Safety, well-being and hope: The untapped potential of family contact in prisons

by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

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Introduction

This thematic review is a powerful illustration of the critical role that families and friends play in the lives of prisoners: we found that for many, family relationships were so important that they influenced virtually every aspect of prison life. We heard numerous, highly compelling accounts of how families supported mental and physical well-being, a sense of purpose and a desire to change.

We deliberately visited a spread of prisons where we had previously seen positive family provision, and in this report we share the many good practices that we found in those establishments. However, there was not a sufficiently comprehensive strategic approach to family contact, locally or nationally. We did not see the 'golden thread' of family work running through all that a prison does, as recommended so strongly by Lord Farmer[1], and there was particularly weak understanding of the contribution that families make to safer and more purposeful prisons.

Disappointingly, on inspection we often find prisons failing to get some of the basics right. The central booking system shared by many prisons is inadequate, visits often start late and there are not enough evening or weekend slots, meaning children have to be taken out of school to visit their parent in jail.

Prisons are completing an annual self-assessment of their family provision, but most of these overestimate the quality of the service being provided and are not adequately driving progress.

Prison leaders often fail to learn from the provision in the best jails, where visits are not just seen as the delivery of a prisoner entitlement, but as a way of motivating prisoners to behave well, raise morale, maintain meaningful family ties and support rehabilitation.

Extended family visits and relationship-focused interventions are too often treated as a 'nice to have' rather than a critical part of a prisoner's journey through custody and towards resettlement. The national rollout of in-cell phones has supported family ties, but other means of contact, including visits, are underused and little has been done to address this problem. This report outlines the many additional costs of family contact, resulting from factors such as prisoners being held far from home and the expense of phone calls. Despite this, financial assistance for families is limited.

Prison leaders face constant pressure to prioritise competing areas of work and must make difficult decisions about where to focus resources. The evidence presented here suggests that family work should be seen as essential both for prison safety and reducing the risk that prisoners will reoffend.

[1] Farmer, Lord (2017 and 2019)

Summary of key concerns

Priority concerns

1. **Family work was largely seen as the responsibility of the contracted family provider, rather than a joint endeavour with the prison.** Prison leaders did not always understand the importance and quality of family ties in motivating good behaviour in their prisons.

2. **Specialist family provision was not accessible to all prisoners who needed it.** Precarious funding meant that services were often too reliant on goodwill and volunteers.

3. **Prisons were often failing to get the basics right in relation to visits.** Problems included inefficient booking systems, incorrect visiting times on prison websites, insensitive and excessive searching, and visits often starting late.

4. **Not enough was done to support family contact during the early days in custody.** The system to help families locate prisoners was slow and there were frequent delays in approving phone numbers for prisoners' accounts.

5. **Families were rarely involved in supporting prisoners at risk of self-harm or violence, despite evidence that family contact can have substantial impact on mental health and behaviour.** Some prisoners were unaware that family involvement was a possibility.

6. **HM Prison and Probation Service's self-assessment system did not provide adequate assurance or sufficiently drive improvement.**

Key concerns

7. **The number of visits had reduced substantially since the COVID-19 pandemic and we found little analysis to understand and address the issue.** Only one prison had evening visits and prisons did not sufficiently advertise financial support available to help mitigate the burden on families.

8. **Social video calls were underused.**

9. **Not all prisons had a process for identifying and supporting prisoners who did not get social visits.**

10. **Family visits were highly valued but often had restrictive eligibility criteria.** They were too short, not frequent enough and held at inconvenient times, including during school hours.

11. **The management and effectiveness of dedicated safety telephone lines for families varied considerably.** Families could not always get through to notify prisons about concerns for a prisoner's safety or welfare.

12. **ROTL was not used effectively to support family ties in any of the men's prisons we visited.**

13. **Care-experienced prisoners received insufficient support to develop and/or maintain ties.**

Section 1 Why we carried out this review

Existing knowledge

1.1 Of the nearly 87,000 prisoners currently held in England and Wales, many will have friends or family in the community. The latest available figures suggest that 78% have children under the age of 18 and between 1 October 2021 and 1 October 2022, 192,912 children had a parent in prison.[2] At any one time the number of people with a relative or friend in prison will run to many thousands of people.

1.2 It is well established that positive relationships with family and friends can help to reduce the likelihood of prisoners reoffending on release. A frequently cited 2008 Ministry of Justice study found that prisoners who received visits from a family member were 39% less likely to reoffend.[3] In 2014, a joint inspection by HMI Prisons, HMI Probation and Ofsted talked of, 'the central importance of an offender's family and friends to their successful rehabilitation'; the report argued that 'an offender's family are the most effective resettlement agency', while warning that family ties should not be seen 'simply as a matter of visits'.[4]

1.3 A few years later, the 2017 Farmer Review described an 'unacceptable inconsistency of work' to help prisoners maintain and strengthen relationships, arguing that with employment and education, family work should be seen 'as the third leg of the stool that brings stability and structure to prisoners' lives, particularly when they leave prison'.[5]

1.4 In 2019, Farmer's subsequent review, this time on female prisoners, found that relationships with people outside prison were an even more important factor in their likelihood of reoffending, but that there were added layers of complexity. This was mainly because women were more likely than men to have experienced abuse and trauma as a result of problematic family relationships.

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2 See: Official Statistics in Development: Estimates of children with a parent in prison - GOV.UK

3 May C., Sharma N. and Stewart D. (2008)

4 HM Inspectorate of Prisons, HM Inspectorate of Probation and Ofsted (2014)

5 Farmer, Lord (2017), p.7

‘Therefore, whilst I emphasise, as in the original Review, that the importance of family and other relationships needs to be a golden thread running through the criminal justice system, it is essential to know which relationships are 'rehabilitation assets' in the life of a female offender and which are toxic.’[6]

Lord Farmer

1.5 In response to such findings and the Farmer Reviews in particular, HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) has sought to improve its work in this area. For example, there is a requirement for all prisons to conduct a 'families and significant others' self-assessment. New HMPPS guidance also includes a policy framework for strengthening prisoners' family ties,[7] and a revised prison service instruction on visits has been published.[8]

1.6 However, the overall impact of this activity appears limited. An HMPPS progress report on the implementation of the second Farmer Review on women reported 'good progress' and stated that 27 of the 33 recommendations had been met. Yet a recent HMI Prisons review, ‘Time to Care: what helps women cope in prison?’, found that family provision remained disappointingly poor, and worse than in the best men's prisons:

‘… there is a failure to offer opportunities for women to stay in contact with their families, particularly children, for whom many were the primary carers… there was a lack of ambition or creativity in helping women maintain good family ties.’[9]

1.7 About a third of women at the four sites we visited for that review were not receiving visits at the time, and the prisons were not doing enough to make visiting easier. About a third of women in most prisons were over 50 miles from home, making it difficult and expensive for their families to visit. In a survey carried out with the women, 94% said that seeing and speaking to family and friends was an important factor in helping them to cope.

1.8 Similarly, HMI Prisons' 'Improving behaviour in prisons' thematic review[10] found that recognising the importance of family and embracing their involvement in prisoners' lives contributed to safer and more rehabilitation-focused prison cultures. Yet there were very few examples of prisons making an active effort to involve families when prisoners were struggling to cope and behave appropriately.

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6 Farmer, Lord (2019)

7 Ministry of Justice (2020)

8 See: Providing visits and services to visitors

9 HMI Prisons (2025), p.3

10 HMI Prisons (2024)

1.9 HMI Prisons' 2024–25 annual report, which examined provision across 38 inspections of adult prisons, concluded that, 'the role of families and friends in a constructive and progressive prison experience was not sufficiently well understood.'[11]

Aim of this review

1.10 This review delves more deeply into the area of family contact to build on existing evidence. We intentionally visited prisons with positive recent inspection findings for family provision to find out what was working well, and what lessons could be shared. We considered a range of areas, including how staff involved families in prisoner safety and preparation for release, specialist family ties work, different means of contact (including visits), and the overall leadership focus on family work (see Appendix I).

1.11 A mixed-method approach was taken, which included quantitative analysis of HMI Prisons' inspection survey data and qualitative fieldwork. The survey analysis used data from 38 inspection reports published between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025.

1.12 Fieldwork took place at eight prisons selected to cover different functional types, including men's, women's, private and public sector establishments, spread across England and Wales. Further detail about the methodology is included in Appendix I.

[11] HMI Prisons (2025), p.40.

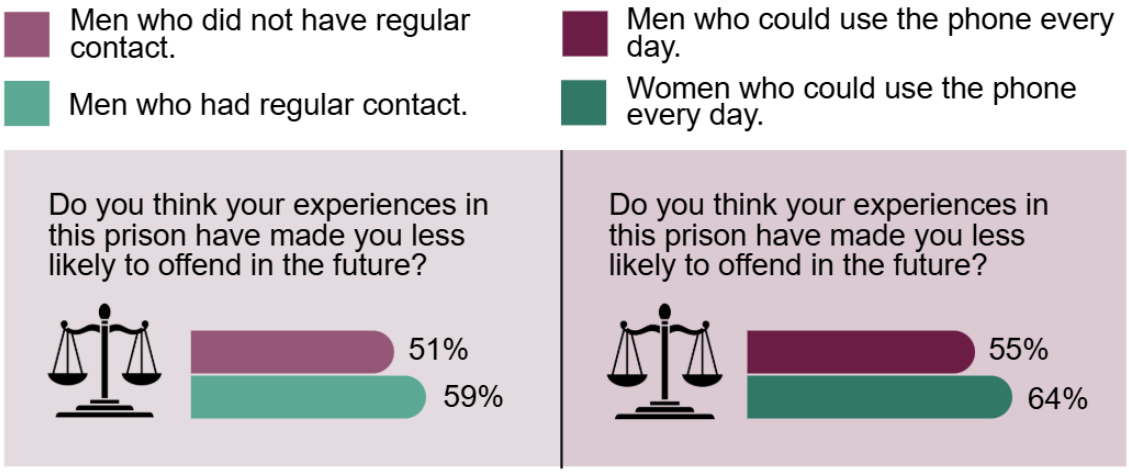
Section 2 Survey findings and family ties

2.1 Given some of the known evidence to date, we began by considering what our own survey data told us in relation to family ties. Our prisoner survey findings indicated some clear links between family contact and more positive outcomes.

2.2 Men who received more than one visit or social video call a month (referred to as 'regular contact' in this report) were much more optimistic about their prospects of avoiding future offending. Similarly, men and women who could use the phone every day thought their experiences in prison had made them less likely to offend in the future.[12]

Figure 1: Prisoners with regular family contact reported being less likely to offend in the future

Adult prisons in England and Wales



Source: HMI Prisons prisoner surveys, 2024–25

2.3 To date, there has been limited focus on the impact that family contact can have on promoting safety in prisons, and the contribution families can make to what is often loosely described as a 'rehabilitative culture'.[13]

2.4 Our prisoner surveys suggest that families may have a positive influence on safety. Prisoners who said they had regular family contact reported feeling safer and experiencing less victimisation. Men who received regular visits or social video calls were less likely to have been supported by the assessment, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT) process (see Glossary), more likely to feel safe and reported fewer experiences of bullying or victimisation by either prisoners or

[12] For men, this was significantly higher than the figure for those who could not use the phone daily (45%). As nearly all women were able to use the phone daily, there was no valid comparison to be made.

[13] Mann, R., Fitzalan Howard, F. and Tew, J. (2018), 'What is a rehabilitative prison culture?'; HMI Prisons (2020), Minority ethnic prisoners' experiences of rehabilitation and release planning.

staff. About a quarter also described the culture of the prison as encouraging them to behave well. Although low, this figure was higher than for prisoners without regular contact.

Figure 2: Prisoners with regular family contact reported feeling safer and experiencing less victimisation

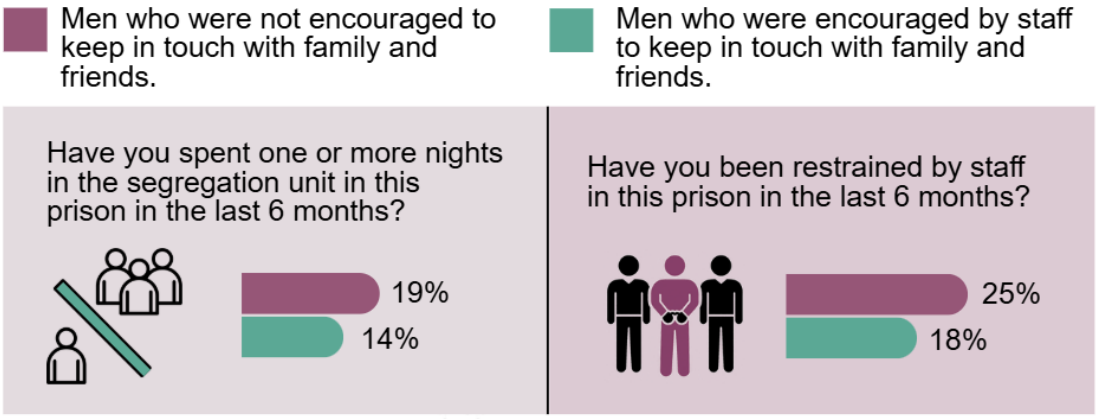
Men's prisons in England and Wales

Source: HMI Prisons prisoner surveys, 2024–25

2.5 Similarly, men who said they were encouraged by staff to keep in touch with family and friends were more likely to report positively about safety and prison culture than those who were not. They were also less likely to say they had been restrained by staff or segregated, both of which are indicators of disruptive and/or violent behaviour.

Figure 3: Prisoners who were encouraged to keep in touch with family and friends reported fewer instances of segregation and restraint

Men's prisons in England and Wales

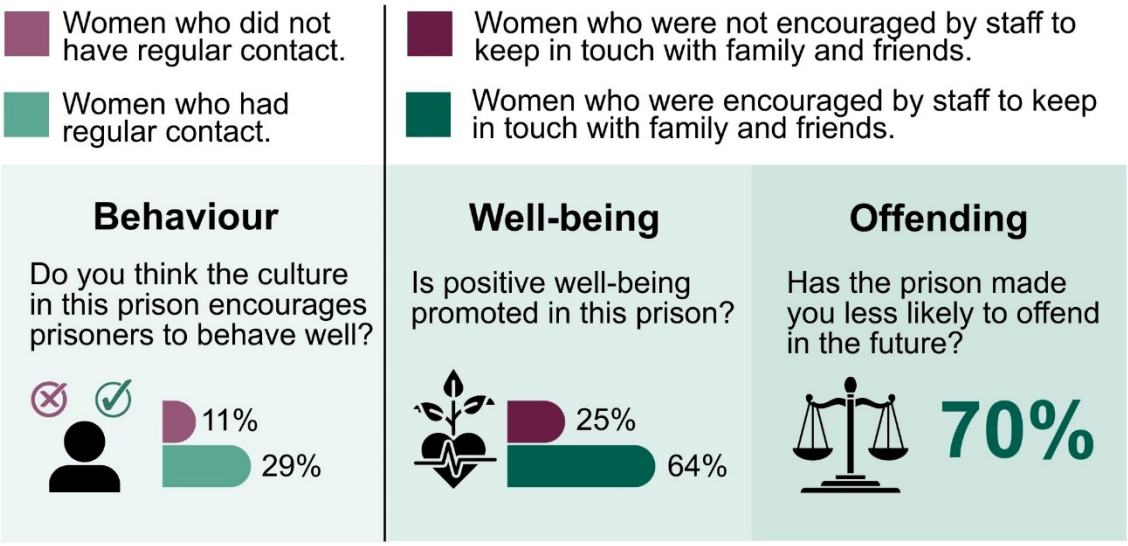


Source: HMI Prisons prisoner surveys, 2024–25

2.6 While the smaller number of women in our survey analysis meant there were fewer areas of statistical significance than for men, the results were still noteworthy. Those with regular contact were more likely to say that the culture of the prison encouraged them to behave well. Similarly, women who were encouraged by staff to keep in touch with family and friends were more likely to feel that positive well-being was promoted in their prison and that their experiences in the jail had made them less likely to reoffend.

Figure 4: Women who had regular contact and were encouraged to keep in touch with friends and family reported a more positive prison culture and said they were less likely to offend in future

Women's prisons in England and Wales



Source: HMI Prisons prisoner surveys, 2024–25

2.7 These findings suggest that prisons should do more to support contact with the people who matter most to prisoners, although there are occasions where this may not be appropriate, such as in cases of domestic abuse.

Section 3 Family ties and safety

Family contact during the early days in custody

3.1 Prisoners and staff told us about the importance of family contact during the first days in custody. This can be an exceptionally stressful and confusing time for prisoners and their families, especially if they have not been affected by imprisonment before. Prisoners' risk of self-harm and suicide is heightened and the reassurance and comfort provided by family and friends can be crucial.

> "I had no contact for over a week... I was depressed every day. I didn't realise it at first. I thought it was just coming back to prison that affected me, but when I finally spoke to them I felt fine."

3.2 However, we found that contact relied heavily on the efficiency of systems for enabling early phone calls and prompt visits. In general, once a prisoner had moved from the reception area to the induction wing, processes to check and add phone numbers to personal PIN systems (see Glossary) appeared to work reasonably well. Yet there were recurring problems across most of the fieldwork sites that prevented contact with families for a large minority of prisoners.

3.3 Not all prisoners were offered a phone call on arrival, and staff told us that the main reasons for this were busy reception areas or late arrivals. Some prisoners were told they could make a call when they moved from reception to the first night unit, only to find that the phones were not working when they got there, often several hours later.

3.4 Security departments were frequently slow to check and clear phone numbers. At some sites, numbers could not be added to prisoner's account over a weekend or bank holiday because the staff responsible were not available. When transferring to a different jail, prisoners had to have numbers approved again, which could take time, especially if there were specific public protection considerations. Category A prisoners often faced additional delays, although leaders at Manchester were attempting to address this by having prison staff conduct the relevant checks, rather than relying on the police.

3.5 Despite the importance of family ties during this critical period, Low Newton was the only fieldwork prison providing 'reception visits', which allowed visitors to drop into the prison within the first two weeks of custody and see prisoners without the need for booking.

Case example: Effective support during the early days in custody

The Early Days in Custody (EDiC) project was established in response to concerns about high numbers of men and women in custody reporting distress and exhibiting risky behaviours during their time on induction wings. It had been delivered by Nepacs in Durham and Low Newton since April 2020 and supported prisoners and family members during the critical first two weeks of custody. The workers provided a point of contact and practical help by, for example, helping prisoners to contact family and friends and book visits. The aim was to mitigate the shock of entering custody and to reduce negative feelings that could lead to behaviours such as self-harm and suicide.

An independent evaluation found that the project had succeeded in improving outcomes for prisoners and families in both prisons. It found, for example, that the project helped to 'make communication between prisoners and their loved ones more efficient and less bureaucratic'; and fulfilled an important safeguarding role by 'working with Safer Custody and outside agencies to keep those inside and outside safe, including children'. This initiative was due to end at the end of March 2026 because of a lack of funding.[14]

3.6 Delays in enabling early contact meant that some families lacked reliable information and reassurance about their family member's welfare. We were told that this uncertainty could have an especially acute effect on children. The partner of a first-time prisoner explained that it would have made a great difference to have had someone to speak to at the prison, to answer her questions and explain how she could maintain contact.

3.7 The Nepacs 'Connect to Court' project was trying to mitigate such problems. Nepacs workers were located in courts across Durham, Newcastle and Teesside to provide support and information to families. Crucially, they also provided a conduit for risk or safeguarding information to be relayed to an early days in custody worker in Durham and Low Newton.

3.8 At the other prisons we visited much less was done by prison staff to contact families and explain what was happening during the early days, and how information could be shared with the prison during this time.

Family contact and general well-being throughout custody

3.9 Prisoners told us that the quality of their relationships with family had a powerful effect on their well-being throughout their time in prison, not just during the early days.

[14] O'Brien, K. and Straub, C. (2023), p.69

> “I need to maintain my family ties otherwise everything falls apart. Not only do you lose your freedom, but you lose everything that's important in life to you, that just takes every bit of hope, normality and life away.”

3.10 Many prisoners spoke in similar terms, often reporting that their family was the single most important thing in their lives. They told us that family contact gave them support and a sense of connection to the outside world, and 'hope' was a recurrent theme in their accounts. Family connection was described as enhancing mental health and encouraging a more positive approach to life. As one prisoner put it, without the emotional security that his family provided, 'it's a whole world of emptiness'. Another man told us that the regular visits from his daughter and grandson 'keep me sane'.

Family involvement in managing vulnerability and risk

3.11 Prisoners told us that their families could help them to reduce their self-harm. HMPPS policy states that those supported by the ACCT process should be asked if they would like their families to be involved in their care, and that staff should make reasonable efforts to increase family contact where it might help to reduce risks. However, ACCT records we checked did not consistently demonstrate whether this support was offered, and some prisoners said they did not know that family involvement was a possibility.

> “My parents know me better than I know myself. They have been through so much mental health struggles with me and they know what helps me, they know what doesn't help me, they would be able to speak on my behalf because they know me and I think it would be beneficial if my parents were involved in some way.”

3.12 In one case we reviewed, a man had asked that his partner be involved in his ACCT reviews. Although included in the initial support plan prepared by staff, the partner was not mentioned again and we found no evidence that staff had acted on the request. We found many other examples of prisoners who were self-harming, where there was no indication that efforts had been made to involve family or friends.

3.13 However, some exceptions demonstrated the value of a more active approach to involving families.

Case study: Involving family to reduce the risk of self-harm

Ms A was low in mood and being supported by the ACCT process when she was first imprisoned. She told staff that while she wanted to speak to her family, she was too afraid to contact them because of the nature of her offence. With her permission, a prison officer liaised with Ms A's daughter to discuss the possibility of contact and how this could work. This led to Ms A initially sending letters, followed by a first phone call with her daughter a few weeks later. Ms A's prison offender manager then attended visits to support her in rebuilding her relationship with her daughter and other family members. Ms A said that the contact she had with her family had a significant positive impact on her well-being.

3.14 In general, where prisoners were behaving aggressively, there was little mention of the contribution that families could make to the challenge, support and intervention plans (CSIPs) that are intended to provide case management for prisoners who pose a raised risk of violence. Some leaders we spoke to told us they did not see the relevance of family involvement in the prisoner's care, and local prison safety strategies generally contained little reference to families. In fact, across all of the fieldwork prisons, we only found one instance of family involvement in a CSIP. The results in this case were impressive.

Case study: Involvement of family to help manage aggressive behaviour

Mr B's mental health had deteriorated, and he was placing himself and others at risk by behaving in an aggressive and challenging way on the wing. His family contacted the prison because they were concerned for his welfare. Prison staff then asked family members during a visit if they would like to be involved in the CSIP that had been opened for Mr B; they agreed and attended a multi-agency case review. Prison staff consulted the family on Mr B's ongoing care, which helped them to manage his difficult behaviour. Staff in the prison's safer custody team called Mr B's mother every week to keep her updated on his progress.

Mr B himself told us how much he valued his family's involvement and that their contribution was the 'turning point' that led to him getting the support he needed. He believed that his mental health would not have deteriorated so much if they had been involved earlier. He subsequently received enhanced prisoner status, had a trusted job and was working well towards D-categorisation.

3.15 In another case, staff who were trying to understand and manage a prisoner's poor behaviour realised that his family could help him. The prisoner told us that his plummeting mental health, violent behaviour and self-harming only stopped when, instead of restricting family contact as a sanction, staff recognised the positive impact it could have on his ability to cope. He was grateful that officers had noticed the effect on him when he spoke to his daughter.

3.16 Prisoners told us that their families helped them to gain perspective within the intense prison environment. Family contact made them feel part of something bigger and more meaningful than prison, which could help them to respond to challenges more calmly and constructively.

> "I think I'd have gone wayward… that outside voice, I suppose a voice of reason... without that I'd have probably made a lot more wrong decisions while I've been in prison. Might have got up to more mischief or just not done the right thing. They've kept me on a rational path."

3.17 Staff in many of the men's jails we visited were sometimes quick to restrict family contact following an adjudication (see Glossary) or when prisoners were placed on the lower level of the prison's incentives scheme. Other prisons understood the incentivising effect family ties could have on behaviour and were seeking to expand their offer.

3.18 The women's prisons we visited were less likely to restrict family contact for poor behaviour and there was a greater acceptance that this was because doing so could make behaviour worse. At Low Newton, those with an adjudication, on the basic level of the incentives scheme or even in the care and separation unit were not excluded if this was in the best interest of the children and family. At Askham Grange, restrictions on family contact were not part of adjudication punishments or the incentives policy.

Family contact with prisons about safety concerns

3.19 All of the fieldwork prisons had a safety line for families to ring if they had concerns about a prisoner's well-being. Some were constantly monitored, while others had a voicemail function for out-of-hours calls. Families should also be able to call a prison in an emergency at any time of the day or night, and the websites for all prisons encouraged concerned individuals to call the main switchboard.[15] The life-and-death consequences of poorly functioning contact systems have been made clear in death in custody reports, which document tragic outcomes when families have been unable to speak promptly to someone in the prison.[16]

3.20 In the best cases, such as at Durham, callers to the safety line received an immediate response, calls were logged, and safeguarding actions were taken and recorded. However, the management and effectiveness of dedicated safety lines varied considerably. At some

[15] The Prisoner Family Helpline Website also has a portal (Worried about someone in prison? | Prisoners' Families Helpline) for family members to raise concerns about a loved one in a specific prison. Requests are routed directly to the prison's safety teams.

[16] In one tragic case, the wife of a distressed prisoner tried to raise the alarm when she realised her husband was planning to kill himself. Her call was diverted to an unstaffed office during the night instead of the control room. When she could get no answer, she drove two hours to the prison, banged on the gate and pressed the buzzer, all without any response. Her husband was found dead the next morning having hanged himself. See Courts and Tribunals Judiciary (2025).

prisons, it was not clear if appropriate action had been taken to safeguard the prisoner or whether the caller had been informed of the outcome.

3.21 Families are advised to use a dedicated website to locate prisoners if they have not heard from them within 72 hours of imprisonment.[17] Applicants should receive a response within four weeks, but when we tested the service, it took over five and a half weeks to get a reply. We were told that this was because of understaffing.

[17] See: Apply to find a prisoner's location - GOV.UK

Section 4 Initiatives to enhance family relationships

Specialist support for families

4.1 Some of the prisons we visited delivered exceptional family work. The partner of one man told us that specialist support had finally given her 'family back' to her. However, not all prisoners could access this provision.

4.2 Parc had a dedicated family unit, where staff from the family provider, Invisible Walls, worked alongside prison officers. The unit held up to 60 men who were given extra support to develop and sustain relationships with their children. The criteria for a place on the unit included having regular visits from children and commitment to attending a parenting course and/or other family interventions. Men were offered opportunities, including 'lounge visits', where they could have an extended visit in a room with soft furnishings, supervised via CCTV only.[18] Some of the family interventions were available to men in other parts of the prison, with short waiting times.

Lounge visits, Parc

4.3 The provision also included newborn baby visits, birthday celebrations with children, and a homework club. There was more regular one-to-one support on the unit than we usually see, mainly because prison key

[18] Lounge visits were also available at Oakwood; see HMI Prisons blog (August 2024)

work was supplemented by additional meetings convened by family workers.

4.4 Parc, along with a small number of other prisons, had established links with local schools to involve them in family work. Funded by external grants, the 'School Zone' scheme included three mentors who worked with children, families, teachers and prisoners to provide support and build mutual understanding between teachers and prisoners' families. Creative use of visiting sessions, such as homework clubs, enabled prisoners to take a more active role in their child's education. Prisoners could also meet teachers and discuss their child's progress.

4.5 This shows what is possible when leaders prioritise family work.[19] The family provision was highly valued by prisoners and their families; one man on the wing told us:

> "I've strengthened bonds... at the beginning of my sentence, me and my partner had split up and then through doing as much as I've done on [the family unit] we ended up getting back together, it means a lot... she could see my dedication to my kids and the improvements I was making."

4.6 A visitor spoke about the 'exceptional' support she had received from the dedicated family services.

Case study: Importance of proactive family work

"Invisible Walls have saved our family… the help and support with the children has been phenomenal."

Ms C described the shock that she and her children felt when her partner received a long sentence. On her first visit, she arrived at the visitors' centre visibly upset and in tears. The family manager, who made herself available to greet visitors, approached Ms C and offered comfort and advice. Subsequently, Ms C said that the family wing had enabled her husband to have more frequent and relaxed contact with their children. She was particularly grateful that her daughter's teachers could attend parents' evenings held in the prison; this had encouraged her daughter to open up at school and had helped to reduce some of the stress and stigma she had experienced as a result of her father's imprisonment.

4.7 At Durham, prisoners similarly valued 'father-and-child' visits, but one case highlighted the problem of inconsistency between prisons. A prisoner had maintained a close relationship with his children at Durham but was likely to be transferred to an establishment which did not have such good family provision. The reversion to 'normal' visits would, he said, feel like a punishment for him and his children.

[19] For another notable example, see HMI Prisons inspection report on Oakwood (2024)

"When you break that bond, that's when the problems start. Cracks start appearing in your relationship, and then when you get released, from past experiences, not that many relationships last in prison, because of that barrier."

4.8 Other notable provision was the Acorn House unit at Askham Grange, which was separate accommodation in the prison grounds that provided a relaxed, domestic environment. Women could spend the whole day with their families and take part in everyday activities such as cooking and eating together. Until recently, family members had also been able to stay in the house overnight, but we were told that this had ceased because of concerns about the condition of the building.

4.9 At Grendon, a therapeutic community, group meetings routinely included discussion of family concerns and attachments. Prisoners explored conflicts, relationship challenges and offences, and how to have difficult conversations with significant people outside prison. Families were also encouraged, where appropriate, to attend end of therapy events at the jail. It was clear that the therapeutic opportunities offered by Grendon were in demand at other prisons.

4.10 In contrast to these examples of good practice, only two fieldwork prisons offered parenting courses, despite promising evidence of their effectiveness.[20] We also found limited use of Storybook Mums and Storybook Dads, a service run by a charity that helps prisoners to audio- or video-record bedtime stories and messages for their children. Use of the service had declined over recent years, but few prisons or staff we spoke to understood the reason for this.

Use of temporary release to enhance ties

4.11 The women's prisons we visited were the only fieldwork sites to use release on temporary licence (ROTL, see Glossary) for any purpose. At Askham Grange this was to be expected given that it was an open prison, but Low Newton, a women's local prison, was also using it in suitable cases. At both jails, women were glad of the opportunities ROTL offered to reconnect with their families and prepare for release. One woman was able to attend a domestic abuse course in the community as part of her sentence plan, and was grateful to be able to regularly see her daughters in a normal environment. Another woman, in the same prison, told us about visiting her family at home every weekend.

"Definitely keeps me going. It keeps the bond there with the kids. So I haven't just been taken away from them completely… It's one thing to look forward to for the next week."

[20] Troy, V., McPherson, K.E., Emslie, C., Gilchrist, E. (2018)

4.12 Temporary release gave one woman an invaluable chance to support her terminally ill father. She had previously visited him in handcuffs and escorted by three officers. She was also pleased that the ROTL allowed her to show her extended family how she had changed.

4.13 At Askham Grange, prison offender managers sent introductory letters to families to invite them to contribute to ROTL applications and made generally good efforts to organise family involvement in sentence planning. We saw some creative uses at the jail: in one case, a mother was released to attend her son's sentence planning meetings at a young offender institution. In another, ROTL had helped a mother to work effectively towards regaining parental responsibility for her child.

Case example: ROTL helping to bring family back together and support effective resettlement

At the time Ms D arrived at Askham Grange, her child was subject to a full care order. Guardianship was shared between the local authority and the child's grandmother. Ms D's contact with her child was undermined by the fact that she did not have a good relationship with her mother. Over two years, ROTL was used to rebuild this relationship and increase contact with her child. This moved from supervised visits to overnight stays. These opportunities allowed social services to consider discharging the care order much sooner than would otherwise have been possible, demonstrating the potential of family-focused resettlement planning.

4.14 During inspections of closed category C men's prisons, we rarely see the use of ROTL to support family ties before release, although this option is available and the outcomes can be very positive. Similarly, with the exception of Grendon, there was little involvement of families in sentence and release planning in the men's prisons we visited.

Prisoners with little or no family contact

4.15 A few prisoners actively avoided contact with family and friends, often because of the shame they felt about their offending. Some families were also unwilling to have contact with the person in prison.

4.16 Prisoners who had little contact with family relied on other sources of support. In some cases, pen pal schemes delivered by New Bridge[21] and Bent Bars[22] helped, although these were not always well promoted. In places like Ashfield, where more than a third (36%) of the population had never had a social visit and 60%[23] had never had a social video call, these schemes could be vital.

[21] See: The New Bridge Foundation

[22] A pen pal service specifically for LGBTQ+ people; see: About 5 — Bent Bars Project

[23] Data provided by the prison's OMiC manager

"It makes me really happy every time I get a letter because it's like that sort of reassurance that I'm not on my own anymore, I'm not all by myself dealing with this nightmare."

4.17 Ashfield also benefited from the work of Circles South-West, a charity contracted by HMPPS to work with people who have been convicted of a sexual offence. Circles was based in the prison and linked prisoners with community volunteers who supported them as they approached release. It continued to support prisoners through the gate and during their first 12 months back in the community. Circles also had plans to deliver a course for partners of prisoners convicted of a sexual offence; this looked promising, but funding had yet to be secured.

4.18 Not all prisons systematically identify those who are not getting social visits, but peer support and 'no visit visits' – when prisoners can go to the visits area for a 'visit' with friends (i.e. other prisoners from other wings), peer workers, voluntary organisations and staff in a relatively relaxed atmosphere – are increasingly common. This not only helps to reduce isolation, but may also develop prisoners' confidence in contacting family and having conventional visits. Peer support is usually an important element of the experience, and was especially impressive at Durham.

Support for people with little outside social contact

Durham had appointed several 'Every Contact Matters' (ECM) peer mentors across each of the wings.[24] The mentors spoke with new arrivals to identify those without social contact and provided information, including about the official prison visitor (OPV) scheme and the New Bridge befriending service. The prison also arranged a monthly community day for those without visits to socialise with their peers. A range of resettlement support was available during these days, including from NHS re-connect and well-being coaches.

4.19 Care-experienced prisoners, estimated to be around a quarter of all those in prison,[25] are less likely to have consistent or positive family relationships.[26] In our survey, men who had been in care were less likely to say they had been able to have a visit with family or friends in the previous month than those who had not (26% compared with 39%).

4.20 Despite this, only 32% of men and 37% of women who had been in care said they had been encouraged by staff to have contact with their families and friends.

[24] The ECM scheme was developed across the north-east region by the prison service's central families team in response to The Farmer Review. Resources including a toolkit to develop peer support and provision for prisoners who did not receive visits.

[25] Berman, G. (2013)

[26] Gooch, K., Masson, I., Waddington, E. and Owens, A. (2022) pp.4–12

4.21 Young care-leavers (aged 18–25) are entitled to specific statutory support. Eligible prisoners, however, were not always receiving this help which could help to counteract a lack of family assistance. This might include setting-up-home grants and bursaries to help pay for education and training. We also saw very little effort to help care-leavers establish or maintain contact with their personal advisor, who could have provided practical and emotional support.

4.22 Some prisons were starting to improve their work with care-experienced prisoners. For example, in Durham, two care leaver single points of contact (SPOCs) invited all newly arrived young care leavers to a monthly drop-in session where they could receive advice and support, including from Durham County Council care leavers team. The Council team also provided useful awareness sessions for prison key workers.

Section 5 Visiting prisons

> "When I see my family members, friends, I will be alive for one week… everybody knows I've come from a visit, they know, because I'm smiling, joking."

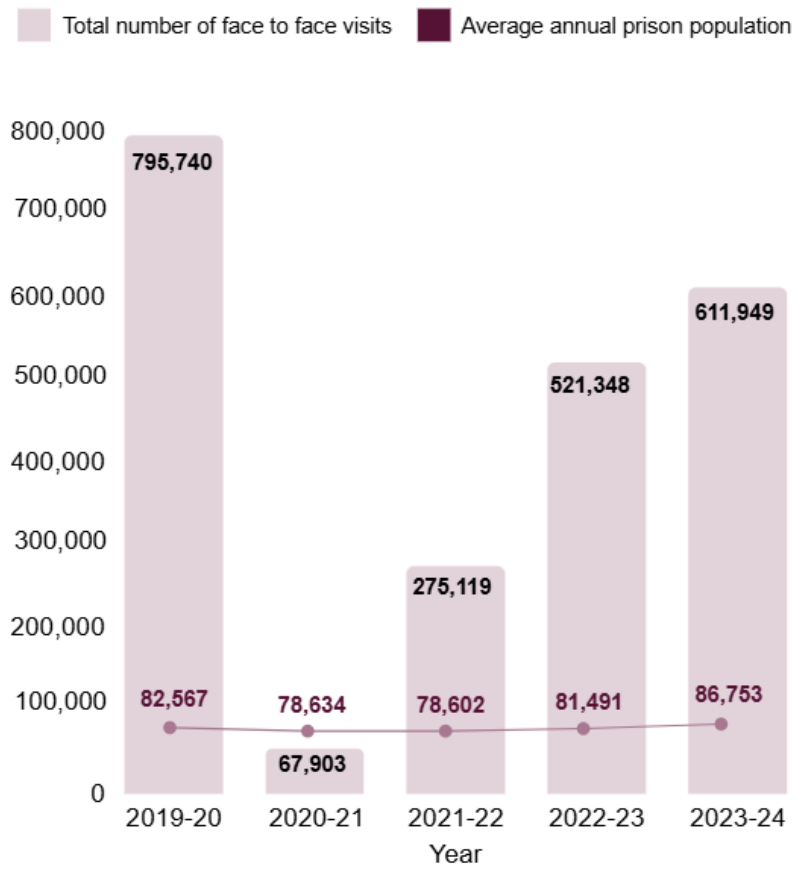
5.1 It was clear from our interviews that family contact through visits was highly valued by prisoners and families. Despite this, the number of face-to-face visits has declined significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2019, there were 65,983 visits (involving 28,903 visitors), but by April 2024 this had reduced to 49,719 visits (involving 22,575 visitors).[27] Between April 2019 and April 2024, the number of visits declined by 26%, while the prison population increased by 7%.[28] We found little analysis to understand or address this trend and there was a common assumption among staff that families preferred social video calls to visiting. In fact, we found that use of video calls had also declined in recent years (see paragraph 6.13). Prisoners and their visitors had other explanations for not booking face-to-face visits, including distance from home, cost, lack of flexibility in visits times and the stresses they experienced when attending.

[27] Randall, E., Jones, J., Atherton, K., Netten, K. (2025)

[28] The average adult prison population in the year ending March 2019 was 82,004. This had risen to 87,590 in the year ending March 2024. See: Offender management statistics quarterly - GOV.UK

Figure 5: Average number of face-to-face visits still lower than before COVID-19, despite the prison population being higher

All prisons in England and Wales



Source: Data supplied by HMPPS Family Services Team and Ministry of Justice and HMPPS, Offender Management Statistics

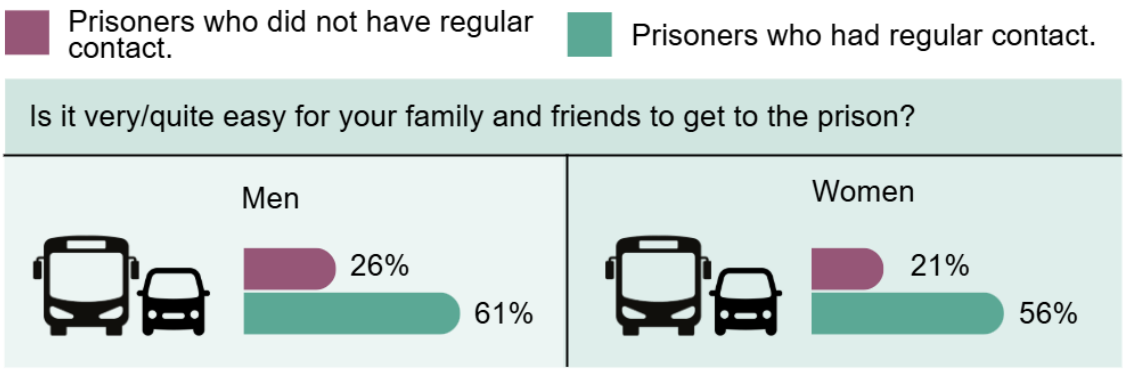
Distance from home

> "I'm local. I see all the buildings out the window, you know, my mum and dad can come, like, literally 30 seconds away, it's walking distance. I hear cars going past every night so I feel like I'm home but I'm not because I'm in prison."

5.2 Most prisons did not keep data on prisoners' distance from home and we found many examples of incorrect information on the Digital Prison System. This made it impossible for leaders to assess the impact of location on visitor numbers. Prisoners were routinely allocated to jails based on available spaces rather than proximity to family or their likely release address. Our survey suggested that this was a major factor in their prospects of receiving a visit.

Figure 6: Prisoners with regular contact report it being easier for their family and friends to get to the prison

All adult prisons in England and Wales



Source: HMI Prisons prisoner surveys, 2024–25

5.3 Location was especially problematic for women, who are often placed a long way from home because there are relatively few women's prisons.

> "When I first came into prison my two boys was with my mum and my sisters, so it used to take them three hours, so I didn't used to get to see them that often..."

5.4 Distance from home could also cause problems for prison discipline. One man who was previously held far away from his family told us that they were paying £150 a visit. He said that his current, closer location had made such a difference that he would refuse to cooperate with another transfer and therefore potentially face prison punishments.

> "I don't want to refuse but… family ties mean a lot in jail… I was sick of being so far away. I felt trapped. Here I can get visits all the time. It's literally a bus ride."

Costs and timing

5.5 Travelling to visits was a significant financial burden on many prisoners' families and not all sites could be reached by public transport or at times that aligned with the prison's visiting schedules.

> "… they used to come every week, and now it's every other week. It's an expense to come up..."

5.6 For families travelling long distances, Ashfield and Parc offered a more flexible approach to visits booking that allowed prisoners to 'pool' their entitlement and have longer sessions. Ashfield was also the only prison we visited that was providing a free bus service to and from the nearest train station. Several prisoners told us this was a real help in avoiding substantial taxi fares. In contrast, at one of the prisons, there was no

public transport available and a return taxi to one of the nearest train stations was around £70.

Bus, Ashfield

5.7 There was some limited financial support to help visitors on low incomes through the 'Help With Prison Visits' scheme,[29] commonly referred to as 'assisted visits'. Across the eight prisons we visited there had been a total of 757 (69% of the total) successful claims in the previous 12 months. Visitors with a monthly household income below £1,250 could claim support for up to 26 visits a year. The scheme was not well understood by prison staff and poorly advertised to visitors.

> "Assisted prison visits have been left behind. Why is there not an app to make it easier for families to get some financial support?"
>
> Family worker

5.8 Use of the 'accumulated visits scheme', whereby prisoners save up visits to be used during a temporary transfer to prisons close to their families, was rare. Across the eight fieldwork prisons, only five accumulated visits had been recorded in the previous year.[30] As with other aspects of family contact, not all prisons were recording this data.[31]

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29 See: Help With Prison Visits: A guide to claiming help with the cost of prison visits - GOV.UK

30 Data supplied by each individual fieldwork prison.

31 Durham was not recording it.

5.9 Prison visiting times were rarely based around visitors' needs. This was especially problematic for families with children who had to miss school. We found waiting times of over two weeks for limited weekend visits. Children who visited relatives in prison told us that they regularly missed out on activities or seeing their friends because visiting someone in prison could be a whole-day event.[32]

5.10 Parc was the only prison that had reached pre-COVID-19 levels of visits and visitors. It offered three evening social visits a week, which helped families to come after work and school.

Visiting family in prison

> "The visits experience shapes the whole culture of the prison."
>
> Head of Clinical Services

5.11 The attitude and approach of staff was generally cited as the most important factor during visits. Most prisoners in our survey said their visitors were treated respectfully by staff all or most of the time (70% of men and 68% of women). In prisons which had dedicated visits staff, we found better rapport with visitors, especially with children.

5.12 Specialist family provider staff members played an important role during visits, and visitors were particularly positive about the treatment they received. Some contrasted their support with what they considered to be a less sympathetic approach from prison staff.

> "They're not like prison staff, they don't feel like they're prison staff... They just treat you like a normal person. Some people don't want to approach officers... but it seems like they're [family provider staff] down to earth..."

Booking visits

5.13 Individual prisons are responsible for updating information about booking visits. Most prison websites we checked during our fieldwork contained misleading information, including incorrect times and days, and the wrong information about the identification required for entry.

5.14 Visit booking systems varied across sites and included phone, online and in-person options, or a combination of all three. In most cases, families and/or prisoners could book visits reasonably easily, but there were recurrent problems.

5.15 Thirty-two prisons in England and Wales use the national HMPPS booking line.[33] Inspectors conducted several tests on the line. The quickest response from an operator was 20 minutes, while the slowest

[32] See: The testimonies of children from Time-Matters UK inspired the play 8 Hours There and Back. – Time-Matters UK

[33] Data provided by the HMPPS Family Services Team.

was one hour and 23 minutes. The delays appeared to result from understaffing of the contact centre dealing with calls (see paragraph 7.1).

5.16 Visits can also be booked by prisoners via kiosks, and those who could book in this way were generally positive about the convenience and speed. However, some prisoners were routinely unlocked first, usually because of their level on the incentives scheme or because they were on a particular wing. This allowed them to access the kiosks before others and book up the most popular times.

5.17 One prison allowed only two children per prisoner, and we met a family that had to choose which two of the three children could visit each time.

Visitors' centres

5.18 Prison visitors' centres are usually located just outside the prison walls and are intended to give families a chance to wait in comfort and receive relevant information, as well as practical and sometimes emotional support before their visit. Each of the fieldwork sites had relatively well-regarded centres managed by the family services provider.

Visitor centres

5.19 These centres had an important function in helping to settle and prepare children before they enter the prison. At Manchester, we saw a useful guide on what children could expect when visiting their father in prison, but this was not typical across the fieldwork sites. Some visitors also told us they needed information before their visit rather than on the day. One partner of a first-time prisoner told us most of her information had come from other visitors.

POPs leaflet, Manchester

Entering the prison

5.20 From the visitors' centre, families went to the prison gate to have their identities checked and to be searched. Searching generally involved putting property through an X-ray baggage scanner and a rub-down search similar to that received in airports. But it could involve more intrusive practices, such as visual checks of visitors' mouths and being sniffed by dogs looking for illicit substances. We saw dog-handlers trying to make this process as friendly as possible for children by, for example, encouraging them to stroke the dogs.

5.21 However, overzealous security procedures were not uncommon. At one prison, adult visitors had to remove socks and shoes, show the soles of their feet to staff and then walk barefoot on dirty floors. This was disproportionate and staff could not explain a rationale for it. We were told that the practice was stopped following our visit.

5.22 At another establishment, we saw a member of staff wrongly telling a mother that she could not enter with her baby because she did not have identification for the child. This was contrary to HMPPS policy, which states that only children over 16 need such identification, and the policy was on the prison's own website. Other examples of disproportionate security measures – loosely or not at all related to identified risks – included handing over spare nappies before going into a visit and not being allowed to take in baby formula.

5.23 Late starts to visits were a regular occurrence. Reasons for this included lunchtime roll checks taking too long and lack of staff to escort visitors and/or prisoners to the visits hall. In one prison, a large number of visitors were crammed into a small waiting area with no toilet or fresh air, because there were no staff available to escort them into the visits room.

In the visits hall

5.24 Visits halls were mostly bright and welcoming. For example, the hall at Parc had large glass windows and a lot of natural light. There were some outdoor spaces but only Wealstun and Grendon used these areas routinely.

Visits halls, and outside visits area at Grendon (bottom right)

5.25 At some prisons, we saw good involvement of the neurodiversity support managers in improving the visits, both for prisoners and visitors. Initiatives included easy-read materials to explain visit procedures and the creation of quiet, relaxed spaces for visitors and prisoners who were struggling to cope in the main visits hall. Such efforts were appreciated by families and contributed positively to their overall experience.

5.26 Families valued eating together in the visits hall. They were usually allowed to bring in £20 per adult to spend, although one prison allowed up to £40.

> “Food always makes people happy, and it's always good for me to have the visits with mum and having the food there as well, it reminds me of the good times I had with my family.”

5.27 Most prisons typically offered sweets and drinks, and more substantial options tended to include pizza, reheated pasties and toasties, and chips. Few prisons catered to special dietary requirements. Family and friends told us they preferred being able to pre-order food, rather than using visiting time to queue for lengthy periods.

5.28 At one of the prisons we visited, £12 'goody bags' were also available for families to buy for prisoners but were sold at an approximate mark-up of 50%. They contained drinks, crisps and chocolates, which prisoners could take back to their cells.

Goody bag

The potential of family visits

5.29 Family visits (known as 'family days') were available at all fieldwork sites and were intended to provide a more child- and family-friendly visiting experience. They gave prisoners an opportunity to have more relaxed time with their families and were highly valued by those who participated in them. Some prisons made a considerable effort to provide normal activities, such as making games available for prisoners to play with children and allowing families to cook and eat together.

> "[During normal social visits] he likes me to get up and play with him [but] I'm not allowed to get up out of my chair and he's like calling me into the little play area and he wants me to 'look at this dad', and I can't. But it's nice to be able to make up for that on family days... so I don't hardly sit down ever on the family days."

5.30 However, the potential of family visits was generally not being maximised and one prison only allowed for three a year. The visits usually took place during school hours and, in one case, the family provider told us that a social worker had raised concerns about the amount of school being missed by a child.

5.31 Family visits could also be too exclusive: some barred adult children and extended family members who might be very close to the prisoner.

5.32 Despite being called family 'days', in the fieldwork prisons most were in fact no longer than a standard two-hour visit. Staff explained that the short length was because prisoners and families became tired and bored with longer visits; however, this was more a reflection of a lack of imagination about how sessions could engage participants.

5.33 We saw some good examples of more creative family visits. At Askham Grange, families were able to go to the prisoners' living accommodation and have a tour of the whole prison, while at Grendon, family days

were held on the units themselves. In both cases, prisoners appreciated the opportunity to address concerns that their loved ones might have about where they were living. Visits staff at Askham Grange told us that families coming onto prison units was 'an absolute game changer in breaking down barriers'. For example, they described children seeing photographs of themselves on their mother's wall, and realising how important they remained to her regardless of the distance between them.

Section 6 Keeping in touch

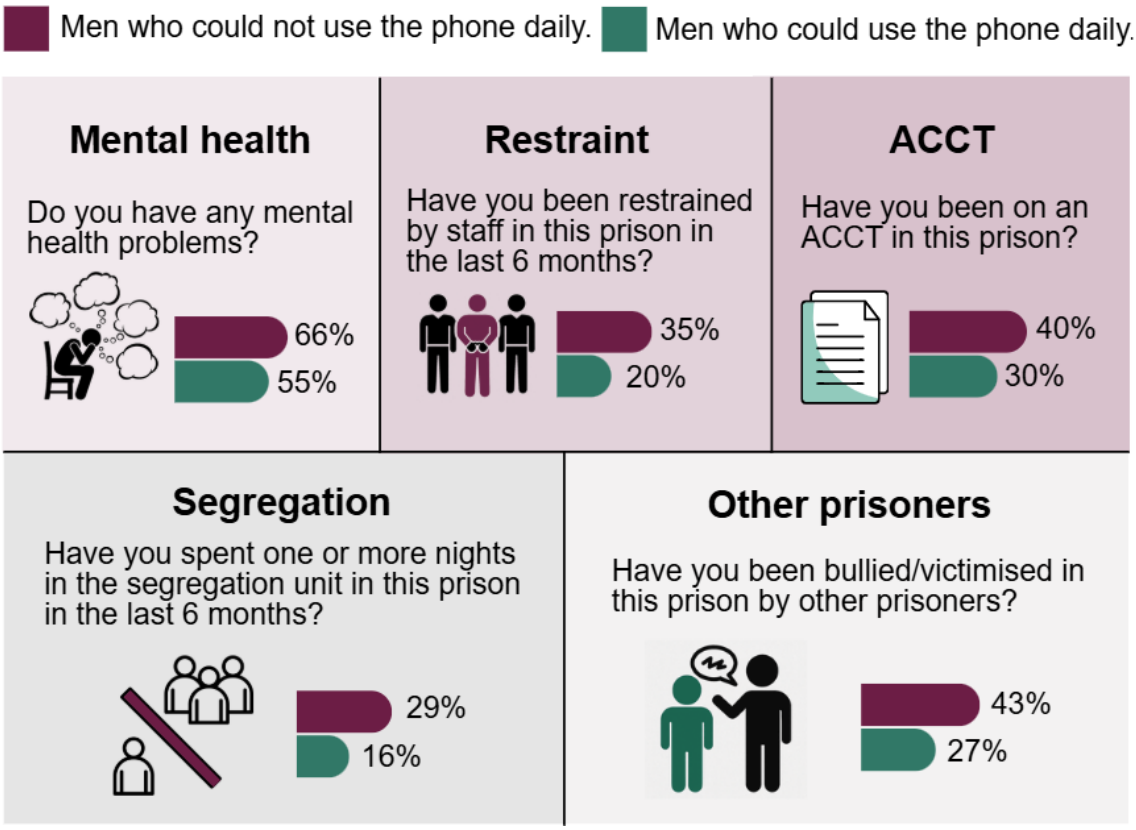
The importance of phone calls

6.1 Since 2018, HMPPS has rolled out in-cell phones in all closed prisons, allowing prisoners to make outgoing calls to approved numbers. This means that prisoners no longer need to queue to use wing phones, increasing access to and the privacy of telephone conversations. Many of the tensions that were once common when prisoners had to compete for access to a small number of landing phones have been removed.

6.2 In our survey, men who could use the phone every day were less likely to report mental health problems or bullying and victimisation by other prisoners. They were also much less likely to have been restrained by staff, segregated in the last six months or to have been identified as being supported by the ACCT process.

Figure 7: Prisoners who could use the phone daily reported fewer mental health problems and fewer experiences of behaviour management and victimisation

Men's prisons in England and Wales



Source: HMI Prisons prisoner surveys, 2024–25

"The best thing I've ever seen since being in prison is having that telephone in your pad... just knowing that you can ring them every morning or every night that's been the best thing... Just having that phone, being able to speak to them and once you can hear and you know they're safe, it puts my mind at rest."

6.3 In-cell phones are not available in open prisons and at one establishment there was evidence that this had led to some bullying by more dominant prisoners occupying the wing phone at the most popular times. Lack of privacy was also a common concern. For example, a pregnant woman in the mother and baby unit at Askham Grange told us that she found it difficult to have proper conversations with her partner from communal phones in noisy locations.

"Being able to phone your family in the comfort of your own room is so important… I miss it massively."

6.4 In most prisons, the phone lines were turned off from 11pm to 6am to prevent unwanted calls that might disrupt the lives of family and friends outside. Prison staff can override the block on any individual account if necessary, but this flexibility was not used for those with a legitimate need to call at night. For example, we spoke to a foreign national prisoner from New Zealand who found it difficult to speak to his family because of the time difference. Some prisoners also told us that they wanted to call their families overnight because this was when they felt at their most vulnerable.

6.5 All of the prisons we visited had a number of broken in-cell phones. This was especially problematic on induction wings from which some prisoners had taken working phones (see paragraph 3.3).

6.6 The importance of keeping in touch with family members who were also in prison was not well understood and it was difficult to organise inter-prison phone calls. Prisons had little oversight of requests, and three prisons were unable to provide any data at all. Prisoners told us they had to ask repeatedly to get these phone calls. One man told us about the impact of not being able to get inter-prison phone calls when he moved prisons.

"I definitely have [missed talking to brother on inter-prison calls], because I know I've got a call every weekend or every other weekend on a Saturday so I'd be looking forward and behave until that call and if I had issues I could talk to him, because he's the older brother, he'd be like listen, calm yourself, take five, do it like this or like that instead of acting impulsively."

6.7 At Ashfield, prisoners also had access to the Unify messaging service, which allows instant messages to be sent to approved phone contacts via in-cell technology. This was popular among prisoners, with 43% of

those at the jail using the service. In the three months before our visit, over 150,000 messages had been sent. Some told us how much easier it was to convey their emotions by text because of the difficulties they had with expressing themselves verbally.

"I don't know what I'd do without it if it were to go. It has become so crucial to me… It's been nice when I'm in a bad place to send a message off because I'm not in a mood to talk."

6.8 However, as of late 2025 only 19 prisons had the in-cell laptops that were required to access the service.[34] The laptops also allowed prisoners to keep emails (see paragraph 6.21).

The cost of phone calls

6.9 Prisoners were keen to tell us about the high cost of phone calls, relatively low prison wages and consequent reliance on families to send money for phone credit. Prisoners typically earn £10 to £20 a week if they are working or in education, while the cost of a single 60-minute weekday phone call from prison to a UK mobile is £3.30, far higher than a similar call would cost in the community. A recent 20% reduction to the cost of calls did not apply to international calls. In a sample of cases, we found that prisoners were receiving on average around £28 a week from families to pay for shop items and phone credit, but the figure was far higher in some cases and especially for those who were heavily reliant on the emotional support from regular phone calls.

"When I first come away, I was literally on the phone all the time, like spending all my money on it, because I needed somebody on the other end of the phone. I was struggling quite a lot."

6.10 Some prisoners told us that they had to make a choice between making phone calls and buying items from the shop. Prisoners could swap unused visiting sessions for additional phone credit, but many were unaware that this was an option. The exception was at Askham Grange, where women who were not receiving social visits or unaccompanied ROTL, were given £1 or £2 extra phone credit depending on their incentives policy level.[35]

6.11 Anyone calling abroad paid a much higher rate. Calls ranged from 8p per minute to Ireland (£4.80 for 60 minutes) to 29p per minute for Afghanistan (£17.40). At the time of our visits, about 6% of the prison population were Romanian, and they paid £14.40 for an hour's call, absorbing the whole of a typical weekly prison wage.[36] In immigration

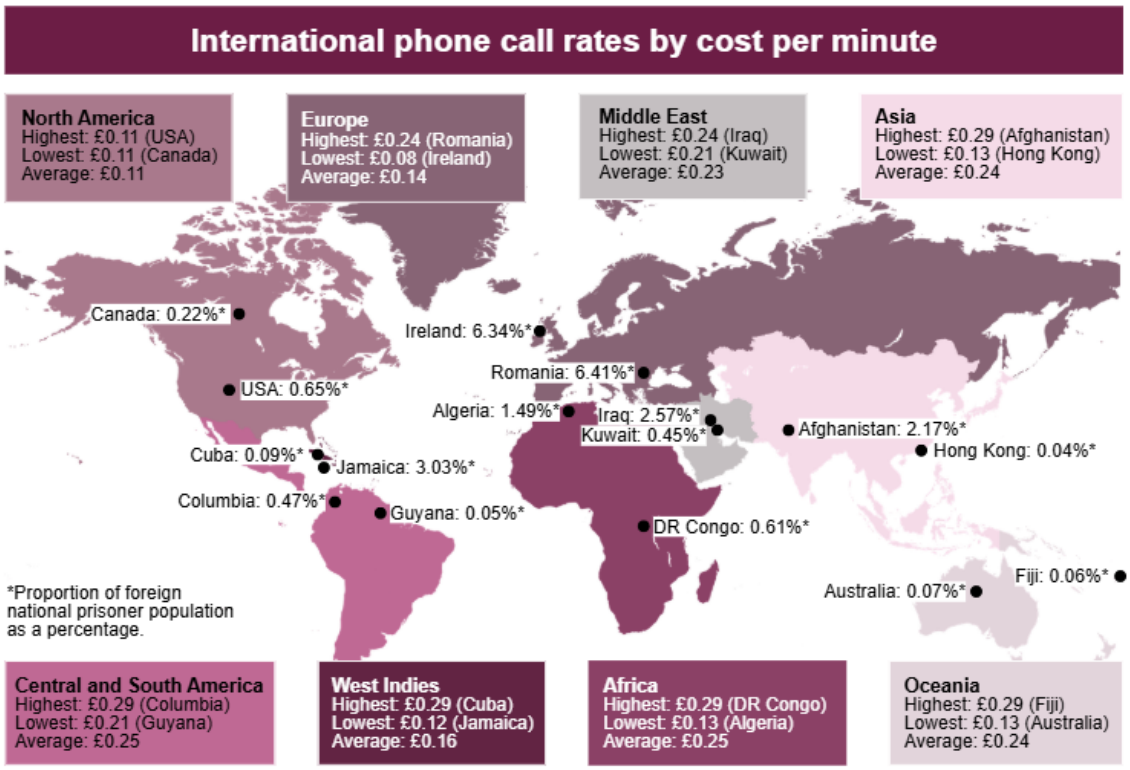
[34] Information provided by HMPPS.

[35] The cost for a call to a mobile phone is 4.5p a minute.

[36] Figures for 30 June 2025; see: Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2025 - GOV.UK

removal centres (IRCs) detainees have access to specialist SIM cards to make phone calls more affordable, but these were not available in prisons.

Figure 8: Costs of international calls varied by country, as of August 2025



Source: Data supplied by HMPPS Transforming Delivery Directorate and Ministry of Justice and HMPPS, Offender Management Statistics[37]

6.12 The security-approved prisoner voicemail service allowed prisoners and their family and friends to send voicemails via an application on the prisoner's in-cell phone. The service was available at most prisons, cost £5 to £10 a month and offered cheaper phone calls to mobiles than the standard fee. However, most of the prisoners, families and staff we asked were not familiar with this service.

Video calling

6.13 In 2020, HMPPS introduced free secure social video calls as part of its response to restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prisoners and families who were using social video calling services were mostly positive about the service, but we found surprisingly low levels of use. National data (April 2024 to June 2024) showed that there were around 13,000 video calls by up to 7,000 prisoners each month. Even allowing for restrictions on social visits in 2021, this represented a steep reduction from more than 30,000 video sessions delivered between March and May 2021, when over 17,000 prisoners used the service.

6.14 We identified various possible reasons for lower use, none of which had been effectively addressed by prison leaders. For example,

[37] See: Offender management statistics quarterly: April to June 2025 - GOV.UK

prisoners and families told us that calls were of poor quality or cut out with the smallest movement, which made them difficult to use with younger children or even pets. Some children we spoke to said they wanted to make more use of the potential that video calls offered by, for example, moving the camera around and showing their parent their bedroom. A frequent concern for prisoners was that calls did not take place in a welcoming or private space, conducive to having a positive interaction with family and friends.

"… you've just got an officer sitting right next to you and that's dead awkward."

6.15 HMPPS policy states that the credit available to establishments 'permits access to up to 60 minutes of secure social video calling per month'. The governor may allow additional free secure video in 'exceptional circumstances'.[38] Despite this, we found that most prisoners were only offered one 30-minute social video call each month, and often not at the most convenient times for families. At one prison with a population of over 600, calls were only offered on one weekday afternoon. As a result, only 109 calls had been made in the whole of the previous year. Low Newton and Parc were the only fieldwork prisons to offer evening video calls, which suited many more families.

6.16 There was generally little creative use of the technology to enable prisoners to have a stronger presence in their families' lives. An exception was at Ashfield, where prisoners felt the service was well promoted, and valued the fact that they could read stories to their children. This was similar to the imaginative use of video calling that we had previously seen at Oakwood, where evening sessions enabled prisoners to read bedtime stories to their children, attend parents' evenings with teachers and call partners during or shortly after childbirth.[39]

6.17 We saw no evidence of additional calls to support well-being and in exceptional circumstances. These could have helped, for example, people who received no visits, including many foreign nationals. One such prisoner told us that he had no idea he could call overseas using the technology.

[38] See: Secure Social Video Calling Policy Framework

[39] See HMI Prisons inspection report on Oakwood (2024)

Video calling areas

Post

6.18 Postal deliveries were generally handled promptly in the prisons we visited, and most prisoners did not raise concerns. The only significant issue identified was that photocopies of mail were sometimes given to prisoners instead of the original. At some prisons the practice was clearly justified on the basis of intelligence and significant illicit drug supply. However, at others where we found little evidence of such problems, similar restrictions applied without regular review.

Emails

6.19 The well-used Email a Prisoner scheme[40] allows families and friends to email messages to a prison via a dedicated website. The messages are then printed and delivered by prison staff, and prisoners can also write responses, which staff scan and send on. In some establishments, prisoners can also receive and reply to messages electronically. The service was welcomed by most prisoners to whom we spoke and contributed to the range of communication methods that allowed contact with the outside world.

6.20 Sending pictures was, however, relatively expensive, with each email that included an image costing families 42p, which increased to 68p if they paid for a reply from the prisoner. Despite families paying to send photographs, only a couple of prisons printed these in colour.

6.21 At prisons with electronic kiosks, the emails were not printed and prisoners could only read them on screen once before they disappeared. Prisoners told us that it was difficult to remember long emails to help them write their reply.

[40] See: eMates - the hassle free way to keep in touch

Section 7 Leadership

Oversight and training

7.1 A small national family services team had a range of responsibilities, including management of the family provider contracts, running the Help with Prison Visits and Victim Contact schemes, as well as the Find a Prisoner service, the Prisoner's Family Helpline and the visits booking service. Despite their efforts, this left little capacity for strategic oversight and analysis of family provision across the prison estate, and there was not much evidence that positive practice was routinely shared. The team had the support of a separate contact centre team, which dealt with phone calls and emails from members of the public in relation to each of these services, although vacancies had led to substantially delayed responses (see paragraph 5.15).

7.2 At the establishment level, the head of reducing reoffending was usually the lead manager overseeing family work. While there had been efforts in the fieldwork prisons to increase the oversight and profile of this work since the Farmer Reviews, heads of reducing reoffending also had a wide range of other responsibilities, leaving little time to focus on this area. We found greater attention to family work where there was a dedicated family manager and/or HMPPS-employed family worker, as at Parc, Grendon, Low Newton and Durham.

7.3 We spoke to a few staff who had completed an online learning package developed by the central team to inform staff with responsibility for maintaining family ties. However, in general, relevant staff training was very limited and we saw little guidance on the importance of family involvement throughout a prisoners' sentence, including the impact of family ties on well-being.

Understanding the demand for family services

7.4 All prisons are required to complete an individual annual needs analysis, develop and embed a family strategy, and undertake a survey of families' experiences every six months. The prisons we visited all had up-to-date needs analyses, but they tended to only include a narrow range of data. All but two prisons did not have records of how many prisoners had children, which limited their ability to plan suitable support and bid for resources. We saw little evidence of families' views being incorporated into developing strategies or helping to drive improvements.

7.5 Each prison also had a general population needs analysis that fed into its reducing reoffending strategy. This typically included some basic information about children and family needs, usually drawn from OASys (see Glossary). However, not all prisoners had an OASys assessment, particularly those on remand, and the Basic Custody Screen, from which most data were derived, only asked about

immediate family and next of kin. There were no questions about ties to other significant people in the community.

7.6 If a prisoner asked to speak to a family services worker or was referred by staff, this resulted in a full family circumstances assessment, which was then recorded on the family provider IT system. This was not shared with the prison to help with a wider understanding of the needs of the population.

7.7 At Low Newton, Nepacs had improved information-gathering through the EDiC project (see case example: Effective support during the early days in custody), but the findings were not integrated into the prison's needs analysis or used to inform its strategy for improving family services.

7.8 Without effective local data and needs analyses, HMPPS's ability to understand need and drive targeted action at regional and national levels was very limited.

Family services contracts

7.9 There was no overall budget for family services in private prisons, with funding instead negotiated for each individual contract. Family services contracts for public sector prisons were commissioned to a total value of approximately £61 million, running from 2022 to 2027.[41]

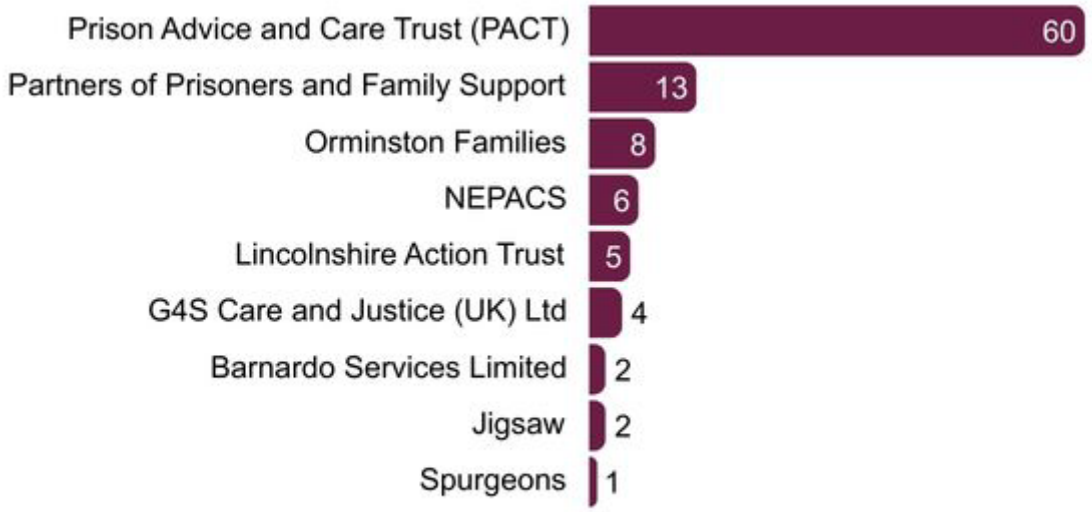
7.10 The contracts varied widely and did not always equate to actual need. For example, while Manchester had only one family worker, Durham had two, Wealstun three and Parc six, and there did not appear to be an objective reason for such variation.

7.11 Alternative funding sources and volunteers were used by many prisons to bolster small budgets for family work. This generally made sure there was reasonable provision, but it was sometimes fragile because of the difficulties in finding and retaining volunteers, and the uncertainties created by short-term external funding.

[41] See: HMPPS Prisoner, Family and Significant Other Support Services Contracts - Find a Tender

Figure 9: PACT was the largest contracted provider of family and significant other support services

Public sector prisons in England and Wales*



* Full Sutton did not have a contracted family services provider.

Source: HMPPS Prisoner, Family and Significant Other Support Services Contracts[42]

7.12 Any surplus from visitor centre food sales in public sector prisons should go into a Visitor Refreshment Fund (VRF)[43] and then be spent on improving services for families. We saw evidence of substantial sales – up to £100,000 in one prison – but costs were not properly accounted for, and it appeared that the surplus was diverted to other parts of the prison. Only Low Newton could show that the money was being spent on improving services for families. The surplus had, for example, been used to refurbish the visitors' play area, pay for food expenses and a breakfast club during family days, and supply toys and books for children.

Assessing progress

7.13 In 2019, following the second Farmer Review, HMPPS developed a 'shadow' self-assessment measure to improve understanding of strengths and areas for improvement. The measure was implemented fully from 2022 after the COVID-19 pandemic. Each prison is now required to complete an annual review and score themselves out of 144, with the prison group director's office expected to provide moderation. A three-point scale (with assessments of not met, mostly met and fully met) is used to score requirements.

42 See: HMPPS Prisoner, Family and Significant Other Support Services Contracts - Find a Tender

43 Information received from HMPPS.

7.14 All prisons we visited had an up-to-date self-assessment. Although the process had helped to give greater prominence to family work in the prisons we visited, there were significant failings.

7.15 Too little data was collected and incorporated to allow a true measure of outcomes. Such data might have included, for example, how many people were benefiting from family provision, as well as how family work was affecting outcomes in key areas such as safety and resettlement. The three point scoring scale was itself too limited. The highest score could be awarded simply for having a basic system in place, regardless of how well it was working.

7.16 The self-allocated scores were also routinely generous. The lowest score we found was 128/144 and the highest 143/144, although at the latter prison we found notable deficiencies. We concluded that the self-assessment process was not being used effectively and, at worst, it encouraged complacency.

Appendix I Methodology

Scoping

The following groups were consulted to help inform the scope of this thematic review:

- families and friends of prisoners
- ex-prisoners
- senior HMPPS leaders with responsibility for family services
- campaigners and others involved in advocating for those affected by the imprisonment of family members.

A mixed method approach was taken to explore the key areas identified during the scoping. This included quantitative analysis of HMI Prisons inspection survey data and predominantly qualitative fieldwork in eight prisons.

Prisoner survey analysis

The survey analysis used data from surveys conducted as part of 38 HMI Prisons inspections published between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025. This analysis explored the impact of contact with family and friends on various areas of prison life, including safety, behaviour management and rehabilitation. In addition, analysis was conducted to compare the experiences of groups of prisoners, for example those who had experience of local authority care with those who did not. Throughout the report we only refer to comparisons between the two groups when these are statistically significant. The significance level is set at 0.01, which means that there is only a 1% possibility that the difference in results is due to chance.

HMPPS data

National and local-level data were requested from HMPPS, including the Family Services Team and individual fieldwork establishments. Where relevant, these data have been presented alongside our own fieldwork findings.

Site selection

Fieldwork took place between April and May 2025 and adult prisons were selected to meet the following criteria:

- a range of functional types
- private and public sector establishments
- a wide geographical spread across England and Wales.

Fieldwork took place in the following establishments:

Prison	Location	Type	Family provider
Ashfield*	South-West	Men's category C for those convicted of sexual offences	Partners of Prisoners and Family Support
Askham Grange	North-East	Women's open resettlement	Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT)
Durham	North-East	Men's category B reception and resettlement	Nepacs
Grendon	South-Central	Men's category B training	Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT)
Low Newton	North-East	Women's local and resettlement	Nepacs
Manchester	North-West	Men's long-term category B with category A function	Partners of Prisoners and Family Support
Parc**	Wales	Men's category C resettlement	Invisible Walls
Wealstun	North East	Men's category C training and resettlement	Jigsaw

***Ashfield is operated by Serco**

****Parc is operated by G4S**

Fieldwork

The fieldwork methodology was piloted during a one-day visit to Wealstun. No significant changes were made to the methodology following this visit and it was decided to include the evidence that had been gathered. Fieldwork at all other establishments took place over three days and included:

- individual interviews with 70 prisoners across every prison
- discussion groups with a further 38 prisoners in five prisons
- individual and group discussions with officers working in visits
- individual and group discussions with 32 family provider staff
- meetings with 69 senior leaders and other key staff
- conversations with family members during visits.

Individual interviews with prisoners

Prisoners to be included in the individual interviews were selected to offer as diverse a group as possible. The following characteristics were used to ensure this diversity: age, ethnicity, care experience, whether they were receiving visits,

whether they had children under the age of 18, and whether they were working with a prison family provider.

Prospective participants were informed of the purpose of the thematic and were invited to take part in the interviews. A reserve list was also drawn up should anyone in our initial selection decline to participate.

The individual interviews covered the following areas:

- family, friends and important others
- establishing contact on arrival at prison
- experiences of a range of methods of contact with family
- impact of family ties on experiences in prison, including safety work to reduce reoffending
- specific support and interventions
- preparation for release/community reintegration
- maintaining relationships/family ties over a longer period of time.

A semi-structured methodology enabled prisoners to describe their experiences while focusing on the topics that were of most importance to them. Interviewers were also able to ask follow-up questions to obtain more detail about specific experiences and concerns.

With the consent of prisoners, the interviews were audio-recorded. Having a full recording of the interview, rather than relying on interviewer notes, allowed for a more rigorous approach to analysis, and the inclusion of verbatim quotes throughout this report. These audio recordings and notes were summarised to facilitate thematic analysis, and direct quotations were also included in the summaries.

Discussion groups with prisoners

Discussion groups with prisoners included questions about specific interventions available at the establishment. Questions also focused on prisoners' views about what was on offer and whether this met their needs.

Discussion groups with officers working in visits

Discussion groups with officers working in visits included questions about their experiences working in this role and the training they had received to enable them to fulfil it. Questions also focused on staff views of the visits offer at the establishment, including practical elements (e.g. rules, delays or cancellations) and any barriers for family and friends.

Discussion groups with family provider staff

Discussion groups with family provider staff included questions about the support they provided to prisoners to enable contact with family and important others, including the barriers and facilitators to providing this in a prison environment.

Meetings with senior leaders

Interviews were conducted with senior leaders to understand what the establishment was doing to help prisoners maintain or develop positive relationships with family and friends, how family work impacted safety and well-being in the establishment, and any challenges the establishment was facing in delivering effective family work. Senior leaders interviewed included:

- Governor or Director
- Head of Safety
- Head of Operations
- Head of Reducing Reoffending
- Head of Offender Management Delivery and Head of Offender Management Services
- Chaplaincy
- Neurodiversity lead
- Resettlement lead
- Head of Residential Services
- Family provider manager.

Conversations with prison visitors

Informal discussions took place with visitors during scheduled in-person social visits. In general, questions covered any involvement they had in specific family support or interventions, their experiences of social visits, as well as any other forms of contact in prison.

Other meetings

We held a structured discussion group with eight children who regularly visited prisons, three parents and two mentors. Before the fieldwork began, we also interviewed people who had experience of visiting prisoners, including staff from numerous support organisations, campaigners and family members.

Key lines of enquiry

Key areas of enquiry were identified through our scoping activities before the fieldwork began. This approach helped us to focus on the areas of greatest concern and interest. We examined the following areas:

- means of contact, including phones, visits, social video calls, post and email
- specialist work to help prisoners develop, sustain or improve family relations, including specific family interventions
- support for groups with specific needs, such as people who received no visits and neurodivergent prisoners
- staff understanding of how families were affected by having a relative in prison, and of the impact that prison policies and practices had on families and friends
- how staff involved families in processes to keep prisoners safe and prepare them for release
- the overall leadership focus on families, including financing and evaluation of family work.

Analysis

A thematic analysis was undertaken to identify the main themes from both the interactions with prisoners and staff, and the key lines of enquiry. For the prisoner interviews there was a focus on retaining the voices of the participants throughout the process of analysis. Verbatim quotes and case studies have been used to illustrate themes and provide more detailed information on the specific experiences of prisoners and staff. The findings from these data sources, as well as the stage one survey results, was triangulated to determine our overall findings.

The review was conducted in line with HMI Prisons' ethical principles for research activities, available at: Ethical principles for research – HM Inspectorate of Prisons.

Inspectors paid particular attention to the well-being of the detainees to whom they spoke, reporting any safeguarding concerns to prison staff, and adhered to the Inspectorate's safeguarding protocol for adults, available at: How we inspect – HM Inspectorate of Prisons

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Appendix III Glossary

Accumulated visits
Allows prisoners to apply for a temporary transfer to a prison nearer to their family to receive visits.

Challenge, support and intervention plan (CSIP)
Used by all adult prisons to manage those prisoners who are violent or pose a heightened risk of being violent. These prisoners are managed and supported on a plan with individualised targets and regular reviews. Not everyone who is violent is case managed on a CSIP. Some prisons also use the CSIP framework to support victims of violence.

Family visits
Many prisons, in addition to social visits, arrange 'family days' which are usually for prisoners with young children or other young relatives.

Find a prisoner service
A centrally managed HMPPS service to help family or friends find out where someone is being held. The prisoner must give their permission for this information to be shared.

Help with prison visits scheme
Provides a contribution towards prison visits costs for close relatives, partners or sole visitors who are on a low income. The scheme is sometimes referred to as 'assisted visits'.

Incentives scheme
Provides a system of privileges to incentivise good behaviour from prisoners. These privileges will be taken away for poor behaviour.

Key worker scheme
The key worker scheme operates across the closed male estate and is one element of the offender management in custody model. Key workers should see prisoners regularly to discuss their welfare and progression towards release.

Leader
In this report the term 'leader' refers to anyone with leadership or management responsibility in the prison system. We will direct our narrative at the level of leadership which has the most capacity to influence a particular outcome.

Nepacs
Nepacs is a charity in the North-East of England which supports people impacted by involvement in the criminal or care systems.

OASys
The Offender assessment system is currently used in England and Wales to assess the risks and needs of offenders.

PACT
A national charity that supports prisoners, people with convictions and their families.

Personal advisor
Care leavers in the UK are entitled to support from a Personal Adviser (PA) to help them transition into independent adulthood. They are automatically entitled to a PA between the ages of 18-21 and can request continued support from 21-25. The PA typically provides support for a range of needs, including future planning, housing, education and finances. They must meet with care leavers regularly and visit them in custody in the first 10 days.

Personal Identification Number (PIN)
Every prisoner is provided with a PIN to enter on the phone before dialling the number they want to call. Money has to be put on the person's PIN account to make a phone call.

Prisoners' family helpline
Support and advice for families and friends of prisoners. This can also direct the person to support from the family providers specifically linked to the prison they are in.

Release on temporary licence (ROTL)
Allows prisoners to leave the prison for a short time for specific activities such as work or family contact.

Secure social video calling
A system commissioned by HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) to enable calls with friends and family. The system requires users to download an app to their phone or computer. Before a call can be booked, users must upload valid ID.

Time out of cell
Time out of cell, in addition to formal 'purposeful activity', includes any time prisoners are out of their cells to associate or use communal facilities to take showers or make telephone calls.

Victim contact scheme
An HMPPS managed scheme that allows victims to be given certain information about an offender, including when they will be released and key stages of sentence, for example if they move to an open prison.

Visit booking service
A telephone visits booking line for family and friends, which is managed centrally by HMPPS and available for 32 prisons as of October 2025.

Appendix IV Acknowledgements

Project team

This report was written by Alice Oddy, Chelsey Pattison, Lizzie Renard and Hindpal Singh Bhui.

The project fieldwork team comprised: Hindpal Singh Bhui (Team Leader), Alice Oddy (Inspector), Chelsey Pattison (Inspector), Lizzie Renard (Senior Policy Officer), Helen Ranns (Senior Research Officer), Samantha Rasor (Research Officer), David Owens, Martin Kettle, Kellie Reeve, Fiona Shearlaw, Sumayyah Hassam, Lindsay Jones, Rebecca Stanbury and Rachel Badman (Inspectors).

External advisory board

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