

1993	1998
Visitors did not require any identification documents	Visitors require two forms of ID with name, address and signature and sometimes a photograph
Visitors were able to take hand bags, baby changing necessities and babies' bottles into visits room	All personal possessions must be left in lockers at the gate or in the Visitors' Centre. Nappies, wipes, babies' bottles etc. may not be taken into the prison
Children were able to take toys into the visit with them	All toys must be left in the lockers and children are only allowed to play with the toys provided by the prison if there are any
Visitors hand bags were searched	All visitors including children have a rub-down search, have shoes and coats X-rayed, pass through a metal detector, have the insides of their mouths and sometimes their hair searched. Visitors of the same gender as the prisoners usually have their hand geometry measured, may have their photographic image encoded on a card and have their hands stamped with UV luminous ink.
Drug detection dogs were not in use	Passive drug detection dogs are routinely used as visitors enter the prison
CCTV cameras were very rarely installed in visits rooms	CCTV cameras are routinely used in all visits rooms of this category
Visits rooms were often furnished with tables and chairs	Visits rooms are usually furnished with continuous counters or fixed furniture which causes difficulties for children and disabled or pregnant visitors
Prisoners and visitors were allowed to use the	There is no access to

ate family.

As the prison population has increased there has been a mismatch between the location of available prison places and the home areas of many prisoners. Consequently many prisoners have been held far from home, making visiting far more difficult, and are liable to be transferred between prisons with little notice to make space, with the result that visitors make wasted journeys.

The LPCL feasibility study had highlighted the lack of facilities for visitors to the London prisons. In the post-Woolf climate of 1993 most prison governors were anxious to improve the quality of visits and seemed receptive to comments and suggestions about more pleasant visits room furniture, play areas and improvements to waiting areas. Lack of funding was the major limiting factor. The less tangible improvements were more difficult - the attitudes of staff were very variable.

Following the dramatic escapes from Whitemoor and Parkhurst in 1994/5 and the resultant Woodcock and Learmont enquiries, the climate changed dramatically. Security was accorded a supremacy over all other considerations.

The Learmont report recommended a return to 'snake' furniture (tables joined to form a continuous line snaking around the room with visitors on one side and prisoners on the other) in secure (i.e. not open or semi-secure category C) prisons in place of the more informal tables and chairs many prisons had started to use.

All visits at many secure prisons now take place at counters or using fixed furniture similar to that found in fast food

restaurants. Because the furniture cannot be moved it reduces the possibility that the visits room can ever be used for less conventional visits such as children's visits or family days. It also makes visiting more difficult for young children (who may be too far from the table to manage a drink safely) and disabled visitors who may find it difficult to take part in a visit properly if the space available for a wheelchair is restricted.

The changes in security measures as they affect visitors have been so dramatic since publication of the Woodcock and Learmont reports that it may be instructive to consider the situation at a typical secure London local prison holding some standard risk category A prisoners in 1993 and in 1998 (see chart page 6). From the outset the committee agreed that LPCL's work should centre around a number of themes: facilities for visitors; policy work; establishing the LPCL Network; visitors' charter; links with charitable trusts; links between prisons and community based agencies; and the problem of drugs.

The Development of Visitors' Centres

LPCL's original aim had been to improve provision for visitors at the London prisons, but since it was always intended to be a timelimited project there was a real danger that any progress made would not last once the project finished. Visitors' Centres offer a sustainable way of ensuring that the interests of visitors are considered at all times and that visitors are able to express their views without having to raise complaints.

Channelling LPCL's energies into the development of Visitors' Centres at the London prisons served two purposes:

- Visitors' Centres offer visitors a range of services and facilities

which cannot easily be provided inside the prison. Refreshments, a play area, somewhere warm and pleasant to wait on arrival, all make a considerable difference to the way visitors feel about visiting. More important still is the information, practical and emotional support that such Centres can provide.

- Through the provision of these services Visitors' Centre staff are able to gauge which issues are of particular concern to visitors. Whether it be delays in handing in property or the late starting of visits the Visitors' Centre staff are able to determine which difficulties are causing particular problems, and, by developing good working relationships with prison staff, take them up as they occur.

'When you go on a visit all you want is for it to be a happy time... You want to get all the nice things in that hour and stay away from the bad things - bills, kids being ill... In the prison they have their own problems'

Prisoner's partner

This strategy for LPCL's work was already in place before the Learmont and Woodcock reports were published, but its relevance has been confirmed by subsequent events. In the post-Learmont climate little progress has been possible in terms of improving the conditions under which visits take place.

At the same time the changes outlined above, as well as a move towards pre-booked visits systems at many prisons, has meant that there have been numerous difficulties facing visitors. The Visitors' Centres' management groups or committees, upon which the prison management is represented, have provided opportunities for the effects of changes of



PHOTO: JAMES MORRIS, AXIOM PHOTOGRAPHIC AGENCY.

The visitors' centre at Belmarsh opened in 1995

policy and procedure on visitors to be anticipated. Obvious problems have been averted and many less foreseeable issues ironed out.

When LPCL started work in February 1993 Visitors' Centres were already in existence at Brixton, Feltham, Wormwood Scrubs and High Down. Brixton, the oldest in the country, had been open for more than twenty years. The Brixton Visitors' Centre occupies a very small building and was then staffed entirely by volunteers.

The more recently developed Centres have taken the idea of facilities for visitors further than it was possible to do in the tiny space at Brixton. LPCL has been responsible for persuading a number of the London prisons of their need for Visitors' Centres and has been intrinsically involved in the development of Centres at:

- Wandsworth, where the old deputy governor's house was converted into

a Visitors' Centre by the prison's works department. LPCL suggested some modifications to the original plans, developed an independent charity to manage the Centre, drew up a job description and designed a recruitment process for the Co-ordinator' post. LPCL continued to be represented on the management committee until October 1997.

- Pentonville, where an extremely unpleasant visitors' reception area outside the prison was converted into a comfortable, if rather small, Visitors' Centre. The Prisoners' Wives and Families Society manage the Centre. LPCL was involved alongside PWFS from the planning stage, prior to work starting, through to the recruitment of staff and has continued to be involved in the consultative committee which consists of prison staff and PWFS representatives and discusses issues affecting the Centre and visitors'

experience of visiting at Pentonville.

- Downview, where a new Centre was built by the Prison Service and opened in 1994. Downview prison shares a site with High Down which already had a Centre managed by the probation service. It made sense for the two Centres to be managed by one organisation, and the probation service was keen to end its involvement. LPCL was responsible for proposing and negotiating a new structure, for setting up the Downs Visitors' Centres Association and registering it as a charity. It was also involved in the recruitment of new staff. LPCL has had a continuing involvement in the management committee of the Downs Visitors' Centres Association and Una Padel chaired the Committee until 1996.

- Belmarsh, which is a new prison, built without a Visitors' Centre. It became clear that the Prison Service was not likely to be able to build a Centre there before the millennium. Belmarsh is situated in a particularly desolate location and the need for a Centre was acute. LPCL linked the need with the possibility of funding from the Tudor Trust to construct a new Centre. Although initially unsure, the prison management team was persuaded that such a Centre would be an asset. LPCL was involved throughout the process, from taking part in the selection of architects and contributing to the design brief to finally proposing that the Bourne Trust, an independent charity working with prisoners and their families, might manage the Centre. The Centre opened in 1995. LPCL has continued to be

represented on the consultative committee. The committee has had a very valuable role in discussing the stringent security measures in place at Belmarsh and their effect on visitors.

- Holloway where a number of attempts had been made to develop a Centre, but lack of money and an appropriate site had foiled them all. LPCL was involved in proposing this as a suitable project to the Tudor Trust, which again generously funded the development of a new Centre. Una Padel chaired the Project Team on LPCL's behalf as work on the design and building progressed. LPCL was also responsible for raising money for equipment for the Centre and was involved in the procurement process necessary to appoint an organisation

'I feel that in the prison they could remember that kids need things to keep them happier and things to play with.'

'I would like to express my appreciation of the courtesy and helpfulness of all the staff, both on visits and in the visitors' centre.'

Quotes from returned Visitors' Charter questionnaires

to manage the Centre. It was opened by the Princess Royal on 27 November 1997 and is managed by the Prisoners' Wives and Families Society. LPCL has continued to be involved in the consultative committee at Holloway Visitors' Centre.

Policy Work

Since 1993 LPCL has been part of the Family Ties Consultative Group convened by the Prison Service. Prior to the Woolf Enquiry no department at Prison Service Headquarters had specific responsibility for issues relating to prisoners' families. Woolf's emphasis on the importance of maintaining

prisoners' relationships outside prison resulted in a section of the Department of Inmate Administration, as it then was, being designated as the Family Ties Section. A standing committee, the Family Ties Consultative Group, was established to enable the civil servants charged with responsibility for this area to discuss the main issues with individuals representing some of the main voluntary sector organisations involved in this area and includes the Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups, the Prison Reform Trust, the Howard League, Save the Children, Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group and the Ormiston Trust and a representative from the Association of Chief Officers of Probation. A prison governor was also involved initially.

The group has usually met every three months. Discussions typically

'The attitude of the staff could make the whole degrading procedure a bit more bearable. What the staff must realise is we, the families, are innocent victims too. We have done nothing wrong.'

'It seems that the prison is aiming to make things as difficult as possible so visits are strained. Visits are the key to peaceable relations between prisoners and officers, but they are now intent on causing friction between everyone.'

Quotes from returned Visitors' Charter question-

include areas such as the workload and efficiency of the Assisted Prison Visits Unit, the searching of visitors to prisoners, the increasing use of closed and non-contact visits, the implementation of pre-booked visits schemes and problems resulting from the fact that some visitors to prisons bring drugs with them.

In the 1995 reorganisation of the Prison Service, responsibility for

Visitors' Centre policy moved from the Family Ties section. Because of this the Family Ties Consultative Group no longer had any reason to discuss Visitors' Centre issues, and a new group to examine this area was set up. The membership was determined in a very ad hoc manner. The group quickly decided that it would be useful to work towards producing a Code of Operating Standards for Visitors' Centres. To support this it was agreed that a separate good practice document should also be written to enable anyone wishing to set up a Visitors' Centre to draw upon the experience of people who had already done so, as well as providing information to those who run existing Centres around the country.

LPCL played a major role in the development of these two documents - by writing sections and by editing both of them. The launch conference took place in June 1996 at the Prison Service College at Newbold Revel. The response to both documents was extremely positive and since their publication they seem to have influenced the way new Visitors' Centres have developed.

The Good Practice Guidelines and the new Centres commissioned by the Tudor Trust have had an effect on the standard Visitors' Centre design developed by the Prison Service architects. The new standard design offers more flexibility. There is an increasing awareness of the need for facilities other than refreshments and lavatories at Visitors' Centres. This is reflected in the provision of space where visitors can talk to staff in privacy, and greater priority has been given to providing a play space for children.

LPCL Network Meetings

The LPCL feasibility study had emphasised the need for greater opportunities for people working with prisoners and

their families – be they from the Prison service, the probation services or voluntary sector organisations – to meet and discuss areas of common concern and interest. A network of all interested parties meeting on a regular basis was central to the original plan for LPCL. Soon after the start of the project a meeting was held to gauge the level of interest in this way of working. Attendance was encouraging, and a number of interesting areas for discussion were suggested.

Initially meetings of the LPCL Network took place about once every four months. Topics discussed included the need to consider the impact on the quality of visits of any new security measures introduced, the needs of children visiting parents in prison, and drugs and visits. The meetings were well attended (by between 30 and 55 individuals each time) and participants came from the range of organisations originally envisaged. A number of prison staff, officers as well as governor grades, came to the early meetings, and those from voluntary sector agencies clearly valued having the opportunity and time to debate issues with them. Prison staff doing similar jobs in different London prisons also seemed to relish the chance to compare notes and share ideas.

Sadly the effects of the financial cuts on the Prison Service resulted in reductions in staffing levels, so that during the first 18 months of LPCL's existence it became more difficult for prison staff to attend meetings outside their prisons. The escapes in 1994 and 1995 resulted in an unprecedented emphasis being placed on security, with a consequent downgrading of other considerations including the needs and interests of visitors to prisons.

The voluntary sector agencies became

increasingly frustrated with the effect these changes had on their clients, and on their own access to prisons. The changes were generally introduced with no negotiation. At the last two Network meetings only one or two prison staff were able to attend. They managed to do so because they were particularly interested in participating in this forum – one even attended on his rest day. Feelings were running so high that these individuals were placed in the position of having to answer for the Prison Service, and were given a very rough ride. This was not a

'The worst part of any visit is saying goodbye... There is nothing worse than almost pushing a child out of the visiting hall or unclawing her fingers from your neck because she doesn't want to leave you. That is the worse thing in the world.'

Female prisoner

'When my husband had the first sentence I didn't tell the children - I told them he was working away and they didn't visit him. The next time I told them and it affected them really badly, particularly my eldest. He used to be sick before a visit and then he'd say nothing all through the visit, just cry his eyes out.'

constructive way to proceed, and so it was decided that no further meetings would be held until the situation changed. By the end of 1997 no further meetings had been convened.

Visitors' Charter

Despite the development of a section at Prison Service Headquarters particularly designated to attend to family ties issues, increasing bifurcation between the centre and the institutions has meant that many prison managers have been unable to give priority to providing services or facilities for the families and friends of prisoners. Though most recognise the importance of visits to prisoners, the vital role they play in

Visiting arrangements at the London Prisons January 1998

Prison family or	Function	Places in February 1993	Population in February 1993	Places in October 1997	Population in October	Visitors' Centre 1997
Belmarsh	Local and cat A (with Special Secure Unit)	841	651	822	895	1995
Brixton available to 5 prisoners	Local with lifer unit	621	639	501	578	1973
Downview a portacabin where	Category C with drug	286	282	327	343	1994
Feltham on the residential rooms	Young offender institution centre	874 of which and remand juveniles	747 of which 150 juveniles	849 of which 194 juveniles	880 of which 100 juveniles	1989 133
High Down	Local with cat A	485	471	649	712	1992
Holloway dren's visits scheme for up to 40	Women's local	517	441	517	517	1997
Latchmere House	Resettlement prison	131	129	193	171	None
Pentonville	Local	695	697	726 rising to 1215 in 1998	913	1994
Wandsworth	Local	965	865	811 rising to	895 1224 in	1994
Wormwood Scrubs Lifers on the enhanced regime to a portacabin where two open visits at a time take place in	Local, main enhanced regime lifer centre where two and therapeutic	472	651	1171	1378	1

Use of visits as part of the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme (IEPS) opened	Visits Room furniture	Visits Play area	Availability of special children's visits
The length of the visits depends on incentive level. Basic: 30 mins, Standard:	Snake furniture Wide tables for enhanced	Open sessions. Staffed by	some None
Extra visits allowed for prisoners on enhanced level.	Snake furniture	Staffed and open most	Family visits every Sunday in visits
Not used	Upholstered chairs and coffee tables	(out of six visits	Staffed four days Lifers have up to four visits at a
Additional visits may be earned and only prisoners on the enhanced regime may have visits on	Unconvicted snake Convicted tables prisoners on the enhanced and chairs	No staffed play	Some visits take place units in the unit common
Prisoners on enhanced may have extra visits	Tables and chairs - fixed furniture coming in 1998	per week	Staffed six days None
Prisoners on enhanced allowed extra visits, which may be used to extend	Fixed tables and chairs.	area open	Staffed play most operates alternate days All day chil- women. Not
All prisoners are allowed out for 'town' visits. Duration depends on regime level. Basic 6 hrs, standard 9 hrs, enhanced 12 hrs.	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable
Only prisoners on enhanced are allowed evening visits.	Snake furniture	Staffed play area open one session daily	None
Enhanced prisoners are allowed additional visits. Enhanced and standard	Tables and chairs and standard	staffed by	Play area None volunteers open
Enhanced - extra visits lasting 2 hours Standard -	chairs - enhanced some extra visits. All basic	Tables and	Play area
		staffed by Snake furniture	have access volunteers

This table shows in summary form the state of play of visiting arrangements in London prisons at the start of 1998. The statistics on these pages show that the number of prison places in London has risen from 5887 in 1993 to 6566 in 1997 (7468 in 1998). The number of prisoners in the London prisons has

**Visitors and prisoners need clear information about:
the prison
where it is and how to get there
visiting times and procedures
prisoners' right and entitlements
what may and may not be brought in....
During the visit visitors and prisoners need:
to talk without being overheard by staff or other
prisoners
to talk out of earshot of their children
to let the children play for part of the visit....**

Recommendations from the London Community
Links Feasibility Study Dr. Silvia Casale 1992

the lives of partners and children outside is given no real consideration in many prisons when policy decisions on visits are made.

LPCL worked with other organisations including the Ormiston Trust, the Federation of Prisoners' Families Support Groups, Partners of Prisoners' and Families Support Group (POPS), the Prison Reform Trust and Leeds Visitors' Centre towards the development of a charter for visitors to prisoners along similar lines to the charters that exist in the National Health Service, education, and other public services. The Prison Services in both Northern Ireland and Scotland have already published charters for visitors to prisoners. The Prison Service Family Ties Section was involved initially, but withdrew because of a review of Home Office policy towards the development of charters more generally.

The group did however embark upon a major survey of visitors to prisons in an attempt to determine the major concerns of visitors. Questionnaires were circulated for visitors at all prisons with Visitors' Centres, and to twenty with no Visitors' Centre. Approximately three hundred were returned, representing the experience of visitors to fifty prisons.

One of the most striking findings from the survey was the overwhelming need visitors had for information about visiting the prison before making their first visit. Provision for children varied greatly from one prison to another, but where it was lacking visitors clearly perceived it as an urgent need. Two thirds of visitors did not know whether the prison they visited had a complaints procedure. Some expressed a reluctance to complain for fear of a negative impact on the treatment of their imprisoned relative. Visitors found the travelling and waiting involved in visiting prisons particularly difficult and frustrating. The attitude of prison staff seemed to vary widely - some visitors had negative experiences while others praised the professionalism of staff, doing 'a difficult job well' as one respondent put it. When asked what improvements were needed visitors highlighted the need for staff training and improvements in attitude, better information, longer visits and extended visiting hours and greater consistency in the application of the rules both within and between prisons.

The Charter Working Group compiled a series of six statements, which could usefully be incorporated into policy at both local and national levels. These are:

- Information - clear, up to date information should be made available to all visitors to prisons prior to their first visit and whenever procedures or circumstances change.
- Training - all prison staff who come into contact with visitors should receive training on the issues facing prisoners' families and on general customer relations.

- Children - the needs of children visiting prisons should be recognised and appropriate provision made.
- Visitors Consultation - visitors should be consulted about visits provision and facilities.
- Complaints Procedures - a complaints procedure should be drawn up and made readily available to visitors.
- Quality - visits should be organised in such a way as to allow the best possible contact between the prisoner and visitors.

This series of statements is to be piloted in two Prison Service areas in 1998. Some of the most basic recommendations of the LPCL feasibility study published in 1992 are echoed in this series of statements because they have

still not become standard practice.

The fact that insufficient progress has been made on the routine provision of information to prisoners and their families, or the numbers of supervised play areas in visits rooms in London and beyond over the last five years is largely attributable to the overwhelming emphasis on security. This caused 'soft' issues, such as improving provision for prisoners' families, to slip far down the list of priorities at some prisons.

Liaison with Charitable Trusts

LPCL established links with a number of charitable trusts active in the penal field at an early stage in the project. Initiatives for which LPCL helped to identify funding include:

- The construction of the Visitors' Centres at Belmarsh and Holloway prisons, funded by the Tudor Trust

High Down Visitors' Centre built by the Prison Service and opened in 1992



- Equipment for the play area at Belmarsh Visitors' Centre funded by the Pilgrim Trust
- The salary of an assistant co-ordinator salary at Wormwood Scrubs Visitors' Centre funded by the J.Paul Getty Jr. Charitable Trust
- Part of the salary of an assistant co-ordinator at the Pentonville Visitors' Centre funded by the Lankelly Foundation
- Some core funding over a three year period for the Wandsworth Visitors' Centre provided by the 29th May 1961 Charitable Trust
- Provision of a water heater at Pentonville Visitors' Centre by the Swan Mountain Charitable Trust
- Funding for three years of the prison project at ADFAM National by the Tudor Trust
- Provision of lockers at the Holloway Visitors' Centre by the J.Paul Getty Jr. Charitable Trust

The total amount is just under £1.3M.

A major element in this part of the work was to provide charitable trusts with a clear picture of the role of Visitors' Centres outside the prisons and their need to be independently managed. LPCL's feasibility study had highlighted the dilemmas over responsibility for visitors to prisons and concluded that both prisons and the community share some responsibility for the provision of services to this disadvantaged group. It is unrealistic to suggest that the construction and running costs of Visitors' Centres should be met from non-prison sources - there simply isn't enough charitable money in this field to sustain that. Local authori-

ties are usually unwilling to provide any financial support to services for prisoners or their families. Prisons generally provide the majority of the running costs of Visitors' Centres, and rightly so in LPCL's view. Some external financial support, however, highlights the advantage of the independent management of such Centres and acts as a reminder, if it be required, that there are organisations and individuals who are prepared to prioritise the needs of prisoners' families.

Links With Community Based Agencies

Prisons have come to rely heavily on community based agencies to provide services of many kinds to prisoners. Drug and alcohol therapy, health education, befriending, advice, counselling, music and drama projects, opportunities to become involved in the visual arts are all offered by staff and volunteers from organisations based outside prisons.

Although the number of outside agencies involved has increased dramatically in recent years, the way in which the working relationships required are established, developed and maintained has remained primitive and very ad hoc at most prisons. The lack of any real assessment of need, the absence of systems for identifying how best those needs may be met and of co-ordination of the work of the diverse organisations involved means that there is no coherent strategy so that the work undertaken is often not as effective as it could be. Outside agencies also require more information about how to approach prisons, how to negotiate terms with them and how to prepare for prison work.

LPCL undertook a survey of community based agencies working in the London prisons and interviewed senior staff at



The play area and cafe at Holloway Visitors' Centre, opened in 1997

five of the London prisons to obtain a picture of the level of community agency activity and the way it was co-ordinated in the prisons. Of the 35 agencies that responded to a postal questionnaire, 27 were currently working in prisons offering drug advice and treatment, health promotion, resettlement help, advice work, counselling, befriending, education, immigration and asylum representation and conflict resolution.

Most of the agencies surveyed had initiated their working relationships with the prisons. In only two cases had the prison made the first contact. Levels of co-operation were generally high - over half the agencies regularly co-worked with prison officers, probation officers in the prison or health care staff.

When asked what they found helpful

and unhelpful in their working relationships with prisons most of the agencies found difficult the effects of overcrowding (prisoners moved frequently) and additional security measures which inhibited their movement around the prison. Just over a third reported that negative attitudes on the part of prison staff caused problems.

Some felt they needed a more thorough induction from prison staff - a security talk was often all that was offered. On a more positive note many of the agencies described a high level of commitment and help from the prison staff with whom they worked most closely.

The interviews with prison staff revealed that the management and co-ordination of the work of outside agencies often left something to be desired. Most of the prisons surveyed had no main contact point for

liaison with outside agencies, no induction package for staff new to prison work (other than the security talk) and few mechanisms for checking that a common understanding of factors such as the service to be delivered, the requirements of the agency and the prison existed.

Evaluation and reviews were infrequently conducted unless initiated by the agencies themselves. There was little sense that the services offered by outside agencies were parts of a coherent whole and that attention was being given to making sure they complemented one another.

Much remains to be done in this area - both with the outside agencies and with the prisons.

Drugs and Prison Visits

In 1995 the Prison service published a new drug strategy document 'Drug Misuse in Prison' as part of the Government's 'Tackling Drugs Together' initiative. The strategy contains measures designed to combat both the supply and demand for drugs in prison. To deal with demand a randomised system of mandatory drug testing was introduced. Prisoners testing positive are adjudicated and punished, but are also offered access to drug treatment programmes where possible and appropriate. These programmes are mainly managed by drug treatment agencies contracted by the Prison Service to provide the service.

Visits have long been identified as one of the means where by drugs are smuggled into prisons, and considerable resources have been devoted to trying to detect and stop visitors from so doing. Sniffer dogs, CCTV cameras, fixed furniture and the prohibition of personal possessions being brought in to the visits room were all designed to make it more difficult to conceal drugs.