



Improving Prison Communication with
Families and Visitors
During Covid-19 and Beyond

Report in Partnership with

Families and Visitors of HMP

29th April 2020

Introduction

On March 24th 2020, it was announced by the Government that Prison visits would be temporarily suspended in response to the Covid-19 Global Pandemic, in order to prevent the spread of the respiratory illness in custody and in the hope of saving lives.

Since that time, families and significant others of prisoners have been prevented from physically connecting with their loved ones, at a time when it is most needed and despite recent academic and media attention which has focussed on the benefits of maintaining family ties, and what Lord Farmer described as 'the Golden thread' of rehabilitation and desistance from crime.

At the same time, as the country is celebrating its Key workers, prison staff who are working on the frontline have recently have been coined as 'Hidden Heroes' because of the nature and culture of prisons as closed institutions.

There is a call from all sides for more transparent, informative, specific and celebratory communications from HMPPS and the Private prisons; from the General public, and of course families and significant others who are terrified and feel disconnected and forgotten about amidst the Covid19 storm. They wish to hear from staff who deserve to be heard.

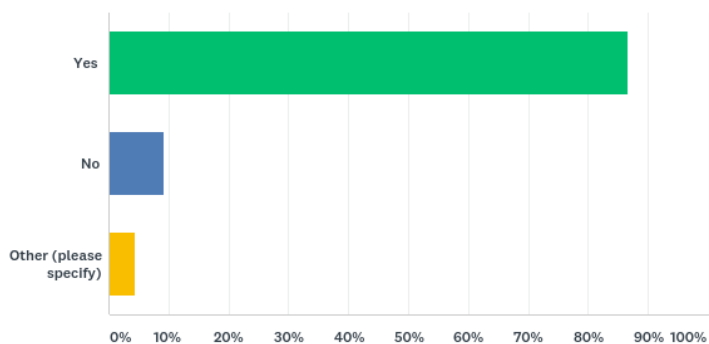
The New Leaf Initiative C.I.C. undertook this small-scale study in an effort to better support Prisons and Visitors by consulting the community in question. The study was catalysed following observations on social media of interactions between concerned and unhappy family members of prisoners and a prison system that is, in many cases, attempting to utilise the power of social media to give insight and information to the general public.

The study consisted of a survey and utilised snowball sampling through our social media connections in order to gather a National and diverse response from as many family members and visitors of prisoners as possible. Conducted over six days, the nine-question survey received 248 responses, 215 of which were from visitors and family members with a loved one serving a sentence.

This is their voice, their solutions and our offer to support their vision of Improving Prison Communications with Families and Visitors, during Covid-19 and beyond, and to also support those who work within the secure estate who are pushing for things to continue to change for the better, despite obvious difficulties in responding to the current crisis.

Survey findings

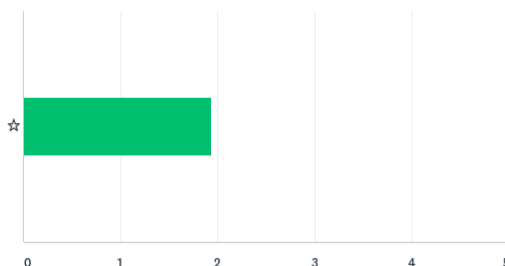
Q1 Do you have a family member or Loved one in Custody?



248 people responded to our survey, however following question one we discovered that 33 respondents had a variety of roles relating to prisons which is why they filled out the online survey. Due to the survey being focussed on how to improve current communications with families, and in order to maintain fidelity of the study, we filtered out the responses to include only those from people who had answered 'Yes' to having a loved one in custody, leaving 215 prison visitor participants.

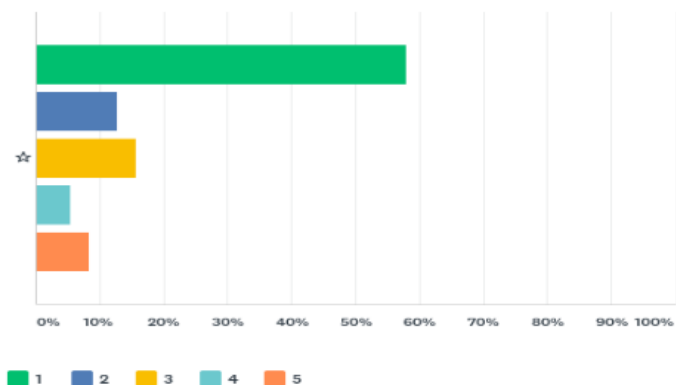
When asked how effective prison communication was before lockdown, visitors rated it as being 1.93*

Q2 How effective was the Prison at communicating with you before the lockdown? 1 = very poor and 5 = very good.



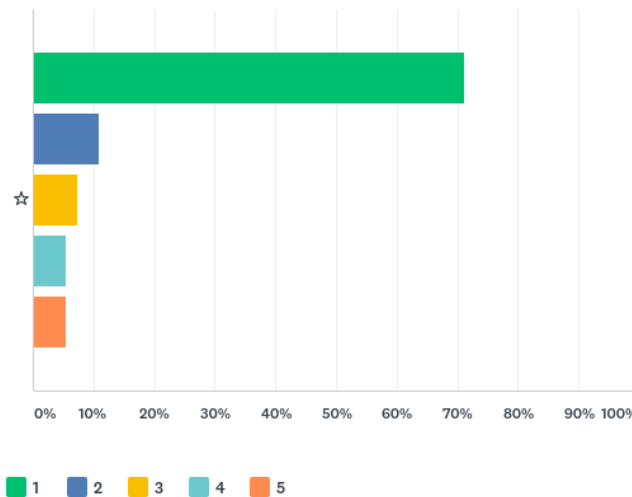
The breakdown of those ratings is as follows:

Q2 How effective was the Prison at communicating with you before the lockdown? 1 = very poor and 5 = very good.



When asked how effective communication has been since lockdown began, visitors rated it as having decreased to 1.63*, with the breakdown below.

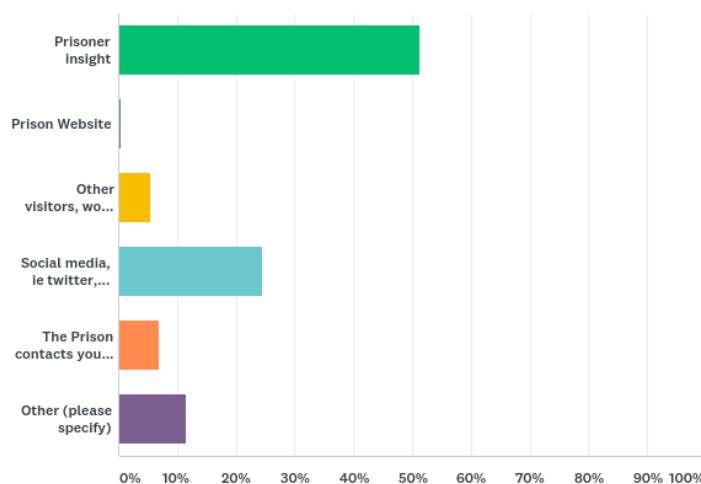
Q3 How would you rate the way the Prison communicates with you since visits were stopped? 1 = very poor and 5 = very good



This decrease in communications during a period of crisis is exacerbating the effect on Prison staff who deal with additional calls, enquiries and potential hostility from Prison visitors and Prisoners.

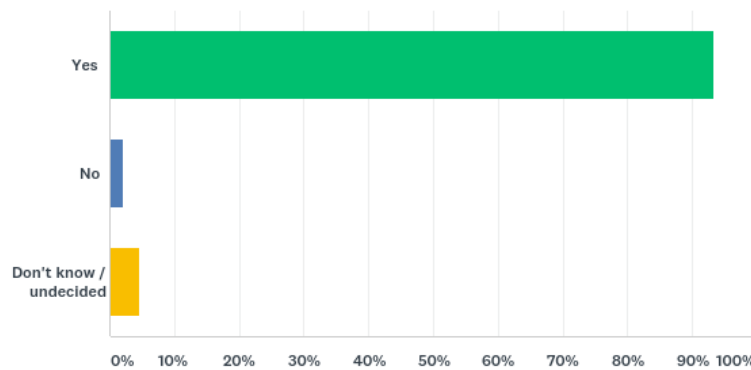
When asked how visitors currently find out information about the prison or their loved one, 51% of visitors stated that prisoner insight was the most common and consistent information source, with social media a second choice with 24%. 7% of visitors said the prison contacts them directly, and they also cited receiving more information from other visitors giving peer support than the Prison website, with only 1% citing this as a way the prison communicates effectively with them.

Q4 How do you find out what is happening at the Prison at the moment?



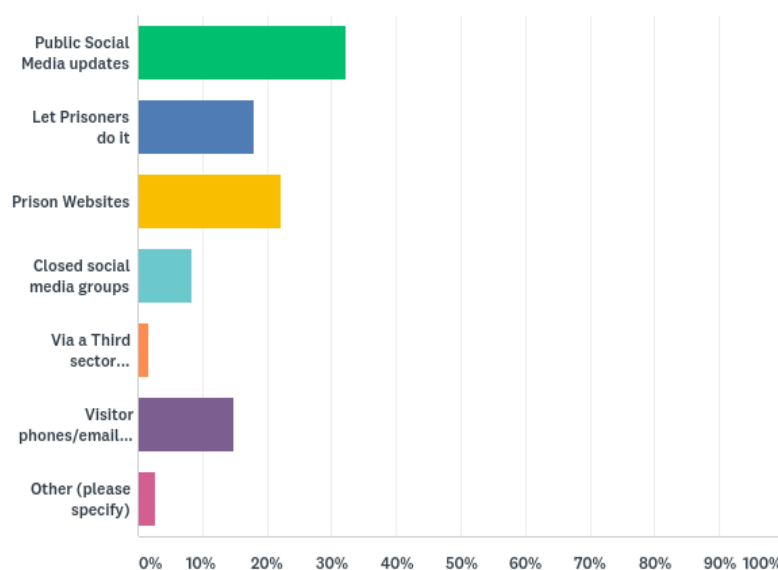
Question 5 asked respondents, 'should communication from the prison be improved?' with 93% feeling it should.

Q5 Should communication from the Prison be improved?



We then asked respondents to consider the simplest way for prisons to communicate effectively with them during the current crisis. 33% felt that social media would be the easiest way to disseminate information to visitors and family members as a free and accessible resource offering some two-way communication. Perhaps most interestingly, 22% felt that prison websites could be better utilised than are currently and could also be a good source of information which would be simple for each prison to maintain. 15% also felt it would be simple for the visitors to take the initiative by contacting the prison directly, for example by utilising the Families Lead.

Q6 What is the simplest way for prisons to communicate with Families and Loved ones at this time?



We asked Visitors what types of information they were looking for, and they gave the following responses.

Q7 What kinds of information are you particularly keen to hear about from the Prison?



The word cloud represents the number of times a particular word was mentioned in the 173 written responses. As you can see, the theme of updating around Covid-19 cases amongst prisoners and staff, keeping family members abreast of information about regime changes, good news stories, safety, phones and video calls all featured most prominently in our open ended questions.

Respondents said

“How prisoners are being kept busy, any information regarding when visits will be happening and other ways which can be introduced to keep contact with prisoner at this difficult time”

“Changes to daily routine of prisoners. Access to resources. Feedback from prisoners and families as how what improvements or challenges those affected are facing. Prison family and staff discussion forum set to include families voices in internal decision making and accountability/transparency”

“Current regime times so I know when to expect calls from my husband and can try to fit them around my job - I work in an nhs hospital and my shifts are all over the place due to covid - need to be able to keep as organised as possible!”

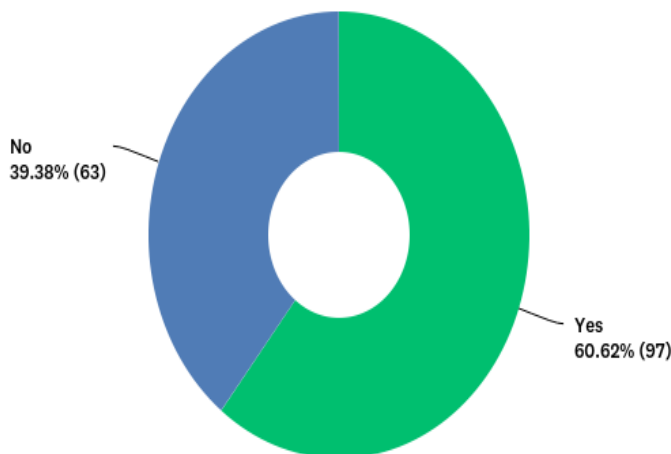
“Current situation and initiatives being utilised to minimise negative impact of the lockdown”

“What morale is like”

“Update on Covid 19 situation inside prison. To ensure wellbeing of loved ones. PPE situation. Also how we can help - what items we can send for example books - magazines - puzzles etc to cut down on the boredom of lockdown. Could we send toiletries to maintain hygiene during this period?”

get in touch with them further, signalling an appetite to support positive change, mirrored by the examples of best practice we are already seeing from Prison Governors, staff and groups.

Q9 Would you like to be involved in supporting the development of better communication from individual prisons?



Analysis and discussion

A review of the feedback from visitors shows a decrease in the already poorly perceived communication from the Prison estate, no doubt exacerbated by the worries and concerns families have for their loved ones in custody at this time. This is on top of the aforementioned staff shortages and, from conversations we have had with prison staff and senior managers, a lack of confidence or a fear of reprisal either from HMPPS, the public, or the media when considering using social media as a resource to engage and inform.

Social media was cited as the simplest way to communicate effectively with large numbers of visitors and is free and accessible to almost everyone. New Leaf and the visitors have observed some outstanding practice from Prisons and Governors who are well thought of and received by the general public, as well as the media. Despite social media emerging as a conduit for many positive communications about the good work prisons do around rehabilitation and family ties, and being warmly received outside the gate, there is still no official guidance, best practice examples which are advertised to all prisons or PSI to support prisons in bravely reaching out on channels such as Twitter, leaving most accounts underutilised.

Likewise, there is no 'one-stop shop' for many prison visitors in respect to information about the systems, processes and communication lines which are in place to maintain the security, safety and well-being of everyone. These should be sent out hardcopy by each prisoner and be available online to view at any time.

Prison websites are currently under-utilised, with less than 1% of our 215 respondents citing them as a source of information, with Prison visitors turning to each other for guidance and support in lieu of other efficient channels. Formalising this mechanism could prove beneficial for both prisons and visitors alike.

In this vein, New Leaf has recently received funding from Barrow Cadbury to galvanise the countries first ever fully evaluated Visitors' Council pilot at HMP Birmingham. The council will provide a clear way for visitors and New Leaf to:

- Develop a model of peer support through peer mentoring and support groups, both online and locally
- Create a solution-focussed dialogue for visitors to feed into, both about their past experiences and visions for improvement
- Maintain a conduit for prison visitors and the prison SMT, and aligning these with the Prisoner councils where available, and supporting the creation of these if not. Provide information, advice and guidance to prisoner visitors, Prisoners and Prison Staff and SM

61% of respondents said they wanted to be involved in supporting the development of efficient and effective systems and practices, which shows an appetite for engagement, not just as service user respondents, but as an active and able community who are ready to spend some time and energy creating positive change for the Prison Estate and Prisoner/Visitor community.

Recommendations

| <u>Action</u> | <u>Who</u> | <u>When</u> |
|---|---|--------------------------------|
| Utilise the Report and desk research to create a best practice step-by-step guide for all prisons, senior managers and staff who engage or wish to engage on social media. Show how this is effective at maintaining positive relations with the public and visitors. Disseminate guide estate-wide for immediate action. | The New Leaf Initiative C.I.C / HMPPS / Group Directors | By the 15 th May |
| Create a family information sheet for each prison with specific information about support which is available, who to contact for which concern, communication channels used by the prison, and giving instructions on how to find/access them. Send to each Prison to print out for each prisoner to send home. | The New Leaf Initiative C.I.C / Each Prison SMT | By the 15 th May |
| Create space for online/remote discussion and support for staff and Prison visitors, using webinars, closed social media groups and 1-2-1 support. | The New Leaf Initiative C.I.C / Visitors | By the 25 th May |
| Develop a Prison specific Family Engagement Strategy to include the creation of a Prison Visitor Council and Peer Mentoring model of support within each Prison. Use the necessary experience, engagement and mediation skills available to develop this. | The New Leaf Initiative C.I.C / Prisons / Visitors | By the 14 th August |

New Leaf wishes to thank all Family members and visitors who took part in this study. We will be contacting you shortly with the next steps.

We are currently applying to HMPPS for a grant to deliver this work as a matter of urgency. We have the support of Public and Private sector Group Directors, Governors and Senior Managers who view the support and insight we can offer as integral to dealing with this crisis effectively, and with the least amount of damage possible.

If you would like further information on this report, our services, or you wish to get involved, please contact:

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