

Scottish Covid-19 Inquiry

Witness Statement

Statement of Professor Dr Nancy LOUCKS OBE

INTRODUCTION

1. My name is Professor Dr Nancy **LOUCKS OBE**. I am [PD] years of age, and my date of birth is [Personal Data].
2. I am the Chief Executive of the charitable organisation Families Outside. Prior to Families Outside, I worked as an Independent Criminologist, specialising in research on prison policy and comparative criminology. I received my M. Phil and Ph. D. from the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge and in 2012 was appointed as Visiting Professor at the University of Strathclyde's Centre for Law, Crime & Justice.
3. I was awarded an OBE in the 2015/16 New Year's Honours List for services to Education and Human Rights.
4. I have been with Families Outside since 2003. Initially, I was an advisor on the Board of Trustees of the charity before being asked to perform the role of Acting Chief Executive Officer. I was appointed Chief Executive Officer on 19 March 2008. I am responsible for the oversight of the charity.
5. My contact address is [Personal Data] [PD]. My contact telephone number is [Personal Data]. My e-mail address is [Personal Data].
6. I am willing to provide a statement, have my information contained within reports and willing for my statement to be published. I agree to recording the statement. I am prepared to provide evidence at the Inquiry. I am aware that I can withdraw my consent at any time. I am unavailable to attend an oral hearing on the following dates: 20-27 February and 18-20 March 2024.

Overview of the Organisation

7. Families Outside is a charity registered in Scotland (SC025366). Founded by a Prison Governor in 1991 and staffed by secondees from the Scottish Prison Service, it was originally known as The Scottish Forum on Prison and Families.
8. In 2001, the organisation changed its name to Families Outside. At that time, the Board took the decision to make the charity independent from the Scottish Prison Service.

9. The charity specifically covers Scotland. However, we support children and families of people who are in prison in Scotland. Some of those families can be based elsewhere.
10. We offer support for families of people in prison, were in prison, or are about to go to prison. We don't have a set package of services that is delivered over a set number of sessions or over a set period: rather, our support depends on the needs of the families. A lot of that work includes allowing families to help themselves. We facilitate a group called Outside Voices that is there for families to share their own experiences and allow them to support each other. This group also feeds into our consultation work.
11. Families Outside is also a company limited by guarantee (company no: 236539).
12. Families Outside is the only national charity in Scotland working exclusively on behalf of families affected by imprisonment. We speak to thousands of families each year, providing information and support on issues such as housing, finance, and emotional support.
13. Our main services include the following:
 - We provide direct support through our helpline and locally-based support through our regional staff as well as through peer support, mentoring, and group work.
 - As an organisation, we provide training and awareness-raising. The aim is to raise awareness on the impact of imprisonment on the families left behind. This includes the practical, emotional, and physical impacts as well as the implications for human rights and children's human rights.
 - Our training is aimed at all professionals whose role means they come into contact with families, and who feel that they would benefit from being able to support families who are affected by imprisonment better.
 - Families can play an important role in supporting the person in prison and preventing reoffending, but they have their own needs too and are deserving of support.
 - Our accredited training modules are designed to provide an understanding of the impact on children and families when a family member is sent to prison. The modules also look at what support families might need at different stages of the criminal justice process – whether someone's relative has just been arrested, is serving a prison sentence, or is due for release.
 - The modules also aim to develop the knowledge and skills of participants and encourage them to consider their own current practice and how this could be further improved to support children and families affected by imprisonment using their service, or who are in contact with their organisation. The training modules aim to incorporate a mix of learning styles and offer opportunities to interact with other participants from different professional backgrounds and sectors.

- We also work to develop policy and practice longer-term through responding to Government consultations, feeding into research, and conducting our own research. We also respond to media enquiries.
14. Our Helpline provides impartial information and support and is often the first port of call for families looking for help. It has been in operation since 1998. Our helpline can receive calls from anywhere, including from abroad.
 15. The most common reasons families contact us is for practical information such as information about visiting or about prisons. Specifically, in the 2022-23 financial year, queries to the Helpline consisted of 15% visiting; 14% concern for someone in prison; 12% information about prison; and 10% emotional support.
 16. If family members require more in-depth support, our Regional Family Support team is on hand throughout Scotland and can offer direct, one to one support until a positive outcome is reached. Specifically, in the 2022-23 financial year, support from the regional teams consisted of 19% emotional support; 14% visits and contact; 10% concern for the person in prison; 10% concern for children; and 10% information about prison.
 17. We also provide tools, resources, and training to those individuals and groups who meet families affected by imprisonment. From prison staff and social workers to health care professionals and teachers, our bespoke training sessions increase the awareness of the issues and challenges faced by families and ensure that they continue receive the support they need.
 18. In my role, I report to the Trustees of Families Outside. We have a board of twelve trustees. We meet as a full board four times a year as part of the Governance arrangements of the organisation, plus the Trustees contribute to sub-committees that also meet four times a year. Our Trustees have a range of specialisms and backgrounds such as finance, civil service, public health, and criminal justice. At least two of the Trustees are people with lived experience of a family member's imprisonment. Our Trustees can serve a maximum of two three-year terms, unless they are an office bearer, where they can renew for a third term.
 19. During the pandemic, the Board of Trustees was very active. They met monthly during that time to ensure that we were okay. Our trustees got nervous during the pandemic on one occasion, as our funding flow was not as fluid as it had been previously. This was especially as we were growing as an organisation, but our funding was not growing at the same rate.
 20. At that point, I was told to cut our costs by 45%. That was going to be a challenge, as 85% of our costs are staffing costs. That meant losing staff. We had to start a redundancy process in 2021. That was horrible, as we lost two members of staff. We had never been through a redundancy process previously. The impact for staff was demoralising, and a number of other staff left the organisation as a result.

21. We currently have 36 members of staff. We also have a small number of volunteers. When I started in 2008, there were a total of four members of staff.
22. We now have two office premises in Scotland - one in Edinburgh and the other in Glasgow. We have access to desk space in the civic centre in Inverness, at Falkirk Police Station, and at the North and South Lanarkshire local authority offices. The current flexible working arrangements have allowed for a mixed mode of both home and office working for our staff.
23. Prior to the pandemic, our staff worked in five offices. The offices in Fife, Stirling, and Aberdeen have closed. Staff also used shared desk space at local authorities prior to the pandemic.
24. Our Glasgow Office had to close during the pandemic. Post-pandemic, we now have a new office at a different location in Glasgow.
25. Families Outside hosts an international network called INCCIP (International Coalition for Children with Incarcerated Parents). It is a global network. That network did a snapshot piece of research during the pandemic about how children were coping. The research paper is available on the INCCIP website and can be submitted to the Inquiry if required.

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Organisation

26. Prior to the pandemic, we had about twenty members of staff employed within the organisation.
27. In December 2019, we moved into new office premises in Gayfield Square, Edinburgh, as our previous office was too small. We had signed a ten-year lease and were excited about the new working environment. Once the pandemic struck, the impact of this was that we could not work from there but had to continue to pay the rent with no rent relief. This was a very frustrating time.
28. In the longer term, the new office space was beneficial to us as an organisation. The larger space allowed us to return to work after the pandemic and work with distance between staff and staggered working hours. Our old office space would not have allowed us to do that, as there was no room.
29. Prior to March 2020, I watched the news on TV, radio, and online so I could keep up to date with developments surrounding the spread of the pandemic.
30. I ensured that our staff were prepared if we had to go into lockdown. The biggest change for us was taking the helpline into remote working arrangements. Prior to the pandemic, the helpline was staffed from our office premises only. We spent a lot of time organising the remote helpline working

arrangements. I am glad that we did this, as when lockdown came, we were ready for this and commenced remote working immediately.

Helpline

31. Through a mix of phone calls, webchat enquiries, and email, the Families Outside Helpline responds to thousands of enquiries from families each year, providing non-judgemental support and information.
32. During the pandemic, the biggest change in the types of enquiries we received was that 'concern for person in prison' overtook emotional support for the first time as the main reason people contacted us. The vast increase in contacts to the Helpline during the first year of the pandemic (including 247% in June 2020 when video calls to prisons were introduced) related to support and information regarding the suspension of in-person visits and the introduction of video calls and mobile phones.
33. We had another challenge with the helpline working remotely. Our staff were having to deal with confidential calls, some stressful, from their homes. That was a concern for us. We had to use a lot of capital investment to ensure that staff had what they needed to allow them to work safely.
34. We introduced several supports to ensure our staff were working safely during the pandemic. We conducted a staff needs assessment, which identified that some members of staff were working from home with laptops balanced on their knees while their children ran around the house. We provided staff with laptops (for those who previously only had desktop computers in the office), desks, and desk chairs where necessary. We introduced a 'staff wellbeing hour' to enable them to get away from their desks and look after themselves. Managers held more regular check-ins with staff online, and team meetings included more 'fun' elements to provide some relief and to raise morale.
35. We shared practice regarding ways of managing stress (e.g. how to differentiate between 'work' and 'home' when both were taking place in the same space), recognising that staff were supporting highly vulnerable families while dealing with their own personal concerns and ill health the pandemic brought. This was very important for staff who needed to 'switch off' at the end of the day after contacts with people in distress.

Finance

36. With the support of the Board, our senior managers provided and regularly reviewed guidance for work during the pandemic, including clear instructions about COVID testing and methods for engaging with families, colleagues, and professionals safely. The Tudor Trust also provided Families Outside a staff wellbeing grant of £2,000. We divided this evenly amongst our staff team,

allowing them to use a £60 voucher of their choice to purchase something helpful for them. This included items such as walking boots, craft kits, aromatherapy candles, and chocolate. We have since introduced the Health Assured Employee Assistance Programme to provide access for our staff to independent support for physical and mental health as needed.

37. We found that there were a lot of COVID grants that we could apply for. This allowed us to change our way of working. We applied to both the UK and Scottish Government for funding. We also applied to charitable trusts. Another challenge was that we had to quickly get up to speed with using applications like zoom and having online meetings and conversations with funders.
38. Of the 126 funding applications we submitted in the 2020-21 financial year, 24 of these (19%) were specifically for costs related to the impact of COVID on the families we support. Nine of these applications were successful for a 1-year period, plus one existing funder agreed to change an existing 3-year grant to a 2-year grant, allowing us to use the same amount of funding over a shorter period. The total amount of funding we received that was restricted to the impact of COVID was £180,300. A full list of these applications and amounts can be provided if needed.
39. Our helpline received an increased number of calls from families that were worried about the health and wellbeing of relatives in prison. Concerns were about people held in prison who were at risk of contracting COVID, with little opportunity to protect themselves, reliant on prison staff following the rules and issuing them with masks, gloves, and disinfectant.
40. We were able to explain the changes that had been made to prison policy and practice because of the pandemic. Where families had specific concerns, we were able to contact the prisons to find out more and to arrange for the person in prison to contact their families. We advocated for families to raise concerns and complaints or to support them to make video calls, sometimes supplying them with tablets, internet access, data, or IT support as needed as part of SCVO's Connecting Scotland project or the Scottish Government's Winter Hardship Fund. This including engaging a volunteer specifically to support families to use IT to connect with someone in prison. With funding from the Scottish Government's Winter Hardship Fund, we provided hardship grants totalling £50,000 to 82 families providing support with utility bill debts and food vouchers to household repairs and new furniture.

Helpline Statistics

41. The main priority for families was learning how to maintain contact with family members in prison when in-person visits were not possible. Also, during the first year of the pandemic, 1 in 4 contacts to our Helpline were from callers with a concern for someone in prison. This included a 51% increase in calls from family members worried about the mental health of someone in prison.

- Issues on Helpline:
 - Emotional Support – 27%
 - Information about prison – 21 %
 - Concern for person in prison – 26%
 - Visiting – 20 % (video calls / 'Virtual Visits')
- Issues for Regional Support:
 - Emotional Support – 26%
 - Visiting – 23%
 - Accessing support in the community 17%
 - Information about prison – 17%
 - Concern for person in prison – 17%

42. The following feedback was received from people who contacted the helpline:

43. *I am very grateful to [the Helpline] for facilitating a [compassionate] call between [son] and my mum last night. I am hopeful that this will be repeated soon. I have to say that everything about the way she handled this task was exemplary. I could tell that she genuinely cared and was determined to achieve an outcome, which she did in a very short timeframe.*

44. *Thank you so much for helping us out so we can be ready for virtual [video calls]. Respect to Families Outside and a massive recognition of all the positive, painstaking and persistent tackling of the problems during this trying time. Without the help of Families Outside I know things would be left to decompose and it would be a dire shame. God Bless the work of you and your colleagues and a huge thank you for being our voice and above all the prisoner's voice. Human rights are being tested, but you are keeping the faith. Wow! Groundbreaking work, thank you with all my [heart emoji] x.*

45. We published a formal summary on our website of our response to COVID, which can be provided if needed.

Families' concerns

46. Families were also worried about the transmission of disease through people moving in and out of prison. People held in prison were unable to protect themselves in a lockdown way, as new people continued to be admitted to prisons across the country. In addition, families were worried about people being depressed, suicidal, isolated, and at risk of illness.

47. Families were not told anything proactively, as the Scottish Prison Service and contracted establishments tend to leave such information to the person held in prison to pass along. The Scottish Prison Service eventually added COVID-19 information onto their website, though this mainly provided information about how to contact their family member. The Scottish Prison Service also set up a

temporary Helpline, which our own staff found useful to keep abreast of the continually changing policy and practice in individual prisons.

48. What made matters worse for families was that they could not see their relatives or support them in the way that they would have prior to the pandemic. This related to all prisons, including contracted establishments.
49. In-person visits to prisons were suspended from the start of lockdown through the end of the pandemic (specific dates varied by establishment, with some resuming visits earlier than others). No alternative method of contact was available, other than letters or telephone calls on the shared hall telephone (assuming people were allowed out to use them – people were kept locked in their cells for 23 hours, with all regular activities suspended) until video calls and mobile phones were introduced in June 2020. For the one hour (and sometimes half an hour) people were allowed out of their cells, they had to make a choice between showers, outdoor exercise, or telephone calls, and families noted that many people in prison were hesitant to use shared hall telephones in view of the risk of transmission of disease.
50. With the introduction of video calls to prisons, we also had a massive increase in calls to our helpline seeking advice. Families were contacting us asking how the use of restricted mobile calls worked.
51. Video calls were introduced in June 2020. We were heavily involved in its implementation, having campaigned for the use of video calls as an addition to in-person visits for several years. As such, we were able to provide the Scottish Prison Service with information about how such calls were regulated based on practice in other countries, sharing guidance with them from Canada, the US, and Australia as well as verbal information from European countries where written information was not provided in English. During this time, Families Outside was in telephone and video contact with the Scottish Prison Service several times a day, both about video calls and mobile phones as well as about communication with and information for families.
52. In June 2020, we saw a 247% increase in enquiries compared to the previous year. This stabilised as both families and prisons adjusted to the life during the pandemic. We supported 1,287 people with 3,097 enquiries. Overall, we saw an 18% increase in contacts to our Helpline service in 2020-21.

Regional Support

53. The impact of lockdown on our regional teams was that they could no longer meet people face to face. Our staff had been informed to prepare the families that they had been working with that lockdown is most likely to happen so when it did happen support could be provided in a variety of other ways such as email, telephone, or video link.

54. When lockdown started, another impact was that many sources of referrals dried up. A number of families still contacted us through the helpline, however, others from prisons, social work and teachers dried up, as they were not meeting people. Since these professionals were not having contact with people, they did not always see the issues that families were facing.

55. In most cases (and for the Helpline in particular), families self-refer, having learned about us online. The tables below show the changes in how families learned about us and were referred to us, comparing the financial year before the first lockdown with the next two years. The figures combine information from all of our services though are likely to differ between our helpline and community-based work (or work that would have taken place in the community prior to lockdown). Contacts to the Helpline did not decrease, but the ways people learned about the Helpline changed. A more detailed breakdown of these figures is available, should this be required.

56. Table 1: Referral sources

Financial year	2019-20			2020-21			2021-22		
Total referrals	1633			1525			1427		
Referral source:	number	% of total	% other than self-referral	number	% of total	% other than self-referral	number	% of total	% other than self-referral
self	1073	66%		1214	80%		1070	75%	
Prison	157	10%	28%	35	2%	11%	46	3%	13%
Prison visitor centre	111	7%	20%	61	4%	20%	67	5%	19%
Social work	105	6%	19%	61	4%	20%	67	5%	19%
Education	58	4%	10%	42	3%	13%	32	2%	9%
Other third sector	86	5%	15%	79	8%	38%	81	6%	24%

57. Table 1 shows that the proportion of people who self-referred for support increased in the first year of COVID and remained high in the second year. The proportion of referrals from prisons more than halved and did not recover, while referrals from education and social work decreased slightly but made up a similar proportion of those other than self-referrals as in the past (bearing in mind that referrals other than self-referrals decreased overall). Interestingly, the proportion of referrals from third sector agencies increased but were slightly lower in absolute terms.

58. Table 2: How families heard about support from Families Outside

Financial year	2019-20			2020-21			2021-22		
How family member heard:	number	% of total	% other than website	number	% of total	% other than website	number	% of total	% other than website
All sources		100			100		1423	100	
website	789	48%		824	54%		543	38%	
Prison visitor centres	145	9%	17%	82	5%	12%	80	6%	9%
Prison staff / leaflets / posters	67	4%	8%	50	3%	7%	32	2%	4%

Education	63	4%	7%	42	3%	6%	32	2%	4%
Social work	104	6%	12%	63	4%	9%	78	5%	9%
Other third sector	106	6%	13%	99	6%	14%	99	7%	11%

59. This table again shows changes in how families learned about the support available from our service during the lockdown years compared to pre-COVID. Broadly, families learned about support less frequently from prisons, prison visitor centres, education, and social work, though information from third sector organisations other than prison visitor centres remained fairly steady. Awareness of our support increased via online searches in the first year, then dropped in the second year.
60. The impact of these changes was that smaller numbers of families accessed our services, particularly the services we would normally provide in their local area. Referral rates to our regional work are only just beginning to recover.
61. Our team of Regional Family Support Coordinators, based throughout Scotland, provide in-person support to families. The continuing COVID-related restrictions reduced these opportunities, with support provided primarily via telephone or video links. As restrictions eased, staff developed creative ways of meeting with families such as in gardens, through 'walk and talk' meetings, or even as part of a community gardening project. Overall, referrals were lower, as referral sources such as schools and prisons also had relatively limited contact with families. However, the number of contacts with families in 2020-21 increased by 13%, reflecting the increased needs families experienced because of the pandemic. We supported 699 families (371 adults and 328 children and young people).
62. Our regional teams will take on casework and make enquires on behalf of families. Our staff are aware of local services that families could use. We provide a Families Outside contact for every Prison. Each local authority also has a designated member of Families Outside staff for them to contact.

Support for staff

63. I was proud in the way that my staff handled these difficult times. My staff were finding that people were terribly isolated. Some people may have not seen others for several months.
64. Families had real concerns, especially about what supports were available to them locally especially as we are not specialist mental health workers or addiction support. Our role is to connect people to these specialist supports, and a lot of those services were just not functioning in the same way. The impact of this on people who were already isolated as someone they knew was in prison were now even more isolated, as the supports they required were simply not there.
65. It was easier for us to connect people to organisations that were delivering food parcels than it was for us to arrange this through our own staff.

66. Our staff were working tirelessly due to the type of issues that families were coming to them with. We found that the type of support families need was more intense:
67. Support from Regional Family Support Coordinators

Financial year	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Number of families supported	604	350	378
Number of contacts recorded	6187	7179	7319
Time spent providing support (Minutes)	142145	118108	125776
Average no. of contacts	10	21	19
Average minutes per family member	235	593	333

68. The table above shows that, while the number of families we supported decreased, the time each Regional Family Support Coordinator spent with families more than doubled in the first year. This began to decrease the following year but has taken considerable time to return to pre-COVID levels.
69. Our staff were feeling isolated, however they had to support other people who were feeling isolated. My focus, and the focus of our Senior Management Team, was to support our staff to get through what they were going through.
70. Our staff were going through illness or had family members that were ill or who had died. To support our staff to support others, we introduced online team meetings with a focus on social contact with fun activities and games. We introduced wellbeing hours so staff could take off to walk their dog or use the time to look after themselves. We did not furlough anyone at that time, because we could not: Families Outside still had work to do to support families.
71. Towards the end of the pandemic, we furloughed one member of staff for two months. This was our volunteer coordinator, as at that time, we were not able to provide work for our volunteers. We were able to use her for other work prior to her brief time on furlough.
72. Prior to the pandemic, we were trying to build a volunteer service. Just before lockdown, the volunteer coordinator was about to launch a project on volunteer mentoring and had trained volunteers. This was then stopped due to the commencement of the pandemic.
73. The big issue for Families Outside was keeping staff motivated and safe and supported.
74. We never had a discrete fundraising function within Families Outside. Rather, my Finance manager and I took on this function on as part of our roles. During the

pandemic, funders asked if they could assist us in any way. One funder provided a wellbeing fund. This allowed us to divide this money between our staff. Staff could buy something special for themselves such as walking boots or craft kits. One member of staff bought incense candles that she would light whilst working and blow it out at the end of the working day.

75. As an organization, we had to spend a lot of money on home-based IT equipment. We purchased desks and desk chairs for staff, as we found that some were working with a laptop computer on their knees, whilst sitting on the sofa whilst their kids were running around.
76. The pandemic was a uniquely challenging time for our staff, many of whom were juggling caring responsibilities with extended school and nursery closures and facing restricted access to services for their own needs. To support our staff during 2020-21, we provided them with five days additional unpaid leave if they had caring responsibilities, a daily wellbeing hour including offering an online mediation sessions, and funding from the Tudor Trust to support wellbeing to provide them with a gift voucher for an online outlet of their choice.

Staff

77. Coming out of the pandemic, we lost a few members of staff. I think people re-evaluated their lives. Some staff felt the strain of the casework so wished to do something different. Some staff were re-locating elsewhere.
78. The impact of losing staff was that we also had to recruit new staff. This was also a challenge. We found that people were looking at our jobs. We expected that people in their 50s may be tempted to return to work, however we are only beginning to see that now in 2023. Following the pandemic, we went through a period where we had a few vacancies. The demands of new members of staff are also different now. People now seem to be expecting higher salaries with more flexible working conditions. Lockdown made it challenging to induct and train new members of staff and for teams to get to know each other. I have found that the dynamic of relationships at work has changed, as hybrid working means that people do not know each other as well.

Prison Visitors' Centres

79. Families Outside continues to provide the national coordinating role for Prison Visitors' Centres in Scotland. The Centres are all run by organisations separate from us such as Action for Children, Barnardo's, The Croft, Crossreach, and Forth Valley Inclusion.
80. As I have mentioned above, all Visitors' Centres closed to in-person contact following the suspension of prison visits in March 2020.
81. As they still had the funding to operate their services, we supported Visitors' Centres to think of innovative ways to contact families and offer service remotely

via helplines, email, telephone, online, and mail. Newsletters, adverts, and social media were also utilised by many of the Centres, as they continued to offer a range of support and advice, including emotional support, to individuals impacted by imprisonment. The Centres also continued to signpost and refer individuals to other agencies.

82. Families Outside's National Prison Visiting Lead supported the visitor centre providers to create a video of the work they did during the pandemic, which was screened at an online conference and can be made available if desired. The positives were that people who had previously attended prison visits in person were still able to receive support and information from a local service. The drawback was that staff who were fully funded to provide a service often struggled to find ways of using their time and were often unable to identify or connect with the families of people who had not previously visited the prison. The shift also gave many prisons visitor centres the desire to engage in community outreach, which duplicates the service that Families Outside provides and risks diluting the support available to families at the prison once in-person visits resumed.
83. Our own staff introduced 'walk and talk' meetings to speak with families once lockdown restrictions had eased enough to do so. Another innovative approach involved supporting a family to attend an outdoor community gardening project. Such positive practice has continued, as it gave our staff confidence to try different approaches to engage with families.
84. In addition, the staff at the Centres supported 958 individuals in 2020-21. They distributed over 900 food packs to families, over 1200 activity bags including crafts and books to children, and 61 tablets to families through the Connecting Scotland initiative.

Review

85. We were involved in the Independent Review of the Response to Deaths in Prison Custody at that time. I was the co-chair of that Review. The Review started in December 2019 and lasted for two years. Originally, it had been set to take place over a six-month period, however the pandemic made this time frame impossible.
86. The Independent Review includes a report specifically on the impact on families. This, and the full report and appendices, are available on the HM Inspectorate of Prisons website. The impact of the pandemic meant that the Review team was not able to speak with anyone in person: all interviews had to be conducted online, as were meetings of the Family Advisory Group, and not all participants had the confidence or ability to engage in this way. In saying this, the online forum for families bereaved through a death in prison custody worked for those who took part, which made the Review team recognise that such engagement was possible and allowed people from a wider geographical spread to participate fully.

87. All the interviews we conducted were done online. This was not ideal, as we were speaking with families who were bereaved through death. However, families were very good about the need for this approach. The realisation of the situation was that where business could be conducted online where it had to be.

Influencing Change

88. We also received a lot of consultation requests from the Scottish Government during the pandemic. This had an impact on our policy function within the organisation.
89. The pandemic prompted a flurry of legislative consultations and COVID-related research over the course of the year. Families Outside contributed to 25 consultations and research projects, available online, including:
- Education and Skills Committee Inquiry into Vulnerable Children during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - QUNO and Child Rights Connect report, Covid-19 and the Rights of Children of Parents who are incarcerated
 - Mandate of the Special Rapporteur of the UN Human Rights Council on children's right to privacy
 - University of Glasgow's *Scotland in Lockdown* research, including participation in the steering group for the project
 - Equalities & Human Rights Committee consultation on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Equality and Human Rights
 - Equalities & Human Rights Committee's call for views on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) Scotland Bill
90. We produced a total of seven new publications during the pandemic period 2020-21. These can be shared with the Inquiry if required. These are as follows:
- <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/10/Families-Outside-Young-People-Booklet-digital.pdf>
 - <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/05/Keeping-Connected-Activity-Booklet-May-2020.pdf>
 - <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/04/Constructive-Connections-Final-Report-2020-FOR-PRINT.pdf>
 - https://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EJPI_2020-ENGLISH_COPE.pdf (article by Denise Jennings)
 - <https://smeal.org/article/the-relevance-of-the-uncrc-in-adult-proceedings/>
 - <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/978-1-78973-343-320201001/full/pdf?title=prelims> (Chapter 4)
 - *The Impact of COVID-19 worldwide on children with an incarcerated parent.*

91. Families Outside also coordinates the National Prison Visitor Centre Steering Group and sits on the Scottish Government's National Prison Visitor Centre Funding Group.
92. Post-pandemic, we participated in a short-life working group for Scottish Government Social Work and a number of cross-party groups.

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Organisation's Membership

93. One of the impacts for the families of people in prison when the pandemic struck was that in-person prison visits were stopped immediately. This meant that prisons had to devise another way for families to stay connected when someone was in prison.
94. All the prisons had hall telephones that people could use, but prisons were keeping people locked up to prevent transmission of disease, plus there were staff shortages and sickness. People held in prison were only allowed out of their cells very briefly and were hesitant to use hall telephones due to worry about transmission of disease.
95. The Prison Service had to introduce something else. This meant the introduction of restricted access mobile telephones and video calls. As an organization, we had been campaigning for video calls for ten years. We had gathered everything we needed such as guidance of practice from other countries. We could state how this works and what the risks were. Suddenly during the pandemic, the Prison Service was calling us 5 - 7 times a day to get information and support on how to get the mobile phone service up and running.
96. Each person held in prison was allocated a mobile phone by June 2020, and subsequently each person coming into prison was supposed to be allocated one. In practice, this did not always happen, with some people needing to wait several weeks before receiving a phone.
97. After about five months, the mobile phone service was up and running. This was a positive step and was quickly introduced. This was very quick for the Scottish Prison Service to introduce a new process.
98. Once the service was up and running, people in prison could contact their families with these devices. The benefit of this was that families could see their loved ones in prison and see that they were ok. Families had lost almost all contact with their relatives in prison.
99. The video calls, or 'virtual visits', were introduced in Scottish prisons in June 2020 as an additional way of maintaining contact with people in prison. People held in prison were taken from their cells to the visiting halls, where they would use the devices to make the calls. These calls were monitored, as prison officers

would be present. We were very clear that these video calls should not count against their normal visit entitlement. The video calls have continued post-pandemic. Uptake of these visits has been low, averaging at about a third of capacity.

100. At the request of the Scottish Prison Service, we conducted research into why people were not using video calls, alongside our own research on people's experience of video calling. The summary of this research is available on the Families Outside website.
101. The main difficulty for people who had used video calls were IT-related (41%) and having a suitable device for video calls (33%), while a small number noted that access to Wi-Fi or enough data was problematic. IT-related issues included problems registering with the service, photo ID, and poor connection.
102. Interestingly, 96% of the families in the Scottish Prison Service commissioned survey of people who had not used video calls said they had the equipment they needed: rather, the main issue was knowing how to use it for video calls to prisons.
103. Over half (58%) said they had no worries about video calls. Those who flagged concerns mentioned technical problems; concerns about being overheard or seeing other people in the background; and difficulty with technical specifications such as identification. One reported inconsistency between prison staff regarding children being allowed on a video call, and one found the '5-minute warning' towards the end of the call to be intrusive. Nevertheless, 67% said they were interested in using video calls in future, especially if they had help with this, and all said they would like video calls to continue to be available in Scottish prisons.
104. To understand more, Families Outside conducted a short online survey asking families to share their experiences of using video calls to prisons. The Scottish Prison Service and Scottish Government subsequently commissioned Families Outside to conduct a short piece of work targeting families who had not made use of video calls. The aim of these surveys was to increase understanding around what might make this experience better, and to help more families stay in touch.
105. Forty-two families responded to Families Outside's online survey, 88% of whom had used video calls to speak with their family member in prison. An additional 33 families were reached for the Scottish Prison Service and Scottish Government commissioned survey. The findings supplemented a survey from Unlink (the provider of video calls in Scotland) of 2,629 people that found that 77% of families thought the calls were easy to book; 75% felt the video sessions were positive; and 89% said they would use these again.
106. Another impact to prisoner's families was increased costs. Although families were not visiting, they were now being required to post items into prisons. This

allowed prisons to quarantine and screen these items. The impact was that for someone who would normally drop items such as clothes or food at the prison now had to post these. This was very expensive for families and another impact for families who are already in poverty.

107. We did research last year on the financial impact of imprisonment (the *Paying the Price* report, available on the Families Outside website) and found that a lot of prisons post pandemic continued to require families to post items to prisoners instead of allowing them to hand these items into the prison. We managed to fight against that, and prisons no longer require families to post these items. We could understand how this was necessary however we found it was coming out of the pandemic caused as much of an issue as prisons just did not change practice. It also took prisons a long time to re-introduce children's visits.
108. In-person prison visits resumed on 26 April 2021 on a reduced timetable, subject to local arrangements (e.g. local outbreaks). Normal visit timetables were due to resume across the prison estate from 27 September but did not do so in all prisons. Children's visits did not resume in all prisons until at least the end of 2021. You will need to check the exact dates with the Scottish Prison Service and contracted establishments.
109. Also of note was that people often lived in different local authorities to the prison where a family member was held. Local authorities imposed different lockdown restrictions at different times, which was very confusing for people needing to travel between local authorities for visits. Even then, individual prisons sometimes operated different restrictions from the local authority as a whole.

Prison Services

110. An impact of the pandemic on people held in prison was that they had no access to outside services. These services such as third sector mental health or addiction services were not allowed into prisons. There was also no access to education or work. There was not a lot for people held in prison to do, but they were continually exposed to increase risks because to people coming in and out of prison. There was also a reduced number of prison staff, as many were off sick.
111. The services that were suspended were from external organisations coming in (e.g., third sector) other than essential services. Core NHS services would have continued.

Prisoner Release

112. The provision for emergency early release of people from prison was not fully utilised as we felt it could have been. The organisations that would provide support for people on transition from prison to community were no longer able

to operate. If people did get released, there was a limited amount of support for them, as all support was provided remotely.

113. The impact is that people leaving prison had little or no access to in-person support, with support only mandated for statutory services (which applies to people sentenced to four years or more). Non-statutory services would have provided what support they could remotely, which made it difficult for them to build relationships and encourage engagement. Third sector throughcare support such as New Routes staff were not allowed into prisons and therefore depended on prison staff to identify and refer eligible cases. The impact of this on reoffending will only be evident upon longer-term analysis.

Supporting families through lockdown

114. Following the suspension of prison visits, video calls, or 'virtual visits', were introduced in June 2020. We supported families to access these by distributing tablets to families who did not have access to a device and recruited a digital support volunteer to provide technical support to families and help them get online.
115. The Scottish Government put out a Winter Hardship Fund. This was helpful and continued for two years. During the period 2020-21, twelve IT devices were distributed to families, and digital support volunteers supported twenty families.
116. During the first year of the pandemic, our 1-to-1 community support to families was down 22%, but overall contact rates with the families we did support was up in 2020 by 23% on previous year. An astonishing statistic that best evidences lack of social contact for Families Outside due to the pandemic is the change in face-to-face meetings and those contacts made by phone with family members needing our support. The number of engagements made face to face in 2020 dropped to around a third of the levels in 2019 whereas telephone support increased to 6,085 contacts in 2020 from 3,990 in the previous year, up by 53%.
117. With the Helpline, contacts increased dramatically by 1,060 individual contacts in 2020. This is an increase of 46% on the rates of contact compared to figures from 2019. This can be directly linked to COVID-19, with trends in call rates available to evidence the peaks in the pandemic.

Training and awareness raising

118. The lockdown restrictions introduced in March 2020 meant that we had to suspend the delivery of community and prison-based training and awareness-raising events. As we adapted to a remote model of working, we developed a training webinar for professionals working with families affected by imprisonment, which we delivered monthly throughout the year. These commenced in June 2020.

119. A total of 1,141 participants benefitted from our training and awareness. 386 professionals attended our webinars for professionals. 209 participants attended our first ever online national conference on 'Human Rights and Hope'. This included a mix of delegates from the statutory and third sectors as well as students and family members. A full list of the sectors represented can be provided.
120. The impact of moving our training online was that our Continuous Professional Development courses had to change to online training. We would normally take participants such as teachers into a prison so they could experience what it is like. This included a training workshop delivered in the prison visits hall. Teachers attended from all local authorities and from both Primary and Secondary schools.
121. The benefit of this training to teachers was to enhance their knowledge of children affected by having a family member in prison or who has been in prison.
122. The transition out of the pandemic was as challenging, as people attending training were beginning to expect in-person training. Currently, we offer a mixture of training methods. These include in-person training and online. The content of these training courses will be amended to suit the style of the delivery.

Prisoners Health and Wellbeing

123. In respect of the medical services available to inmates, I cannot specifically comment on this in respect of the impact of the pandemic. I can comment in general terms. The concern now, as I do not know what the situation was like pre-Covid, is the number of vacancies in prison health care teams.
124. The impact of this is on the people with the highest level of health care needs in the population in Scotland. In the prison estate, you are considered 'elderly' if you are aged over 50. Scotland also has the highest proportion of deaths in prison compared to England and other prisons in Western Europe. This includes suicide and natural cause deaths.
125. Other factors in poor health of people in prison relate to poverty, substance misuse, and mental ill health as well as high levels of head injury, respiratory illness, and many more. See <https://www.gov.scot/publications/understanding-health-needs-scotlands-prison-population-synthesis-report/>.
126. Also see p. 12 on 'Prison population and prison mortality rates':
https://www.prisoninspectoratescotland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publication_files/Independent%20Review%20of%20the%20Response%20to%20Deaths%20in%20Prison%20Custody%20p6%20%281%29%20WEB%20PDF.pdf.

127. HMIPS will have specific information on the breakdown of causes of death in prison each year. The Scottish Prison Service does not currently publish this information.
128. Since the pandemic, GEO Amey, the prison transportation company, is having difficulties recruiting staff. This has always been the case but appears to have worsened because of the pandemic and consequent staff shortages.
129. The impact of this is that people held in prison sometime struggle to attend crucial appointments such as Children's Hearings or hospital appointments. In one case, a family was worried that the person in prison risked losing a leg due to infection and missed follow-up appointments at hospital. Another family member contacted us about someone who missed their chemotherapy appointment because the escort driver could not find a parking space at the hospital so had simply left.
130. Prison health care cannot provide all types of support, so people held in prison need to go in and out of community-based health settings.
131. Currently, we have concerns surrounding the management of long-term health conditions of the prison population in Scotland. It has always been a concern, and families raise these concerns with us. Families cannot get information or participate in conversations about care plans unless the person in prison specifically requests it. Sometimes some families are not notified when someone has been taken to hospital.
132. On occasions, next of kin information is not always up to date. Prisons tell us that updates to next of kin information is the responsibility of the person held in prison. The Independent Review therefore recommended that updates to this information be sought on a regular basis. This recommendation has not yet been implemented.
133. Another impact on families was that even when prison visiting resumed, there was a restriction on hugging and physical contact. This applied to everyone over the age of twelve. That meant that a child under age twelve could hug their mum or dad but not a child who was over twelve. Families can now hug again.
134. Our staff and families were having difficulty reaching someone in prison to enquire about the welfare of people held in prison. This was frustrating. Each prison has a dedicated family contact officer, however, we found that they were being deployed into other roles. The dedicated telephone lines that they would use for such enquiries were being left unanswered. It is difficult to say whether this was due to the pandemic. Certainly, deployment to other roles was exacerbated during the pandemic, as staff sickness and shortages were high, but this was not uncommon prior to and after pandemic as well.

135. One family we supported related to a young boy with autism who could not understand why he could not visit his dad in prison. The boy was suicidal on the back of this. That was a particularly disturbing case.

Peer Support

136. We expanded our group work and peer support team during this time. This created a variety of local and national group work sessions delivered virtually via Zoom, or in person (where possible) to support children, young people, and adults affected by a family member's imprisonment. We felt that the in-person meetings were more effective.

137. The 'Stronger Families Inside Out' programme, in partnership with Street Sport and HMP Grampian, delivered in 2020-21:

- 10 online sessions
- 1 family activity day
- Supporting 25 children, young people, and adults
- 8 children and young people attended 6 online yoga sessions
- 16 children and young people participated in our national Reading Activity Challenge
- 7 children and young people participated in our national art competition run in collaboration with Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE)
- 10 children and young people participated in our national Music Broth project run over 6 sessions
- 4 adults participated in a joint project with SHMU run over 8 sessions

138. We are currently trying to resume peer support through in-person meetings. Some funding streams from local authorities have allowed us to rebuild this work. It is, however, only in pockets across the country.

People in prison on remand

139. The impact of remand on people in prison and their families during and post-pandemic is huge.

140. The Government introduced emergency Covid regulations and suspended the time limits that were previously in place to limit the time spent on remand (untried before court). The courts were also suspended for a period during the pandemic, so the impact of that is that courts have developed an enormous backlog of cases.

141. The impact of the suspended time limits was that untried prisoners were spending an extended period of time on remand without knowing when that was going to change. The proportion of people on remand in Scotland has increased due to the impact of the pandemic. The remand population in prison reached 30% of the total population.

142. This extended time limit for remand prisoners is still in place. Families do not know how long someone is going to be held on remand and neither do the remand prisoners. These people are not convicted. The impact of this on families is what I have reported earlier and that they are spending half of their income supporting someone in prison whilst they are on remand.
143. As noted above, the impact of imprisonment on remand is significant. For example, our research on the financial impact of imprisonment found that families were spending on average half of their disposable income to support someone in prison on remand (compared to a third of their incomes once someone had been sentenced). The duration of remand is uncertain, which creates additional stress for families who do not know what their futures hold.
144. Suspension of court processes during lockdown and the resulting backlog meant people were spending longer and longer periods of time in custody. The remand population in Scotland, which was already high, increased from 20% of the prison population on 6 March 2020 to 30% of the prison population on 4 March 2022. The figure remains high, with 27% of the prison population on remand on 12 January 2024.

Lessons learned

145. We have learned that we can work in a flexible way, however, we appreciate the value of in person contacts where possible are essential, especially as so many of the families we represent are isolated.
146. Our research on financial impact showed how strained things were for families when someone goes to prison, even before the cost-of-living crisis. This research was to focus on the pandemic, but it turned out to be a more general piece of work. We learned how dire the financial situation was and how people were spending a third of their income supporting someone in prison during sentence and half of their income during remand and on release. The impact for families having to spend that income was that they would go without food so that their children could eat.
147. The lesson for me is that groups such as the families of people held in prison should always be considered. They are so easily forgotten about, yet the impact on them can be extreme. The pandemic did show that the Scottish Prison Service can respond quickly to a situation if it has to.
148. Our support for families who are worried about someone in prison continues. The recommendations from the deaths in custody review highlighted these matters also. In August 2023, The Scottish Prison Service was to set up a dedicated phone line for people worried about the health and wellbeing of someone in

prison and have an immediate concern. This is now due to be launched in January 2024.

149. The families we support feel like nothing is changing, however, the value of collaboration and communication is important. This is why we will continue to be the voice for families.
150. Our support for our staff also continues and ensures that we do not take staff for granted.
151. There are lessons learned for the charitable sector, as funding depends on showing evidence of what you have done in the previous year. However, if you cannot show that because of circumstances beyond your control (such as during the pandemic), then the risk is that people do a lot of activity just to show that they have been busy. That is not a constructive use of time.
152. Funding structures for the third sector are always a challenge year on year. Many third sector organisations shut during or after the pandemic. The funding issue should be looked at moving forward.
153. I have also received anonymised information from two family members regarding their experiences during the pandemic. I have included this information within Appendices.
154. I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that this statement will form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and be published on the Inquiry's website. By typing my name and the date below, I accept that this is my signature duly given.

STATEMENT CONCLUDES

Signed

Personal Data

Date

17 January 2024

Appendix A

Lived experience from anonymous person known as 'L'

L's dad is serving a life sentence. When COVID hit, all visits were cancelled, but visits were the only thing her gran had left of her son – the only thing that kept them connected – so this really affected her gran mentally. The introduction of mobile phones was very helpful (though it took five months for this to happen).

The change affected her dad's mental health as well. He has become 'institutionalised' (though doesn't like to think of himself that way), so he was used to certain ways of doing things. Lockdown completely changed the routine and structure, which was very unsettling at first, for example no access to work or education. However, he found he liked the reduced engagement, both with prison staff and with other men in prison.

The impact of COVID was mainly on the relationship between her dad and gran. People held in prison weren't able to access health care as readily as before, for example they couldn't get their medication at the right times. This worried her gran about his level of care: Gran always trusted that the prison would look after her son but felt that this changed during COVID. This put a massive strain on Gran and her mental health.

Dad is now very depressed that the regime is opening up again and that he has to interact with people again. Older people serving longer-term sentences are always a target to younger ones trying to prove themselves; the more reduced regime made it easier to keep his head down and keep to himself. Gran now understands the benefits of the limited interaction on dad's progression through his sentence.

Personally, L says she doesn't really care and is numb to it all. She has grown up with dad in prison, so this is normal / her whole life. She doesn't visit but just takes phone calls from him every couple of months on a dedicated phone to help her control what contact she has with him. She just wants to know he's ok and for him to know she's ok. She says the whole situation with COVID and prison didn't really affect her personally, other than the stress it clearly put on her gran. Again, this especially related to medication being missed: the prison health care team was severely short-staffed, and the prison officers don't really care about the need for specific timing for medication or whether it needs to be taken with food, etc. This is a mindset of people in prison not being a priority for them because people are in prison through their own actions (a mindset she shares).

People in prison are really only just coming out of lockdown now (delayed compared to people in the community). She could see that the experience of COVID may have been more negative for people serving shorter-term sentences, but for those on longer sentences, it was a bit of a relief in many ways. Peer support and peer contact was reduced, but peer support in prison isn't always positive.

Appendix B

Lived experience from anonymous person known as 'A'.

Son in prison on remand from December 2019 – August 2020. He had previously been in prison 10 years prior to this.

Email, 30/1/24

The SPS website was woefully inadequate in that it did not make it easy (or even possible) to find answers to practical questions such as how to send in items, pay in money or how prisoners could stay in touch by phone. This was compounded by rumours around mobile phones for many weeks before they finally arrived.

On a personal level, I found that lockdown allowed me time to hide away from the world while I dealt with the shock of my son's arrest and imprisonment. However, I could not access support for the severe anxiety disorder I developed as a result, so I lived in fear for many months before finally accessing phone counselling privately. This was compounded by the fact that my, then fit and independent 85-year-old mother was admitted to hospital in February 2020 and contracted Covid whilst there. We were unable to visit her, which accelerated her decline into dementia, and by the time she was transferred to a care home in July, she had pretty much forgotten my son. He was allowed to make just one phone call to her in hospital after the intervention by [Families Outside] helpline staff but was refused any further calls, which was devastating for them both.

My anxiety for my son's well-being was compounded by the details I shared with you at the time (below). We went many days without phone calls and experienced some very early, rushed, interrupted calls until video calls and mobiles became a reality. The uncertainty around these issues was made worse by a media focus on sensationalising the inaccurate information they were receiving and put a spin on it to make it look like prisoners and families did not deserve consideration. In fact, the idea was promoted that prison officers, as front-line workers, deserved much praise and sympathy at the prisoners and families' expense, whilst we knew first hand that the behaviour of some was inappropriate to say the least. My son had experienced a professional [prison] workforce on the whole, before lockdown. The behaviour of those who remained at work during lockdown became less and less [professional] as the lockdown dragged on. Once the teething problems of the video calls and mobiles was ironed out, these went some way to calming the worries down at home. I don't think it was enough to give prisoners much peace of mind for the rest of the 23 and half hours they spent in their cells.

One of the unexpected consequences was [that] my son's period on remand was almost the whole of his final sentence. It is a little-known fact that remand prisoners did not receive 'wages', which meant he relied on us for everything. He witnessed many prisoners go without because their families were unable to provide money for them.

All in all, once my anxiety was under control, my overwhelming feeling was one of anger. It is already one of the most difficult things families can suffer, and yet we had to witness our loved ones being treated as less than worthy of basic rights such as fresh air, exercise, personal safety, good health, hygiene and a relationship with loved ones, which we on the outside were also denied. In the case of my mother, this meant never experiencing the very close relationship she had with my son ever again and vice versa. Meanwhile, we had to endure exposure to the popular view on this as somehow deserved. An idea which was promoted by some members of staff inside the prison and exacerbated by the inability of SPS to keep us informed, answer our questions and reassure us that our loved ones were safe and protected."

Email, 19/4/20

Following our discussion, here is what we see as the most immediate and, for some, the most difficult to handle effects of the current situation on one hall at SPS Edinburgh. It is of course, just a snapshot.

By far the biggest concern is lack of opportunity to stay in meaningful contact with loved ones. This is due to a number of related but presumably not insurmountable changes to regime. In the hall concerned, prisoners are locked in cells for 23 and a half hours a day. During the remaining 30 minutes, they must attend to everything else that enables them to stay well. This means choosing to prioritise between calling loved ones, cleaning cells, discussing daily meal selections and / or emergent problems / issues with staff or to shower. If choosing to phone home, most of the thirty minutes is spent queuing for the phone. In this hall, the 30 minutes allocated is around 8am. This means that it has also become almost impossible for prisoners to contact their lawyers.

The timing of this slot means that families and friends are either at essential work, preparing for work or still in bed. This problem is compounded by the fact that each prisoner can only make very short calls, meaning little of importance or comfort can be discussed. Some of those with family on the front line have not spoken to them at all in recent weeks. Prisoners also feel pressurised to end calls abruptly (I have heard the shouts from staff), guilty about the desire to use the phone and stressed about the need to choose between their physical and mental health as well as that of their families. This is especially worrying, as there is now no opportunity for indoor exercise.

As the regime has changed, it has become very inconsistent, which means that no planning can be done to ensure that a balance of these tasks is achieved. Some days the 30 minutes is extended, some days it is reduced. As some staff become more stressed with the situation, they are expressing their own feelings and opinions to prisoners, and this makes prisoners feel more guilty for trying to ask questions, arrange property collections, choose meals etc. in the very limited time available. It is as if these essential concerns are no longer relevant in the rush to tick the boxes of completed actions. This is compounded by the fact that incoming mail is held at reception for longer and longer (one parcel we sent was there for almost two weeks and took several phone calls from us to have it

released. The contents were then found to be damaged). So, the cycle of limited time, additional issues to be discussed and the stress that involves continues unabated.

There are a few simple solutions to the worst of these difficulties, suggested by prisoners themselves. First of all, they have read the newspaper article regarding mobile phones in cells and would like to know, in a timely fashion, whether this is accurate and if so, how it will work. This would relieve some of the tension generated by the overwhelming uncertainty.

Secondly, if phone arrangements remain unchanged, they would like to see a visiting style booking system for longer phone calls (and some evening availability for those whose families are working in essential services etc.)

They would appreciate a change to weekly menu selection (this is already in place for those with dietary requirements.) They would also like to see alternative methods of contacting staff with non-urgent queries, such as a pro forma. Time could be allocated to deal with these while cells are locked, and results fed back. All in an effort to relief pressures on both staff and inmates and thus support good relations.

Finally, they would find a regime of better defined free time allocation to ensure essential personal hygiene, cleaning etc does not have to be sacrificed in order to queue to phone home.

Purely from a family point of view, I feel that much more could also be done to keep families informed and to signpost information online to enable families to understand how property and funds etc should be sent. Families also need some reassurance re Covid 19 measures as the coverage in the press focuses on the difficulties staff experience and gives the impression that they are the ones most at risk. This attitude is adding to concern for prisoners and families alike. Prisoners must surely be more at risk from staff carrying the disease than staff are from inmates who have no other contact with the outside world.

Email, 27/7/20

A quick update re video calls and mobile phones. We have had increasingly frequent and stress-free video calls for a few weeks now. Initial technical issues seem to have been quickly addressed and the security procedures loosened somewhat, with a common-sense approach being taken re differences between what is supposed to happen and what can happen to ensure a call takes place.

Our only concern is that there must be many families not taking part in such calls, as the allocation of 30 minutes per month each has been abandoned, and it becomes obvious that large number of slots remain unbooked, with the same few inmates meeting time and time again in half empty call rooms. I wonder if this is as a result of technology / finance/ digital skills-based inequality? On a minor point, the prisoners use an air mic which often picks up the voices of other callers in preference to their own, making privacy and continuity difficult. It

surely can't be too hard to provide them with mics in the headsets they're wearing.

With regards the mobile phones, [son in prison] has done his own survey and says the feedback is overwhelmingly positive.

Pros:

The phones provide a countdown of minutes used.

The connections are usually good.

300 minutes are free per month.

There are multiple slots when the phones can be used (half an hour at a time)

Prisoners also like the calculator, clock, games, and notes functions.

Cons:

Security - there is no way to ensure the phone is safe when left (as per the rules) in an open cell.

There is no access to the pin to ensure that phones left alone are not used to make calls inappropriately by someone else (e.g., 999, which would result in a charge, or prank / abusive calls to others' recipients)

Some staff believe that no access is now needed to landlines, even though that is still the only way lawyers can be contacted.

Some were supplied with faulty phones which they're told can't be fixed, so not all have one.

Many would like the option to buy extra minutes as there is a welcome but stressful expectation of longer calls from friends and family.