

Visitors' Voice Event 2015 – Surviving the Sentence

On 13 March 2015, an annual engagement event was held for people using Nepacs services, giving them the opportunity to discuss and share their views on service provision and any concerns they have.

The event took place at Pallion Action Group in Sunderland, in partnership with Pallion Action Group and Gentoo Housing.

The day opened with an introductory address and was followed by three workshops aimed at stimulating conversation on set subjects: visits experience, preparation for release and building support networks. After lunch Claire Curry and Lynda Hope from Offenders Families Helpline gave a presentation about their service.

An evaluation form was handed out at the end of the event to each delegate. The form asked five closed questions with answers varying from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

100% agreed/strongly agreed that the event had met their expectations

'Excellent event. Shame more families could not attend'
'All families involved have the same problems even in different prisons'
'I found more information about visits'

100% agreed that the length/pace of the event was appropriate

One person commented that it would have been good to have *'Breaks between sessions, allowing for talk'*

100% agreed/strongly agreed that the event was enjoyable and would attend something similar in the future

'I would like to be involved in a Visitors Voice group'
'Discussed subjects relevant to everyone with someone in prison'

96% agreed/strongly agreed that the venue was appropriate

'And there's parking!'
However, 4% disagreed and the following comments were made about parking and directions to the venue: *'Need more parking space', 'Better clearer directions are needed/maps'* and *'Too difficult to find. No map provided'*. We will ensure that a map/directions are sent out by email to delegates for next years event and when choosing a venue take into consideration ease of access by car, public transport and parking.

94% agreed/strongly agreed that they felt better informed and prepared for the eventual release

For some the issue of release was not yet appropriate. Their comments included:
'N/A yet'
'Cannot be prepared when faced with an indeterminate sentence'

Comments

'I feel much better about my situation. Now meeting and talking to people like me'
'Currently working for Gentoo, I think it would be great to have some literature available in the community. I would like to be involved in a Visitors Voice group'
'I don't like facebook/twitter. I think they are dangerous sites - accessed by anyone, therefore would not use them'

Suggestions

There was much discussion in the workshops with people sharing experiences and offering ideas. Some of the suggestions included:

- Check that all first time visitors are getting information at Visitors' Centres - ***we already do have this but will work with each centre to ensure all first time visitors receive information***
- Video links with prisoner would be good – due to distance for visiting – ***this has previously been discussed with regional prisons but not currently happening***
- Positive about volunteers sitting in on first time visits – ***this already happens in our centres and we will feedback to managers that this is something that families value***
- Volunteers not always aware if processes/information has changed i.e. discretionary help for disabled – ***we will aim to improve communication with our volunteers to ensure that they are kept up to date with developments/changes through team meetings and by managers/project workers***
- “Email a prisoner is good” and “Email a prisoner is a useful resource offering various types of help and advice for prisoners, ex prisoners, families such as information on grants, business insurance etc.” - ***information on Email a prisoner will be included in our literature and information made available in our centres***
- Involve families in sentence planning, pre release – ***we are working on this project which is called 'heading home'. We will hopefully work with families and prisoners on this by the end of this year.***
- Need more toys/craft stuff in Durham play area and area is too small. Kids get bored and start to cause damage – ***we already have quite an extensive range of toys in the Durham play area and for each visit the play workers/volunteers select a range of toys/activities to put out for the children. We will give feedback on this to the play workers at Durham for consideration.***
- A number of comments/suggestions were made about our Visitors' Voice groups and on the possibility of locality based support groups for families of prisoners:
 - ‘Good Visitors’ Voice groups in some prisons e.g Frankland and Low Newton’
 - ‘Should have visitors’ voice in prison visitors’ centres’
 - ‘Peer groups/support helps provide face to face support’
 - ‘Like support groups around the prisons, not necessarily around localities’
 - ‘Suggested noticeboards in centres for Visitors’ Voice including feedback from members on what they have gained, what has been done for visitors, showing how they have been listened to’.
 - ***Visitors Voice groups meet regularly at some of our prisons including Holme House, Frankland and Low Newton. This is work we are keen on developing and we will seek opportunities to deliver this in the future, either within the centres or in localities, where possible.***
- A few suggestions were received about the information provided to visitors:
 - ‘Knowing what ID to bring – different in each prison’
 - ‘Leaflets possibly out of date i.e. named worker on leaflet not there any more’
 - ‘Advice given as to what loved one are entitled to e.g. visits for remand or convicted prisoners and others. Differs between prisons’
 - ‘Like more information on what goes on’
 - ***We have included this in our communications strategy for further development and we are currently in the process of updating the information materials available within the centres.***
- Courts project should be extended to Newcastle – people are left in limbo as to where the prisoner is going, what happens next – ***we have been exploring funding opportunities to help support the development of the courts project in Newcastle but have not yet been successful. We will continue to seek funding.***

- Advice sessions may be useful e.g. health services, debt/money but could train volunteers up/have leaflets available – ***our visitors' centres have invited external agencies to attend Visitors' Voice groups or the centres in the past to provide advice and information to visitors and/or volunteers. This suggestion will be passed on to visitors' centre managers.***
- Concern that not everyone has access to a computer, therefore is it possible for a computer to be made available for use in the visitors' centre. Allowing them to get information with volunteers on hand to offer support – ***we will be exploring funding opportunities to enable tablets/computers to be used by volunteers/staff in the visitors' centres when talking with visitors.***
- Clear information about each prison, list of what's available, visitors' charter, project info should be available on the Nepacs website – ***during 2015 we will be looking at developing a new website for Nepacs and will include these suggestions in the plan for the new site.***

Nepacs' Manifesto

During the introduction Nepacs chief executive Helen Attewell asked delegates to give consideration throughout the day to possible issues to be included in a Nepacs' election manifesto to promote family ties – which would be a call to action to prospective parliamentary candidates to take on board the needs of prisoners and their families in their future role and to seek to influence the political parties' manifestos. The proposals put forward on the day will be sent to the candidates and publicised in the media as a follow up from the visitors' voice event. The following issues were raised:

- Government to fund a family support worker in every jail
- Listen to families when they are raising concerns about safer custody
- Introduce national rules for ID across the prison estate
- Create more opportunities for contact between family members held in different prisons
- Ensure families are involved in sentence planning
- Ensure that there are adequate staff levels in prisons to maintain safety standards
- Inform families when their loved one is being shipped out to a different prison
- Ensure decent health care for prisoners – this causes great concern for families
- Reverse ban on personal items being sent into prison
- Make sure prisoners are held as close to home as possible
- Improved information on visiting for family members
- Speed up decisions on releasing people held on indeterminate sentences who are over tariff
- Ensure good access arrangements for visitors with a disability / sensory impairment
- Ensure consistency in terms of visit entitlement across the prison estate including easier access to accumulated visits and evening visits
- Provide more consistent Visitors' Centre services across the country
- Ensure facilities for prompt booking of visits are available at every prison
- Prisons to contact family members to confirm safe arrival of loved one in custody to provide reassurance of their wellbeing.

Thank you to everyone that attended the event. Your input and feedback is very valuable to us and we will certainly look to make best use of all of the comments, thoughts and suggestions you have made.

For those that have provided us with their contact details we will keep you informed of any future events of this kind; otherwise you can stay in touch with us via email or telephone and the details for this can be found on our website www.nepacs.co.uk or alternatively ring 0191 3322810.

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