

# Foreword

This document, prepared for a day conference held in London on 18 February 1998, is part reportage and part comment. It describes a time limited project - London Prisons Community Links - and details the nature of the work in which the various people involved in the project have been engaged. The Report aims to account - What we have done - and tries to explain - Why things have turned out the way they have. At various points the Report celebrates achievement. Elsewhere it chronicles failure. At no point, however, do we wish to suggest that these achievements and failures are solely those of LPCL or indeed any other single person or agency.

LPCL was intended to be a catalyst for developing and improving links between prisons and the community and has tried to serve in that capacity. It has tried to bring people together, to forge partnerships. It has tried generally to bridge the gap between prisons and the community, in particular to strengthen the community ties of prisoners. Our efforts have been made within a policy stream of consciousness influenced by many diverse forces: shifting public opinion; mass media campaigns; scandals and happenstance; changes of government and ministers; new organisational structures and priorities. To the extent that the arena in which we have worked has made progress or suffered setback it is attributable to a subtly shifting penal policy climate at least as complex as global warming or cooling. No single cause can be identified and LPCL has been a bit-part player in a play in which, whether we acknowledge it or not, every citizen is involved. To that extent we are all responsible for the prisons which operate in our collective name.

Several hands have drafted this Report and many more people have contributed to the work it describes. I should like to thank: our imaginative funders; my colleagues on the Management Committee who have given so generously of their time; the many community groups with whom we have collaborated; and the many friends within the Prison Service who are as committed to our objectives as we are. Finally,

# Introduction

## LPCL's Aims

LPCL was established as a three-year project (later extended by two years) designed to:

- work with the London prisons to improve facilities for visitors and visiting arrangements, and to encourage greater co-operation with community based services at a local level
- liaise with the Prison Service at headquarters level, using the experience gained from the work with individual prisons, to influence policy development and implementation
- develop links with charitable trusts interested in contributing to initiatives in the penal field
- convene the LPCL Network to offer organisations working with prisoners and their families and prison staff the opportunity to meet and discuss issues of mutual concern

This report will provide an overview of the work carried out during the project and a commentary on the impact policy changes have had on prisoners' opportunities to keep in contact with their families, friends and communities over the last five years.

The main funding for the project throughout was provided by the City Parochial Foundation - hence the focus on London prisons. The Royal London Aid Society funded the costs of office accommodation and travel for the Co-ordinator during the entire project and acted as her employer. Additional funding during the first two years of the project came from the Sir Halley Stewart Trust. The LPCL Management Committee is very grateful to all three funders.

Although LPCL operated under the auspices of the Royal London Aid Society, it had its own Management Committee, chosen on a strategic basis, to bring together a variety of experience and perspectives on the issues of concern to LPCL. The Committee comprised people responsible for operational matters and

# Historical Background

In 1991 the City Parochial Foundation's interest in penal affairs became focused on improving links between prisons and the community. Successive reports by the then HM Chief Inspector had drawn attention to the importance prisoners attach to visits and the effect of maintaining contact with family on a prisoner's resettlement. The Prison Service's evidence to the Woolf Inquiry made a similar point :

"The disruption of the inmate's position within the family unit represents one of the most distressing aspects of imprisonment ... Enabling inmates, so far as possible, to stay in close and meaningful contact with the family is therefore an essential part of humane treatment.... There is every reason to believe that the nature of a prisoner's relationships with his or her family will be an important factor in determining whether he or she will succeed in leading a useful and law-abiding life on return to the community."

In 1991 many visitors to prisoners in London faced great difficulties because of the conspicuous inadequacy of visiting provision at most establishments. For those on the outside, the "forgotten victims" as Matthews put it, the visiting experience was a kind of extra punishment, unintended but real, in addition to the penalty of losing a spouse, parent, relative or friend through imprisonment.

Discussions between HM Chief Inspector of Prisons and the Clerk of the City Parochial Foundation led in 1991 to the Foundation commissioning

Silvia Casale to undertake a feasibility study. Its remit was to explore the possibility of establishing an organisation to draw together the efforts of various statutory and voluntary sector organisations interested or involved in the prisons field in the London area. The initial focus would be visiting arrangements and facilities for prisoners' families and friends. The feasibility study aimed

- to explore the potential for improving arrangements for people visiting prisoners held at London prison establishments;
- to make practical suggestions for

***'Approaching the prison is a dismal prospect even when it is not raining. A prison manager described how prisoners' wives "drag up here each day" at the risk of being propositioned or even mugged.'***

Description of visiting a London prison.  
LPCL Feasibility Study 1992

better practice and facilities; and

- to make proposals regarding the creation of London Prisons Community Links, an independent charitably funded body which would facilitate improvements in this area.

The study was not a rigorous research exercise, but a focused examination to produce practical suggestions for improvement at eight prison establishments in the London area. The approach was to identify existing arrangements and facilities for visiting prisoners and consider how they might be developed or changed to provide a better quality of visit.

At that time the Model Regime for Local Prisons and Remand Centres was being drafted and included specifications for visiting. In the wake of the Woolf Report a broad consensus was emerging, between those working with the prison system from the outside and those working within the prison system, about what was needed at every prison in terms of visiting arrangements and facilities: information, help in getting to the prison, including financial aid granted through the Assisted Prison Visits Unit, and facilities before, during and after the visit, including Visitors' Centres. These Centres, situated outside the prisons, provide for the needs of the families and friends of prisoners on arrival, before they go inside the prison to the visits room where the visitors and prisoners

actually meet, and after the visit when visitors are preparing for their journeys home.

In April 1989 the Prison Service had begun making grants for running Visitors' Centres (up to a limit of £16,000 annually per establishment for three years). Establishments tried to find ways of funding the capital costs, some with notable success due to the generosity of outside organisations.

The then three existing Visitors' Centres in London, at Brixton, Feltham and Wormwood Scrubs, were funded from a range of sources. Holloway Prison had started operating its extended visits scheme for children in partnership with the Save the Children Fund, and Latchmere House was making full use of town visits to help prisoners

The gate at  
HMP Belmarsh



re-integrate into their home life prior to release. The newly opened Belmarsh included a well-planned visitors' waiting room within the prison. These efforts notwithstanding, there was little sense of urgency about the gaps in provision for visiting.

This appeared to be the product of accumulated experiences of slippage. Planning blight was a familiar phenomenon in the prison system, as in many other areas of public funding. In the prison context there was an expectation that plans pencilled into the budget for one year would be moved back to later budgets in a constant reordering of priorities.

The pressure on budgets was compounded by the unpredictability of major factors affecting the prison system, such as the size of the prison population and outbreaks of unrest. The prison disturbances which had given rise to the Woolf Inquiry were still fresh in everyone's memory and there was a strong sense that financial planning for the prison system was affected by crisis management.

There was a prevailing state of flux both at individual establishments and in the prison system, as a result of the general reorganisation of the Prison Service, the refurbishment programme to provide integral sanitation and changing local circumstances, such as shifts in population. The London prisons were in the process of re-orientation to become multi-functional local establishments serving a variety of types of prisoner.

The profiles of the eight London prisons studied revealed enormous variation across prison establishments in the London area, a phenomenon reflected in the prison system as a whole. The extent of the contrasts among London

establishments went far beyond what might be attributed to local differences in approach and raised serious questions about the inequality of provision for prisoners and their families.

The feasibility study discussed the independence of Visitors' Centres and the problem of defining the boundaries between official obligations and community involvement. In the climate of economic austerity there were increasing calls for the voluntary sector to supplement public expenditure and little realistic expectation of full resourcing in a prison system perennially dogged by budgetary problems.

The feasibility report concluded that there is no simple demarcation of where

***The visitors' room is a large dark room with frosted windows and with large load bearing pillars which obscure vision of the 45 tables arranged with a degree of informality.... There are plans under discussion to develop a Visiting Room at a different location in the establishment.***

Description of visiting room at Wandsworth, LPCL Feasibility Study 1992. In 1998 the room is still in

the prison's responsibility ends and the community's begins and urged the post Woolf view that a prison is part of the community as are the prisoners and staff who live and work there and the people who visit there: the responsibility is a shared one, the terms to be worked out by negotiation and with common sense.

A number of practical suggestions were put forward for immediate improvements to visiting, some in discrete areas without major implications for other aspects of provision, including improvements in transport, information, shelter,

re-decoration/cleaning of waiting areas, refreshments, public telephones, support and counselling services, ventilation and separate areas for smoking, and childcare. Longer term options were also considered, involving redevelopment of the prison sites, such as purpose-built Visitors' Centres, alterations to Visits Rooms in prisons or extensions or adaptations of existing Visitors' Centres, as, for example, at Pentonville.

The study challenged the assumption that visits follow a standard pattern and proposed the development of different approaches to visiting as well as improvements to the traditional arrangements and facilities. It suggested the expansion of innovative patterns of visits, such as visits in the residential parts of prisons (wings or units), full day visits and town visits; the latter were discussed as one way around the factors inhibiting development of conjugal visits in this country, including the perceived erosion of the punitive nature of the custodial sanction.

Although the study concentrated on practical improvements, it also discussed the need for changes in attitude. It proposed, inter alia, specific staff training in dealing with visitors, emphasising the importance of professional care and courtesy in the face of the emotional stresses of visiting.

While acknowledging the positive attitudes of some staff, the study noted the potentially adverse effect of excessively masculine elements in the prison ethos on visitors, many of whom were women or children. The study suggested the need to recognise the isolation of prisons from the community and to develop strategies for bridging the gap.

In 1991 visiting belonged within the responsibilities of the Directorate of Inmate Administration, because traditionally visits were defined as an entitlement. The security implications of visits sometimes led to institutional responses which had a negative effect on visiting. One senior manager at Prison Service Headquarters observed that security at visits was at times handled as though the aim were to keep visitors out of prison rather than to keep prisoners in. At establishment level visits fell within the management functional area of the Head of Custody rather than of the Head of Inmate Activities. The feasibility study suggested the need for direct management lines of responsibility to someone in overall charge of family ties.

In London in the early 1990s a number of charitable bodies and individuals involved in the voluntary sector had come together in particular local initiatives concerned with visiting arrangements, facilities and services at the London prisons. The need for consultation across this field was evident. The experience accumulated at various establishments by different individuals and organisations should inform a pro-