



**NIACRO Response to the Northern Ireland Prison Service
Visitor Experience Consultation**

28 February 2018



Response to the NIPS Visitor Experience Consultation

About NIACRO

A voluntary organisation working to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities, some of NIACRO's specific contributions in recent times have been to:

- Support the resettlement of adults leaving prison and those on community supervision. This includes helping people to build skills, confidence and employability.
- Support children, young people, families and adults who are at risk of engaging with the criminal justice system to make positive lifestyle choices.
- Ensure that other service providers (statutory, voluntary and community) are informed about the needs of our service users and well prepared to support them.
- Contribute to public debate; influencing others with regard to criminal justice matters, at the highest level.

At the heart of NIACRO's work is a drive to reduce (re)offending, understanding that integrated and flexible approaches towards desistance are most effective.

Preliminary Comments

NIACRO delivers a range of services offering practical and emotional support to those in prison and their families and our service users visit all four prison establishments (Maghaberry, Magilligan, and Hydebank Wood College and Women's Prison). A full list of our services can be accessed on the [NIACRO website](#).

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) Visitor Experience Consultation.

Context

“Strong attachments to children, and to partners who are not involved in crime, provide both a focus for time and attention and a reason for not returning to prison”

(Anne Owers, Review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service 2011)

“Given that the majority of prisoners' families are profoundly motivated to help men serving sentences build a better life for themselves, free from offending patterns of behaviour, they constitute a potential army of support for the prison system that has not as yet been strategically and consistently deployed across the estate”

(The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime, Lord Farmer, August 2017).

Families' first 'face to face' encounter with the prison system is usually with prison staff in visiting halls. This is an opportunity, perhaps a critical or one time opportunity, for prison staff to engage positively with them; recognising families to be a valuable resource in supporting



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the rehabilitation of those in their care. Families ought to be treated with dignity and respect at all times. It can be all too easy for prison staff to regard family members as complicit in the prisoner's offending or to regard family contact as a privilege that the prisoner ought to be grateful for, rather than a right.

Visiting a family member in prison can be stressful, emotionally charged and challenging, particularly for children. Locked gates, waiting areas, security checks, searches and sniffer dogs all add to the feelings of anxiety. Yet a timely explanation or helpful word from a member of the prison staff can go a long way to alleviate some of this anxiety. Welcoming family friendly visiting areas, the chance to have a cup of tea together, toys and games available for play together and some privacy are examples of some of the things that our families tell us contribute to visits that are more convivial.

It is in everyone's interests that prison visits go well. Visits are often the only means by which a prisoner keeps in touch with the outside world, and so help to reduce his or her feelings of isolation and contribute to mental wellbeing. Children have the chance to see and talk to their parent, easing some of their worries around how their parent is coping. Prison staff work with a more contented prison population.

Whilst we recognise that Governors often operate differing regimes within the four prison establishments for various legitimate reasons including security, NIACRO calls for consistency across the estate with regard to support for families and practice surrounding visits. Of particular concern is consistency regarding: availability and role of Family Officers; provision of child centred visits; and family days. We call on all Governors to recognise families as a potential asset in their efforts to support prisoners' road to desistance.



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Services for Visitors: Feedback

To prepare this response, NIACRO:

- Held three focus groups of prisoners' families, two of which were attended by adults and one by children. Approximately 25 families were represented at these.
- Spoke with the two drivers of our transport service to Magilligan and Maghaberry regarding their observations about the issues families face through conversations on the buses and at arrival at Visitors' Centres.
- Held informal conversations with those who have engaged with all our family services over recent weeks
- Circulated NIPS' survey widely amongst family members; encouraging 30-40 completions

These events included service users who are engaging in the following NIACRO projects:

- CHIP: Identifies and supports children with a parent in prison to access early intervention services in their communities.
- Family Links: Practical and emotional support to help families cope with and access information during the imprisonment of a family member.
- SCOPE: One-to-one support to children and young people who have a family member in prison.
- Transport Service: To all three prison estates to support family contact during periods of imprisonment.

The feedback we received, along with NIACRO's own observations, has informed our response below. Fuller details of the feedback are provided at Appendix 1 & 2.

Theme 1. Visit Information

From our focus groups and conversations with families, NIACRO (and in particular Family Links) emerged as the primary source of information for families to find out about visits.

Families spoke of their experiences of navigating the prison visits process alone, having to find the information they needed, dependent on their circumstances. Family Link's information pack, follow-up phone call and offer of a home visit are valued services for families at this very difficult time. The independence of NIACRO is an important factor in making families feel at ease and engendering trust.

From our experience of running Visitors' Centres, we understand that families can find it difficult to book visits. We know that in some cases, the Visitors Centre may be the only point of contact for booking visits for those without access to mobile phones. Visitors needing assistance with the booking system, for example to rearrange a visit, sort out unforeseen problems regarding a visit, or change names of visitors booked onto a visit, will



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be assisted to do so at all the Visitors' Centres. We know from experience that many visitors to the prisons have difficulty with numeracy and literacy, and Centre staff need to support such individuals when booking visits.

A full overview of service user feedback in relation to Visit Information can be found in Appendix 1.

Theme 2. Services that would be Helpful

Confidential, empathetic and, at times, practical support for families is vital. Centre staff need to be responsive to visitors' needs, offering advice, guidance and appropriate support. Where relevant, it is also helpful if staff can suggest where they might secure additional support. This may be community based (e.g. Social Security, Family Support Hubs or NIACRO's Family Links or CHIP) or prison based (e.g. Family Officers).

NIACRO would welcome a Visitor Service User Forum. Gathering user feedback is critical to identifying needs or gaps in provision and working towards effective service delivery. Information may be gathered through focus groups, one-to-one conversations and questionnaires. Furthermore, by collating information about the help visitors seek and the questions they ask, Centre staff can add valuable insight into the effectiveness of service delivery and unmet needs. All feedback information could be presented to the Governor of the relevant establishment at regular intervals.

Visitors' Centre staff would benefit from being trained in offering complete information relating to visits. Specially trained staff could then offer one-to-one confidential support to visitors, particularly those wanting to talk through personal difficulties they are experiencing because of the imprisonment. Any disclosures should, of course, be treated in confidence under the terms of a Confidentiality Policy.

Theme 3. What is Working Well and Areas for Improvement

The main themes emerging from our consultations that families believe are working well or that could be improved/expanded are outlined below:

- **Meet and greet service at each location** – The Visitors' Centre ought to be a welcoming environment, with the staff available to meet visitors as they arrive and help them to understand what to expect, particularly identifying those visiting for the first time (who often are uncertain, confused or anxious). To do so effectively, staff would need to be fully conversant with procedures for arranging visits, bringing money or parcels for prisoners etc. They may also provide a listening ear for those who need it; in our experience, often a simple chat over a cup of tea helps people who are anxious to feel better prepared for a visit. This, in turn, helps to ensure a better quality of visit with better outcomes for the visitor and the prisoner.

- **Transport and Shelter** – A bus should be available to transport visitors to and from the main external gate and the visiting area. Sheltered walkways or areas before entering the main visitors' areas would be a welcome addition.
- **Communication and digital services** – Provision of clear information in key locations about the services available to prisoners and families including, for example, Email a Prisoner, Prison Voicemail, Skype, Book and Tape Club/Big Book Share.
- **Family Days** – These have worked well when organised in Magilligan and would be a welcome addition in the other establishments.
- **Family Induction Days** – There may be scope to consider Induction Days which may include tours of particular parts of the prison; something our younger focus group participants were keen to see. (See Appendix 2).
- **Child Centred Visits** – These have worked well. However, NIACRO has lobbied for many years to have such visits available to *all* parents irrespective of their status in the regime. We considered that the child's right to such a visit should not depend on his/her parent's status or behaviour and refer to Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR); that that everyone has the right to private and family life. The requirement for those in prison (Maghaberry) to undertake a six-week parenting course before being eligible for a child centred visit places a barrier in the way of this right for the parent and the child. It also assumes that all fathers requesting Child Centred Visits are in some way lacking parental skills.
- **NIACRO Transport Services** - NIACRO would be keen to explore the possibility of extending the opening hours of the booking line or using alternative methods of booking e.g. email, online or via mobile app.

A full overview of service user feedback can be found in Appendix 2.

Theme 4. Impact and Purpose

In the main, those in prison are impacted positively by regular visits. They can be their only contact with the world outside, they maintain family bonds, and they provide an opportunity for children to talk about their lives; school etc. On the negative side, where visits do not go well, prisoners can be impacted very dramatically. Criminal Justice Inspectorate reports have highlighted how, on occasions, negative family contact and/or visiting experiences have been a contributory factor in some deaths in custody.



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Conclusions

We understand that NIPS' Family Strategy is under review. This focuses on promoting opportunities to assist families of prisoners, recognising that positive family engagement is a key factor supporting desistance from crime. We are encouraged by NIPS' ongoing partnership working with the third sector to help transform engagement with families and we are hopeful that this commitment to put families towards the forefront in the improvement of services and support will continue.

NIACRO welcomes the opportunity from the Department of Justice and the Northern Ireland Prison Service to respond to this consultation and look forward to engaging with both in the future on the issues outlined in this consultation.

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Appendix 1 – Summary of Families’ Feedback with respect to Visitor Centre Information

The issues families identified for review include:

- Support / information for families with respect to:
 - Visiting times and prison procedures
 - Different types of visits: remand; sentenced; joint visits; ecclesiastical visits; legal visits
 - How to book a visit (including booking line opening hours etc.)
 - Changing booked visits
 - Applying for Assisted Prison Visits and support for completing PV9 forms
 - Support for “double” visit requests (particularly for people who have a distance to travel)
 - Security, searching and passive drugs dogs: what to expect
 - Preparing for a first or significant visit – what to expect
 - Refreshments available during visits: prices and selection; prison rules on coins/paper money; provision of coins (change) for purchases in prison
 - Forms of identification required
 - Leaving parcels – clothing and cash allowances: what can or cannot be signed in
 - Appropriate clothing for leaving for prisoners
 - How to deposit money in accounts
 - Transport options including train pick up and return arrangements
 - Transport booking arrangements
 - Prison life; routine, rules, regulations, rights, privileges etc.
 - Ordering newspapers and/or signing in paperback books
 - Availability of supervised childcare while on a visit for children aged between 2 and 16 years old
 - Communicating with prisoners outside of visit times – written correspondence, telephone calls
 - Visiting arrangements if prisoner is admitted to hospital
 - Contacting prisoners in emergencies such as the death of a family member
 - Questions of concerns about release

- Further specific concerns Visitors’ Centre Staff may be available to support families with:
 - Understanding what the sentence means
 - Health or medication concerns regarding to a prisoner
 - Bad visits / concerns for the prisoner after a visit



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- Concerns relating to family circumstances; accommodation or financial needs, stigma, anxiety and distress etc.
 - Finding practical support for needs, for example completion of forms or arranging a benefits check
 - Finding support for family (including children's) wellbeing. For example, what to tell children, supporting children experiencing difficulties at school, behavioural problems etc.
 - Information about expected time of release of a prisoner who has been granted bail
 - Advice regarding the prison complaints procedure
- Further areas where Visitor Centres may be involved in supporting visitors included:
 - Centres keeping a supply of alternative tops to enable visits to proceed where inappropriate clothing is worn
 - Extra support for visitors for whom English is not a first language including access to translation services and leaflets in a variety of languages
 - Extra support for visitors with reading difficulties
 - Facilitating the collection of goods made inside the prison, for example picnic tables.



Appendix 2 – General Service User Feedback

A Feedback from Adult Focus Groups

1. Booking a visit

Participants spoke of

- Difficulties obtaining visit reference numbers when a family member first enters prison, leading to further difficulties booking visits and providing money for their family member. This was also an issue when a prisoner was transferred between prisons.
- Issues for families contacting the booking telephone line, as the service was often busy. While callback was helpful, as it was from a withheld number, some were reluctant to answer calls. Several commented on the helpfulness of some of the staff on the booking line, giving lots of practical information and support. This was true for both Maghaberry and Magilligan. One booking line staff member at Magilligan, for example, told a caller the length of time she could expect to be travelling and gave directions to the prison.

2. Transport

- Those who use the NIACRO Transport Service depend on and appreciate the service. Many of these people would struggle to make regular visits otherwise.
- More concern should be given for visitors who are elderly, disabled, have mobility issues and who are coming with small children. Participants reported struggling between the Visitors' Centre and the visiting entrance, with the loss of the transport facility.
- Difficulties visiting Magilligan by public transport. Whilst the NIACRO Transport Service had the potential to fill this gap, there were a number of people unable to go on the specified days.

3. Visitors' Centre

- Feedback regarding Visitors' Centre staff was very positive; they were supportive, friendly and welcoming. Yet many felt that the Centre was not being used to its full potential (see Conclusion for further detail).

4. Visits Reception

- Most participants understood the security reasons behind visiting procedures. However, some of the difficulties visitors had experienced included:
 - The long wait outside to get into the prison; especially difficult when the weather is bad (Magilligan).
 - One regular visitor forgot her visiting reference number and was not admitted to the visit having travelled on the bus to the booked visit.(Magilligan)
 - Visitors arriving with clothing to be told that clothing was not accepted on Saturdays and having to make alternative arrangements to visit the following week on a weekday.
 - Unexpected presence of the security dogs (felt a warning could be given).
 - More recently, people reported having to have ID to leave clothes for a prisoner, not knowing that this would be the case.

5. Visiting Hall

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- Some reported having visits cut short depending on staffing levels; that the end time of the visit could vary from week to week with no reason given.
- Some have been upset at the time they have been kept on the way out of the visiting area to have handprints taken, unaware that handprints were taken just after coming out.
- One family member recounted how another visitor had guided her through the process during her first visit, as she felt she had received no information from the prison.
- Participants would appreciate Family Officers being available at committal visits to give advice and support.
- Signage or a clear pathway for coming out of the visiting room was highlighted as an area for improvement, it had been disorienting for new visitors coming out of visits.
- Toilet and changing facilities available in the visiting hall to ensure that visits are not interrupted and full visit time is given would be beneficial.
- Several participants raised the issue of removing the lids of coffee/tea cups, calling for clearer guidance on this. Several recounted instances where a visitor had removed a lid (not realising the requirement not to), to be approached by prison staff and escorted out of the visit. Notices about the necessity to keep lids on cups could be better highlighted.
- Visitors to Maghaberry can be unaware that they need coins for the vending machines.
- Long queues for the tea bar were a concern; it was suggested that it might be helpful to use the trolley approach as in Magilligan.
- Calls for more healthy food options for children in the tea bar.

6. Further Comments – Visiting

- Visits could be longer to account for the time taken to get through security.
- One elderly participant recounted events during a recent visit to his grandson at Maghaberry. Near the end of a visit, he said one of the officers shouted at him to take the tray back to the canteen counter. He felt there was no need to be shouted at in the way he was. He was struggling to take the tray while using walking sticks. Whilst he was made aware that he could put in a complaint, he said he felt if he did, his grandson might suffer consequences.



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B. Feedback from Children and Young People

In August 2017 the Head of the NIPS, Mr Ronnie Armour, met with children and young people participating in SCOPE, who have a parent or sibling in prison. This provided the children and young people with the opportunity to share their experiences of familial imprisonment, particularly their experiences of visiting prison. During discussions about their visiting experiences, the children and young people suggested that artwork in key prison locations would help to contribute to a more positive visit experience, for them and their imprisoned family member.

NIACRO then applied to the Ballygrainey Fund to deliver *Make your Mark* from April to June 2018. We are delighted that NIPS are supporting this project. *Make Your Mark* will create an opportunity for children and young people to work alongside artists from the company Blaze FX to design and then produce artwork that will be displayed in the prison, creating the opportunity to:

- Express ideas and see these become a reality through the art work; and
- Brighten their (daunting and often overwhelming) experience of prison visiting through art.

In February 2018, SCOPE and CHIP staff held a focus group with 10 young people aged between 7 and 15, who have a parent or sibling in one of the three prison establishments in Northern Ireland. The aim of the focus group was to ask for the young people's input for new booklets SCOPE; child friendly information on the prisons and visits. Later on, Lesley Mason and Davy Dowds from NIPS talked with the young people about their experiences of having a family member in prison, answered questions and listened to concerns. Young people then completed questionnaires about visiting prison.

From these discussions, the young people identified an number of areas where they would like to see change, including:

- **FaceTime/Skype** – This was number one on their list of priorities. We understand there are these facilities in Maghaberry but are not running at the minute. More information would be welcomed on how families and prisoners can access this at each of the prison sites. This is something that we would be keen to include in our child friendly booklets. NIACRO has hosted in our offices a family contacting their father at Magilligan by Skype.
- **Tour of the prison** – Young people would be keen to have the opportunity to have a tour, to give them a better understanding of the prison experience of their family member. They would especially like to see inside a cell.
- **Photos of the prison** – Young people would like to see pictures of the gym, dinner hall, cell etc. This is also something that NIACRO would be keen to include in our booklets.
- **Visitors centre and visiting hall** – The children reiterated that the visiting hall does not feel like a welcoming environment. They felt that it could be more colourful and it feels like a drab 'canteen' environment. *Make your Mark* will produce artwork to be displayed in the prison (Maghaberry).
- **Visiting facilities** – Older young people would like more toys, games, and activities appropriate for their age group in the playroom. Children also said they would like to be able



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to bring in their own toys into visits. They also said it would be good to have an iPad in the visiting hall.

- **Magilligan Family Days** – Young people who have been to the Magilligan family fun days said how good they were. Children with parents in the other establishments would like the opportunity to attend a family fun day.

The young people enjoyed getting to ask questions about the prison and felt that they were listened to by staff and their opinions were respected. They also enjoy the opportunities NIACRO creates for them to meet other young people who also have a parent or sibling in prison and having a safe space and the opportunity to speak openly about their experiences without being judged; it is hugely important for them.



Appendix 3 – Case Study from CHIP

A CHIP service user recounted a recent visit to prison. There had been an incident at a nearby table. Whilst our service user recognised that the prison staff had a job, after witnessing how the situation was handled, she felt anxious; crying and feeling unwell for 24 hours. She attended an appointment with her GP the following day and was given additional anxiety medication for three days.

Her young child had been at the table during the incident and she said he was shaking and very upset, at the time and on the long journey home. He had woken three times during that night upset with nightmares. She said her son's reaction had been so significant and the incident had been so extended that her partner became concerned for her son.

The day after the event, our service user had been unable to take her son to pre-school and an extended family member had had to take time off from work to help her

The mum expressed panic and concern about how witnessing this could affect her and her son - she said she was frightened of bringing him to the Doctor. She also said that as she was so upset, her other children, who had not been on the visit, had been affected. She said they "keep asking me why I'm crying" and when she had told them what had happened, they had said they wished their younger brother had not seen the incident.

She has said she does not feel comfortable/does not want to visit the prison again with her children and had plans to cancel the next visit. She said this had already started to have an impact on the children's contact with their dad.

She also pointed out that her son believes his dad is at work – he kept asking why his dad's bosses were fighting.

She asked why the prison could not hold families' visits in a different area to alleviate the impact of these events on those who are visiting, particularly young children and families.