research in relation to prisoners, families and visiting was sourced.

Research by Tudball (2000) carried out in Australia into the needs of children, families and prisoners in the state of Victoria, identified a paucity of research in this area and, similar to the UK, this situation was not helped by the prison estate not gathering data on the parental roles of male prisoners. She identifies the link between a child having a family member in prison and the impact that has on the child offending in the future and the importance of breaking that link through supportive work.

Boswell and Wedge (2003) draw on extensive research to examine the effect of the separation of child and parent as a result of prison and examine the effect it has on the emotional development of the child. They then make suggestions for work with prisoners and families. They specifically look at the impact that prison has on male prisoners and their children.

Boswell and Wedge (2003) identify that research indicates that families where a parent is imprisoned are likely to suffer significant disadvantages and to need additional and perhaps different support from intact families (Shaw, 1992). Peart and Asquith (1992), state that the emphasis should shift from re-establishing family relationships to maintaining family relationships.

Boswell and Wedge (2003) report that most fathers in their study succeeded in maintaining low quality contact with their children via the prison system and more significantly the goodwill, commitment, expense and effort of their families (Boswell and Wedge, 2003). They conclude that there is scope for developing the links between formal and informal support systems with the dual aim of maintaining the child-father relationship and rehabilitating the prisoner 'within his own most likely source of practical and emotional support – the family' (Boswell and Wedge, 2003:136).

In 1995 Save the Children published a comprehensive review of research, policy and practice in relation to prisoners' children (Lloyd, 1995). Its findings emphasised the legal rights, both of children to go on being parented and of prisoners to continue parenting (*ibid*, 1995). In the report, they state that the interests of the child cannot be separate from any decisions made about issuing a custodial sentence to the parent or primary carer (*ibid*, 1995). They identify six underlying principles which Boswell and Wedge (2003) summarise as:

- The interests of the child being paramount;
- Minimal disruption to the child during parental imprisonment;
- Good quality access during imprisonment;
- Parental responsibilities taken into account;
- Recognition and coordination of support needs of partner/carer; and
- Priority given to the maintenance of the child's home life.

Wood (2003) is currently carrying out research for her doctorate within the anthropology department at Durham University. The title of her thesis is 'Doing Time: a Study of Kinship Relations Between Prisoners and Their Families'. Her MA thesis was entitled 'Embracing the Divide: an Ethnographic Study of a Prison's Visitor Centre', the research for which was carried out in HMP Durham.

Wood (2003) notes that there has been little research carried out in visitor centres, with the exception of work carried out by the charities that run them for service evaluation and improvement purposes. Wood also notes, in agreement with Boswell and Wedge (2003) that despite attempts to distance prisoners from their families, 'some prisoners still manage to maintain reasonably strong kinship ties' (Wood, 2003:12).

In her thesis, she identifies the work of Mathews (1989) who carried out research in the 1980s in the context of an authoritarian Conservative Government who espoused family values. Mathews refers to families of prisoners as 'forgotten victims'. He noted that authorities thought 'this type of family is not worth supporting or strengthening. The prejudice persists that this situation is of their own making, that there is guilt by association or that the family must be dysfunctional, there must be something wrong with it otherwise it would have not produced a criminal (Mathews, 1989:8).

The SEU (2002) report states that although families are not always a positive influence on offenders, in the vast majority of cases they will have been entirely uninvolved in the prisoner's criminal behaviour and in some cases they may have been victims. Despite this families often say they are assumed to be guilty by association (SEU, 2002).

Wood (2003) also identifies that a prison sentence is a debt that is being paid by the whole family. She notes that time is of major importance to families visiting

prisoners, including time taken to travel to the prison, time wasted whilst waiting and going through the administration and searches and a shortness of time whilst visiting the prisoner.

Research carried out by Murray (2003a) on behalf of APF examined the contact and family ties between prisoners and their families at HMP Camphill and investigated how contact was maintained and the difficulties that were experienced. The research showed that although family contact was extremely important to prisoners, many men were never visited (55% of prisoners had not received a single visit and only 16% had received two visits a month) and many had difficulty maintaining contact via telephone or letters (Murray, 2003a). The research showed that 81% of prisoners in their survey said it was not easy for family and friends to visit (*ibid*, 2003a). The research identified a range of practical difficulties that prevented contact. For example, cost and distance to travel for families and cost of phone calls for prisoners. The research showed that these difficulties were more pronounced for fathers (*ibid*, 2003a).

The research by Murray (2003a) showed that men whose family found the cost of visiting difficult or the ease of making the journey a problem were much less likely to have had a family visit. Furthermore, even those who did receive visits, 70% reported difficulties with cost, 39% reported difficulties with travelling, 12% with difficulties with visiting times, 22% with child care, 10% with searches, 12% with writing and 9% with booking visits (*ibid*, 2003a).

Other research by Murray (2003b) notes that the rupturing of family relationships caused by imprisonment has been related to the suicide of prisoners during their sentence. In this study, Murray (2003b) concludes that children who have a father in prison suffer a range of acute psychological difficulties and there is an urgent need to extend specific services into a comprehensive national framework of support for these children and their carers.

Box 2.1 Women in Prison and Family Contact

Since 1992 there has been a 173% increase in the women's annual average population in custody (4299 in 2002) compared to a 50% increase for men (66562 in 2002) (Home Office, 2004). The Home Office (2004b) estimates that 70% of children had been living with their mother before her imprisonment.

The Home Office (2004a) identifies the following:

- 8000 children a year have their living arrangements disrupted by their mother going to prison.
- 92% of fathers in prison reported their partner was looking after the children, compared to only 25% of mothers.
- 12% of women prisoners have children who go into fostering, care or adoption, compared to 2% of male prisoners.
- 55% of women in prison have at least one child.

Women in prison are more likely to be held further away from home, making visits difficult particularly for dependent children (SEU, 2002). A Home Office report (2004c) states that women prisoners are held an average of 69 miles from home.

The SEU (2002) cites a study which showed only 50% of women who had lived with their children or been in contact prior to imprisonment, had received a visit from them since going to prison.

In total only 5% of women prisoners' children remain in the home when the woman is in custody (SEU, 2002) and few mothers are able to stay with infant children in specialist mother and baby units in prisons (*ibid*, 2002).

For 85% of women prisoners, it was the first time they had been separated from their children (SEU, 2002).

The HM Inspectorate of Prisons Thematic Review (in SEU, 2002) found that:

- 25% of women prisoners stated that their children's father or a spouse or partner was caring for their children (compared to 92% of fathers).
- 27% were care for by their grandmothers.
- 29% were cared for by other family members or friends.

Few children remain at the family home once their mother has been sentenced and some mothers do not expect to live with their children on release (SEU, 2002).

Box 2.2 Young Fathers in Prison

The position of young, unmarried fathers (who form a significant minority in young offender institutions and young adults in the prison system) are often characterised as 'weakly socialised' or 'weakly socially controlled' (Boswell and Wedge, 2003 and Halsey, 1992). This position is not substantiated by the current research which suggests young fathers often play an important role in the lives of their young children.

Boswell and Wedge (2003) estimate that figures for children that are affected by a parent in prison do not include figures for children affected by young offenders and use the example of the male estate where evidence suggests that 35 to 40% of young offenders have children. They also state that the general ignoring of the role of young men leads society, including responsible professionals to exclude them from parenting from the outset. Research carried out by Rhoden and Robinson (1995) demonstrated that stereotypes of young fathers are misleading. They state:

'We are learning that the stereotype of teenage fathers as uncaring and uninvolved males is not always true and that given the chance, many of them report that the fathering experience is a central event in their young lives. Many teenage fathers are emerging as young men who want to be active fathers' (Rhoden and Robinson, 1995:106, quoted in Boswell and Wedge, 2003).

The Impact of Imprisonment on Children

Separation from a parent in prison can be extremely traumatic for a child, leading to problems with mental health, school performance and delinquency and inter-generational offending (Home Office, 2004b; Tudball, 2000). Shaw (1992) demonstrated that children of imprisoned fathers tend to be socially, financially and educationally deprived, with the imprisonment itself exacerbating emotional and economic hardships.

Murray (2003b) notes that children suffer when a parent is in prison in a number of ways. Firstly, they are often already from vulnerable backgrounds, and so suffer further vulnerability and exclusion at school and from the wider community. Secondly, (and in relation to the first point) the removal of a family member will mean they will have to cope with less support than previous and may have to take more family responsibilities. The SEU (2002) detail research which shows 60% of prisoners' families stated that they were less well off whilst a family member was in prison and it was estimated that the average cost to a family member when they have to care for an offender's children is £25,000 (SEU, 2002). The reduction in household income or the material wealth of the child will also place further stresses on the child.

Hairston (1998) identifies the importance of maintaining links between a parent and a child as relationships 'can not be put on hold'. Hairston (1998) states that as children grow up their memories fade and when there is no contact to support their relationship they begin to experience their parents as strangers. Such situations can lead to permanent, rather than temporary severance of family ties (*ibid*, 1998).

However it should be noted that some children are positively affected by the removal of a family member, especially if that family member is violent or uncaring, and can flourish in the period of respite (Murray, 2003b).

A prison visit often means a child will have to miss a day of school. As families are often embarrassed about telling the school about their circumstances, the day off will often be marked as an unauthorised absence. Katz (2003) notes that children struggling to fit into a new school can miss so many days that they are never reintegrated, parents can be accused of abetting truancy; and children miss out on developing a school social life because of secrecy and absences.

Shaw (1992) found that 33% of children of prisoners had not been told why their parent was absent and a further 33% being told lies. Katz (2003) noted that some children thought their father was in a dungeon or in a 'terrible hospital' or army. Boswell and Wedge (2003) noted that children of prisoners often experience disturbed behaviour such as persistent truanting, running away from home, delinquency, bed-wetting, lack of concentration and deep seated unhappiness. To reinforce the problem, they identify that less than 40% of prisoners' wives and partners had access to professional support from probation officers, social workers, health visitors or the voluntary sector (Boswell and Wedge, 2003). As parents needing to support vulnerable children, they themselves are unsupported (*ibid*, 2003).

Children have been noted (Boswell and Wedge, 2003) to be the secondary recipients of the decision-making and sentencing process. Shaw (1992) argues that the ideology that the offender should have thought about the consequences of their actions before offending, implies that it is acceptable for guiltless children to suffer if that is necessary for maximum general deterrence and general protection.

Boswell and Wedge (2003) also report that visits are crucial to the continuation of family relationships, but are arguably damaging to children.

They summarise from their findings:

'There are very many parents/carers and children who are committed to the process of continuing the father-child relationship throughout the prison sentence – and that they are willing to endure a series of hurdles and stresses in order to further this ... however, ordinary visits cannot be guaranteed to be a positive

experience, where as [special visits and family days] were almost universally described by all parties in appreciative terms' (Boswell and Wedge, 2003:118).

Murray (2003) notes:

'Even where children do get to visit their dads, the experience can be very mixed. Children are generally very pleased to see their dads but, especially for young children, long waits, searches, sniffer dogs and seeing their father in a prison environment without much physical contact or play can be very distressing, confusing and scary' (Murray, 2003b:3).

In the research by Boswell and Wedge (2003), one visiting family summarises the dilemma of visiting a father:

"An enormous gap opens up between dad and his children because of the prison. It's a difficult choice, diabolical: to put children through the ordeal of visits into prison, or have them believe their dad isn't interested in them? To visit or not to visit?" (Boswell and Wedge, 2003:117).

APF have identified older children, especially teenagers, with a parent in prison as a particularly excluded group. One of the reasons for this is that Prison Rules state that people under 17 are not allowed to visit a relative without the accompaniment of an adult. APF note that this presents difficulties to teenagers who are in care or living with relatives who do not want to, or are unable to, visit the prisoner. The APF's research (APF, 2003) has shown that 75% of young people (older children) had experienced changes in their family beyond the removal of the prisoner, one third had moved into other care arrangements, and the majority noted a decrease in finances, treats, activities and celebrations. They noted that some young people tried to take care of younger siblings to take responsibility and pressure off their mothers and some tried to protect their family from rumours and negative judgements (*ibid*, 2003). They note that the majority of young people receive no support, with the exception of their carer/mother and 80% had said no-one asked them at any stage how they were coping with the imprisonment of a relative (*ibid*, 2003). They noted:

'Young people very clearly wanted to maintain a relationship with their imprisoned relative. However, visiting regimes were often described as extremely difficult and unpleasant experiences. The issues which concerned young people most when visiting were the inability to visit unless accompanied by an adult, the boredom experienced while waiting to be allowed in for a visit and the lack of privacy and individual time with the prisoner' (APF, 2003:5).

Research by Noble (1995) notes that the imprisonment and loss of a family member prompts the fear of further loss; parents may avoid asking for support because they fear that if they are not seen to be coping then their children may

be removed (see also Tudball, 2000). Children in turn fear the loss of their remaining parent (Noble, 1995).

Research presented by Boswell and Wedge (2003) indicates that there is a strong correlation between separation from parents (usually fathers) before age 10 and later conviction up to the age of 32. As many as 59% of boys with a convicted parent were themselves convicted up to the age of 32.

Support Services Available to Families

Research by Noble (1995) noted that families tend to create a protective web around themselves to prevent further disruption or loss. She notes that the very real emotional and practical support needs which most family members in her research voiced, may not be recognisable to anyone outside the family. In other words, the need for support and the ability to ask for it are two different things.

Noble (1995) notes that in her research, of those families who sought external support, about half had been successful in finding it, although not from one single source. One in three received help from their GPs, many spoke of the erratic nature of the support provided by the Probation Service, the quality of the support seeming to depend on the individual officers, rather than a commitment of the agency, and there was a mix of other agencies with mixed results (*ibid*, 1995).

Boswell and Wedge (2003) estimate that 64% of families had no links with any external support organisation. According to their research 88% of adult inmates, 84% of young offenders and 82% of partners said they knew of no supporting agencies. This is significant in the light of a range of support agencies across the country and the verbal and literal commitment by the Probation Service that they are facilitating families access to support (*ibid*, 2003). They go on to note:

'It is striking that the support which is often assumed to be provided by the probation service and by welfare organisations in the community is so frequently absent when inmates or families are reporting their links with agencies' (Boswell and Wedge, 2003:134).

Further highlighting the distressing situation is the fact that there are no statutory procedures for passing information about the circumstances of a prisoners' child to other relevant services (SEU, 2002). In addition to this, families have no opportunity to discuss with the prisoner how they are going to address childcare before they are taken to prison (*ibid*, 2002).

In the light of the evidence presented above, it is not surprising that families themselves provide most support to both themselves and the prisoner. Research has shown that up to 32% of prisoners rely on help from friends or family for their

accommodation needs post release, rather than relying on help from official organisations (HIP, 2001; SEU, 2002).

In a survey carried out by the prisons inspectorate, of the 20% of prisoners who had secured employment before they entered prison on a consecutive sentence, 'some of those with jobs had got them through family, friends or partners' (HIP, 2001:83). Families also provide financial support and assistance to ex-offenders, including help with debt relief and for deposits on accommodation (HIP, 2001).

The Resettlement Role of Family

The Woolf report (Woolf and Tummin, 1991) identified that families play an important part in the reduction of re-offending. In the report, they state:

'The disruption of an inmate's position within the family unit represents one of the most distressing aspects of imprisonment ... Enabling inmates ... to stay in close and meaningful contact with the family is therefore an essential part of humane treatment. In these terms alone, the improvement of family ties must be a priority for the Prison Service. In addition, though, relationships with the family can contribute very positively on several levels towards the achievement of successful reintegration into society following release from prison. There is every reason to believe that the nature of a prisoner's relationship with his or her family will be an important factor in determining whether he or she will succeed in leading a useful and law abiding life on return to the community. All this must reduce the likelihood of re-offending (Woolf and Tummin, 1991:401).

There is strong evidence to support the role of the family in reducing re-offending. For example: the SEU (2002) is explicit in its recognition that maintaining family relationships can help to prevent prisoners re-offending and can assist them to successfully settle into the community; Heybourne (2004) states that prisoners who maintain good family relationships whilst in prison are six times less likely to offend than those who have not; and Adalist-Estrin (2003) states that the family is probably this country's most valuable weapon in fighting crime. See also Boswell and Wedge, 2003:23.

APF research (Heybourne, 2004) also shows that families' involvement in resettlement work makes prisoners more honest in their assessment of the progress they are making in addressing their offending behaviour.

Families have been shown to be an underutilised resettlement resource (HIP, 2001). Nacro research (unpublished although submitted to the prison service in March 2000; *The Needs of Prisoners' Families*) showed that 34% of men and 38% of women indicated that it would have helped if their families had been involved in sentence planning and preparation for release. The reasons demonstrated by the Nacro research were that they would have had a greater appreciation of their problems, would have had a say in what happened to them,

been able to act as advocates on their behalf and helped them avoid relapse (HIP, 2001). Despite this, in only 9% of cases were families significantly involved in pre-release planning (*ibid*, 2001).

Returning to a stable home environment is crucial in preventing re-offending (SEU, 2002). However, one research study noted that whereas three quarters of partners expected the prisoner to return home to live with the family, less than half of the prisoners expected to do this (Tudball, 2000). In addition to this, prisoners may find it difficult to re-assume a parental role (or in some cases take one up for the first time) as a result of the absence (SEU, 2002).

In research carried out by Noble (1995), she notes that less than half of the family members in her study were looking forward to the release of their relative in prison. Nearly all of them expected problems, some spoke of being very nervous or terrified and none spoke of any involvement in preparation for release plans or courses (Noble, 1995). Heybourne (2004) also notes that research done by APF found that less than half of the families surveyed were looking forward to the release of their relative, nearly all families experienced problems and none spoke of any involvement in preparation for release courses. Katz (2003) noted that relatives of prisoners have complex and ambivalent feelings about having a family member back from prison, with all the joy, worry and tension that this brings into the family again.

Noble (1995) notes:

'The promotion of family ties within the prison system which is aiming for rehabilitation seems to be entirely focussed around the prisoners' needs rather than around those of the family as a whole. The prospects for successful re-establishment of families where members would so choose must be greatly diminished by this' (Noble, 1995:44).

In the light of the enormous (and substantiated) potential of family relationships to reduce future re-offending, there seems to be scant involvement of the families in any resettlement activities.

Visits and Other Means to Maintain Contact

It is widely known that prisoners place high value on visits from friends and family and many prisoners feel that they do not receive enough visits or opportunities to maintain contact with their families (e.g. HIP, 2001).

Despite the rise in the number of prisoners, there has not been the expected rise in the number of visitors to prisons, and figures show that the number of people visiting people in prisons is declining (Heybourne, 2004). Heybourne (2004) states that:

'The booked visits system is scandalously poor with inadequate staffing and opening hours – pressures on booked visits lines means some families spend hours trying to get through, some simply give up trying to book a visit' (Heybourne (2004:5).

Others estimate that the number of visitors to prisoners has dropped by a third between 1998 and 2003 (BBC, 2003). The same source puts forward attitudes of staff, long distances to visit prisoners far away from home and the visits booking system as reasons for this decline (*ibid*, 2003).

The SEU (2002) notes that evidence points to a decline in the overall number of visits whilst the prison population has been increasing. One aspect of the evidence is that claims for financial assistance have dropped by over 10% between 1999 and 2000 (this is in the context of the fact that visiting prisoners can be very costly) (SEU, 2002). The Home Office (2004c) states that between 1995 and 2000 the number of visits per prisoner fell by 30%. The latter report attributes this to:

- Population pressure leading to more prisoners being further from home and increased pressures on booking lines;
- The growth of telephone booking arrangements; and
- Stricter controls on drug smuggling.

The Home Office (2004c) report states that:

'Not all probable reasons for the decline, however, are necessarily malign. For example, time out of cell has made it easier for prisoners to use prison telephones, which may have reduced the need for visits'.

This current research strongly disputes this statement due to: the limited time they have on the phone to talk to all their family (in some cases a maximum of five minutes) and difficulty prisoners have gaining access to phones on the wing. The desire of the prisoner to have as much contact with their family as possible using all means available, i.e. speaking to a child or partner on the phone for five minutes is not a substitute for seeing them for one hour twice a month. This is

backed up by research undertaken by Wood (2003) in relation to families' reactions to visiting time being shortened due to prison procedural problems, 'The anger that the visitors display [as a result of losing visiting time] is understandable when viewed in the context that there are only three ways that families can maintain kinship relations, through letters, telephone calls and the visit' (Wood, 2002:27). The SEU (2002) notes that whilst prisoners can keep in touch with their families through letters, many prisoners have low basic skills levels, which makes written correspondence difficult.

Many visiting families have to rely on public transport for visits and this presents a series of problems, not least for those who live in remote rural areas. The SEU (2002) estimate that a quarter of visitors face a round trip of at least five hours.

Box 2.3 The Experience of a Visit

On entering the Visitors centre, visitors are given a number that substitutes the prisoners' name – an example of which would be something like ML 3988. The visitor is then provided with a number that represents their order of arrival. After this, all their personal possessions are placed in a locker, purses, identification, keys, and cigarettes the only thing that they are allowed to take over to the prison is the locker key and ten pounds worth of change. All other items are restricted for security reasons. The explanation provided is that people visiting prisoners may try to smuggle drugs. When their number is called the visitors are then allowed to go over to the prison where they will be subjected to a further series of security checks, procedures which are conducted on both adults and children who are visiting prisoners. Shoes, belts, watches and coats are removed and placed on a conveyor belt that feeds the items through an X-ray machine. The visitor is then required to step through a metal detector after which they will be subjected to a rub down search. The hair, mouth and soles of the feet are examined and if there is a prison dog on duty, visitors will be lined up at specific intervals against the wall whilst the dog is led past searching for drugs. Once these procedures have been carried out the visitors are allowed to enter the prison visits room. Inside the prison, visitors like the prisoners are under continuous surveillance. The room is surrounded by cameras, and prison officers who stand around in groups; a couple of officers also sit at desks at each end of the room monitoring the prisoners and their families on the TV screens while the visits are taking place.

Source: Wood, 2003 (see section on 'To Pay One's Debt').

Wood (2003) using anthropological methods in her research records notes her observations about seeing visitors after they have left the prison on a visit:

'The effect that this experience has on the prisoners' family is sometimes seen in their demeanour after their visit when they come back to the visitors centre. On many occasions I have witnessed the tearful expressions of prisoners' wives and girlfriends, who seem to shake uncontrollably and repeat the phrase "I'm not

coming here again” (Wood, 2003:22). She goes on to say that visiting is not just an ordeal because it is an extension of punishment, but because it deprives families of intimacy, subjecting every action and gesture that passes between the prisoner and his visitors to the scrutiny of prison officials.

Wood (2003) noted the important role of the tea bar to the prisoner and their family. She notes in her research that visiting the tea bar and buying food to share is a major part of the visiting process as it is the only occasion where they can buy and share food, which has a highly symbolic role in the family. This is why prisoners and families get very upset if the tea bar is closed or there is difficulty queuing or getting served in a timely fashion (Wood, 2003). This research backs this up and has confirmed that amongst the research cohort, sharing a meal is very important even if it is just crisps or a snack and people often come back from the tea bars with loaded trays. Wood (2003) quotes a manager of a tea bar:

‘...it is part of a social setting which is very sensitive and nerve wracking... Food and drink simmer things down and make things a bit more manageable... it is the only meal that a family has together... it is an important aspect of being together, family ties is to have that round the table. Even the purchasing, the families going to the tea bar and directly saying could I buy a Mars bar, could I buy him that...taking it to the table in an instant. You know.... where as what they normally have to do is pay for a postal order...or put something in the post an get it vetted and they get it in a week or two weeks time or they have to put it in to the prison.... they never get the chance to directly give them anything again, which is an important aspect of family ties...’ (Wood, 2003:31).

The facilities for visiting families, especially within prisons, are often inadequate. There is no Prison Service standard for the conditions and facilities in which visits are conducted and conditions vary with the result that they can be far from ‘user friendly’ (SEU, 2002). The SEU (2002) identify that such inadequacies include:

- Some visiting halls are unpleasant and frightening, especially for children;
- Time slots for visits are usually pre-scheduled and inflexible. They are nearly all in the daytime which means adults have to take a day off work and children day off school.
- Booking a visit on the phone is very difficult as lines are frequently engaged, this makes booking difficult whilst at work it means often constantly ringing to try and get through.
- Procedures for booking and visiting vary widely from prison to prison and information is often hard to come by. This means that when a prisoner is transferred visitors are unfamiliar with new visiting arrangements and often are turned away on the first visit as they lack the correct information.
- Visiting often takes a whole day and visitors with children may find this particularly difficult as they must be entertained, fed and changed. Many

visiting families have children with special needs which makes things even more difficult.

- Staff attitudes at the visit are often unsympathetic and suspicious and create additional tensions for the visitors. Visits staff receive no training on how to deal sensitively with the needs and concerns of families.
- Drug intervention measures are often unnecessarily severe and intrusive, which again create tensions.

In almost complete contrast to normal visits, children and family visits schemes have received extremely positive reports from both the prisoners who participate in them and by the research community. Boswell and Wedge (2003) found them to be feasible and welcome, as well as motivating and humanising of family and inmate

Wood (2003) notes that:

'Whereas, the ordinary visits take place in an artificial environment where the structure and surveillance place a strain on kinship ties; the freedom that the prisoners are allowed on the special visits seems to have the opposite effect. Because prisoners are able to move around, play with their children, and give them sweets ... there is the opportunity to re-naturalise and re-establish the bond between father and child' (Wood, 2003: 30).

Parenting courses also seem to be a very important part of maintaining family ties. Boswell and Wedge (2003) note that if the mother has a high regard for the father's parenting abilities, she is likely to encourage and facilitate regular contact, whereas if her regard is low, the contact is likely to be weakened and may, at times, be sabotaged. APF have produced a number of key recommendations for a range of agencies involved in parenting courses and family learning in prisons (see APF, 2003).

Visitor Centres

There is much support for the role of visitor centres as providing good practice (SEU, 2002; Boswell and Wedge, 2003). Tudball (2000) notes that poor visits areas (both physically and from a staff perspective) contribute to the increased difficulties in the interactions between parents and their children.

Wood (2003) notes in her research into visitor centres in the North East that they play a dual and sometimes difficult role. She says that the structure and regimentation of prison time is directly opposed to the informality of family time. By adopting a mediating role, the visitors centre is placed in the direct firing line of both the prison and the visitors and it is often let down to the skill of the volunteers to keep the situation under control (Wood, 2003:27).

Wood (2003) notes that the volunteers and staff of the visitors centres try to get families as many visits as they possibly can to keep up the relationships within their families and she uses the examples of grant providing to families and providing holidays.

The Home Office's response to the SEU (2002) report states that visitor centres have an important role to play in helping to keep families together and enabling them to contribute to the rehabilitation process (also Home Office, 2004c). It continues by noting that as well as practical help, visitor centres can act as a gateway towards a range of other specialist support services.

The Home Office (2002b) notes the potential of visitor centres in assisting to deliver the strategic aims of reducing re-offending is apparent. The Home Office has now legislated that every new establishment will have to have a visitor centre.

Good Practice

SEU (2002) identifies visitor centres as examples of good practice in supporting families and use Ormiston Children and Families Trust operation of the visitor centre at HMP Norwich as an example of good practice. Here, Category D prisoners are allowed out on licence to go to the visitor centre and play with their children using their facilities. Ormiston provides a range of support for visitors and runs parenting programmes in the prison (SEU, 2002). Parenting courses in prison have allowed parents (especially fathers) to develop their knowledge, skills of parenting and encourage the maintenance of relationships with their children (Murray, 2003b).

Crouch (2004) notes that the benefits of good practice in one part of the prison's visiting arrangements can be undone by poor practice elsewhere in the process, for example, if the visits room is to a high standard but the staff are ill-mannered and unhelpful; if the gate staff are very helpful but there is nowhere to dry for the visitors to wait. He identifies a series of examples of good practice (Crouch, 2003):

- The provision of a comprehensive information pack for visitors at HMP Reading;
- A joined up approach to booking visits, taking place at the visitors centre at HMP Woodhill; and
- The management of security and humanity at HMP Magilligan.

The SEU (2002) identifies parenting and family relationships course that are now part of the Prison Service's core curriculum as good practice. The report cites a 10 week family learning programme at HMP Wolds as an example, where pre-school children visit every week. Boswell and Wedge's (2003) research showed that 80% of the young offenders who attended parenting programmes said they

had changed the way they perceived their fathering role and expected this to impact on their children; 64% of adults shared this view.

Also identified in the SEU (2002) as an example of good practice is a project run by Nottingham Library Service at HMP Nottingham where inmates select books and tape stories to be sent to their children along with postcards so that they can write back.

Action for Prisoners' Families is a charitable organisation who works to support families affected by prison. They have implemented a number of projects across England and Wales, many of which are regarded as good practice. A series of their projects is aimed at supporting older children with who visit imprisoned relatives. These projects include: the provision of a physical space for older children and the access to support services at the HMP Durham visitor centre in conjunction with NEPACS; and a young people's advisory group in London to capture and respond to the needs of young people with a parent or relative in prison.

Based on their work, APF put forward a number of recommendations how children and families of prisoners can be supported (see APF, 2003:26).

Others examples of good practice include:

- HMP Bullingdon has introduced a visitor improvement programme called Being Decent to Visitors and has developed a series of performance indicators relating to provision of appropriate facilities, avenues of communication and professional and helpful services.
- Portsmouth Relate ran a series of one day workshops at HMP Winchester which target prisoners who are just about to be released and would be returning to a partner (priority was given to those with parenting roles) (Heybourne, 2003). The workshops allowed couples to explore, discuss and consider their relationship especially in terms of the changes and stresses experienced during separation and resettlement (*ibid*, 2004). APF stated that the feedback from these workshops was extremely positive (*ibid*, 2004).
- HMP Parc has a minimum target waiting time of 30 minutes but typically visitors wait no more than five minutes (SEU, 2002). The prison can arrange compassionate visits at two or three hours' notice and has extended visiting hours to 9pm (*ibid*, 2002).
- Every prison in Scotland has a Family Contact Development Officer to provide a point of contact for prisoners' families (SEU, 2002).
- KIDS VIP have developed guidelines for extended children's visits in male prisons.

3.0 Policy Review

In November 2003 a decision was made by the Prison Service's North East Area Manager to hold a conference to consider the issues relating to prison visits in North East establishments. The conference, which took place in March 2004 at a venue in Newcastle, was jointly organised by the Prison Service, NEPACS and KIDS VIP. Representatives of eight establishments in the North East attended, the voluntary and charitable sector, and several prisoner and visitor representatives (the latter from HMP Kirkclevington Grange and HMP Low Newton). The report of the conference states:

'The aim of the day was to allow ideas, views and feelings to be shared by the conference delegates and good ideas and best practice to be highlighted. The team from each establishment was asked to critically consider their visiting arrangements over a number of areas and develop an action plan to address any identified deficiencies' (HM Prison Service, 2004).

The repeated themes that emerged throughout the conference, as detailed in the conference report (*ibid*, 2004), were:

- The need for families and prisons to work in partnership as they share many similar goals of safety and security;
- The need to improve the attitudes of prison staff when they are dealing with visitors;
- The need to improve the information supplied to visitors;
- Proposals and ideas were raised including extending child centred visits; replacing visiting orders more effective systems; improving the telephone booking system; standardising drug dog procedures; introduce staggered visiting times; and carry out satisfaction surveys.

Throughout this policy review certain sections are highlighted in bold type to draw attention to their policy content and directives.

The report by the Government's Social Exclusion Unit, *Reducing Re-Offending by Ex-Prisoners* (2002) is widely regarded as the standard by which to compare the efforts of prisons, probation and other organisations to reduce re-offending. It identifies nine key reasons which contribute to offending and the reduction of offending and one of these is families. From the very beginning, the report presents key findings that identify many offenders from socially disadvantaged groups with weak family relationships.

Table 3.1 The Characteristics of Prisoners Compared to the General Population

Characteristic	General Population	Prisoners
Ran away from home as a child	11%	47% of male sentenced prisoners and 50% of female sentenced prisoners. (Higher for remanded prisoners and much higher for those with mental health, drug and alcohol problems)
Taken into care as a child	2%	27% (Those who had been in care also had longer criminal careers).
Has a family member convicted of a criminal offence	16%	43%

Source: SEU, 2002.

Despite this evidence the SEU (2002) identifies that support and advice for families is limited, visiting facilities are often inadequate and families are rarely involved in the process of tackling offending behaviour. Prisoners' families, including children, often experience increased financial, emotional and health problems when a family member is imprisoned and very little help is available to deal with these problems (SEU, 2002). The report estimates that 125,000 children have a parent in prison which adds to the inter-generational effects of custody.

SEU (2002) identifies that the problem in relation to families, despite evidence from research about the resettlement role of families, is that at every stage of the Criminal Justice System, families are largely left out of the decision making process and rarely get the opportunity to support prisoners effectively. This is substantiated by Boswell and Wedge, 2003.

The report identifies problems and difficulties associated at each stage, including at court, sentence planning, visiting and post release support. It also identifies the lack of agency support and responsibility for maintaining family links whilst a prisoner is in custody. In addition to this, support for families outside is raised as an issue, including impacts on family health, finances and the impact on children.

The report also identifies a series of good practice examples (these are presented in the section on good practice).

In 2004, the Home Office published their response to the SEU (2002) report, Reducing Re-Offending National Action Plan. The action plan introduces each of the nine key areas and lays out actions to address each area in a matrix.

The report, in the section on Children and Families of Offenders (page 37), 'Maintaining family relationships can help prevent ex-prisoners re-offending and assist them to resettle successfully into the community' (Home Office, 2004b:37). The report also states that 43% of sentenced prisoners have lost contact with their family as a result of going to prison (*ibid*, 2004).

Within the Key Action Area for Children and Families of Offenders, which lays out actions, although there are national policy recommendations, there are few practical recommendations for either regional or local agencies. Taking a critical view, the action area lacks substance and guidance and legislates few actions. The action area is mostly populated by areas that require consideration, development of approaches or further review. The few actions that are presented relate to visitor centres, which are mostly already in place, and Offender Behaviour Programmes. There are no guidelines for supporting children and parents of prisoners although there is one national action that advocates the National Probation Service to identify best practice in relation to the children and families of offenders in the community with the aim of identifying a national framework. The Home Office (2004c) states that this will achieve:

- Safeguarding the circumstances and welfare of the children and families of offenders.
- Identifying and responding to the social problems of offenders' families.
- Identifying and addressing the risk of harm posed to family members by offenders.
- Identifying or developing evidence of what works in working on the family issues of offenders and setting service delivery standards.
- Maintaining of family links/support of offenders throughout and after sentence to reduce the likelihood of re-offending.

It is apparent that the paucity of guidelines and recommendations contained in the action plan will make it difficult to achieve the aims stated above.

The Home Office (2004b) recommends that a more coordinated and strategic approach needs to be taken to develop an effective pathway for children and families and indicates that the new directorate for children and families within the Department for Education and Skills may take responsibility.

The Home Office's Action Plan on reducing re-offending (2004c) it states that in the Government's Every Child Matters Green Paper there is a focus on the children and families of prisoners and noted:

- The lack of coordinated support for children and families of prisoners; and

- Asked whether information on parents should be shared between professionals working on their behalf.

However, the researcher could find no reference to this in the Green Paper. Furthermore, the resultant Every Child Matters White Paper, Change for Children² had no information or reference on children and families of prisoners. Instead, there is only a focus on ‘young people who get in trouble with the law’ (DfES, 2004a:16). This is despite an explicit commitment improve the following outcomes for all children: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being.

More worrying is the presence of only one reference to this group in the associated document, Every Child Matters: Change for Children in the Criminal Justice System, which puts a requirement on the Probation Service to ‘work with adults to reduce their offending in order to protect children, young people and others from violence and exploitation and to enable adult offenders within families to improve their, and their children’s lives’ (DfES, 2004b).

This policy weakness is worthy of concern, particularly in the light of the negative impacts on children who have a family member in prison and the links between family contact and the reduction of re-offending.

However, it is rare for adult criminal proceedings to take into account either the ‘welfare’ principal identified in children’s legislation, or the likely effect upon shared parental responsibility when sentencing a parent to imprisonment (Boswell and Wedge, 2003).

The North East Regional Resettlement Strategy: Reducing Re-Offending (2004) published by Government Office North East is the region’s response to the SEU (2002) report and is aimed at reducing re-offending by improving the strategic coordination in the delivery of services for offenders. The strategy is part of the process of joining up the work of the criminal justice agencies and improving links between the community and the Criminal Justice System. In the foreword to this document, Paul Goggins, the Minister for Community and Custodial Provision states:

“In order to manage and address issues of re-offending a combined approach by all partners is necessary. One of the main objectives is to enable and empower the community to help re-integrate offenders. Effective resettlement requires close collaboration and in the North East all the agencies are committed to reducing re-offending through the effective integration of service delivery for all offenders, whether in custody or in the community” (GONE, 2004:1).

The Resettlement Strategy identifies each of the key resettlement components of the SEU (2002) as a Strategic Pathway. There is a total of seven Strategic

² To which Paul Goggins, Minister for Community and Custodial Provision was a signatory.

Pathways. Strategic Pathway 4 concerns Family and Social Support and is intended to enable offenders to maintain and develop positive relationships with their family, partners and their home communities.

The contents of the Strategic Pathway demonstrate that there is recognition of the need to support family relationships. However, amongst its current commitments (see figure 3.1) it does not specify the extent to which these services are provided, for example, who and how much training are officers receiving, the frequency and accessibility of the family learning and how many family work posts are created in prisons. The absence of the specification of extent of existing services, the intended improvements and timetables of action, leaves the content of the Pathway a wishlist. There is also no specification of a responsible authority in the prison service who will ensure this strategy is implemented.

However, the Resettlement Strategy's aim can only be encouraged, especially as it states: 'There is sufficient capacity within North East prisons to hold all North East based offenders within the region ... This capacity allows for the effective delivery of a Regional Resettlement Strategy and local case management, better maintenance of family and community links ...' (GONE, 2004:12).

Figure 3.1 Strategic Pathway 4 Family and Social Support

**Strategic Pathway 4:
Family and Social Support**



Enable offenders to maintain and develop positive relationships with their family, partners and their home communities.

Stages and Processes	Current commitments	Emerging issues
<p>Before custody</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families and significant others kept informed of developments before and during an offenders imprisonment. At PSR (pre-sentence report) stage - where offender is primary carer for children or elderly/disabled dependants, ensure appropriate supports in place. <p>During custody</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Telephone contact established early on arrival at the prison. Visits available to all offenders, and reception/visits information available to all visitors, to enable offenders to maintain close and meaningful relationships with family and friends, whilst taking account of security needs. Support groups for families/partners supported by agencies. Information provided to visitors/families and communicated clearly and sensitively. Families included in Sentence Planning review process where practical. 	<p>Current commitments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All offenders allowed to contact family and significant others on day of reception into prison. All North East Prisons are currently involved preparing an action plan to improve the delivery of visits and to involve prison visitors in this process. Partnerships established with family support groups (North Eastern Prison After Care Society (NEPACS), KIDS VIP). Visitor Centres meeting families' needs. Children's visits/Child-friendly visits. Family work posts in Prisons. Telephone help line for offenders families. Relevant information provided to prisoners. Parenting courses within prison establishments. Training and awareness course for prison staff on needs of visiting children. Training and awareness initiatives for schools, social services, community groups etc on needs of prisoners' children. 	<p>Emerging issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accurate information in respect of North East prisons to be available from Police, Probation, and court services. Continue to develop and improve the involvement of voluntary sector organisations in working with prisoners and their families through Service Level Agreements (SLAs), which are focused, relevant, support regime objectives and have the potential to reduce re-offending or aid resettlement in relation to all voluntary/private sector use of/extension of existing video link facilities to improve communication for special needs/problems of rurality. All prisons to produce a comprehensive information document (HMP Reading example of good practice) and to make it available to visitors.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information and application forms for Assisted Prison Visits scheme available from Visitors' Centres to Assist visitors to offenders. Family learning modules delivered in prisons. Provision of counselling / support for children and parent with family member in prison (Relate) 	

Figure 3.1 Strategic Pathway 4 Family and Social Support Continued

Stages and Processes	Current commitments	Emerging issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Needs of minority ethnic groups recognised within visits arrangements and support systems. ● Ensure consideration is given to the specific needs of women offenders in maintaining close relationships with children and families. ● Initiatives established to maintain family ties/ partnerships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify need for access to interpreter/translator services. ● Develop/maintain Children's Visits and Family Days arrangements where appropriate. ● Develop existing links with community organisations providing help and support for offenders' families and friends. Relate provides targeted support to offenders and couples pre-release. ● The ROTA project funds Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) workers to provide debt, housing and other social welfare advice for offenders at four of the regions prisons. It will also enable offenders to access specialist family law advice from solicitors via video conferencing. ● To hold a second one day conference to address and improve the delivery of visits to prisoners and their families. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review and refine transfer protocols and the structure of release plans across the region, in order that intervention and sentence plans are commensurate with offenders sentence/treatment needs, progression, and family support where possible. ● Promote the system in place at Castington prison to involve families in sentence planning. ● Inform families of decisions taken at sentence planning and review boards.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Family and parenting behaviour directly trained within regime provision. <p>After custody</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Community support available for offenders without families. ● Families informed about release arrangements and consulted where relevant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● OASys/ ASSET assessments to determine regime provisions ● Development of existing voluntary and community sector links providing support for offenders with or without families. ● Families to be included in resettlement arrangements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conduct gap analysis of programme provision. ● Telephone help line. ● 'Relate' provision of post release support and counselling.

Lead agency/partners: Regional Offender Manager, Prison Service Area Manager, National Probation Service Regional Manager, Youth Justice Board Manager, Youth Offending Teams /Social Services, Voluntary and Community Sector organisations, Sure Start partnerships.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons *Expectations*³ (HIP, 2004) is an assessment tool that examines every aspect of prison life, from reception to resettlement. Each 'expectation' is set out in relation to domestic and international human rights. The report introduces the idea of a 'healthy prison' (based on World Health Organisation guidelines) which is used by the Inspectorate and rests upon four key tests (HIP, 2004):

1. Safety: that prisoners, even the most vulnerable are held safely;
2. Respect: that prisoners are treated with respect for their human dignity;
3. Purposeful activity: that prisoners are able, and expected, to engage in activity that is likely to benefit them; and
4. Resettlement: that prisoners are prepared for release into the community, and helped to reduce the likelihood of re-offending.

Family and friends is one of the key 'expectations' and reads:

'Prisoners are encouraged to maintain contact with family and friends through regular access to mail, telephones and visits' (HIP, 2004:53).

There are a total of 32 'expectations' or headings upon which individual establishments are assessed. The expectations range from access to telephones to the requirement to have a visitor centre. The more pertinent expectations to this study are as follows:

- Prisoners are encouraged and helped to maintain contact with their families and friends, except in situations where contact is assessed as inappropriate (HIP, 2004:53).
- Efforts should be made to assist prisoners who have family a long way away, or in other countries to maintain good family contact (HIP, 2004:55).
- The visits booking system is accessible and able to deal with the number and needs of visitors. Visitors can book the next visit before the current visit ends (HIP, 2004:56).

³ The report has sections on all aspects of prison life, from bullying to staff-prisoner relationships. Within each section there are headings (known as expectations) upon which the individual establishment will be assessed. In conjunction with these headings, there are guidelines on where evidence can be found. Example:

Expectation – Race Relations

All staff in all units should be trained in cultural, racial and diversity issues

Evidence

- **Staff:** ask staff and management, e.g. that staff are aware of what constitutes a racial incident.
- **Documentation:** check training figures for staff in race relations and diversity, and any training available for prisoners.

- Prisoners' visitors are given information about how to get to the establishment, its visiting hours and details about what visitors can expect when they arrive (HIP, 2004:56).
- All procedures for prisoners and visitors are carried out efficiently before and after visits, to ensure that the visit is neither delayed nor curtailed (HIP, 2004:56).
- Visits staff are aware of the concerns facing prisoners' families, especially the impact of visits on children and any emotionally charged situations that may occur during or after a visit (HIP, 2004:56).
- Evening visits and family days are available (HIP, 2004:57).
- A well-run visitors centre is available alongside the establishment and is open at least an hour before and an hour after advertised visiting times (HIP, 2004:57).
- Visits areas are staffed, furnished and arranged to ensure easy contact between prisoners and their family or friends. Security arrangements in visits do not unnecessarily encroach upon privacy (HIP, 2004:58).
- Children are safe and can enjoy family visits in an environment that is sensitive to their needs. A children's activity area is provided where children can be supervised by trained staff and where prisoners can play with their children (HIP, 2004:58).

There are also additional guidelines in relation to prisoners and family contact in other expectations contained in the document. For example, contained in the Sentence and Custody Planning Section is the expectation, 'Prisoners and, where appropriate, their families participate fully in the development and reviews of the custody or sentence plan and in preparation for release' (HIP, 2004:58).

The guidelines that have been laid down by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons clearly demonstrate a commitment to supporting relationships between prisoners and their families and friends.

The Home Office's Women's Offending Reduction Programme Action Plan (2004) is a multi-agency strategic plan which aims to coordinate work across departments and agencies to ensure that policies, services and programmes and other interventions respond appropriately to the particular needs and characteristics of women offenders.

The background information within the Action Plan recognises that 'policy makers, practitioners, police, courts, voluntary organisations and others have a role to play in the way women offenders are dealt with, need to know what the particular issues are for women (including the impact on their children and families' (Home Office, 2004a:13). Furthermore, the report continues:

"... women are more likely to be the primary carers but much less likely than men to have a partner to look after their children if they are sent to prison. Research shows that these children suffer not only as a result of separation from their

mothers but also, particularly for those who end up in care, their own lives are subsequently disadvantaged, with the increased risk of social exclusion for the next generation' (Home Office, 2004a:13).

Despite the recognition of this evidence, child and family provision is only mentioned three times in the action-oriented recommendations. These are:

- In the section on Building on Good Practice, the report states that a mapping exercise is underway of all programmes, initiatives and centres which addresses the complex issues in women's lives, such as childcare (Home Office, 2004a:16).
- In the Community Provision action point, under the heading of Case Management, the report recommends reviewing arrangements for women with childcare responsibilities (Home Office, 2004a:21).
- In the Women Offender Management action point, under the heading of Non Prison Accommodation for Juveniles, the report recommends that a review is carried out of mother and baby provision for girls and young women within the secure estate (Home Office, 2004a:25).

In the action point of Prisoner Resettlement there is no mention of child or family support or provision.

Therefore, despite a recognition of the role of women prisoners in child care and the implications that children of women prisoners are at a high risk of social exclusion, the report provides little in operational support of mothers or their children.

Through the Prison Gate: A Joint Thematic Review by HIM Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation (HIP, 2001) was an important review document that contributed to the creation of the National Offender Management Service.

The report is explicit in its recommendations to support family relationships whilst a family member is in prison. For example, in the context of resettlement work to reduce re-offending, it states that the prison service must pay much more attention to locating prisoners close to home so that links can be retained or built up with family. This is in the context of 50 % of prisoners from training prisons and 18% of prisoners from local prisons were located more than 50 miles from their home area (HIP, 2001). Similarly, the report notes that the problem of prisoners being located far from home impeded resettlement work by probation staff and affected family relationships.

There is recognition in the report that many organisations, other than the prison or probation service, play important roles in the resettlement of offenders and these include visitor centres and family support groups. The report also identifies support for family relations as a key integration factor in relation to resettlement.

In the chapter that examines the work undertaken with offenders by the prison and probation services in relation to sentence planning (Seamless Sentence – Pre and Post Release) it states 'less than half the offenders sentenced to custody were interviewed immediately following sentence (the purpose of these interviews was to identify any immediate practical issues arising from imprisonment, such as childcare concerns)' (HIP, 2001).

The HIP (2001) report states:

'Despite the recognition given to the importance of maintaining family ties and social networks in the rehabilitation of the offender, no single agency carried statutory responsibility for prisoners' families. Without such a "champion", contact with families and others was seen as a privilege to be earned rather than a right or a potential aid to rehabilitation and social integration. The SEU (2002) corroborates this by adding that no one has day-to-day responsibility within prisons for ensuring that links between prisoners and families are maintained. The SEU report (2002) continues 'families are not involved in the process of rehabilitation, there is no one person the family can contact for information, and there is generally no one they can pass on concerns to about the prisoner's welfare or mental health' (SEU, 2002:112).

The role of safeguarding the interests of prisoners' families and promoting their role therefore fell to charitable organisations or self-help and pressure groups and, in 1990, the Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups was founded to encourage the development of, and act for a voice for, organisations providing assistance to families of people in prison. Their aim was to provide a variety of services "*to support anyone who has a link with someone in prison ... to cope with the stress of arrest, imprisonment and release* [their italics]' (HIP, 2001: 91). It is worthy of note that this mission statement does not explicitly recognise the role that families play in the reduction of re-offending or the prevention of future offenders.

NEPACS

NEPACS stands for the North Eastern Prisoner Aftercare Society, although it is a description that is now rarely used. Instead, the NEPACS' descriptor reads 'Building Bridges for Prisoners and Their Families'. The aims of NEPACS are⁴:

- To support and assist families and friends of prisoners in their visits to the prison.
- To ensure that children visiting relatives in prison will feel welcome and find the experience as pleasant as possible.
- To relieve hardship due to poverty of some offenders and their families.

⁴ These aims are taken from the NEPACS' Annual Report 2003-04.

- To support the education and training of offenders and other processes which may assist their rehabilitation.
- To collect and publish information relating to criminal justice matters and to the prevention of crime.

NEPACS is a complex organisation with an annual turnover in 2003/04 of £406,590. Sales from tea bars in prisons and in visitor centres accounted for almost a half of NEPACS' turnover, with the remainder coming from grants, donations and the Prison Service. It has 29 paid staff and around 200 volunteers.

They are seen as an integral part of safer custody within prisons as they pass information between families and the prison in relation to prisoner welfare, self harm, depression and potential suicides.

NEPACS Projects

These include:

- The administration of four visitor centres (which service HMP Acklington, HMP YOI Castington, HMP Durham (including a youth project working with 12 to 18 year olds in conjunction with APF), HMP Frankland and HMP Low Newton and HMP YOI Low Newton).
- The administration of the North East area National Prisoners' Families Helpline (funded through the Community Fund) – the phone line receives an average of 30 calls on a Saturday session (NEPACS, 2004).
- The administration of five children's play areas in the prisons in table ... (an additional play area is currently being prepared at HMP Castington) and assisting with special children's visits at HMP Durham (monthly) and HMP Low Newton (weekly). These are in addition to normal visits and last from two hours to all day visits.
- The provision of two caravans in Northumberland for newly released prisoners and their families to provide them with an opportunity to discuss resettlement and family issues. In the 2003 season, 31 families including 70 children took advantage of the holiday caravan (NEPACS, 2004).
- Publications including a NEPACS Bulletin, information leaflets and a website.

In addition to the above projects, NEPACS also provides funding for prisoners' families and prisoners (for example, for clothing, phone calls, educational resources or hobby material) and also plays a lobbying and advocacy role on behalf of prisoners experiencing difficulty and their families (see box 3.1)

Box 3.1 An Example of NEPACS' Advocacy Role

John Jones (not his real name) from Newcastle was sentenced for drug-related offences to six years in prison and began his sentence on remand in HMP Durham. This was his first time in prison and he became seriously depressed and found it very difficult to adjust. His family were very concerned about his safety and welfare and sought help from the NEPACS' staff at the visitor centre at HMP Durham. With their help and support they succeeded in stabilising John and he became focussed with continued visiting and support from his family.

After sentencing John was transferred to HMP Haverigg in Cumbria and despite the long journeys, his family continued regularly visiting and he made good progress, addressed his offending behaviour, stopping smoking and went onto a drug-free wing. He became very positive, enrolled and excelled at education courses and was referred to as a model prisoner at a governor's meeting. However, two days before taking his final exam, he was transferred to HMP Risley in Cheshire as a result of bullying complaints from his fellow inmates (strongly suspected to be false).

John became depressed once again and his family could only visit him twice in three months as they ran a successful business and the 400 mile round trip to HMP Risley to 11 hours. John's elderly grandparents and siblings with disabilities could not make this trip.

John was then transferred to HMP Birmingham as a result of concerns over his well-being. This is a 500 mile round trip. John's condition continued to deteriorate and he was transferred to HMP Featherstone, still in the Midlands.

At this point, John's family approached NEPACS for support. NEPACS produced a Professional Support Report which they addressed to the relevant agencies involved with John's custody. With the help of NEPACS a move was negotiated for John to HMP Acklington.

John now can maintain close and positive relations with all the members of his family and he has recommenced his education and training.

4.0 Case Studies

4.1 HMP Acklington

This establishment is an old RAF base and consists of a series of large hangars. It is located on an exposed site and often experiences severe weather conditions. It was purchased by the Prison Service in 1971 and in 1972 became a Category C prison⁵. The number of prisoners it holds was 882 on the 14 March 2005. The prison also has a small lifer population of about 30. The prison population is roughly made up of half mainstream inmates (mainly from the North of England), who are in prison for a range of common offences, and half vulnerable prisoners (VPs), these are predominantly, but not exclusively, in prison for sexual offences. The VPs receive less visits than the mainstream prisoners. This is a result of there being relatively fewer prisons that hold VPs in England and so the VPs at HMP Acklington tend to come from all over the country and so visitors have longer to travel. The mainstream prisoners are more likely to be local. It is also due to the nature of the offences and the unwillingness of people to visit, especially if there are family members who have been victims.

Visits at HMP Acklington

HMP Acklington shares a visitor centre with HMP YOI Castington. There are 50 visiting slots every day: approximately 30 for mainstream prisoners and 20 for VPs. Mainstream visits are full every day but it is rare that all the VP visiting slots are full. There are two areas in the visits room: one large one for regular prisoners and one smaller area for VPs.

As in most other prisons, there are three categories of visits:

1. Normal visits: these are held on chairs around a low table where visitors and the inmates can touch, kiss and pass things to one another. They can go back and forwards to the Tea Bar and children are free to come and go between the table and the play area and play with the prisoner.
2. Non-contact Visits: these are a result of a sniffer dog at the gate indicating that it can smell drugs on the visitors' clothes. Visits are held at on facing upright chairs across a high table. A low screen reaches from the floor to chest height, whilst sitting. This is to stop items being passed between the visitor and the prisoner. There is more vigilance from the supervising POs.

⁵ 'Category A offenders are the most dangerous prisoners whose escape would present a huge threat to the public and the nation. Category B prisoners pose less of a threat to the public, but they are still dangerous enough to warrant quite high levels of security. Category C offenders are considered to lack the skills or the desire to escape so they are deemed a minimal threat to the public. The remaining prisoners, those who do not pose a risk to the public and are also unlikely to escape are called Category D. Category A, B and C prisoners are held in what are termed 'Closed' prisons, whereas Category D prisoners are held in 'Open' prisons. Women prisoners and young offenders (anyone aged between 15 to 21) are not categorised like adult male offenders' (www.bbc.co.uk/crime/fighters/prisonservice.shtml).

Visitors and prisoners cannot touch and children cannot use the play area and must stay at the table.

3. Closed Visits: these are a result of disciplinary measures against the prisoner who may have been abusive or caused additional offences in prison, such as using drugs. There is no contact between prisoner and visitor and both are separated by Perspex screens. There are no phones as in the United States and visitors can hear fellow visitors more than they can hear the people they are visiting.

Sex offenders have visit restrictions, i.e. they cannot receive visits from under 18s unless the Social Services and the Probation allow it. However, they do receive some visits from minors but they are highly monitored.

They have lifer visits twice a month. *“When someone is away for along time [20 year tariff] it is more difficult to maintain family ties ... so it's important to do what we can to maintain those links⁶”*.

The Visiting Process at HMP Acklington

The prisoner sends the family a visiting order in the post. The family then phone a booking line to make the appointment for the visit. This is the first problem that the family's experience.

The lines are open from 9:00 am to 11:30 am and 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm. In HMP Acklington the operator of the visiting booking line also deals with all incoming queries and operates the internal prison switchboard, in addition to handling the prison mail. Families say that it is very difficult to get through because the booking line is constantly engaged. When visitors do get through a common complaint is that the visiting time that they want has already been taken. The times that the booking line is open are also a problem as it is in work hours. If a spouse is working it is very difficult to be constantly ringing the booking line to get through, especially as this rouses suspicion on the part of employers who may not know that a relative of the employee is in prison. The Coordinator of the visitor centre says that she has often heard that people go to the toilets at work in order to phone the prison, but, she says, there is a limit to how long people can stay or go to the toilet.

The visiting orders are processed at the visitor centre and the first thing a visitor will do is 'check in' at the visitor centre. The visitors identification will be checked (this has been raised as a major problem with visitors bringing inadequate or insufficient forms of identification, which is sometimes blamed by the visitors of prisoners who have been transferred from another prison on differences in prisons' visiting requirements). They will then be given a number which corresponds to their place in the queue. When the visiting starts the prison will call the visitor centre and ask for the visitors in batches of four. It takes

⁶ Mike Kirby, 2004, pers. communication.

approximately one minute to process each visitor and batches will be called every four minutes. If there are 50 visitors, then the 50th visitor will get 50 minutes less visiting time than the first visitor in the queue. Therefore, visitors try to get to the Centre as early as possible to be as near the front of the queue as possible. This results in long queues outside the door of the visitor centre even before it is opened.

Once the visitor is inside the prison, they wait to be searched in the small waiting area. Once inside the prison they will queue and the drug dog will walk pass them.

The visitors then go to the visits area, where they will have to check in again at the visits' room control area, which has two staff. The visitors will go to a table and wait for their visitor. The prisoners enter the room after being searched (the prisoner is searched both before and after the visit) and the visit starts.

One staff member on visits said that "*although it is smooth and trouble free it is time consuming. If three adults and three kids visit then it takes time to search them*".

Provision by the Prison Service

Within the prison, there is a high level policy commitment to improving the visiting process and a recognition that the issues identified within the SEU (2002) report about the need to maintain family ties. This is coupled with an operational commitment to improving both normal visits and family visits. This includes:

- The prison is currently constructing a family learning centre with funding from the DfES' Innovation Fund (approximately £180,000). The parenting courses (see following point) will be run from the new Family Learning Centre when it is finished. There will also be a large play area and two classrooms where prisoners will be encouraged to learn and teach their children. It will be staffed by two teachers, one officer and a group of volunteers, who will be trained to work with the inmates to teach them how to teach their children.
- The prison also runs a series of parenting courses (see box 4.1) through the Learning and Skills unit including the Family Man course and other parenting courses. There are plans for the Newbridge Charity (a parenting charity) to come in and run courses at the new centre.
- A Visits Improvements Strategy has been drawn up by the Head of Operations and the NEPACS' coordinator.
- Visits are managed by the Senior Management Group and specifically by the Head of Operations. The same group of staff supervise visits, which means that some familiarity can be built up between visitors, prisoners and staff. The

Governor is conscious that *“the visitor is not made to feel like an offender themselves”*.

- NEPACS provides the crèche worker for the play area in the visits room.
- They have ‘lifer days’ once a fortnight, where families can come and spend a day with the inmate. They have recently had an additional lifer day which brought together families, inmates and staff and a series of discussions were initiated and presentations were given; another day is planned for the New Year.

They have good relations with NEPACS and they are considered very professional and effective. NEPACS play a crucial role in meeting and greeting prisoners and the provision of information. This saves the prison considerable time and money, as otherwise they would have to provide a similar service. The Head of Operations stated that much of what the prison does in relation to visiting is driven by NEPACS. *“There is very good communication between us [him and NEPACS]. We meet once a quarter formally but two or three times informally”*.

The Governor stated that families have a very important role in reducing re-offending and in resettlement. The Governor also stated:

“If families play a supporting role then many of the problems faced by offenders can be dealt with, such as substance misuse. Many people end up in places like this because families stop loving them and they have been excluded because links have been broken. If prisons can help re-establish those links then it can only be a good thing”.

He suggested looking into the feasibility of clustering phonelines on a regional level. He says that clustering is already happening in other areas, such as clustering training and human resources with HMYOI Castington. Every prison has a different booking system so it will be difficult to have a central booking line.

Box 4.1 Family Learning at HMP Acklington

The Offending Learning and Skills Unit started a course in August 2004 using learning approaches developed by the charity Safeground. There were two courses: the Family Man; and Fathers Inside. They were both four week courses. They have completed one Family Man course and had 15 prisoners complete it (20 started). The course made inmates reflect on their past family life and gave instruction on how to become a better parent. It was a group work based course and because of its nature was not suitable for VPs. It was a very emotionally and highly motivating course and was well liked. At the end of the course the participants made a presentation to their own families, with a buffet and family day. However, because of a result of the intensity of the course participants often felt depressed when they returned to their wings as they were not going to be released for some time.

The next time they run the course they will take prisoners with four months left to serve and after the course there will be one week of reflection then a four week exit course, which is also a very highly motivating course. It is hoped this will lead to very positive results when they are released.

The Head of Operations took a very pragmatic approach to improving visits and stated that "*If their [the prisoners] lives are better, so are ours*" and he felt that they must increase the quality of the two hour visit.

Problems Experienced by the Prison Service

Problems identified by the prison staff include:

- The telephone booking line; and
- The physical size and geography of the prison; it can take 10 minutes to walk from K Wing (a prisoner residential block) to the visits room and there are six gates to go through. It takes a lot of time to physically get the prisoner and visitor together. This is compounded due to staff shortages; there are 176 Prison Officers to 882 prisoners.
- There is not enough OSG staff in the control room to extend the time that the booking line is open. The Head of Operations felt that if more staff are put on then we will have more calls and problems will remain the same.

Security in the prison also stated that Mandatory Drug Testing of prisoners is showing more positive results (i.e. showing more people are taking drugs) so more drugs are getting in to prisons and the biggest route is via visits.

Provision by NEPACS

The visitor centre serves both HMP Acklington and HMP YOI Castington, although it is mostly used by visitors to the former. Firstly, this is due to the fact

that it is physically closer to HMP Acklington. The second reason is the visitors to HMP Acklington access a ticket scheme whereby when they arrive they receive a ticket with a number on it representing their order in the queue – they can then go and take refreshments or sit in the waiting area. The visitors to HMP YOI Castington however, have to stand in a queue to secure their place and therefore wait in an unsheltered position outside of the YOI.

The visitor centre's opening hours are from 12:30 pm to 4:30 pm Tuesday to Sunday. This corresponds to the visiting days and times at the prison. HMP Acklington visiting times are from 1:45 pm to 4:00 pm.

There are seven paid staff including: the Coordinator – full time; four part time project workers (two that work 16 hours (4 x 4 hours) and one that works eight hours (2 x 4 hours) and one that works 12 hours (3 x 4 hours); two part time play workers that supervise the play areas (one that works 12 hours (3 x 4 hours) and one that works eight hours (2 x 4 hours) in HMP Acklington, which are open six days a week in line with the visiting days. NEPACS manages to supervise nine out of ten play sessions at visiting times. When they are not present, the POs notice a significant difference in the enjoyment and order of the children.

They have four regular and four occasional volunteers. The regular volunteers come once a month and one a fortnight respectively. The occasional volunteers work infrequently and when their other commitments allow. They currently have three in training. This is compulsory and something that all volunteers (and paid staff) must complete.

The training mainly consists of a 'buddying' system where trainees shadow a trained staff member in the different areas of the Centre, including the Tea Bar, the Office and the main seating area. This is done until the trainees feel confident to be able to carry out duties by themselves. There are also courses that trainees must attend that are delivered by Prison Officers. These include: manual handling; security issues; fire training; and a prison tour.

There must be a minimum of two staff (paid or unpaid) at the Centre at all times. They have always been able to ensure this, although many times it has been due to the commitment of the staff who have often "*bent over backwards to make sure there's always been staff [at the Centre]*"⁷.

The staff at the Centre are highly committed. The Coordinator feels this is due to the type of individuals that work there; some have had family members in prison and so they have first hand experience of what it is like to be a prison visitor and the hardships involved; and some are simply non-judgemental, emphatic individuals who want to support others.

⁷ Debbie Flounders, 2004, pers. communication.

There is a good atmosphere in the visitor centre and trouble amongst or between visitors is very rare. The Coordinator thinks this is also due to the staff working at the Centre and their efforts to provide a warm and welcoming environment. Staff are sensitive to the visitors' needs; if visitors want peace and quiet then there are peaceful areas and if some visitors want talk and distraction then staff will engage them in conversation.

The quality of service is qualified by testimonies from visitors; the Centre receives many cards, gifts and positive comments in the Comments Book.

The Centre does not simply play a visiting facilitatory role; it also provides support to visitors, through practical and emotional support. There is also the phone line which provides information and support on any issues surrounding visiting. They will liaise with the prison on behalf of visitors. The Coordinator says that NEPACS is about building bridges between prisoners and families and says "*if it is a visitor's issue then it's a NEPACS' issue*".

They have a very good relationship with the prison which is due to a number of factors including: they have a long history of working together and the previous Coordinator was employed by the prison before NEPACS took over; they reduce the workload of the prison by dealing with many queries that visitors have; and the prison pays the salaries of the staff and some administration costs.

The Coordinator carries the keys to HMP Acklington and enters the prison daily. She attends the twice weekly prisoner induction sessions (one for mainstream prisoners and one for VPs) and outlines the visiting process and the role of the Centre. Their post is also delivered to the prison and she attends meetings in the prison. There has recently been a Voluntary Sector Forum set up where agencies working in the prison to discuss various issues and network. She sees this as a very positive development as it allows her to know what services other agencies can provide to prisoners. This increases the options and ideas she can communicate to the families of prisoners. She says "*prisoners are far more likely to listen to their wife or mam if they tell them about something, rather than a Prison Officer*". The Coordinator sees one role of NEPACS being about resettlement – she says "*it's about enabling families to work together*".

Prison Officers and outside agencies also use the visitor centre to run Q&A sessions. These include sessions by the: Pre-Release Team from the prison, which are very well attended and often have queues to attend; Drugs Agencies, such as CARATS, which are poorly attended; and the CAB and Barnardo's. These are run fortnightly.

Visitors are starting to see that the visitor centre is separate from the prison. The Coordinator, since her appointment, has made considerable efforts to 'brand' the Centre, though putting up posters and distributing information with the NEPACS brand name.

The problems that the Centre experience are largely to do with visiting: the Coordinator would like a shelter to protect the visitors from the weather as they queue outside before it is opened; better furniture and money for the toilets to be refurbished. She would also like to see two visiting sessions per day so less visitors could go through and have more time with their family members. This would reduce queuing because people would get their allotted time with their family member and not have to be first in line. However, she realises that funding constraints mean this is unlikely to happen as nine Prison Officers are needed for every visit, so money would have to pay for these additional resources.

The Experience of Prisoners

The story of one prisoner illustrates the damaging effects of being located in a prison far away from his home. For the last 12 months this prisoner has received no visits from his family (a girlfriend and three children, aged 10, six and three) as they find it too far and too difficult to travel from Leeds. He served time in two other establishments: HMP Forest Bank in Manchester where he served six months and received visits from his family every week; and HMP Haverigg in Cumbria where he served five weeks and received two visits.

Since he has arrived at the prison, he has split up with his girlfriend and he will live with his mother upon release. He attributes the breakdown in the relationship because of his family's inability to visit caused by the long distances involved.

"we wouldn'ta split up if I was still in Forest Bank".

He made repeated attempts at getting a transfer to a prison nearer to where his family lived but was unsuccessful.

"I put loads of apps [applications] in an me mum even wrote to the jail but nothing happened".

Another prisoner says his family experience many difficulties when they visit, including the length of time it takes to travel on public transport, the expense and the stress it puts on the children.

"They left at 8:30 and you know what time they got back? Ten to twelve! [midnight]".

In addition to this he says that they never receive their allotted visiting time.

"No-one gets a two hour visit ... I leave K wing at ten to [1:50pm] and go down to D wing where we have to wait for half an hour ... by the time we get into the visits hall, they've [family] been waiting twenty-five minutes ... they've come all the way up from Manchester an they only see me for an hour".

He says that if he was in a prison nearer to his family he would get more visits.

He feels that his family do have an impact on whether or not he chooses to re-offend, *“what your family go through, wouldn’t have ‘em do that again”*. He suggested that more opportunities should be provided to allow fathers time with their children.

“Be good to have a place to go with our kids, like a park, somewhere we can push them on the swings”.

One prisoner felt that, as the prison is the furthest north in England, it should have better facilities for families that have to travel a long way to get there.

“Most of the prisoners here are from North West, and the families are knackered by the time they get here”.

The prisoners who had participated in the Fathers Inside course said it was beneficial to them although they all felt that the absence of opportunities to spend time with their children was a problem; *“what’s the point of doing life skills if you can’t put them into practice”*.

The Experience of Visitors

All of the visitors interviewed for the research spent considerable time visiting their relatives. Even for those who lived in the North East, visiting the prison often took the entire day; leaving early for several changes on public transport to Newcastle, or less commonly Morpeth, which has the only direct bus route to the prison (the prison is not near any railway stations). *"I come from Sunderland, it takes me two and a half hours each way"*.

When the visitors arrive at the visitor centre they queue outside for between 30 minutes and an hour; once inside the visitor centre they waiting for up to one hour and 15 minutes; going through the gate and through security and searches takes around 15 minutes; and once inside the visits room they have to wait another 30 minutes before their prisoner arrives. When young children are brought to visit, the entire experience can be an ordeal.

Almost every visitor complained of having to wait outside the visitor centre before it opened in all weather conditions with no facilities, either for themselves or babies and children.

All of the respondents said that visiting was costly and none interviewed received financial assistance from the Assisted Prison Visits scheme. Some respondents did state that when their relative was in a prison further away, they used to claim their money back but they no longer do so. This was attributed to a long delay in getting refunded, the scheme not refunding associated costs like refreshments and the administration (i.e. filling in the forms and posting them). Even when visitors lived in the Newcastle area, visiting was still a costly exercise, *"it costs me £20 per visit [from Wallsend to HMP Acklington]*.

All respondents stated that it was difficult booking a visit. *"Sometimes its engaged for forty five minutes and when you get through it just rings and rings"*.

The refreshments available inside the prison visits room were felt to be inadequate, especially if the visitor has travelled a long distance, *"it would be nice to be able to share a sandwich or even buy him a kitkat or biscuit that he can take back to his cell and eat at night but they're not allowed"*. Queuing at the tea bar was also felt by many respondents to take up valuable time *"I've waited twenty minutes for a cup of tea"*.

There were varying opinions on the attitudes of Prison Officers; some found them to be acceptable and some found them to be very poor. A common consensus was that the attitudes of the Prison Officers varied depending on the mood of particular Officers, *"it depends what day it is ... depends what mood they're in and what officers're on"*, or their work load, i.e. if they were busy they were likely to be considered rude. There were enough responses concerning the poor attitude of Prison Officers (*"ignorant"*, *"degrading"*, *"arrogant"*) to make their

observations significant. Another visitor describes waiting in the visits room for 55 minutes until an officer came and told her that they could not locate her husband, *“they weren’t apologetic”*. However, there were similarly many comments about the Prison Officers attitudes being *“fine”*, *“no problem”* and *“OK”*.

Some respondents complained of not being able to touch their relatives, *“you can hold hands but you haven’t seen him for two weeks and having a kiss and a cuddle at the beginning and end’s not enough ... it’s degrading not being able to touch him, he’s superglued to that chair ... you’re separated for all that time you need to touch”*. The physical contact that visitors are able to have with their prisoner was stated to be dependent on which officer was policing their area, *“sometimes, you’re not even allowed to hold hands”*.

Several respondents stated that they feel that they are also treated like prisoners by the prison and the visiting process just adds to the difficulties of having a relative imprisoned, *“I’m suffering more than he is”* and *“I’ve done more of the sentence than him”*. One respondent stated:

“I shouldn’t tell him [how I’m suffering] but I do ... I struggle a lot out there ... I need for him to know what his sentence does to us [his family].”

This respondent stated that she did this to attempt to discourage him from re-offending.

Summary to HMP Acklington

HMP Acklington has made their commitment to maintaining family contact explicit, especially through the construction of the Family Centre. They also have a very close relationship with NEPACS, whom they invite to policy and planning meetings. Much of the good relationship that exist between NEPACS and the prison is attributed to the prison contributing to staffing costs, which frees up the time of the coordinator allowing time for participation in policy making.

The visitors centre is open to correspond to visiting times and although families queue outside for it to open, this is thought to be the result of the ticket scheme, as opposed to the hours that the centre is open. However, the research with the prisoners and their families demonstrates that the visitors often experience long and exhausting trips to visit their relatives, the visits can be restrictive (lack of physical contact) and they do not get their allotted time at visits. There are also difficulties associated with booking visits.

Depending on when the Family Centre is built and how accessible it is to prisoners and their families, some of these issues may be addressed but visits are currently the only way that prisoners at HMP Acklington can maintain family contact.

4.2 HMP YOI Castington

This prison is situated adjacent and previously belonged to HMP Acklington. Also similar to HMP Acklington, it is located on an exposed site and often experiences severe weather conditions. The establishment became independent in 1983 and houses long term young offenders between 16 and 21 years old. It also has a remand wing which can hold 126 prisoners. It has an operational capacity of 406: approximately 240 young offenders and 160 juveniles. Visitors to Castington come from all over the country because it covers 42 YOT areas.

The visitor centre, which it shares with HMP Acklington, was built by the prisons in 1992. The administration of the centre was taken over by NEPACS in 1998.

Visits at HMP YOI Castington

Visiting times at HMP YOI Castington are from 1:30 pm to 4:00 pm Tuesday to Sunday. The visitor centre's opening hours are from 12:30 pm to 4:30 pm on the same days.

HMP YOI Castington receives approximately 36 visitors per day.

Currently at HMP YOI Castington, visitors queue outside the prison gate to receive their allotted position in the queue. There is no ticket system in operation and NEPACS do not administer the booking in process. Thus, visitors cannot leave the queue to use the facilities at the visitor centre unless there is someone to keep their place. If they do leave the queue, they lose their place. This means that visitors do not use the visitor centre and queue outside the prison where there is no cover in all weather conditions.

However, this system will change in September as a result of the Deputy Governor and visitors will receive their booking order when they book a visit on the phone. This will mean they will start to use the facilities in the visitor centre.

The prison has two Senior Officers who are permanently responsible for the administration of visits, including gate duties, searches, control room responsibilities and the visits area. These oversee seven Prison Officers who rotate from other prison duties and staff visits.

The Visiting Process at HMP YOI Castington

The visitor arrives at the prison gate with their VO, which will be checked by the gate staff along with their identification.

Lockers are available within the prison for visitors to leave their personal belongings.

The visitors then go past the drug dog and then into the search area where they are searched.

Visitors are then taken into the visits area where the prisoners are waiting for them.

Provision by the Prison Service

Senior policy staff at HMP YOI Castington recognise the importance of visitors. The Deputy Governor stated, *“I want to give parents the impression that it’s a safe and caring environment for their kids”*. There is a recently completed child’s play area in the visits room. The prison also stated that they endeavour to keep prisoners local to make it easier for their families to visit.

The main concerns of the staff that administer the visits is drug smuggling. This concern was reinforced in July when a prisoner died of a heroin overdose, thought to be brought in via visits. The Head of Operations stated:

“We’re as meticulous and strict as we’re allowed to be”.

Security measures include, if a drug dog has indicated on a visitor, they will be offered a closed visit; if on their subsequent visit, the drug dog indicates again, they will be refused further visits.

The Head of Operations stated that family visiting provision is more difficult to monitor for drug smuggling. This is particularly so as they have existing systems for normal visits but none for other means of visiting. However, despite this emphasis on security, the Head of Operations is supportive for additional family provision in the prison and believes the prison should provide more opportunities.

“I would never say don’t do it [family visiting] because of security ... let’s get [security] procedures in place to make that happen”.

It is felt by senior staff that *staff attitudes are very good “The inmates are kids and the staff are on first name terms with them. My attitude is I am here to help people”⁸*.

They are the only prison in the North East that has a Safe Custody Unit which is intended to look after the welfare of the prisoners and is the family friendly side of the prison. The unit does not have to worry about security and can specifically focus on their role as Safe Custody Officers. One of the Safer Custody Unit’s objectives is trying to get families to play an active part in the lives of the prisoners.

⁸ Alec Tate, 2004, pers. communication.

They are explicit about the importance of maintaining family ties and the links with reducing re-offending. They recognise the link between the reduction of stress, encouraging good behaviour, etc. and the family. For example, the Safer Custody Manager stated that *“you can’t look at self-harm without looking at bullying and you can’t look at depression without looking at maintaining family links ... it isn’t the family that has committed the crime”*.

The Safer Custody Unit carried out a survey as a direct result of the prison visits conference in 2004, in an attempt to try and improve the visiting process. This is presented in the section on the Experience of Visitors.

They have a Family Links phone line (see box 4.2) which is a 24 hour line (staffed in the day and answer phone at night). It started in July 2004 and has had 178 calls so far on issues such as what can be sent into prisoners, bullying, depression, disabled parking, for example, *“I’m very upset cos I haven’t heard from my son”*. They respond to these calls by either writing a memo to the prisoners or by going and seeing them in person. *“Because the prisoners are so young it is often their first time in prison and just to talk helps families⁹”*. The Chief Inspector of Prisons rated this provision very highly.

The prison ran a Christmas party for fathers to enable them to spend some time with their children and partner. It lasted for two hours and there was food served. The prison bought presents for the fathers to give to their children. They had a total of 14 applications from prisoners and seven families turned up. Three prisoners went and their families did not turn up but the prison gave them the presents so they could post them to their kids. NEPACS staff and the prison librarian helped on the day and three prisoners thanked them for putting it on. All the children were under four. There were five YOIs and two juveniles.

The prison also feels like it has a very good relationship with NEPACS, both in the support they provide to NEPACS and the services that NEPACS provides to the prison.

They have a series of proposed activities:

- A comments box in the visits area and the visitor centre.
- A Safer Custody surgery in the visitor centre.
- A leaflet aimed at parents to be distributed in the courts in the North East.
- A newsletter aimed at fathers.
- Changing the booking in system so that the visitor centre administers it, so visitors do not wait outside in the rain.

Five years ago they had the Newbridge charity running parenting courses but it stopped because the prison changed to predominantly a juvenile prison and

⁹ Janet Harbottle, 2004, pers. communication.

there was little interest. Now there are three juvenile units holding 166 prisoners and four YOI units holding 240 and so they may look to restart the parenting courses.

There is a recognition by prison staff that provision for visits needs improvement and this includes visitors waiting outside the prison before visits (often in bad weather), the small and unwelcoming reception area once the visitors enter the prison and the inadequacy of the telephone booking system (*“we need a booking phone line that’s open until 9:00 pm”¹⁰*).

¹⁰ Alec Tate, 2004, pers. communication.

Box 4.2 The Family Links Telephone Line at HMP YOI Castington

During the first six months of the Family Links line at Castington the total number of calls received was 186. A total of 62 of these were about property and clothes (this has proved to be an important issue for families); 21 of the calls were enquiries about the visiting order system and what is needed as identification to make a visit eight calls were requests to pass on telephone numbers to the young person at Castington.

A total of 79 calls raised a variety of concerns held by families: 35 calls were general enquires about concerns about the prison, its regime and rules and regulations, callers tended to be quite emotional, saying that this is the first time any one in their family had been sent to prison and they were extremely grateful to be given any information, no matter how small; 13 were concerns about the well being of certain young people. One of these was a phone call from a mother who had left a letter at the visitor centre saying that her son had talked about killing himself during a visit. Two calls were reporting actual self-harm committed by young people currently at Castington, and 10 were to say that a young person appeared to be depressed. One call reported alleged historic child abuse, two were about alleged bullying issues and two concerns were from Solicitors over the well-being of their clients. A total of 26 calls were from people tracing the whereabouts of their young person, all of the enquiries proved that the person was in fact at Castington.

Almost all of the callers have been really pleased to have someone to talk to who can give them information and allay their fears. The calls about concerns for the well being of young people at Castington have been the most important contacts in safeguarding young people at Castington.

Having a Family Links line as it upholds the Decency agenda at Castington and contributes to Prisoners' Family Life Standard:

"Establishments enable prisoners to maintain close and meaningful relationships with family and friends, whilst taking account of security needs."

Helping a young person to maintain family support, whether it if his family/parents or his own family if he is a father, has been found to be a major factor in helping him not to re-offend. If more time could be allocated to the family links I would like to see a support network set up. Those families needing this are easily recognised, they are the families who use the Family Links line at least once a week, spend 20-30minutes on the phone and are desperate for any contact to talk to about their relative.

The financial cost to the Prison Service far outweighs the costs involved in providing a Family Link line.

Source: Adapted from Harbottle, J. 2005.

Problems Experienced by the Prison Service

Problems they see are the isolated location of the establishment (there is one bus per hour from Newcastle) and the fact that visitors do not use the visitor centre but queue outside the prison to get an early visit (unlike HMP Acklington who use a ticket scheme (similar to delicatessen counters in supermarkets), the visitors to HMP YOI Castington lose their place if they move out of the queue).

There are also problems about mixing Young Offenders aged from 18 to 21 and Juveniles aged from 15 to 18 as they are effectively mixing adults and children.

They are also aware that the waiting area for visitors is very small, unwelcoming and claustrophobic.

There were problems experienced in the form of a low attendance of fathers to the Christmas party (and this is reflected in the prisoners' testimonies). To advertise the event, they put up colourful posters in the young offender wings which were up for a week. One Officer stated that Prison Officers did not 'sell it' as well as they should as "*some of the staff member's attitudes may be in question*". After a low response rate they put leaflets through all the doors of the juvenile prisoner and in retrospect it was felt they should have done this with the young offenders. It was intended that this Christmas party would develop into family visit days. This has not happened.

Provision by NEPACS

See corresponding section on HMP Acklington as both establishments share a visitor centre.

The Experience of Prisoners

One prisoner who was interviewed receives three visits per month, one from his father, one from his mother (who lives in Ferryhill) and one from his girlfriend (who lives in Middlesbrough) who both bring his two year old son. He sees his son between one and two times a month. This prisoner is now over 21 and will shortly be getting transferred to an adult prison, possibly Doncaster, which would make it more difficult for his family to visit. He is putting an application to be transferred to HMP Kirklevington Grange which would make it easier for family visits, especially as a result of his father's illness.

About the visits, he says that the staff attitudes are good and the atmosphere is 'OK' and he describes the best things about visits being "*... to kiss and cuddle*" his son. He says he waits a long time before his family arrives at the visits room – "*it gets to me sometimes*" and he does not get the allotted time.

He is also not allowed to get out of the seat and go and play with his son in the play area, *“My mam or girlfriend has to go and get him [from the play area]”*.

The prisoner attended the Father’s Christmas Party and he said that this day was nothing like normal visits, particularly in relation to the contact he could have with his family. His girlfriend and son came to the party and he spent half of the time with his son and half with his girlfriend. They could get out of the seats *“not like a normal visit”* and played party games.

One prisoner described the good things about the day as *“being able to play with my son and not sitting on a seat with my back to him [when he’s in the play area] ... just getting involved”*.

“I don’t think everyone knew about it [the family day] ... been better if there were more there”.

Another prisoner said that the Christmas Party was the *“best visit I’ve ever had ... you could get up and play, pass the parcel ... you’re more free”*.

The same prisoner remarked that *“normal visits are more tense, with family days you have more time”*.

Prisoners who attended the party said that few inmates were aware of the event. *“Not many people knew about the family days ... I found the leaflet [about the Christmas Party] on the floor ... only people from E Wing were on it and one from J Wing and that was our cousin’s boyfriend ‘cos I told him about it”*. It was felt that the publicity was poor, *“no one reads the posters ... you need to put the leaflets with the canteen form ... there’s a canny few dads in here”*.

In relation to whether the family had any impact on the choice to re-offend, one prisoner said: *“My family have a big difference on whether I re-offend ... I was selling drugs for my son but now I’ve got qualifications [gained whilst in prison] to get a job”*. Another prisoner said *“My girlfriend says that she’ll only stay with me this time ... if I does it again she’d tell me to fuck off”*.

The Experience of Visitors

All of the families that were interviewed said that they experience considerable difficulties and discomfort queuing outside the prison, *“we can’t go to the toilet ‘cos we’ll lose our place”*. Waiting outside was particularly difficult for children. One visitor stated that her children repeatedly became ill as a result of waiting in the cold and rain¹¹. *“I don’t bring her anymore, she was getting too poorly”*. Other visitors complained that they had travelled very long distances to get to the prison and waiting outside in the open put additional stresses to a very long day.

Another problem experienced by the visitors were the cramped conditions in the foyer area, just inside the prison.

Many visitors, although saying that the staff attitudes were good, complained that they were not allowed to cuddle the prisoner. One person who was visiting her boyfriend said, *“if I touch him or try and cuddle him the officers come and pull you off”*.

Many respondents had received closed visits because the sniffer dog had indicated they were carrying drugs. Many visitors had strong feelings about this, e.g. *“I’ve never had any drugs, I work in a hospital and the dog has sat on me three times”* ... *“they [the dog] do it [indicate] for a treat, I’ve seen them after they’ve sat down get a treat”*.

In September 2004 a survey was carried out by the prison into the views of visitors about visiting. A total of 42 questionnaires were returned. The survey showed that:

- 59% found it easy to find out how to visit a prisoner for the first time, 36% said it was difficult or confusing and five percent said it was very difficult.
- 95% of respondents said that they were treated well by staff and only four percent said they were treated poorly.
- Only 26% of respondents said it was easy to bring in or collect property from the prisoner, 50% said it was either difficult or confusing.
- 69% of visitors said it was easy to get to the prison and 21% said it was difficult.
- 26% said that the difficulty in getting to the prison affected how often they visited.
- 76% of respondents said they would like to visit seven days a week.
- 80% of the respondents stated that they would like more food and drink provision at the tea bar, including hot meals, especially for people who had to travel long distances. A total of 10% said the existing facilities were adequate.

¹¹ Note: the prison is located in a particularly exposed site and can often experience extreme weather conditions.

- 45% of respondents visit once or twice a week (therefore to remand prisoners) and 30% visit once a fortnight.
- 78% of respondents stated that the current visiting facilities were adequate, whilst 22% said they were inadequate.

The findings of the survey also reiterated the common problem of having to queue outside the prison, which causes visiting times to be shortened. Additional problems raised were the cramped waiting area inside the prison and the absence of adequate food and drink at the tea bar.

Summary to HMP YOI

Prison policy at HMP YOI Castington is supportive of maintaining family contact and the intention to provide a positive experience at visiting time is good. However, this is not translated into meaningful practice. There have been no more family days after the Christmas party despite the promises of more.

It is apparent from the testimonies of prisoners that the experience of a family visit compared to the experience of a routine visit is extremely different. At a family visit, there is a more relaxed atmosphere, more physical contact, more time can be spent with both the partner and child(ren) and it is a generally more rewarding and fulfilling experience.

The prisoners also stated that there would be much demand from young fathers, many of which were not aware of the first father's day.

NEPACS currently does not play a significant part in visiting or resettlement policy nor do they have any major contact with the prison. However, this may change after September when the visiting arrangements change.

The research at HMP YOI Castington also demonstrates that visitors to the prison find it difficult to book a visit, to actually visit as many have travelled significant distances, and experience many difficulties whilst visiting, not least waiting in the open for long periods of time, many with children. After this, they often experience shortened and unfulfilling contact time.

4.3 HMP Holme House

This is a modern Category B prison (built in 1992) which can hold 1000 prisoners, making it the third biggest local prison in the country. The majority of the prisoners it holds are from the North East. It had 994 prisoners on the 22nd April 2005, made up of convicted and unconvicted (i.e. remand) adult male and unconvicted male young adults. It includes a purpose built visitor centre that was part of the main prison build.

Visits at HMP Holme House

Visiting times at HMP Holme House are from 1:30pm to 3:45pm on a Monday, Wednesday and Friday; from 1:30pm to 3:45pm and from 4:45pm to 7:15pm on a Tuesday and Thursday; and from 8:30am to 11:30am and from 1:30pm to 4:30pm on a Saturday and Sunday. The prison receives approximately 100 visitors each day.

Remand prisoners are allowed three hours visits per week. Convicted prisoners are allowed two hours but prisoners can save them up as they are valid for 28 days and use them all in one week. This helps visitors who have a long way to travel.

The visits hall is a big area which is divided into two areas, a bigger area for normal prisoners and a smaller area for VPs. There is a small play area which has a height restriction and is suitable, generally, for children between two and eight. This is staffed by two volunteers. The majority of visitors are women with children.

There are three blue chairs for the visitors and one green seat for the prisoner, these are arranged symmetrically around the table and bolted to the ground.

The Visiting Process at HMP Holme House

1. The visitor receives the visiting order from the prisoner;
2. The visitor books visit by telephoning the booking line at the prison;
3. The visitor arrives at the Visitor Centre and the Centre staff check that the visiting order is correct (the right date and name) and the identification of the visitor;
4. The visitor centre staff stamp the visiting order and give the visitor a number in the queue.
5. The staff puts a booking reference on the visiting order and give them a table allocation;
6. The staff log the visit for their records;
7. The visitor centre staff provide any information or support as required;
8. The staff contact the prison and tell them about the visitors who have arrived and the numbers;

9. The visitor centre staff contact the prison portal to ask if there are any property allocations (if there has been any advance permission given for visitors to bring property to give to prisoners);
10. They send the visitors over in groups of six. When there are only one or two visitors at the gate they send the next six over (visitors can be seen going through the prison gate from the Centre).

An OSG (Officer Support Grade) takes the visitor through the metal detector and searches them and the child(ren) and gives a UV stamp to the male visitors. They contact the door officer to collect the visitors and the VOs. The door officer then collects the visitors in batches of six and lines them up for the drug dog. The door officer also checks their mouths. If there are a number of visitors and the drug dog indicates on one, the visitors have a choice of either all go on a closed visit, or all the visitors can visit without the person who was indicated for drugs. Previously there was a choice of either all go on a closed visit or there is no visit.

One staff allocates the seats and does the closed visits (there are five closed visit booths). The visitors then take the seats.

The door officer then takes the VOs up stairs to check and collect the prisoners. The prisoners are then taken through the search tank and they go downstairs to the visitors.

The visiting staff begin work at 1 pm and they start getting the visitors across. The other prison staff begin work at 1:30 pm after their lunch and from 1:40 to 1:45 the prisoners are taken down. This results in a time lag.

The earlier visitors arrive at the Centre the longer their visit will be. The number allocating system to visitors, works very well unlike other visitor centres, they do not have the problem of visitors queuing outside the Centre to make sure they get their place (where there is a first come first serve basis – such as HMP YOI Castington).

Most of the visitors are from the surrounding area, as it is a local prison. But there is still a lack of adequate public transport so it is difficult to get to the visit.

There is some flexibility on reception visits where the visitor may not be turned away if they do not bring suitable ID, especially if they have travelled a considerable distance. The SO has discretion and can either seat the visitor at a table near to an officer or put them on a closed visit. These reception visits are only supposed to last for 30 minutes but he gives them longer.

Provision by the Prison Service

There are two strategic documents which guide the prison's policy on visiting. The first is the Regional Resettlement Strategy which identifies strategic

pathways based on the SEU report and the second is Holme House's Resettlement Policy Document, which is a three year development plan.

The prison is very explicit about the role of visiting, stating that visits are about maintaining family ties.

The prison prides itself on its visiting policy and approach. They have a dedicated visits team (set up in May 2003) which oversees the process and they provide more visiting opportunities than the specified statutory provision. HMP Holme House has eight senior officers (including one policy officer) who manage the visits process. The prison feels that having a dedicated team means that relationships can be established with prisoners and their families, and that staff feel a level of ownership about the arrangements. The head of resettlement states that this is manifested in the visits room; *"There is very different atmosphere in the visits room [compared to elsewhere in the prison] and this has been created on purpose"*.

The head of resettlement states: *"Visits are very good in Holme House, it's better than statutory provision ... we have visits five days a week, two evenings and on weekends"*.

It is felt by the prison that there is no need to be a conflict between security and resettlement and the relationship between both units in the prison is stated to be good.

The prison has a family learning centre, where prisoners and their families have to go through an application procedure. There are less than five children and their fathers in the centre at one time and the prisoner must already be involved in some aspect of learning in the prison.

The attitudes of some visits staff was found to be concerning. One Officer who worked on visits almost every day was very derogatory about the majority of visitors, stating that the prisoner would not be interested in seeing their children and only want visits if their girlfriend comes; *"If they [the kids] had to visit without the girlfriend they wouldn't visit"* and *"their parenting skills are very poor"*. The Prison Officer also stated that visits are mainly about drug passes:

"90 percent of prisoners are looking for drugs or very intimate contact and the kids are used to shield drug passes".

"Most phone calls are about arranging drug passes"

In relation to parent, child and prisoner behaviour, it was stated:

"Because Holme House is a drug prison the men don't play a big role in the family".

“When they come in the kids go one way the parents go the other ... they want to pack em in the play area and just forget about them”.

“Small percentage of kids are well behaved ... most parents think once they come in to visits the kids are not their responsibility”.

“It is left to the staff to tell the kids off and take them back to their mams”.

“The kids get bored and you know sooner or later there’ll be an incident, someone’ll get hurt and you’ll have to fill out a report for health and safety”.

In relation to visitor conduct it was stated that:

“We have rules about conduct but they take no notice”.

“We have leaflets and posters all over the place explaining the required conduct but they take no notice”.

Problems Experienced by the Prison Service

HMP Holme House experience a series of problems which relate to the visiting process. These include:

- Security and drugs; the prison feels that visitors will always take the chance to pass drugs.
- In the visits room problems lie with *“unruly kids running around”*. One Officer stated *“they run, trip over, spill drinks ... some have been scalded on tea and coffee ... as young as three or four”*. There are VPs on one side of the visits hall which also raises issues if children are running about the hall.
- No Officer on the gate area that can exclude drunk and disorderly people. OSGs currently at the gate do not make decisions on who to exclude and so visits staff often have to exclude people from the visits area which is more inconvenient.
- It is recognised that the booking lines are also a major problem.
- They have a poor take up of family learning.
- It was felt that the efforts to improve visits for prisoners are constantly thwarted by inmates; *“we are constantly let down by prisoners”*.

It is felt that establishing and maintaining family ties is the weak link in resettlement at the prison. The head of resettlement stated that, *“all the other*

areas in the SEU report, like drugs, accommodation and employment, we know where we're going, but not with family ties".

The head of security at the prison stated:

Family Learning ... we've got no more concerns than for ordinary visits ... the visitors go through the same procedures. We don't differentiate.

We've never interrupted someone on a family visit.

There's so many people in Holme House that've been involved in drugs that it's a nonsense to vet the names [of prisoners who apply to go on family learning] and I'd be surprised if they'd take notice if we said no. But, if it were a known drug trafficker then I'd hope they'd refuse access, if not we'd have to protest.

Provision by the Holme House Visitor Centre Society

The VISITORS CENTRE was built in 1992 at the same time as the prison. The VISITORS CENTRE was initially run by uniformed prison officers when it opened. Then in November 1992 the management and administration of the centre was transferred to the newly created charity called Holme House Visitor Centre Society.

The Centre receives a grant of £36,500 from HMP Holme House which pays for administration and the salary of the manager. The utilities and capital upkeep are also paid for by the prison. The canteen in the Centre is administered by the prison and makes approximately £5,500 per year. This is donated by the prison to the Centre and pays for the volunteers expenses.

Their system of management and administration has evolved over time in response to need and circumstance.

The visitors centre is open seven days a week. However, the visitors centre opens before the stated times: at 10:45 am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday (until 4:30 pm); at 10:45 am on Tuesday and Thursday (until 8:00 pm); and at 7:45 on a weekend (until 5:00 pm). The centre opens in relation to need; if there are people wanting to use the centre, then it will open, and not close until the last visitors have gone (visitors often have to wait for buses when they are leaving).

They have 13 regular volunteers, who have been coming to the centre for between two months to 10 years. In a typical week the volunteers will collectively work between 130 to 160 hours.

The volunteers come from all walks of life: retired people, lonely people, students, as part of their courses, prisoners from HMP Kirklevington Grange to help them prepare for life on the outside.

There is no formal volunteer training process and volunteers are trained using a hands-on approach. Volunteers are found by word of mouth and recently there was an advert placed in a local free paper; three responses were received and only one was suitable.

Working at the centre is very demanding due to the intensity of the feelings of the visitors. Visitors expect volunteers to know the answers to all the questions they have and the manager says "*you have to be a real people person to work here*".

The centre staff have always managed to cover the Centre's opening hours with the exception of when the manager is on annual or on sick leave. As a result of this the manager typically is only able to take 10 days annual leave each year. When she is on leave, there are four regular and experienced volunteers who are paid on a sessional basis who cover for her.

The centre provides advice, information and support to visitors and carries out the first level of visits administration. The manager says:

"We listen and care, we are not uniformed and we have no axe to grind ... we are non-judgemental, patient and thick skinned, which we need to be when you hear some language in here!".

She says that the visitors realise quite quickly that they are not part of the prison.

The centre was built when the prison population was only 500, now it is around 1000. Consequently the centre was only designed to cope with visitors for 500 inmates.

As a result of a lack of space there is nowhere to deal with distressed visitors, of which there are a number, "*there is nowhere quiet*". The manager says that many visitors approach her and ask "*can I have a word?*" and she goes outside or in a corner. She says that this makes her feel like "*she is doing half a job*".

The lack of space also means that other support agencies cannot provide their services to visitors. The CAB and a health promotion organisation wanted to put on drop-ins but there was no space. If they had extra space such agencies could provide useful support to families.

Some visitors to HMP Holme House have an indepth knowledge of the prison system because they have been visiting a family member for years, but others know very little. This latter group are not only traumatised by having a family member in prison but also because they do not know the practical arrangements and what to do. It may take several months before people come to terms with all of the implications of having a family member in prison. The centre supports

them in this process, either through face to face contact or through frequent phone calls.

The manager describes the relationship (which was scored seven out of 10) with the prison as:

"A lot of prison departments forget about us until they need something".

She also says:

"It took a long time, maybe three or four years, before we were taken seriously by the prison, then they [the prison] realised that we didn't take ourselves too seriously but we did take the job seriously".

The manager has been a key holder for one and a half years and considered this to be symbolic of how the prison feels about the centre. The current governor authorised the key holding and she feels better about prospects for the relationship between prison and centre as a result of the new generation of governors.

However, as a result of the time constraints she experiences as a result of short staffing, the manager cannot attend training courses run by the prison which she is invited to. She is invited to attend the anti-bullying meetings inside the prison but also cannot attend due to time pressures.

She is not invited to attend any resettlement meetings or other policy group meetings. She does not have access to the prison's intranet. She feels the centre is *"separate until it suits"*.

The manager feels that the centre is in a vulnerable situation because of her central and crucial role in its administration and management. She feels it is her "baby and creation", which, as a result of the centre's administrative and managerial evolution, it is. She says that *"I would not recommend anyone staff a visitor centre like this"*.

She also thinks that the attitude of the uniformed staff does not help the visitors.

Views of the Volunteers

The views of the volunteers who work at the visitor centre were noted by the researcher using semi-structured questions. In the views of the volunteers:

- The best things about visiting a relative in prison were being able to maintain contact and meeting other people in a similar position.
- The worst things about visiting a relative in prison were the waiting time, the intimidation that visitors experience throughout the process, the procedures

that visitors have to go through at the portal (i.e. queuing and searching) and going home.

- The good things about the visitor centre were the friendliness and help that visitors received (and the fact that they were civilian and not Prison Officers), the tea bar and clean toilets.
- The main problems faced by visitors were the provision of identification (either it being incorrect, insufficient or inconsistent), parking and trying to book a visit.
- The things the prison did well was the family learning.
- The improvements that could be made to the prison to improve visits were more consistency (it was felt that the prison changes visiting rules without notice), a change of staff attitudes, improve the booking line and empty the telephone at the visitor centre promptly (when it is full people cannot use it).
- The improvements that could be made to the visitor centre to improve visits were more space and more opportunity for private discussions, and provision for disabled visitors.

A consistent complaint was the prison changing visiting rules with little or no notice, problems visitors have with forms of identification and the lack of an area for private and confidential discussion. Problems with insufficient or wrong identification often resulted in angry and disruptive displays by visitors.

The Experience of Prisoners

Several prisoners said that when their children visit, they are often scared in the visits room as a result of the behaviour of the officers on duty.

“There was an incident when a group of screws jumped across tables and pinned a lad down ... scared my daughter to death ... now she won’t go near them, if there’s a screw there she’ll walk the long way round ... she wasn’t scared til that happened now when they go past she’ll climb onto my knee until they’re past”.

One prisoner said, *“they made my baby strip ... take her nappy off to check for drugs ... I know they gotta check but that’s a bit much”.*

Children experience particular difficulties and have specific fears at visits. *“Having to be searched, take their shoes off ... if the kids go to the toilet they have to go past the drug dog again ... my daughter won’t go to the toilet any more ‘cos she thinks just in case they won’t let me back in”.*

“I was told to stop cuddling my daughter twice when I was reading to her on my knee ... I was told to stop and put her in the chair”.

“There’s often lads getting restrained and there’s lots of swearing ... I try and keep it as clean as I can for her ... I never swear”.

All prisoners interviewed complained of not getting their allotted visiting time. For example, one prisoner said *"on a day visit, [cell] doors open at one thirty, at ten to two or two you're on the landing, ten minutes in the holding area and then you get down to the visit ... it takes one hour to get from the cell to the visiting area ... it's a five minute walk"*.

One prisoner interviewed participated in the Family Learning course with his girlfriend and three year old son. He put in for the family visits eight months ago and has been on the visits and associated course six weeks – it is a 16 week course. His 10 month old daughter cannot attend the course, and he thinks this is because there is an age limit imposed, with only children over 18 months old being allowed to attend. He regrets that he can not also spend time with his youngest child and also is concerned about the pressure it puts on his Auntie, who provides childcare, as the youngest child has special medical needs. He also finds this confusing as part of the accompanying course is about building relationships with very young babies. His three year old daughter enjoys the sessions, *"it's good but I wish the other little one could come, I don't know her so well 'cos I'd been inside four weeks when she had her ... it brings you closer to the kids while your in here"*.

He is allowed to kiss and cuddle his girlfriend at the beginning and end of the family visit. But he feels this does not reflect a normal relationship between parents who hold, touch and kiss each other frequently.

The course is difficult for prisoners to access, *"loads of other lads put apps in but they get knocked back"*. Another prisoner said, *"I put in for Family Learning eight months ago and they said I wasn't at the right phase of my Therapeutic Community course ... they said it'd take seven or eight months before I could go on but now my daughter's going to school and she can't come ... I'm gutted 'cos me and my girlfriend were really looking forward to it"*.

It was felt that many prisoners would like to get on Family Learning but cannot. *"There's loads put in for it but not many get in, 'cos of the security risk ... mind you, you can sit in someone else's cell and be classified as a security risk"*.

Prisoners had a series of suggestions about how to improve visits. These included:

One prisoner said how much his girlfriend hated visiting, *"my girlfriend loves me but she doesn't like visiting, the waiting around, getting bored, searched, she feels violated, getting rubbed down"*.

The Experience of Visitors

Roughly one third of visitors interviewed stated that they experience no problems whilst visiting partners or relatives in HMP Holme House. Two thirds of respondents said they did experience problems. These problems ranged from not being allowed to take in items for the prisoner to the tea bar not serving adequate refreshments.

The most frequent complaints amongst visitors to HMP Holme House were the length of time it takes to book a visit on the telephone and not getting their allocated visiting time with prisoners. Indeed a very common complaint was how much waiting they did throughout the day, e.g. for buses, at the visitor centre and in the visits area. Some visitors reported of frequently waiting for up to 30 minutes in the visits area. Another complaint for those that had children was that the children's play area had been closed for several months, which meant their children had nothing to do.

Many other visitors stated that a prison visit took a whole day and incurred significant cost.

Below are a series of comments from visitors:

"It's shocking ... going through the gate, they go through [child's name] bobble, it's a bit over the top ... they make you feel like a criminal".

"Some Officers're OK ... some are arrogant ... just depends on who's on".

"My daughter finds it stressful ... when she kisses and cuddles him, they [Officers] tell them to stop".

"They closed the play area five months ago ... said it was a lack of funding".

"He's [prisoner] has got a six year old daughter with someone else, but I can't bring her 'cos she gets scared going through the search area ... when she goes to the toilet they search her so I don't bring her that much".

"Ringing to book it really difficult sometimes it takes me five hours".

"I've only managed to bring things in once ... tried four or five times to bring stuff in but I gave up in the end, there's never anyone on the door to take it".

"Once I waited in the visiting area for over an hour with five others, we were told that the VOs had gone missing".

"I feel like I'm doing the sentence ... it's a very scary place".

A consistent complaint was the prison changing visiting rules with little or no notice, problems visitors have with forms of identification and the lack of an area for private and confidential discussion. Problems with insufficient or wrong identification often resulted in angry and disruptive displays by visitors.

Summary to HMP Holme House

Similar to the other two prisons in this article, HMP Holme House has laudable intentions with regards to visits and maintaining family contact. On paper, there is excellent provision with more than the statutory visiting provision and Family Learning days. However, enrolling on this course seems to be very difficult. Those people that have participated in the Family Learning say how beneficial it is for all those involved, particularly for maintaining family relationships.

Both prisoners and families experience considerable difficulties at visiting times and very few prisoners can access the Family Learning. Both prisoners and families experience considerable difficulties at visiting times. Similarly to the previous case studies, visitors that reported difficulties when attempting to book visits and both visitors and prisoners reported the frustration of not receiving their full allocated visiting time. Furthermore, there are some disturbing reports of events that children are exposed to when visiting their parents, which compounds the difficulties they experience from being separated from their fathers.

The Holme House Visitor Centre Society is also excluded from the prison and its significant potential input in many prison policy areas, specifically resettlement, currently is ignored. This is compounded by the visitor centre having very few paid staff, which means existing staff can not attend meetings, even if they wanted to, due to time constraints. This also affects the quality of service they can provide to visiting families.

4.4 HMP Low Newton and HMP YOI Low Newton

These establishments are housed in the same location. The young offenders (between 16 and 21 years old) are normally contained within one wing (Elvert wing), although it is currently under refurbishment which means that the young offenders are located on the same units as the adults. The prison used to be a remand centre for young male offenders (it was purpose built in 1965) but turned into an all female estate in 1998. The number of prisoners that both establishments held in on the 27th February 2004 was 396.

HMP Low Newton holds between 250 and 300 adult female remand prisoners and convicted women including lifers (when HMP Durham became a community prison in 2004, HMP Low Newton accepted all the high security female prisoners). HMP YOI Low Newton holds between 50 and 70 unconvicted and convicted young females, aged between 16 and 21 years old.

Both establishments are administered by the same set of staff, including the same Governor, Resettlement staff and Operations. As mentioned, the young offenders are usually housed on separate residential units and eat meals separately but share association and some activities. Hereafter, both establishments will be referred to as HMP Low Newton.

Visits at HMP Low Newton

Visiting times are from 2pm to 4pm Monday to Sunday. Routine visits are administered by Operations (security in the prison). They run a parent and child morning each Friday from 9am to 11am, which is administered by wing staff from Residential Block 2. They also run a parent child 'day' once a month, from 11am to 4pm, which is administered by the Physical Education department.

A total of 50% of visitors come from the North East with most from Teeside. The remaining 50% come from all over the United Kingdom including the South Coast, Wales and Scotland.

There are 18 visiting places per day with six additional spaces for reception visitors. On weekdays, visits are rarely full, and can receive anything from two to 15 visitors. Weekend visits are generally full. This is thought to be attributable to visitors from outside the North East predominantly only being able to visit on weekends.

Prisoners are allowed three adults per visit and there are no limits on how many children under 18 are permitted. Unconvicted (i.e. remand) prisoners are entitled to four visits Monday to Friday and one on a weekend. There is no VO required for these visits. Convicted prisoners are entitled to one visit per week and visitors must have a VO. There are two other types of VO: Privileged VO which can be used from Monday to Friday; and Enhanced Privileged VO which can be used Monday to Wednesday. Prisoners can earn up to two PVOs and two EPVOs each month and so can potentially have eight visits a month. VOs can also be saved up and used in the same week, for prisoners with families from outside the North East and further afield. Previously, VOs were valid for 28 days but now are only valid for 14 days.

The visits booking line is open from 10:00 to 11:30 am and from 1:30 to 4:00 pm.

The parent and child visits on a Friday are also rarely full (there are spaces for six prisoners). In November 2004, there was only one family who took advantage of these visits. These visits are held in a variety of places, sometimes in the prison gym and sometimes in the visits room itself. They used to be held in a room in the hospital wing, although when this was taken over by the PCT, it could no longer be used. To register for the child-parent visits, the prisoners must put their names down on a list that is put up on the wings each month. Some months

there are only three or four names down, other times, especially during summer holidays, so many prisoners put their names down that a waiting list develops.

One the last Thursday of every month the prison runs a Millennium Child Parent Visit. The Millennium days were set up by a group of prisoners four years ago and have accessed £10,000 funding per year to resource the days, including providing a buffet lunch. It is administered by a committee made up of six prisoners, and several prison officers who meet every two months. A list is put up on the wings and the women can put their names down to participate in the days. Up to 20 women and their children can attend the day. There is a set of criteria which the prisoners must adhere to, including: being in the prison at least eight weeks, passing a Mandatory Drugs Test and signing up to and passing at least two Voluntary Drugs Tests. There are routinely eight to 10 women who fail the MDTs or VDTs and cannot participate in the days. Often the days are undersubscribed and generally the same prisoners participate each month. From January until September a total of 35 different prisoners had attended the days. There are on average between 10 and 15 children at the days.

The day is an opportunity for children aged up to 16 years and their mothers (N.B. carers are excluded) to spend a day together. It lasts from 11am to 4pm and takes place in the prison gym and is administered by the Physical Education (PE) department. The children are brought into the gym by a carer or guardian, who can spend five minutes with the prisoner and their children, and must then leave.

The PE department took over the administration of the visits from the education department two years ago. The former state that *"the day was designed for parents to maintain the links with their families"*.

A total of 90% of those who attend the days are from the North East. The PE department stated *"there are not many from outside the area"*.

The Visiting Process at HMP Low Newton

The visitor centre receives a list from the prison of the visitors that will be arriving that day. The visitor centre then checks the visitors against that list. There is sometimes a problem with visitors bringing along additional children who are not on the VO and in these cases the Duty Governor must be contacted and they make a decision on whether they can attend the visit.

The visitor centre then telephones the gate staff to let them know which visitors have arrived. The visitor centre then sends the visitors across two at a time. They look across to the prison gate from the visitor centre to see if those visitors have gone through and then send the next group over.

The visitors are met at the inner gate by OSGs who search them. They are then taken over to the visits area where they pass the drug dog. The visitors then enter the visits area where they are checked in by security staff and they are then let into the visits area to be seated awaiting the prisoner.

Provision by the Prison Service

The maintenance of family ties between a prisoner and their family is the responsibility of a number of departments within the prison. This includes the Resettlement team for the strategic approach, the Operations team who administer visits, the Physical Education department who administer the Millennium Child Parent days and the wing staff of Residential 2, who administer the child-parent days every Friday.

The prison states that it takes the Regional Resettlement Strategy as its starting point for its policy on the maintenance of family ties. The prison also has its own Resettlement Strategy and Action Plan. Within this document, under Strategic Pathway 4, it is stated that the maintenance of family relationships can help reduce re-offending and there is a recognition that support and advice for families within the prison is limited. Also within this document there is a recognition that 60% of women in prison have dependent children under 18. Under the action for this Strategic Pathway, there are few actions that would contribute to the maintenance or strengthening of family ties, with the exception of inviting NEPACS to the Resettlement Policy Committee 'when this agenda item is timetabled' (HMP Low Newton, 2005: 18). However, there is recognition that this is a draft document and can be developed.

In early 2005 the prison opened a new visits area which was near to the gate. This modern facility replaced a visits area that was further inside the prison, an approximate 10 minute walk from the prison gate.

There are proposals from the Resettlement team to employ a part time family support worker, although their remit was not yet known.

The resettlement team within the prison state that there are two roles that the family contact facilitated by the prison must play. The first is to reintroduce mother and child, if there have been parenting problems. The second is the maintenance of the relationship between a mother and her children whilst she is in prison.

The Security team (Operations) administer the routine visits. They have a total of five staff within the visiting area, not including the drug dog handler and the OSGs at the gate. There are two teams that regularly staff the visit.

The priority of the Security department is to “ensure the safety of the people inside the prison¹²”. The Security department takes pride in the informality of the visits room and the good atmosphere. They also talk highly of the professional approach of their visits staff and their state of the art technology whose CCTV system can “see the Queen’s head on a coin on the floor”. In relation to drugs passes they stated “we have intelligence to say there’s going to be a drugs pass¹³”.

Security also vets the names of anyone who is participating on the child-parent days of the Millennium days.

The Security Governor felt that, whilst visitors use children to pass drugs, “I wouldn’t stop them [families] ... I’d encourage them to come”. He stated that “it’s about getting a balance between the concerns of the family and drugs”.

Problems Experienced by the Prison Service

The prison states that the biggest impact on the number of visitors that a prisoner receives is forced transfers, i.e. if a prisoner from the North East is transferred to another women’s prison or a prisoner from another area is transferred to HMP Low Newton.

“I get a dozen requests every week begging me to send them [prisoners] back [to the prison they were transferred from] so they can see their families”.

The prison states that it is under particular pressure in relation to forced transfers as there are only a finite number of female prisons in the country and so they have to either take or disperse prisoners on request. For example, when HMP Buckley Hall changed from a female to a male prison, they had 350 prisoners they had to disperse, a number of which were sent to HMP Low Newton. Similarly, when HMP Durham changed from a mixed high security prison to a community prison, HMP Low Newton had to take 20 of their high risk prisoners. The prison states that ,*“this makes resettlement work difficult”.*

There is also no suitable area for the child-parent visits.

Provision by NEPACS

The visitors centre is open from 1:15 pm to 4:00 pm from Monday to Friday and from 9:15 am to 11:15 am and 1:15 pm to 3:30 pm at weekends. They normally open the doors at 12:45 pm to allow visitors to use the facilities, and there are usually people waiting in cars as they have frequently travelled long distances and want to arrive early.

¹² Tony Brown, Security Governor, pers.communication, September, 2005.

¹³ *Ibid*, 2005.

The visitors centre manager is part time and contracted to do 28 hours per week, although she can do up to 40 hours per week, of which the extra hours are unpaid. There is one paid worker who provides weekend cover once a fortnight to enable the manager to have time off. This worker also provides holiday cover.

NEPACS also employs a child care worker who works in the crèche inside the prison for three sessions a week. There are 13 regular volunteers who have been at the visitors centre for a number of years. There are two volunteers that work on a Monday, one on Tuesday, three Wednesday, two Thursday, three Friday and none on the weekend. Volunteers will arrive at 1 pm and leave at 4 pm.

Volunteers receive on the job 'hands on' training. There is a formal training day once a year but this is generally not attended as volunteers have busy lives and do not have time to attend. The majority of the volunteers come from the Mother's Union. The chairman of the Union was very supportive of providing services to prisoners and their families and consequently encouraged her members to volunteer at the Centre. There has only been one new volunteer in three years.

Volunteers are scarce and the manager believes this to be due to the "*unglamorous*" nature of the visitors centre. She says that the people, particularly students, are keen to volunteer inside the prison at the crèche for example, but do not want to work at the Centre. She says, "*we're the Cinderella of the prison*"

The centre and the staff provide any support they can to the visiting families and they try and make them as welcome as possible. The service is totally confidential and they do not gossip about the visitors. They "*try and soften the experience*".

The staff will attempt to deal with any problem the visitors may be experiencing with the visiting process, this includes help with applying for financial assistance. If they cannot immediately address the problem they will ask others inside the prison. They also deal with a range of other problems that the families may experience. For example the family may not want the prisoner's bail address to be the home address because the prisoner is a heroin user and they have experienced repeated theft and family disturbance from them. They therefore need to find alternative accommodation and telling the visitors centre staff may be the first point of enquiry. The visitors centre staff will then progress this to the prison. The visitors centre staff also provide an emotional support service and are often the first to hear about incidences of bullying.

The visitors approach the staff for help if the prisoner is experiencing problems, such as bullying or depression. The staff will then contact the relevant prison Officers and the Officer will often see the visitor in private at the end of the visit to let them know how they will deal, or have dealt with the problem.

The visitors centre staff build up relationships with visitors, especially if those visitors come to the prison over a long period. They often receive presents and cards expressing thanks from visitors and they rarely experience trouble.

The visitors centre felt that there was a resentment from the prison when the Centre was opened because Officers saw money being invested outside of the prison when the prison had investment needs. It took two to three years before the Centre and the staff were accepted.

The manager used to sit on a series of prison committees but she can no longer attend because of time constraints. The manager can also not attend any prison meetings as they are held in the afternoon during visiting times. The manager is not consulted about resettlement nor is she on any resettlement policy committee. The manager says this is frustrating and would like to go to the committees at the very least to know what was going on in the prison.

The visitors centre does not receive any news or information from the prison and they consequently feel isolated. A major problem faced by the visitors centre experiences is a lack of space for private conversations.

The visitors centre manager felt that not many people take advantage of the assisted visits scheme, mainly because they do not know about it.

The Experience of Prisoners

Many prisoners stated that routine visits were not a suitable atmosphere for children and some prisoners would not allow their children to visit at routine visits, preferring to see them on a child-parent visit on a Friday or at the Millennium days. One prisoner stated "*I don't let my bairns come on the normal visits, only mi mam ... I see the bairns on the Millennium days*".

Many prisoners also stated that the contact they had with their children was not sufficient to maintain contact. For example, some prisoners stated that their children could not come to the weekly child-parent visits either because they had to miss a day at school in order to come, or because they lived too far away to arrive at the allotted time. One prisoner stated "*they have to come from Leeds so they can never get here for nine*", another stated "*she used to come when she was in middle school 'cos her teachers knew [that her mother was in prison] but now she's in high school she can't come*".

Prisoners stated that the level of physical contact they were allowed at routine visits with their family was extremely inadequate. Prisoners felt that officers were over zealous and "*over the top*". One prisoner commented "*one time my daughter was sitting on my knee and an officer came over and told her to sit on the floor next to me*". Prisoners felt that the level of contact they could have with their

visitors was dependent on which of the two 'teams' that staffed visits were present; with one team being more harsh than the other.

Some prisoners complained that they did not get their allotted time with their visitors, particularly those who came from further away. One prisoner said *"I get in about ten past two because my family get here early, but there are some lasses who don't get their visitors until two forty"*.

Prisoners get more visits from their children when it is school holidays. However, some prisoners said that their children do miss some school as a result of visiting them.

Prisoners complained that they were not always notified if they were going to receive a Millennium visit, i.e. if they had been successful at being accepted onto the list for the forthcoming day. One prisoner stated *"you're supposed to get a slip under your door, but you don't all the time, maybe six out of ten times ... if I didn't call my partner the night before I wouldn't know if he was coming"*.

There were mixed feelings about the Millennium days. Although prisoners welcomed the opportunity to spend prolonged time with their children, they also stated that the children often became bored because the toys were more suitable for younger children and for girls. Bored children were often told off by the prison officers. Prisoners complained that their children could not help themselves to the buffet lunch that was provided (paid for from the Millennium fund), instead they had to choose what they wanted and an officer would give it to them. This takes away a major part of the enjoyment of children having a buffet lunch; picking and choosing what they want themselves. There was also a complaint that one child, after playing on the bouncy castle, was refused another drink, *"they said to her you'd already had one"*. There was also complaints about one officer who openly admitted that she did not like children.

There were feelings that there should be a meeting after each day to recap on how the day went and to plan for the next day. On one occasion there was almost a failure to buy paint in for the forthcoming day (it arrived the day before) and it was stated that *"this woulda been a disaster cos all they [the children] do is paint cos there's nowt else to do"*. It was stated that officers did hand out questionnaires after the days but *"nothing seemed to happen about these"* and there was an absence of analysis and reflection. There is also an absence of follow up, for example, the prisoners are still waiting for photographs of them and their children (that are taken by the officers) from the July day. However, despite the poor resourcing of the day, the boredom of the children and the lack of planning, these days were universally appreciated, with one prisoner saying *"I'd go on them every week if they had them on"*.

One common complaint about the days is that they do not allow parents or carers to share the sessions. This was deemed as important as it normalises the

experience for the children, i.e. seeing a whole family unit, and also allows the mother to catch up on the news of the child's progress, e.g. with talking, walking, friends, accidents, etc.

At the weekly child-parent days, it used to be the case that partners and carers were allowed in for five minutes at the beginning and the end of the visits. This has now been stopped (security prefer it if the children are left at the gate and no adults come into the prison). The retraction of this practice was felt by the prisoners to be have a negative impact. Aside from easing the transition for the child from outside to inside the prison, it also give the prisoner an extra opportunity to see a partner. One prisoner stated *"if I was having a bad week, that was my five minute cuddle"*. Prisoners felt that the officers who staff the weekly child-parent days were excellent and the atmosphere was much more relaxed than other visiting opportunities and this was attributed to the fact that they are normally residential wing staff. It was felt that the PE staff were the next best and the worst were security officers who staff the routine visits.

Prisoners also complained about the failure of administration in the prison system which had a major impact about the level of visiting they could access. For example, prisoners can save up their VOs, PVOs and EPVOs to be used in batches. One prisoner stated that she had been issued with VOs to be used on weekdays which meant these could not be used on weekends. As her child could only visit on a weekend because of school she received less visits . She should have been issued with a PVO or an EPVO which can only be used on weekdays. *"it's little things like this which may not sound much, but it's the little things that get too much and lead to self harm"*.

"Visits are so important for my relationship with my daughter but they make it so difficult".

The Experience of Visitors

The visitors complained that the later they get at the visitor centre, the shorter time they get with the prisoner. This is particularly felt by visitors who have to travel long distances to get to the prison, *"if you get here early you get longer with your [prisoner], but I don't get here 'til twelve an I only get an hour"*. This means that, as the visitor centre operates ticket systems which guarantees a visitor their place, those visitors who live in more locally can arrive early to the centre and get a good place in the ticket queue. Those who arrive later, get a later ticket position, enter the visits hall later and get a shorter time with the person they are visiting.

Visitors complained that there was not enough time to kiss and cuddle the prisoners, *"five minutes at the beginning and the end is not enough, cos you haven't seen them for weeks"*.

Visitors stated that the children do not enjoy visiting because of the behaviour of the officers. One stated *“kids don't like getting rubbed down ... especially after each time they use the toilet ... I mean they're hardly going to bring drugs out”*.

Visitors complained about the behaviour of some staff, although others staff were felt to be very professional. A common comment was *“it all depends on who's on ... some are dreadful with particular people ... some of the comments are uncalled for like ‘you getting a strip search today?’, ‘the dog not sitting on you today?’*”.

Bringing in property for prisoners was also raised as a major problem area, with some visitors saying that they receive contradictory messages from the prison about what they can and cannot bring in. One visitor stated *“my daughter put applications in for six weeks for me to bring in clothing for her but I still can't get it to her ... they keep saying there's no property officer on or something”*. Another visitor stated, *“there's no consistency ... they don't make it easy for visitors”*.

The visitors expressed four main problems:

- The emotional shock of having a family member in prison and the stress of coming to a visit;
- The emotional and financial burden of taking responsibility and becoming the carer for the prisoner's child and taking that child to visit the parent;
- The financial burden of visiting a family member; and
- The negative and judgemental attitude of the local community.

“Visitors have a lot to put up with”.

The child-parent visits are not well used and the visitors say that this is due to them taking place too early for many people to get to the prison. They also take place in school hours which mean the carer must take the child out of school in order to attend. In addition to this, visitors do not like leaving the child with the mother and having to wait elsewhere and not seeing the prisoner themselves.

Summary to HMP Low Newton

The Millennium Days and the child-parent visits hold significant potential and are highly valued by the prisoners that participate in them. However, there is much room for improvement: for the Millennium Day there needs to be better resourcing, equal participation for partners and carers and training of officers in customer relations; the child-parent days need to be put on when it does not conflict with school opening times and there needs to be an adequate space for them to take place.

Prisoners and visitors complain of significant inconsistencies of the behaviour of the prison officers on visits and prison policy and procedure on what is allowed

and what is not. This both makes the visits experience more stressful and more difficult.

Of the prisoners at HMP Low Newton it is estimated that 75% are mothers of dependent children (under 18). Of these, it is further estimated that 50% are the primary carers of their children. There are therefore approximately 150 prisoners, at any one time, whose children are now looked after by someone other than their primary carer. It warrants further investigation why there are only an average of 12 prisoners per month on the Millennium Child Parent day, why the weekly child-parent day is undersubscribed, why, only on a weekend, are visits full and why there are only 18 visiting places for convicted prisoners.

5.0 Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

This final section presents the main findings from the research in the four prisons and draws a series of conclusions from the evidence that has been collected. Finally, a series of recommendations are presented in the light of those conclusions.

5.1 Findings

This research has produced a series of important findings. Some of these reinforce what research and policy professionals already know and some are new findings. The findings include:

- Visiting a prisoner is not a pleasant experience, particularly for children, and the many difficulties discourage family members from visiting. This results in fewer people visiting family members in prison, which means more family relationships are damaged.
- Routine visits do little to support and maintain family relationships and indeed can put more strain on relationships because of the difficulties involved for the family. Most of the strain is caused by the prison service, its protocols and behaviour of the prison staff.
- Those responsible for security in prisons have consistently said that security concerns need not restrict family or child-parent visits.
- Opportunities when a parent can spend a sustained length of time with his or her child(ren) is extremely beneficial to all involved. What is even more beneficial are opportunities when the prisoner and his or her family can have sustained and quality time together.
- Provision by the prison service for family days is very poor. Some prisons have no provision for family visiting outside of normal visits. Other prisons do have provision but make it almost impossible for prisoners and families to access those opportunities. Other prisons put on the days so infrequently as to severely limit the impact they have on improving family relationships. Many prisons with weak or infrequent provision openly state in their policy and communiqués that they do much to support and maintain family relationships.
- All the prison strategy and policy is highly supportive of measures to support and maintain family relationships.

In addition to these, the research has also found that NEPACS and the Holme House Visitor Centre play an extremely important role in facilitating the visiting process and provide many valuable support services to visitors, including practical and emotional support. However, there are a number of problems experienced by the visitors centre administrators which predominantly concern staffing and resourcing issues. Where visitors centres have close working relationships with the prisons they serve and there is investment by the prison, e.g. HMP Acklington, there seems to be an effective collaboration. Where there is weak cooperation, then the relationship is weak and the visitors centre's

contribution to service delivery, e.g. in resettlement policy, is weak (through no fault of their own).

Problems often arise in the visiting process because different prisons have different procedures. Prisoners have often been held in several establishments and receive visits by family members. Because procedures vary depending on the establishment, families often experience problems when they expect procedures to be the same.

5.2 Conclusions

The research for this article has demonstrated several important issues that are of importance to the prison service and policy makers in the criminal justice field.

To answer the question of why is visiting declining when the prison population has risen, this evidence suggests that it is because visitors find it difficult to visit family members in the current system. From the beginning of the visiting process they encounter inadequate telephone booking systems and are faced with long and exhausting trips (with children). On arrival, they experience long queues, often intimidating security procedures, rarely receive their allocated visit time and have unsatisfactory contact with a member of their family that they have possibly not seen for weeks.

These difficulties are occurring despite major national, regional and prison-based policy which states that every endeavour is made to support the maintenance of family ties. When returning to the HIP 2004 *Expectations* list, out of total of 10 recommendations, only two have been found to have been fulfilled in some of the case studies presented here. Firstly, only three out of five prisons provided evening visits and family days were either unavailable, or difficult to access in three of the case studies. Secondly, a well run visitors centre was available in four out of five case studies.

Therefore, this research indicates that the main weakness in supporting and maintaining family relationships is the delivery setting, i.e. the individual establishments not doing what they are saying, or not doing what they are instructed they should be doing.

The Government has identified that the maintenance of family ties as a key factor in the reduction of re-offending and in resettlement (SEU 2002 among others). With the prison population having exceeded 77,000 the resettlement agenda has never been so important. Within this research, routine visits have been shown to be inadequate to maintain family contact. This is particularly relevant to the relationship between parent and child(ren). Against this backdrop, it would seem incredulous and shallow that the Government is saying that an initiative is important, that it is doing it, but on inspection it is not. It is also concerning that if

it were not for voluntary sector research, such as this, that this would not have been identified.

5.3 Recommendations

What this research points towards is the need for frequent opportunities for prisoners to be able to spend some time with all of their family members, particularly their children. In order to achieve this aim there are several recommendations.

- Family days and child-parent visits need to be as widely available as possible to all prisoners and should cease being considered as privileges. This means that the individual establishments need to make them easier to access (i.e. HMP Holme House and HMP YOI Castington).
- Where family provision already exists, the quality of that provision must be improved, for example in HMP Low Newton, the child-parent days must be made accessible at times outside of school hours and the Millennium days must be better resourced and it partners and carers should be allowed to participate in the day.
- Where family visiting provision does not exist, i.e. in HMP Acklington, it must be started.
- It is recommended that information on whether the offender has any dependant children be collected on admission to custody. At present this information is either not collected, not used or in an accessible format. Knowing parenting responsibilities is the first step in addressing needs. OASYS, the resettlement tool, needs to include information about family status and responsibilities (something that it does not currently do, i.e. information on if the prisoner has children or if the prisoner is the primary carer of any children). If this is not known, it is almost impossible to design any family or resettlement support either whilst the prisoner is in custody or upon release.
- Special visits, child-parent or family days should not be regarded as privileges as any time spent maintaining and rebuilding family relationships will lead to greater success in the post-release settlement process.
- There is training for staff on their attitudes and how to speak to and deal with children and their parents.
- Inconsistencies between prisons about what is and is not permitted in visiting different prisons should either be ironed out or made very clear to visitors and so if a prisoner is transferred then visitors are clear about the different rules about visiting (a cause of many family problems).

- The organisations that administer the visitors centres must be assisted to participate in resettlement policy and other key meetings inside the prison. This includes investment by the prison to free the time of visitors centre managers to allow them to participate, i.e. contribute to staffing costs.

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