

Ormiston Children and Families Trust

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**Time for Families**

**HMP Blundeston:  
Visits & Family Ties Survey**

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**2005**

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## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Ormiston Children and Families Trust

This report has been produced by the Ormiston Children and Families Trust as part of its *Time for Families* programme. The purpose was to assess the facilities at HMP Blundeston for promoting family ties for prisoners and identify possible ways in which these might be strengthened.

Ormiston Children and Families Trust is a voluntary organisation providing both community and prison-based services for children and families in the eastern region. It has been engaged in work with families of prisoners in this region since 1989.

*Time for Families* is a region-wide initiative established by, and funded through the Eastern Region Families Partnership (ERFP). The Partnership combines the funding power and strategic goals of three organisations: Ormiston Trust, the Lankelly Foundation and the Prison Service, to meet the needs of the children and families of prisoners.

*Time for Families* supports families affected by imprisonment by working within prisons and in the community, and with partner agencies such as schools, social and community services. Key aims of the initiative are the provision of good quality visiting and contact opportunities in prison, and delivery of support and information for children and families. The initiative also provides parenting courses in prisons, and is working to enhance the role of families in sentence planning and resettlement.

This initiative now manages projects based in six prisons, as well as four community based posts providing support to schools, information and support for families and action research. This study will form the basis for the development of new work at HMP Blundeston, as part of *Time for Families*.

### 1.2 HMP Blundeston

HMP Blundeston is a category C training prison housing around 460 adult male prisoners. Built in 1963, it includes a 40 place Therapeutic Community and a Drug Support Unit. It does not accept prisoners with less than 12 months to serve. Blundeston was converted from a category B prison in 2003.

On average, Blundeston's prison population is older than that of similar establishments and it also takes a relatively high number of foreign nationals. A large proportion of prisoners are from the London area. Blundeston is located 4.5 miles north of Lowestoft in Suffolk.

A staffed Visitors Centre is situated just outside the prison. The times of Social Visits have recently been changed, from Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday afternoons to Fridays, 13.45 - 15.45; and two sessions on Saturdays and Sundays, 09.30 - 11.45 and 13.45 - 16.00.

### 1.3 Importance of strengthening family ties

The role played by family involvement in helping in the successful resettlement of offenders is emphasised in many recent research studies and government reports.

Recent reports from the Social Exclusion Unit (1999, 2000, 2002) all recommended policy developments which improve family support. The 2002 report, *Reducing Re-offending by ex-prisoners*, stated:

*Maintaining family relationships can help to prevent prisoners re-offending and can assist them to successfully settle into the community. However support and advice for families is limited, visiting facilities are often inadequate, and families are rarely involved in the process of tackling offending behaviour. Also, there is scarcely any post-release support, which is the time when relationships are at most risk of breaking down.* (chapter 15)

The Report quoted research findings that only just over half of prisoners in training prisons received the minimum statutory entitlement of two visits per month. It commented that this may be principally due to the long distances prisoners are kept from home and the remote location of many prisons. The Report recommended that:

*Sufficient opportunities should be made available for positive family access and contact.*

In response to the reports of the Social Exclusion Unit, the Home Office drew up the *Reducing Re-offending National Action Plan (2004)*, which stresses the importance of family support in reducing reoffending and highlights the value of partnership working to achieve this. The Action Plan noted, however, that between 1995 and 2000, despite a rise in the prison population, visits per prisoner actually fell by about 30%.

The Plan aims to identify best practice on:

- maintaining contact during sentence, including how prisons make the environment more attractive and family friendly;
- teaching of parenting skills to prisoners
- provision of advice, including through the Prisoners' Families Helpline.

Messages from several research studies show evidence of the positive benefits of family involvement with offenders and people at risk of offending. These include parenting programmes (Ghate and Ramella, 2002). Utting and Venard's research (2000) confirmed that interventions that do *not* work include those programmes which failed to include families. Studies show that many families welcome the opportunity to be involved; this was also the view of most families who participated in this consultation study at HMP Blundeston.

The work of Ormiston's *Time for Families* initiative also links with the desired outcomes of *Every Child Matters*, the Government's vision for children's services. This aims to maximise opportunities and minimize risks for all children and young people and focus services more effectively around their needs. The 2003 *Every Child Matters* Green Paper drew attention to the financial, emotional and health problems often suffered by children having a parent in prison. The impact of these issues on children and young people in the eastern region was highlighted in the recent study undertaken by Ormiston, *Sentenced Families (2004)*.

In relation to potential developments at HMP Blundeston, two outcomes identified in *Every Child Matters* are particularly relevant:

- *Making a positive contribution* - children and young people are helped to develop socially and emotionally, and are helped to manage changes and respond to challenges in their lives;
- *Staying safe* - by supporting prisoners in their role as parents and encouraging an active sense of parental responsibility throughout their sentence and after release.

The *Change for Children in the Criminal Justice System* document (DfES 2004) stresses that '*Engaging families so that they benefit from these reforms is vital.*' A key goal is to '*value the input of parents and carers as partners at every stage*'.

## 2.0 Methodology for Consultation

This study comprised a number of elements:

- **Observation of the facilities for visits** - including the Visitors Centre, visits hall, and search area; this included observation of a Friday visit session.
- **Information gathering** - from staff, prisoners and visitors; this included meetings with the Governing Governor, Teresa Clarke; Head of Finance, Nigel Black; Head of Chaplaincy, Bill Salmon (who has since left Blundeston); Residential Governor, Katheryn Andrews (with responsibility for Foreign Nationals); Visitors Centre Manager, Dee Brown; and telephone contact with Ged Callaghan, Drug Support Unit Manager.
- **Focus groups of prisoners** - groups of six prisoners, from each of four wings, were facilitated by Gill Pugh (Time for Families action researcher) and Stuart Haworth (Operations Manager seconded from the Prison Service to the Time for Families initiative). Each group lasted half an hour and explored the prisoners' views about visits, telephone calls and letters; issues which prisoners identified themselves regarding contact with their families whilst in Blundeston; and their views about parenting courses and family support. Additionally, a discussion was held with a group of foreign nationals to explore their views about family contact.

Participants were selected by wing staff largely on the basis of availability, but with priority given to those prisoners who were fathers. Almost all the participants said they had children.

- **Visitors' views** - these were obtained by two methods. Firstly, informal discussions were held individually with visitors using the Visitors Centre prior to a visit session.

Secondly, prisoners were given information sheets about the family ties survey and asked to give contact details of a family member to whom a questionnaire could be sent. Brief questionnaires asking for their views about issues such as visits were then sent out, enclosing SAE's so they could be returned to the researcher at no cost to the family. Optional sheets for children to express their feelings were also included. This method aimed to include the views of non-visiting families.

A total of 16 families returned questionnaires. Four children aged between three and ten years old, from two different families, also completed activity sheets expressing their views. The views of both the adults and the children are included in this report. The questionnaire is shown in appendix 1.

### 3.0 Identified Issues

This section examines all the issues around family ties raised by families, prisoners and staff during this consultation. Although surveys generally tend to attract more brickbats than bouquets, some feedback about HMP Blundeston was very positive. But the biggest issues by far for everyone were identified as:

- Distance from home
- Delays in starting visits on time
- Lack of facilities for children visiting

#### 3.1 Distance from home/ visiting times

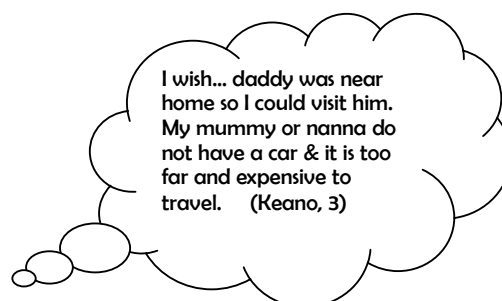
HMP Blundeston tends to be used as an ‘overspill’ prison for the London area. The 2002 Inspection Report recorded that 29% of prisoners came from London, 13% from Essex and only 11% from Norfolk or Suffolk. Many prisoners and families complained about the strain of keeping in contact due to the long distance from home, compounded by the inaccessibility of the prison by public transport, especially at weekends. This was by far the single biggest issue raised in the visitor survey.

A recent regime change has led to a change in visiting days, with visiting now possible only on Friday afternoons and weekends, starting at 9.30am. The new times are unpopular with many visitors. The roads from the London area particularly are very congested on Friday afternoons adding to journey times and stress, and public transport at weekends - especially on Sundays, is very limited from all areas. Visitors with families find it almost impossible to travel long distances and arrive in time for 9am visits. For example, a wife from Birmingham said she has to leave home at 4am. The lack of choice of weekday visits also makes it very difficult for some visitors to get there.

In theory it is possible for families to stay overnight in the area and combine visits on two successive days (‘back to back visits’). In practice however few are able to afford the cost or time commitment that this option entails, especially if they are not eligible for assistance from the APVU (Assisted Prison Visits Unit).

On a positive note, the prison chaplain had organised a commercial coach service to provide transport from London on alternate weekends, but at the time of the survey this was not being well used and was in danger of being withdrawn. Some felt the cost of £25 for adults and £15 for each child was just too high for a family.

The prison is to be commended for providing a mini-bus to pick up pre-booked visitors from Lowestoft station on visits days. However, one visitor said that this arrives too late to enable her to book in early enough to get the full visiting time (see below) so she prefers to get a taxi from the station, even though this costs £10 each way. The mini-bus does not operate for enhanced or lifer visits.



### 3.2 Delays in starting visits on time

This was an issue of major concern to prisoners and their visitors. It was acknowledged to be an issue by prison staff including the Governor, but the latter did not believe that visits were held up 'significantly'.

In the visitor survey, 80% of respondents said either their last visit, or most visits, had not started on time. Comments included:

- *They're always more than half an hour late, even when you arrive up to 45 minutes prior to the start time.*
- *To get a full two hour visit, you have to be booked in at the Visitors Centre by midday at the latest; the later you are after that, the more your visit is cut down.*
- *It's very disappointing after a three hour journey to have such a short visit.*

One prisoner said his partner travelled from Liverpool - a journey of 5 hours each way plus an overnight stop. His visit lasted only 45 minutes. Since then his family haven't visited and he hasn't seen his young son for five months.

Visitors explained that, in order to try and get in the queue first, in order to maximise their chances of getting their full visit time, they have to arrive before the Visitors Centre opens. Even if they arrive by car (which many do not) they cannot wait in their cars or they would lose their place in the queue. Consequently families wait outside in all weathers until the Centre opens.

On the Friday visiting session which was observed for this survey, by 2.15pm - half an hour after the scheduled start of the visit - only four families out of 18 had been admitted to the visits room. Anxieties and stress levels amongst those families still waiting in the Visitors Centre, who had often experienced a long and difficult journey to get there followed by a lengthy wait, were very high and tempers were beginning to fray. Visitors Centre staff often bore the brunt of visitors' frustrations in the absence of other prison staff.

Prison staff explained the main reasons for such delays. Firstly, staffing levels allow little flexibility. Staff - who had only recently been re-profiled - say they are unable to start the search process until officers return from lunch at 1.30pm. They are unable to start lunch any earlier because they are needed to supervise prisoners' lunches and lock up. Incidents, for example of bad behaviour, on the wings may delay the process still further.

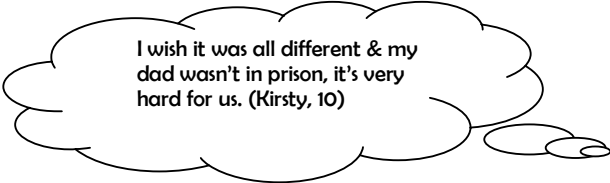
Secondly, the physical size of the search area used for the drugs dog is too small to allow more than one family at a time to be searched. Consequently, even if the search process started promptly at 1.30pm, there is no possibility of processing all the visitors in the 15 minute interval before the start of the visit.

Thirdly, prisoners are not brought to the visits room until their visitor is seated there, which delays the visit still further. This is apparently based on past experience, to avoid the risk of visitors being turned down or offered a closed visit after being indicated by the search dog and then having to deal with angry prisoners in the public environment of the visits room.

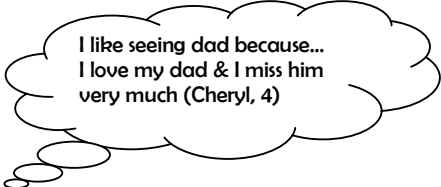
For all these reasons, prison staff felt powerless to resolve the situation. From the researcher's point of view, it is not known how much effort has gone into trying to improve this issue. However, given the importance of visits as a means of maintaining the family relationships which can help or hinder a prisoner's chances of successful resettlement, it seems imperative to re-examine possible solutions. For example:

- Can prison staff be re-profiled to stagger lunch breaks for those supervising visits?
- Alternatively could visiting times be re-scheduled?

- Could larger accommodation be found for the drugs dog searches?
- Some prisons have a holding area near the visits room; is this feasible?
- How best can explanations or apologies for delays be given to families and prisoners?



I wish it was all different & my dad wasn't in prison, it's very hard for us. (Kirsty, 10)



I like seeing dad because... I love my dad & I miss him very much (Cheryl, 4)

### 3.3 Lack of facilities for children visiting

Visiting prison can be extremely daunting for children who may already be under stress from the absence of a parent and the stigma of imprisonment. Child-friendly visiting conditions can lessen the damage to children of having an imprisoned parent and help to break the cycle of offending within families.

Opportunities for supervised play in the visits room can reduce the tension for children whilst giving parents an opportunity to discuss important issues in more privacy.

Extended 'children's visits' focus primarily on children's needs and encourage interaction between the prisoner and his child. They promote bonding and allow men to show care and responsibility for their children. By enabling fathers to spend quality time with their children, 'children's visits' help fathers to keep in touch with their children's development and prepare them for the realities of release.

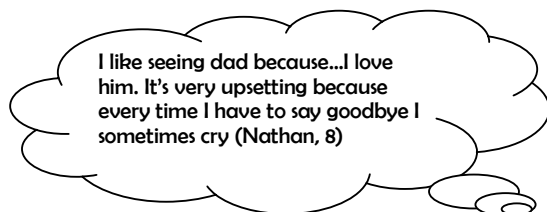
#### 3.31 Play facilities for children in the visits room.

The visits room has space for 24 visits. Low tables are set out in rows with two hard chairs (not fixed) on either side. A tea bar at one end is run by WRVS, which is much appreciated by visitors. The atmosphere is fairly informal, with couples able to sit close to each other, but there is no children's play area or even a corner with toys. Staff feel that the space is not big enough to accommodate a play area for domestic visits.

Visitors surveyed expressed mixed views about the child-friendliness of the visits room. Those who rated the facilities for children the most highly were almost all those without children. Parents with children wanted more for them to do and a chance for the children to interact with their fathers more. One prisoner said:

*It's hard to calm them down when they get excited and they start table-hopping. It's not their fault. My little girl keeps trying to get me to chase her. You try to explain that you can't move out of your seat, but it'd be nice to be a bit more normal for the kids.*

The Governor expressed her concern about the lack of a play area, but the problem of limited space is difficult to resolve.



### 3.32 'Children's visits' / family visits

There are currently extended 'family visits' available on one Friday per month for up to 20 'enhanced' prisoners only. These are organised by prison staff and replace ordinary domestic visits on these days. They last from 10am to 4pm.

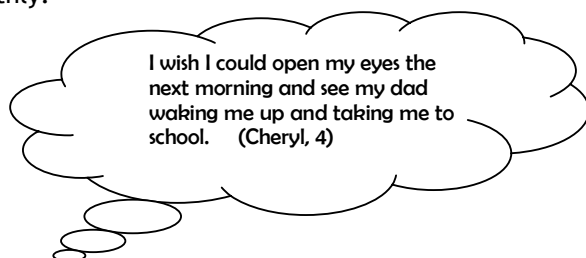
Space is cleared in the visits room for nursery nurses from the Visitors Centre to run a play area. Lunches are provided and paid for by the prison, and photos are taken for the families by the prison. Prisoners can wear their own clothes and move around. Suffolk library provides a librarian to encourage story-telling, and the emphasis is on the opportunity for fathers to play with their children. The visits are not restricted to men with children, but fathers are given priority during school holiday periods.

These visits are very popular and demand greatly exceeds supply. Consequently men can only get enhanced visits every other month. However, prisoners reported that many families (apparently around 8 out of 20) book these visits but then don't turn up, so that the hall is then only half full. The reasons for this were unclear, but caused much frustration among those whose applications for an enhanced visit were turned down.

Visitors said they liked the greater length and more relaxed atmosphere on the 'enhanced visits'. They praised the nursery staff and the food and enjoyed the friendly attitude of prison staff. Suggestions for improvement included better toilet facilities, having more things to encourage interaction between father and child and for some, being allowed to smoke.

Visitors whose partners were not 'enhanced' status however felt it was very unfair on their children that they did not get any extended family visits, nor photos. They felt such opportunities should be available to all families for the primary benefit of the children, rather than being linked to status. This view is generally shared by Ormiston Children and Families Trust, who through their *Time for Families* initiative provide Children's Visits in six prisons in the Eastern Region.

This point was raised with prison staff, who felt that enhanced visits provided an important incentive to prisoners to work towards enhanced status. Currently 40-45% of prisoners are enhanced status. They are eligible to apply for this after three months and it is reviewed monthly.



### 3.33 Lifer Days

'Lifer Days' provide extended visiting opportunities for lifers and their families approximately four times a year on a Friday. They are run along similar lines to the enhanced Family Days, from 10am - 4pm, with hot food (paid for by the prison), a crèche and input from Suffolk library.

Feedback about these days, though limited, was that they had proved disappointing. Prisoners or families had to pay for their own drinks, no smoking was allowed and there were few games or activities available for children:

*It's the only prison I've been to where you have to pay for your beverages, and for children, there's nothing for them to do all day. Other prisons let you take your telly over or playstations or games for them. ('Lifer')*

One prisoner reported that the only thing provided for children on one visit was one 'connect4' game, although sometimes somebody comes in to do face-painting with the children. If this feedback is reliable, there would seem to be considerable room for improvement in this provision, particularly for the well-being of visiting children. The prison has however held a meeting with prisoner representatives to review how lifer days are run and the lifer governor is working on an action plan to address these issues.

### 3.4 Visitors Centre

The Visitors Centre is situated in a portacabin just outside the prison. A new and attractive outdoor play facility has recently been added with the help of a £9,000 charitable grant from Suffolk ACRE and fencing has been provided for additional safety.

The Visitors Centre looks welcoming and comfortable and provides a friendly and relaxing environment for visitors. There are comfortable chairs and coffee tables, plants, a tea bar serving drinks, sweets, crisps and hot snacks when staffing allows; lockers, toilets, a thrift stall and information leaflets and posters. Visitors Centre staff are paid by the prison to run the booking line.

Part of the Centre is partitioned off for a crèche, run by NNEB qualified staff. The play facilities and equipment were excellent and the standard of care and friendliness of the staff was much appreciated by visitors. Space however is limited and means that the ages of children catered for has to be restricted.

The creche staff offered the option of looking after children for part of the visit then bringing them over to the visits room to join the parents. This enabled the adults to have some uninterrupted time together and prevented the children from getting restless and bored during a long visit. This is particularly helpful practice given the lack of play facilities for children in the visits room.

#### 3.41 Visitors Centre - staffing

The Visitors Centre is currently run by a Management Committee comprising Prison Service employees plus the Visitors Centre Manager and one IMB member. It is funded by the prison together with profits from the tea bar and fundraising. Until February 2005, when the Manager retired, the Centre was staffed by the Manager with two admin assistants, covering the 20 to 25 sessions per month, plus two qualified and one part-qualified nursery nurses, a cleaner and several volunteers. Since the departure of the Manager, the prison has

employed one of the volunteers as an additional admin assistant on a temporary basis until more permanent arrangements are put in place.

Visitors Centre staff are given additional funding to staff the enhanced and lifer days.

The Visitors Centre staff offer information and emotional support to visitors and this is much appreciated. Comments included:

- *Staff are kind, caring and thoughtful, it's never too much trouble for them if you need help and advice.*
- *The staff are brilliant - they helped me when the prison has not.*

There are also opportunities for others to provide counselling in the Centre, such as the chaplain, Drug Support Unit or Citizens Advice Bureau.

Since the change of visiting days, it has been harder to retain volunteers, as many have church commitments on Sundays. Consequently the prison has been paying for additional staff to work there on Sundays.

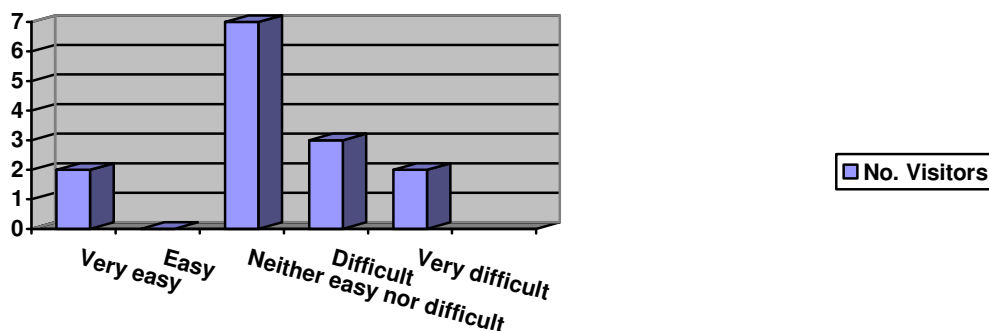
The prison would like to see the management and funding of the Visitors Centre placed on a firmer footing, and would like to see responsibility transferred to a community based organisation such as Ormiston Children and Families Trust.

Until very recently the links between the prison and the Visitors Centre have been weak, with little communication or contact between the two apart from on financial matters. However the Manager was recently invited to Resettlement meetings for the first time, which she viewed as a very positive development.

### 3.42 Booking line

The booking line is operated by Visitors Centre staff on an hourly payment by the prison of £5. (The rate has apparently been contentious). The line is open every weekday morning from 9.30 -12am. Visitors wished the opening hours could be longer, stating that the line is often engaged and the limited hours are difficult for those who work. Visitors' rating of the ease of booking is shown below:

How easy or difficult was it to book your visit?



The Visitors Centre Manager reported that Visitors Centre staff are willing to provide evening sessions for the booking line, but this has not been accepted by the prison.

### 3.5 Parenting courses

At the time of the survey there were no parenting courses being run in the prison. These are a feature of Ormiston's work in other prisons in the Eastern Region, aiming to encourage prisoners to look at their responsibilities as parents and to help them to maintain or strengthen their relationships with their children whilst in prison.

The Governor would like to see such courses developed at HMP Blundeston and funding has recently been obtained from the Innovations Fund to provide a room for this purpose. Visitors Centre staff had hoped to start delivering the 'Fathers Inside' course in 2005; this would be funded by the prison. It was hoped to eventually link this to enhanced family visits. Arrangements are currently on hold however since the departure of both the Visitors Centre manager and the Head of Learning and Skills who was organising the course.

There was some support amongst the prisoners for parenting courses, particularly from a few prisoners who had had some experience of them. One prisoner commented:

*I did find I was learning new skills - your relationship with your child, how to maintain relationships - but there's only so much you can do when you're in prison.*

Visitors in the Visitors Centre generally thought parenting courses would be useful and said they would welcome any opportunity to be more involved in their partner's sentence planning and preparation for release.

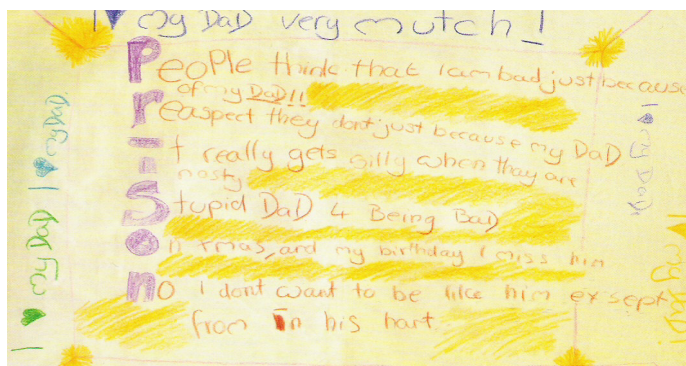
The chaplain highlighted the importance of working with families to address and reinforce the same issues which prisoners were looking at in the Therapeutic Community and on their courses. For example, prisoners are encouraged to seek legitimate employment but their families may be reluctant to forego the high income they have become accustomed to from the proceeds of criminal activity. Parenting skills for new fathers would also be greatly welcomed, especially when so many men have negative or minimal experience of being fathered themselves.

### 3.6 Family support

Recent Inspection Reports have praised the good prisoner-staff relationships at HMP Blundeston and report a 'relaxed supportive and decent environment for prisoners' (2002). Visitors also spoke positively about friendly staff during visits.

Family support has been a particular feature of work undertaken in the Drug Support Unit, whose work on these issues has been recognised in a recent Prison Service Audit. A competition was run by the Drug Support Unit and Visitors Centre for families and prisoners to design a poster highlighting how prison affects the family. The winner was a child whose father was on the Drug Rehabilitation programme.

The design was reproduced as posters and postcards which have been sent to all 140 Prison Establishments across England and Wales, together with local police stations, probation offices and courts:



Prisoners also identified Adfam and the Carats worker as being very supportive towards both them and their families in the process of drug rehabilitation. The chaplaincy had also been found to be a good source of support by some. Many prisoners emphasised the importance of

involving their families in their recovery and rehabilitation. Any help towards resettlement was greatly welcomed.

There was however still an unmet need, identified by both prisoners and visitors, for help and support with family issues generally, particularly when there was a need for liaison between the prisoner inside and the family outside. Sometimes Personal Officers are able to fulfil this role but sometimes a lack of trust or poor relationship with the prisoner or just a lack of specialist knowledge or skills hindered their ability to fully meet this need.

Prisoners commented:

- *I would greatly welcome someone to be in the middle...you have to go to an officer and half beg them to make a phone call, which lots of people don't want to do...*
- *When my brother died, I was trying to get to the funeral; I felt lousy, I went to one of the governors, she went, 'Oh, get over it, it was a couple of days ago now!'*
- *One guy, his kid was in hospital, for two days they wouldn't put money on his phone for him to find out if his kid's alright. They only sorted it when they saw us ready to kick off on the Wing – it shouldn't have come to that.*
- *When your family are far away, you're not getting any visits, your morale is low, who can you talk to?*

Visitors said they would like more information, for example about what could be brought in and also wished there could be a specified link person to take up problems and answer queries. For example, one family had requested permission for their son to be allowed to visit his sister, to whom he was very close, in hospital after she had attempted suicide. Permission had been refused and the family did not know how to discuss the situation further with prison staff. A designated person to liaise between the family and the prison in a supportive role would have been greatly welcomed.

### 3.7 Telephone calls, letters and other ways of keeping in touch

Telephone calls and letters are an important means of contact with families for most prisoners, but especially those receiving infrequent visits. No problems were reported with sending or receiving letters at HMP Blundeston such as are found in some prisons.

Prisoners were generally satisfied with the number of **telephones** and the times when they could have access to them and with the level of privacy enjoyed, although it was pointed out that C and D Wings lacked phones on each landing.

However - in common with many prisoners in other establishments - there were strong feelings about the high cost of making calls, particularly for those with families abroad. One prisoner, for example, said that a 10 minute phone call to his children in Ghana cost him £10. Prisoners also felt that if they had private money to spend they should be allowed to put more money on their canteen for phone calls.

HMP Blundeston has signed up to the Blue Card Telephone system which gives **foreign nationals** a free five minute phone call once a month; additional cards can also be bought which give approximately half price calls abroad. This recognises the particular difficulties faced by foreign nationals who are rarely able to receive family visits and for whom the cost of keeping in touch by telephone is especially great.

Several foreign nationals mentioned that they had been told they could have photos taken to send to their families, but this had not happened yet.

Foreign national prisoners also highlighted the additional difficulties experienced by themselves and their families due not only to the long distances separating them but also

their language difficulties and ignorance of the system and its rules. Many families felt frustrated by rules forbidding them to bring clothes, etc in for the prisoner and requiring items to be bought through catalogues instead.

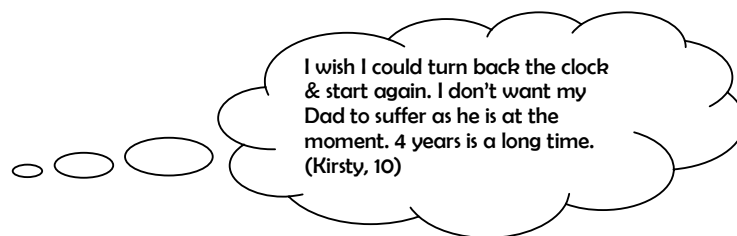
However this was said to be especially difficult for families to arrange from abroad, particularly when many families had language or literacy problems and little money. Foreign nationals therefore wished an exception to the rule could be made whereby they could be allowed to receive even just one package from home.

Foreign nationals at HMP Blundeston have their own monthly forums (although the frequency is not always maintained) and a nominated Governor is responsible for their needs, but isolation can be a big problem.

A **story tapes** scheme was introduced in Blundeston in 2004 so that men can record stories on to tape to send to their children. One prisoner praised a scheme he had experienced at HMP Chelmsford whereby with the help of a church group, Christmas presents could be sent out to prisoners' children (**Angel Tree scheme**, run by Prison Fellowship). He wondered if such a scheme could be introduced here.

Finally, prisoners and families greatly welcomed the opportunity to have **home leave** (Release on Temporary Licence). Used as an important part of preparation for release, home leave can give prisoners and their families a chance to address the realities of the real world and deal with relationships in a more relaxed setting than is possible in the prison environment.

For the children and partners there is none of the stress associated with long and expensive journeys and a restricted visiting regime, although adjusting to changed roles and relationships can be stressful for all concerned. Unfortunately around 90% of prisoners nationally never have a home visit during their sentence.



## 4.0 Summary & Conclusion

This consultation explores the views of prisoners, their families and prison staff and managers about how to maintain or strengthen the family ties of prisoners in HMP Blundeston. It examines the current situation at Blundeston and highlights a number of areas in which development could help to promote good quality family contact.

Some of these areas are dependent upon changes being made within the prison whilst some are identified as possible areas in which Ormiston Children and Families Trust, through its partnership with the Prison Service in the Eastern Area, might be able to contribute. The main areas are summarised below:

### 4.1 Areas to be addressed by HMP Blundeston

- Visits times/days which are difficult for visitors to attend

- Provision of mini-bus from station for Family and Lifer Days
- Delays to start of visits - an area of major concern
- Provision of space in the visits room for a children's play area
- Improved liaison between the Visitors Centre and the prison
- Increased access for all prisoners to Family/Children's Visits
- Extension of visits booking line hours and appropriate payment of staff manning the line
- Increased used of ROTL for home visits (Resettlement Licence) and extended family visits using the outdoor play area.

#### **4.2 Areas for possible partnership working between Ormiston, the prison and the Visitors Centre**

- Staffing input to the Visitors Centre
- Provision of play facilities in the visits room if space were to be made available
- Provision of Children's Visits to supplement the enhanced Family Days
- Introduction of accredited parenting programmes, to include the involvement of families
- Family support/liaison to prisoners and their families

This report aims to provide a starting point for discussions between all parties to determine which areas to prioritise for action. Future development needs to build on the good practice and commitment to families which has already been established at Blundeston.

*“A stable, supportive family throughout the sentence is a key factor in preventing re-offending on release...I firmly believe that we should do as much as possible to sustain family relationships at what for many will be an especially traumatic time in their lives.”*

*(Martin Narey, Commissioner for Correctional Services, 2001).*

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## Appendix 1

# HMP Blundeston Family Ties Survey

The effects on family life when someone is in prison can be enormous. Ormiston Children & Families Trust works with the prison service to support children and families affected by imprisonment.

I am seeking the views of families, prisoners and staff about ways to help strengthen family contact while someone is in Blundeston. Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Please return this form in the enclosed envelope by 14<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

If your children would like to draw or tell us their thoughts about visiting HMP Blundeston too, please include the attached sheet(s) when you return this form.

<p><b>About You:</b></p> <p>1. Have you visited HMP Blundeston? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>2. If No, which of the following reasons apply?</p> <p>a) He hasn't been there long enough yet <input type="checkbox"/> e) I don't want to visit <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>b) Journey is too difficult <input type="checkbox"/> f) Other reasons (please tell us): <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>c) Journey is too expensive <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>d) He doesn't want me to visit <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>3. Do you have children? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Ages _____</p> <p>No <input type="checkbox"/> (please go to question 7)</p> <p>4. If yes, have any of your children visited Blundeston? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>If No, which of the following reasons apply?</p> <p>a) He hasn't been there long enough yet <input type="checkbox"/> f) Poor facilities for children <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>b) Journey is too difficult <input type="checkbox"/> g) Time/day not suitable <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>c) Journey is too expensive <input type="checkbox"/> h) Other reasons (please tell us): <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>d) He doesn't want them to visit <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>e) They don't want to visit <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>Office Use only</p> <p>a e</p> <p>b f</p> <p>c</p> <p>d</p> <p>a f</p> <p>b g</p> <p>c h</p> <p>d</p> <p>e</p>
<p>5. What 2 things would make visits better for children?</p> <p>1. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p>	

**Enhanced family visits:**

6. Have you ever had an 'enhanced' family visit at Blundeston?

Yes

No

If yes, what did you like best about this visit?

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How could it be better?

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**Visitors Centre:**

7. Please say whether you agree with the following statements:

The Visitors Centre helped me: *(please tick)*

	Agree	Disagree	Not applicable
a) Find help from another service			
b) Get financial help			
c) Understand prison rules better			
d) Feel more relaxed during visits			
e) Listen to me and gave me support			

8. Please add any further comments about the Visitors Centre here:

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**Booking:**

9. How easy / difficult was it to book your visit?

Please circle a number from 1 - 5:

very difficult 1    2    3    4    5 very easy

**Ordinary domestic visits:**

10. Did your last visit start on time?

Yes

No

Haven't had a visit before

11. If No, how late was it?

Less than 10 minutes

10-30 minutes

More than 30 minutes

Can't remember

Y / N / H

a b

c d

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<p><b>12. How do you rate the following aspects of the visits room? (please circle a number from 1 to 5)</b></p>		---
Refreshments:	Very bad   1   2   3   4   5   Very good	---
Child-friendliness:	Very bad   1   2   3   4   5   Very good	
Attitude of prison staff:	Very bad   1   2   3   4   5   Very good	
<p><b>What 2 things would help most to maintain your family ties whilst your relative is in prison?</b></p>		
<p>1. _____</p>		
<p>2. _____</p>		

Thank you for your help 😊



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