

Eastern Region Families Partnership

Partners: H.M. Prison Service, Lankelly Foundation, Ormiston Children & Families Trust & Ormiston Trust

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HMP Bedford: 2004 Review of Visitor Facilities

Aims of original 2002 survey of visitor facilities:

- To get a picture of the needs and views of visitors to HMP Bedford.
- To plan improvements to services and facilities for visitors.
- To input into the planning of a proposed new Visitor Centre.
- "To highlight the impact of imprisonment upon families, and the value of investing in family support services as a resource in the process of rehabilitation." [2002 Visitor Survey Report].

The main issues to be addressed by the 2004 review were:

- Length of visits (maximum 45 minutes at time of survey).
- Physical conditions in Visits Room (cleanliness, space, noise levels, provision of refreshments).
- Availability of play area within Visits Room for all visits.
- Telephone booking system (difficulties getting through).
- Facilities for children visiting - particularly a lack of Children's Visits.
- Urgent need for a Visitor Centre, to include provision of information and support for families.
- Need to raise awareness amongst prison staff of the issues faced by families of prisoners.

Evidence was gathered from the following sources:

- Observation of visiting conditions in the Visitors Centre and the visits room.
- Feedback from visitors via questionnaires (total 45).
- Feedback from prison staff, Ormiston and Spurgeon's staff.
- Visitors Centre Comments book.
- Evaluation questionnaires completed by participants in Children's Visits.
- Statistical information collected by Ormiston project staff.
- Ormiston at HMP Bedford's annual Project Review: May 2004.

Key developments in provision for children and families of prisoners at HMP Bedford 2002-2004:

Ormiston at HMP Bedford:

- Management of Visitors Centre
- Weekly 2 hour Children's Visits
- Input into Induction about family support
- Accredited parenting programmes

Prison play area:
Visiting hours:

Staffing by Spurgeon's Childcare to cover weekend visits.
Extended from 45 to 60 minutes.

Views of visitors about provision for families at HMP Bedford

Children's Visits: The feedback from families and prisoners who had participated in Children's Visits was overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic, eg.

- *It made me feel close to my daughter again. She's only two and the normal visits are no good really for playing and spending proper time with her.*

Visitors Centre:

- Visitors felt the Visitors Centre particularly helped them to understand prison rules and feel more relaxed during visits. They emphasised the friendliness and helpfulness of Visitors Centre staff.
- The comments book was well used. Around a third of entries praised the Visitors Centre staff or facilities in some way. Several people commented that the whole visiting process, especially the play facilities in the visits room, was well run.
- Two-thirds of visitors found the information leaflets "very useful" and one-third "fairly useful". Information about the prison and packs for new visitors were considered particularly helpful.
- Frustrations included visits not always starting on time (although delays were brief) and sessions being too short.

Booking Visits:

Experiences of getting through on the booking line were very mixed and varied at different points in time.

Visits room:

The review showed a significant increase in the level of visitor satisfaction in the areas of: cleanliness, refreshments, the play area and the attitude of prison staff.

Views of prison staff

Visitors Centre:

- The transition towards the development of the Visitors Centre was felt to have been generally smooth.
- The Visitors Centre creates a nicer, less pressured environment for both visitors and staff.
- The extra office space is welcomed and well-used.
- The Visitors Centre is felt to have created an increased awareness of family issues by operations staff.
- Fewer official complaints are now received from visitors; most complaints can usually be more easily resolved.

Children's Visits:

- Staff are generally very impressed with the Children's Visits. They have received high praise from both prisoners and the Inspectorate.
- Some staff feel Children's Visits should be used as incentives to achieve compliance and good behaviour.
- Complaints have risen about Children's Visits being denied on security measures grounds.

Visits room:

- The play area is well-run but gets crowded and needs to be enlarged, particularly to cater for children in wheelchairs.
- Measures have been taken to improve punctuality of visits.
- Liaison with Visitors Centre staff helps to lower prisoners' anxieties.
- There have been some problems with the booking line but these were felt to be largely resolved.

Conclusion

Since the 2002 Visitor Survey was carried there have been huge changes in the level of 'family friendliness' at HMP Bedford. The evidence gathered for this review presents an extremely positive picture of the changes which have taken place and the feedback from the staff and most importantly, the service users. It is within this context that any outstanding concerns should be seen.

Issues to take forward

1. Booking line - complaints about getting through fluctuate and this needs to be closely monitored.
2. Visiting Orders - several complaints were made about these not being stamped or having incorrect information.
3. Punctuality of visits - some concerns still exist about delays in starting visits.
4. Play area in the visits room - while well run, the space available is inadequate for the number of users and needs to be addressed as a priority.
5. Visitors Centre - more staffing (both OSG's and volunteers) is needed at weekends and busy periods to free up Ormiston project staff from booking-in tasks to enable them to be more available for family support.
6. Having a regular team of OSG's assigned to the Visitors Centre would help to achieve greater consistency of approach for visitors.
7. Visitors Centre facilities - provision of a public telephone and information in alternative formats (eg video) would be welcomed.
8. The Visitors Centre becomes overcrowded at busy periods, reducing the ability to provide a relaxing and supportive environment for children and families. Whilst this is a difficult issue to resolve, it deserves further discussion in order to maximise its potential.
9. Length of visits - although extended from 45 to 60 minutes, the duration is still shorter than at many prisons and remains a concern for many families.

Recommendation

It is recommended that through the Governor and Advisory Group of HMP Bedford these outstanding issues are considered and an action plan drawn up to address future improvements. By continuing to review and update services it is likely that HMP Bedford will maintain its ability to support strong family ties for its prisoners and their families.