

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)

In Spring 2022, as the prison estate finally emerged from covid restrictions, I and my Parliamentary Adviser, Dr Samantha Callan, visited several prisons to gain a sense of how the implementation of my two Reviews was faring. Our deliberations are summarised in the following addendum to the two Farmer Reviews. It is intended to assist HMPPS/Moj and governors as they weave the golden thread of relationships into the rehabilitation agenda following the pandemic.

LORD FARMER

Introduction and Recommendations

The whole country owes much to the very many prison staff who faithfully carried out their duties during the deeply uncertain and anxious times we all lived through, when the covid pandemic gathered momentum and over the long months of national lockdown. Although not in the minds of many of those ‘Clapping for Carers’, those looking after prisoners also kept working through covid, despite the personal danger to themselves and their families.

No one should forget or downplay the constraints prison governors/directors and their teams were forced to operate under during this period, when public health priorities and staffing pressures sharply limited their ability to run normal regimes. Now prisons can put their attention back onto reducing reoffending, this is the time to resume the very promising trajectory many were on to ensure relationships are a priority going forward.

On my recent visits I was reminded why inmates who receive family visits are 39% less likely to reoffend than those who do not. Among all other rehabilitation pathways, good quality contact with family and significant others is, statistically, the most effective way to cut crime.

‘Without a supportive family to return to he’ll return to crime regardless of the education he takes part in and the accommodation he gets upon release.’

Deputy Governor, men’s prison

For him, without the father-child bond they have nothing to fight for – family are their fight, it’s the golden ticket.

Wife of first-time prisoner with two teenage children

The 2017¹ and 2019² Farmer Reviews were commissioned to ensure family and other relational ties were strengthened rather than weakened whilst men and women are in prison (with implications for the wider criminal justice system). Their emphasis on the motivation and purpose which the golden thread of relationships brings to all aspects of prison life, and the policy framework and measures developed in response, laid important foundations which can now be further built on. This short addendum to these Reviews makes recommendations to the MoJ/HMPPS, His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) and governing governors/directors to help them recover lost momentum and ensure healthy relationships become increasingly prioritised in all aspects of prison life.

¹ Lord Farmer, 2017, *The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners’ Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*, MoJ

² Lord Farmer, 2019, *The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders’ Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*, MoJ

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)

Arguably this matters more now than ever: HMIP recently reported that ‘the most disturbing effect of the restrictions was the decline in prisoners’ emotional, psychological and physical well-being’.³ Furthermore, a survey from EP: IC Consultants found that the ‘lack of contact with family was the biggest cause for declining mental health’ amongst prisoners.⁴ For many in prisons the impact of covid is extending far beyond the duration of the pandemic and families can play a critical role in supporting their wellbeing and safety. **2022**

The response to covid did fast-track implementation of some aspects of the family and relationships agenda laid out in my two reviews, and the speed with which video calls were made available across the whole of the estate in England and Wales was particularly heartening and impressive. In just over six months, over 90,000 video calls had been made, almost 45,000 hours of contact, and prisoners were enabled to see their families in more than 100 countries.⁵

However, no one I met on my visits was complacent about the progress their prisons had made to ensure relationships are always essential in rehabilitation. This encouraged us that governors and staff across the estate are keen to regain any ground that was inadvertently lost during the pandemic and keep building on good foundations. What follows below highlights some of the good practice I saw, to aid in that process, and I make the following recommendations for developing the relational culture that is needed.

1. Families and relationships to be routinely included by MoJ/HMPPS in all departmental documentation and communications related to reducing offending. This third ‘leg’ of rehabilitation needs to be firmly embedded, alongside education and employment/training, and flow into all rehabilitation activity. Over five years of intense work from HMPPS’ Family Services team and others should inform policies and strategies at a departmental level. An emphasis on relationships must be explicitly part of the MoJ’s DNA. (And, whenever I can, I will continue to encourage ministers to include this emphasis in speeches and other forms of communication.)

2. To revitalise, where necessary, prison governors’ efforts to implement their Family and Significant Other Strategies and fulfil their ethos, data collection through the new family measure and prisons’ requirement to have a senior operational lead should be used as vital levers to drive change.

3. A thematic HMIP review on the difference family services made during covid, lessons for the future and how prisons and their partners are innovating as they come into more normal times, to assist governors.

4. Each prison to audit, and improve where necessary, provision for first night and early days in custody, when basic needs, including for family contact, are often going unmet. This should include a focus on **how well they are deploying peer support to increase prisoners’ ability to take responsibility for their own lives and contribute to the wellbeing of others** during this period. Further, each prison to

³ [What happens to prisoners in a pandemic? \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)

⁴ Wainwright L and Gipson D, 2020, *The Impact of Lockdown to Mental Health: A summary of patient views*, EP: IC Consultants

⁵ [Secure video calls help all prisoners maintain essential family ties during pandemic - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)

consider if they are sufficiently harnessing the potential of peers to make a difference across the whole of prison life.

5. HMPPS and DfE to pilot the integration of external visitors centres into family hubs networks, so families using them have access to a full range of family support services and, where they are of sufficient size, these should be accessible by the local community.

6. Take steps to improve prisoners' access to telephone contact. Both Farmer Reviews recommended re-negotiating contracts with telephone service providers, so prisoners are treated the same as other customers with regard to cost. Although call charges have seen reductions, **prioritization to be given to improving contract terms further.**

The Farmer Review for Women recommended piloting the use of simple, non-internet enabled mobile phones as an interim and less costly solution than in-cell telephony. The pandemic provided a natural experiment in their use in the male and female estates.

HMPPS to draw on this learning and redeploy mobile phones wherever possible.

7. Build on the pandemic's legacy of a hybrid system of visual contact. Video calls to be an area of ongoing improvement in terms of how well they work and how widely they are used. Physical visits remain important for many prisoners but old and new barriers exist to accessing these. **Governors to consider how to make social visits as satisfying and worthwhile as possible, how barriers due to location can be overcome and how video calls and physical visits can become an integrated system.**

8. Recommendations from this report to be added to the Implementation Plans for the two Farmer Reviews.

Purpose of the visits and interviews

We were keen to see if and how prisons were picking up the threads of family and other relational work during the recovery phase from the pandemic. This report draws on the practice and experiences of eight prisons we visited, which varied in security category and therefore the kinds of pressure they operate under (see table below). We did not include open prisons as were they subject to fewer and different restrictions during covid.

We obtained first hand accounts from the prisons' governing governors, directors, deputy governors, prison officers, men and women who had served time during covid and 80 family members, the vast majority of whom filled in response forms in anticipation of our visits. We also did a rapid review of 15 of the most recent HMIP reports, including from six of these establishments and talked to the governing governor of another women's prison.

What came across forcibly from our visits was the important role played by chaplains and others in the prison workforce, particularly family support workers often employed by partner organisations. Those who stayed accessible to prisoners and families throughout covid, and helped them to communicate with each other, were highly praised by them.

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid *an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)*

Prisons visited

Men's estate

HMP Five Wells – Cat C (Resettlement)
HMP Full Sutton – Cat A/B (High security estate)
HMP Frankland – Cat A (High security estate)
HMP Manchester – Cat A/B (Training)
HMP Wakefield – Cat A (High security estate)
HMP Durham – Cat B (Reception)

Women's estate

HMP Low Newton – closed (and restricted status)
HMP Peterborough – closed (and restricted status)

Whilst appreciating this is a developing landscape, we identified three common and interrelated themes of the impact of covid on family work with the aim of supporting and encouraging the efforts of governors and their staff teams to prioritise relationships moving forward. There is a clear need to:

- Re-prioritise 'Family and Significant Others' Strategies where necessary
- Address the effects of the lack of contact with families
- Recognise the increase in video calls and decline in face-to-face visits

Re-prioritise 'Family and Significant Others' Strategies where necessary

'Family stuff was put on the backburner during covid'

Deputy Governor, men's prison

One prison we visited included the following 'caveat' on the front page of their 'Family and Significant Others' Strategy (FSOS):

'Due to the current ongoing pandemic the ethos of the current family strategy policy has been unable to be facilitated to its full potential due to social distancing requirements, Tiers, and local/national lockdowns. Therefore, further reviews and development of the Family Strategy policy will be conducted following the national/local review and reduction to COVID social requirements within the UK and [local] borough.'

This prison prioritised meeting as soon as restrictions were lifted to address future family support targets, integrate these into the reducing reoffending agenda and include them within the bi-monthly Reducing Re-offending Meeting attended by all partner agencies.

To support governors as they seek to improve their 'Family and Significant Others' Strategies, the Family Services function within HMPPS constantly shares good practice between prisons. Further to this, the collection of data as part of the new HMPPS' family measure, one of 14 KPIs each prison has to deliver against, and the explicit need to designate a senior operational lead, are important levers for implementing FSOSs.

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)

It has been encouraging to see how HMIP reports are holding prisons to account in this area and the importance of being able to maintain relationships with families and significant others is increasingly mentioned with key recommendations to governors to do more. For example, one report in our rapid review pointed to a promising family strategy but the lack of an action plan to drive improvement.

More positively we found other examples of strategic re-sets following covid. Officers at one prison said ‘Covid gave us time to look at all our processes – we have never had the time to take stock.’ The 2021 HMIP report from HMP Wandsworth noted, albeit more cosmetically, that the visitors’ hall had been redecorated during covid, making it more welcoming.⁶

Revitalising the family agenda, building on previous progress and restating how imperative it is to meet relational needs, acknowledges the additional hardships prisoners and their families endured during covid, and the cooperation they provided to regimes. HMIP could play an important role in supporting governors as they seek to do this.

Recommendations

2. To revitalise, where necessary, prison governors’ efforts to implement their Family and Significant Other Strategies and fulfil their ethos, **data collection through the new family measure and prisons’ requirement to have a senior operational lead should be used as vital levers to drive change.**

3. **A thematic HMIP review on the difference family services made during covid, lessons for the future and how prisons and their partners are innovating as they come into more normal times, to assist governors.**

Ensuring family contact is quickly established at the beginning of a sentence

The pace and character of regime activity has always differed from one part of the estate to another: high security prisons, where unspent sentences are long, are typically far more settled than reception prisons where a large percentage are undergoing a painful transition from life outside to the restrictions of the regime. Population needs for family contact are also very different.

Getting contact with family and significant others right at what is often the most stressful – and strategic – point in sentences can make the difference between life and death, as around a third of all prison suicides occur very early (within the first week) in custody. Isolation from relationships or a breakdown in communication can play a decisive role.⁷

At HMP Durham we were made aware of the suddenness of severed relationships and heard that it could be weeks before people knew how to get in touch with families, and how to organise visits.

⁶ HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2021, *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Wandsworth (13th and 20th-24th September 2021)*

⁷ Liebling A, 1999, ‘Prison Suicide and Prisoner Coping’, *Crime and Justice: Review of Research*, 26, 283-360

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid *an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)*

HMIP reports from other establishments also highlighted how hard it was in some prisons to contact families on arrival, but this is an essential, minimum requirement.

Many men are held on remand 'just waiting' so it is important to ask who was taking care of their family and significant other relationships during this incredibly stressful time, which can set the tone for their whole prison journey. Staff from NEPACS, the voluntary sector organisation in the North East of England, provide an important messenger service between men and their families and ensure other basic needs were met, through the 'Early Days in Custody' project (also run in HMP Low Newton).

The need to address the beginning of prison experience, from the perspective of ensuring family relationships are not badly damaged, or fraught with fear, was brought home forcibly. When someone is in prison for the first time, the uncertainty is extremely difficult for those at home who have often done nothing wrong. Alongside the new prisoner they are coping with a transitional nightmare.

We were told that the first question families ask is 'What does a cell look like?' This can be easily answered by making a short video in each prison or even mocking up a cell in the visitors' centre as they have done in HMP Oakwood. Encouragingly HMP Durham had implemented my recommendation to enable families to request the opening of an Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) document and update them on actions taken, with prisoners' consent.

Peer support to enable prisoners to build supportive relationships from the outset

HMIP Expectations for both male⁸ and female⁹ prisons highlight the importance of peer support when people first enter prison: good relationships on the inside contribute greatly to a successful transition into custody. The latest inspection of HMP&YOI Doncaster (which receives more than 250 new prisoners per month) described 'excellent peer support during the early days at the prison'¹⁰ and it is not unusual for Safer Custody teams elsewhere to use peers for first night support. Certainly, we found that many new entrants simply want to be able to ask a fellow prisoner if and how they can make themselves safe.

Without minimising the value of well-trained and experienced prison officers, good relationships between prisoners can be transformational for rehabilitation. Several prisons we visited referred to how they had expanded peer support. For example, HMP Peterborough have piloted a Motherhood Mentors programme which draws on grandmothers as well as mothers whose relationships have 'become layered with shame and hurt'.¹¹ Whilst they have missed and lost opportunities to nurture their own children or help them raise grandchildren, because they are inside prison, the programme enables them to nurture younger women.

⁸ [Men's prison Expectations \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/men-prison-expectations/)

⁹ [Women's prison Expectations \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/women-prison-expectations/)

¹⁰ HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMCP), 2022, *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP&YOI Doncaster* (21-22 February and 28 February – 4 March 2022)

¹¹ Personal conversation with the researcher Dr Lucy Baldwin who covers similar themes in Baldwin L & Epstein R, 2017, *Short but not sweet: A study of the impact of short custodial sentences on mothers & their children* De Montfort University

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)

More broadly, new contracts for family services also include greater use of peers in delivery and peer-**led** initiatives are a pillar of operations in the new prison HMP Five Wells. Maximising this approach creates a plethora of opportunities to take responsibility and work towards improving *others'* wellbeing.

Recommendation

4. Each prison to audit, and improve where necessary, provision for first night and early days in custody, when basic needs, including for family contact, are often currently going unmet. This should include a focus on how well they are deploying peer support to increase prisoners' ability to take responsibility for their own lives and contribute to the wellbeing of others during this period. **Each prison to consider if they are sufficiently harnessing the potential of peers to make a difference across the whole of prison life.**

Category A/B prisons and family ties

In the high security estate (HSE) family relationships can be very stable. Some family members have even been known to move into the local area to be near the prison for ease of visiting. Such proximity, again, enabled them to be involved in ACCT processes. Officers at one HSE prison described how during covid:

'If men were in crisis ACCT Reviews provided an avenue for speaking to families and welfare checks were carried out if a family member flagged concern. Sometimes we have lengthy discussions with families on the spiderphone – maintaining links and getting their support.'

On the other hand, family relationships can be painfully difficult because of the crimes committed:

'Some do not want anything to do with their families – some murdered their families.'

Positively we heard how one HSE prison was making contact with significant others a priority going forward. The deputy governor explained how they were vetting a lot of additional people, given that police checks are often required for social visits in this part of the estate.

Some had also used the re-set following covid to improve family days for example by having a specific Neurodiversity Day where visitors with, for example, autism or ADHD, were catered for. One prison, HMP Wakefield, allowed colour family photos to be printed:

'It's a small thing but really nice – and there is no spice involved in electronic communication.'

(Intriguingly men in other HSE establishments were aware of this and lobbying for an upgrade from black and white.)

Integrated support for family and other relationships inside and outside prisons

Governors also need to be very intentional about where they base their family work inside the prison. NEPACS works extensively on the wings in HMP Durham and are now based in the Safer Custody corridor. They are trying to locate their operations similarly in other

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)

prisons, because it helps to integrate NEPACS' work and caseload with this highly relevant team.

POPS, another organisation whose employees were also inside prisons during covid told us:

'Covid was a terrible thing but in some ways it helped prisons to know what a family service can do on the wings – including ACCT support.'

Prisoners also benefit from being able to access support from the family service provider as they are leaving prison, to help them reintegrate with their families, and/or connect with services on the outside. This is one of the guiding principles for Pact's Routes 2 Change project running in HMP Brixton and HMP Isis. Tees Valley Probation Services commission NEPACS (mentioned earlier) to run the HMP Low Newton Departure Lounge and the Nelson Trust have now opened a Women's Centre inside HMP Eastwood Park.

Another voluntary sector organisation, Spurgeons, is joining up support for families within prisons with community support on the outside, based in Family Hubs. These enable local services, which may be based in different buildings, to work together in closer partnership, so they are more easily accessible to families. Such networks of family support could draw in external visitors centres as delivery sites for services that are not directly related to the prison visits process, such as debt management, housing advice, and parenting support.

Integrating external visitors centres in local family hub networks and making them accessible to other families in the local community is another way of making prisons more 'extrovert' and helping to break down the stigma faced by prisoners' families.

Over the five to seven years until the next commissioning round for prison-based family services, the model can be refined and there will ideally be evidence of the effectiveness of this integrated approach. This would enable the model to be incorporated in the next commissioning process as an inter-departmental initiative with the Department for Education, the home department for Family Hubs.

Recommendation

5. HMPPS and DfE to pilot the integration of external visitors centres into family hubs networks, so families using them have access to a full range of family support services and, where they are of sufficient size, these should be accessible by the local community.

Address the effects of the lack of contact with families

'Covid has been very difficult for me, my partner [prisoner] and his family. Increased phone calls was good but not seeing each other for nearly a year was hard. It affected both our mental health and mood negatively and we are so glad visits are slowly increasing and getting back to normal with minimal restrictions.'

We heard first-hand from many in prison how hard they had found the long wait before social visits could resume, not knowing when they would see their families again. It was not unusual to have had no visits for a year when previously they had been very frequent.

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)

Governors told us it was to prisoners' credit that there was not a lot more unrest especially when they were aware that restrictions were loosening in the community far faster than was possible inside jails (although care homes and hospitals were more valid comparators).

Rightly there was a lot of public appreciation for frontline workers during covid, including prison officers: prisoners themselves expressed their gratitude to them for turning up day after day, despite the risks to their own safety. Yet it should also be recognised that many prisoners served sentences under far harder conditions than in normal times. One woman whose husband was first imprisoned during covid told us how the isolation had a huge mental effect on him, and he had suffered significant memory loss from 24/7 lock up.

Men we talked to described how,

'Psychologically it's massively harder without family support.'

The importance of the relationship between young men and their mothers was specifically mentioned. They were also living with the awareness that their families were profoundly affected. As one male prisoner told us,

*'Not seeing my family has 100% affected **their** mental health.'*

Whilst the extra PIN credit all prisoners received during the pandemic did help meet the costs of phone calls, the 'major discrepancy' between call charges inside, faced by the lowest (legally) waged people in society and those outside prison came up repeatedly.

Levelling the playing field where there is not yet in-cell telephony

It is heartening that all closed women's prisons now have in-cell telephony, and family members told us:

'In-cell telephony is unbelievable.'

'During covid, phones in cells were so important – he used to ring me three times a day. With a long one in the evening.'

However, family members and men inside increasingly think this is the norm across both estates, so it now seems inequitable if they are held in a prison which still has only landing phones. Non-internet enabled mobile phones were deployed during the pandemic and these should be made available as standard until phones have been installed in all prison cells.

Whereas, in an HSE prison with no in-cell phones (or secure mobiles, possibly because security would not have cleared them) men described how there were as few as nine or ten phones between 200 people. Calling in evening or morning when outside cell:

'...did not work with family circumstances: sometimes there was no one to talk to, it's a really big problem.'

Recommendation

6. Improve prisoners' access to telephone contact. Both Farmer Reviews highlighted the need to negotiate better contracts with telephone service providers, so they treat prisoners in the same way as other customers with regard to cost.

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)

Although call charges have seen reductions **prioritization to be given to further improving contract terms.**

The Farmer Review for women recommended piloting the use of simple, non-internet enabled mobile phones as an interim and less costly solution than in-cell telephony. The pandemic provided a natural experiment in their use in the male and female estates.

HMPPS to draw on this learning and deploy mobile phones wherever possible.

Prisoners' right to contact with children in more normal times

Three years after the Farmer Review for women was published, we still heard concerning stories on our visits, and from frontline family support workers, that incarcerated mothers often do not have even a minimal understanding of what their parental rights are, once they enter prison. Many are advised not to disclose parental status during court proceedings and are unaware that they do not lose parental responsibility simply by being in prison and have a right to be updated on their children's welfare.

Although some are able to attend children's welfare hearings virtually on ipads, it is by no means standard for mothers' voices to be heard before decisions are made. Barriers include difficult relationships with the other parent or person with day-to-day responsibility for their children. This was particularly likely if mothers have not made arrangements before coming in. Some do not know where their children are, let alone if they are still legal parents.

The importance of all prisons having someone with parental (legal) rights training, who knows who to contact in children's social care services and how, points again to the need for social workers to be part of the multi-disciplinary team inside prison.¹²

It was flagged to us that care-experienced prisoners' engagement with social workers can re-traumatise them. So, it is vital to employ social workers who have a high level of skill and relevant experience and are able to work well in partnership with family engagement workers and others who can build trust.

Role of chaplaincy

For those who do not have 'significant others' on the outside, the safe, neutral and ideally uplifting space of the prison multi-faith prayer room/chapel, and welcoming chaplaincy staff, can make a major difference to prisoners' wellbeing and motivation to desist from reoffending. We found the HMP Low Newton multi-faith prayer room/chapel to be a particularly inspiring example. This was a space where relationships could flourish. As one chaplain there told us:

'Creating the right atmosphere doesn't need to cost a fortune. We got a new carpet, the women decorated it and put artwork up, then we stuck a couple of rabbits in there and hey presto! If you

¹² See Recommendation 28 in Lord Farmer, 2019, *The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime*, MoJ

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)

can do it in a pre-fab you can do it anywhere: it's often the biggest space in the prison – there is no reason at all for the space to be boring.'

Recognise the increase in video calls and decline in face-to-face visits

One of the silver linings from covid was the rapid implementation of the Farmer Review recommendations to make video calls available when face-to-face social visits were impossible or disproportionately inconvenient, or where the prisoner was a primary carer.

A largely positive picture emerged of how effective these had been during the pandemic, best illustrated through quotes from families and prisoners, the majority of whom were very grateful for them, however locally prisoners were held:

'I really like the purple visits ['PV', the original provider brand] and hope they can continue as we live a long way from Wakefield and its good to know we can still stay in touch with our loved ones.'

'Cat Bs and Cs are nearer families therefore less need of PVs than Cat A as PV helps with distance.'

'A PV was brilliant – I am a local lad, but parents are older and have underlying health issues.'

'The purple visits are still important to my daughter as because of her low immunity she can't visit.'

'The video calls were the best thing to come out of covid.'

'Purple visits a lot better option, suits modern life, less inconvenient for families who can feel a responsibility to visit.'

'Particularly valuable for the children – a reminder of normality and enables neurodiverse children to engage.'

'PV were an absolute godsend especially for internationals.'

Unsurprisingly there were teething problems with the very rapidly implemented service as security considerations made the video call interface far more sensitive particularly to movement, than the various other video platforms families had quickly grown accustomed to using in the community.

'Purple visits were supposed to be a lifeline for prisoners/families. But everytime we would lose connection, even if you just moved.'

However, a lot was done to iron out these problems and eventually their use became routine and reasonably straightforward for many. In some cases, services from a new provider that was coming on stream when we made our visits, were also proving to be 'gliche-y' for prisoners and families but the overall number of complaints was on the decrease. That said, ongoing improvement is required from commercial video calling services outside prisons and we should expect no less from what providers delivering inside.

Maximising the potential of video calling technology

Each prison now needs to make sure they improve the way prisoners can access video calls, without conveying any sense that this will become the default for visits or the prison's preferred way to facilitate them. One governor of an HSE prison described how:

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)

'Arrangements were put in place very quickly, but I am now keen to introduce a multi-function visits area which would be more efficient from a staffing point of view. This would need some investment to site the terminals in best place.'

Moreover, it was clear that prisons need to increase the applications for video calling technology going forward, for example by enabling and encouraging its use for interviews with future employers, social services and others. Another governor told us:

'We need to think in terms of using IT in a more forward-focused way. In-cell tablets would normalise the routine at the end of every day for mothers if they could be with their children virtually.'

The researcher Dr Lucy Baldwin referred to maternal trauma attached to being a primary carer inside prison, and parents' sense of powerlessness, especially where older children are concerned. She confirmed that the ability to be involved through video calls, in their children's everyday lives, made a significant difference to their and their parents' wellbeing.

Family members told us that they were keen to keep fathers involved in education through video calls with teachers and HMIP's 2022 inspection of HMP Styal found that a video booth had recently been introduced for prisoners to contact social workers and psychologists in the community. This was important provision for many women, particularly those with children in local authority care.

The importance of face-to-face visits

As indicated earlier, there have been concerns that video calls could replace face-to-face visits or that prisoners or family members might come under pressure to go down that route. It was clear from our visits why this should not happen and why choice is so important. There is now, more than ever, widespread public awareness that a screen enables only rather 'lean' and 'flat' communication. As one family member told us:

'It didn't feel as though I had an actual visit.'

Another said:

'When my daughter visited the prison, the school said it was a breath of fresh air for her, they could see the difference, the face-to-face contact brought a massive improvement.'

A prisoner serving a long sentence told us:

'I came in in 2016 and parents used to come every weekend. I realised how frail they have got with the long break for covid. Purple visits are not the same.'

Many prisoners and families told us how long a gap they had endured with no physical visitation, some as much as 18 months, and how much they disliked non-contact visits, even if they were of longer duration. Prisoners being able to hug and hold their partners, children and parents – is vital. A male prisoner said:

'Even if you have the visits, it's the quality of visits. We need more physical contact – people don't want two-hour visits as they are so austere.'

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)

We are concerned that visiting habits seem to have changed as a result of the pandemic and that this could be permanent, and to the detriment of prisoners and their families, unless senior leadership in prisons are proactive about bringing the quality of face-to-face visits back up to good practice standards.

An inspection carried out in late 2021 in a closed women's prison found that the uptake of visits had declined since the pandemic, and a significant decline in the perceived quality of visits: two fifths of women felt they were treated respectfully by staff (vs 70% pre-covid). There was no planned date for the popular family days to restart.

Relationships and parenting materials were provided for the women but largely unused. In this case physical visits did not seem to have been replaced with video calls, for which there was very low uptake (7% of women had used them in the previous month). A key recommendation was that women should be able to maintain family relationships.

During the pandemic family services providers told us some prisons seemed to have gone backwards to less enlightened times in terms of how welcoming their visits environments were. The need for protective measures like plastic shields was understood but:

'It is somewhat chilling that the perspex has gone up again and I hope it comes down again as soon as possible.'

Distance from home was also cited as a barrier to families making physical visits, now that video calls are available, with one man expressing the view that distances were increasing:

'I have got used to not having [in-person] visits. It was considered to be a punishment move to be so far from home, now it's the norm.'

Travel costs are now even more of an issue due to much higher fuel prices, another reason why, when families do make the often very long and difficult journeys to prisons, their visits need to feel worthwhile. The first Farmer Review highlighted the need for prisons to be 'extrovert' and consider how they can work in partnership with local businesses. They might, for example, be able to help with transport from the railway or bus station to the prison gate. It would be vital to involve visiting families in any transport consultation and understand their preferences.

There were also caveats expressed about how intrusive video calls could be for those outside who were often trying to rebuild their lives in the face of a family member's very long sentence, particularly given the complexity of many relationships. One governor in an HSE prison described how a lot of his men were coercive in their family relationships and:

'Video calls are not a blessing for everyone. Given the length of their sentence some family members are effectively leading a double life that the prisoner can now get a look into.'

Good quality video calls and physical visits *both* need to be available, so prisoners and family members have better options for access and staying in contact, particularly with those who would be very loathe to visit, for example because of autism or infirmity. Some prisons are already delivering both well. In HMP Coldingley (Cat C) 17% of prisoners said they had been

Recovering Momentum on Families and Relationships in Prison after Covid an addendum to the Farmer Reviews (published December 2022)

able to see family and friends in person more than once in the last month, against the comparator of only 6%. Family days had already restarted ahead of most prisons.¹³

Moreover, their video call uptake was higher than average; there were no restrictions on the number of such calls a prisoner could make, and though the prison only funded 433 such visits a month, the governor had voluntarily increased this to 1,200.

In the community one member of a family who may be unable or unwilling to join a family gathering in person, perhaps due to illness or neurodiversity issues, now has the choice to join virtually. The coexistence of these two options in prison could enable this flexibility to be extended into a visits hall and unite families who might not have met together for years, if ever. This would bring home to prisoners that they have a ‘tribe’ who cares, is waiting for them, and is worth going straight for.

Expanding choice in how and with whom prisoners stay in contact, gives them a greater sense of agency and more responsibility. It also, vitally, prepares them for the new ‘hybrid’ social normal that is waiting for them when they leave prison.

Recommendation

7. Build on the pandemic’s legacy of a hybrid system of visual contact. Video calls to be an area of ongoing improvement in terms of how well they work and how widely they are used. Physical visits remain important for many prisoners, but old and new barriers exist to accessing these. **Governors to consider how to make social visits as satisfying and worthwhile as possible, how barriers due to location can be overcome and how video calls and physical visits can become an integrated system.**

Conclusion

To reiterate, the prison workforce is to be highly commended on the way they looked after our prison population during what, we all hope, was a once in a lifetime global pandemic. Now they are able to re-focus on reducing the country’s very high rates of recidivism and intergenerational crime, my recommendations are intended to help them weave healthy relationships into all their broader efforts.

This is not being soft on crime: if better family contact and a greater emphasis on prisoners’ relationships help make significant inroads into reoffending levels, this will mean less crime, fewer victims, lower criminal justice costs, fewer children without their parents, and more ex-offenders working, paying tax and producing rather than consuming national wealth.

Recommendation

8. Recommendations from this report to be added to the Implementation Plans for the two Farmer Reviews.

¹³ HMCIP, 2022, *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Coldingley (6 and 10-14 January 2022)*