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## PRISON VISITING

Prison visitors don't have a definite agenda; we do not work 'to a purpose'. We don't write anything down, we don't have 'boxes to tick' and we don't have to reach targets. We are ordinary members of the public and we offer our friendship and commitment to the prisoner whilst she is in prison. We conceal our identities for obvious reasons and go on first names only. We have no official powers within the prison - in fact we are very limited in what we are allowed to do. This limitation can be very frustrating – for instance, we can't make 'phone calls for the prisoners or buy them a new pair of trainers or write official letters for them to solicitors, Social Services etc. We cannot take anything into the prison and we cannot bring anything out; this could result not only in dismissal but, in extreme circumstances, prosecution.

OPVs do NOT need a Visiting Order for their visits, provision is made by the staff and Security, but they do need to adhere to the visiting times. OPVs have to realise that it is a serious responsibility and they must abide by the rules of the prison and the guidelines for the Official Prison Visitors from the Ministry of Justice. OPVs are appointed by the governor of the Prison, approved and supported by the Ministry of Justice – our position as an Official prison Visitor is entirely in the hands of the Governor. As well as being responsible for our appointment, the Governor can also request our resignation, so we have to take it very seriously. It only takes one OPV to take risks and we can all be tarred with the same brush. We have to be trusted.

OPVs are volunteers; this, together with the fact that we have total commitment to the prisoners we visit, gives our organisation abiding strength. We are not Prison Officers. The nature of an Officer's work is of necessity authoritative. They are there to do a job and to make sure the prisoners tow the line within the rigorous behavioural structure of the prison. They are responsible for the safety of the prisoners and the security of the prison. Like many people in authority they are often maligned and ever open to accusations of unfairness from some of those in their charge – this is unfair in itself, but it is a fact of life. OPVs must be impartial – empathise, maybe try to lighten up a situation, but not to take sides. OPVs are in a unique situation. They do not visit in an official capacity; they are not the Police, solicitors, lawyers, medical staff etc. and if any OPV has professional knowledge in these areas, they must be very wary as to how they use it, as it would not be acceptable to allow their own opinions to influence the prison, should the OPV disagree with the prisoner's advice or treatment from any of the attendant services within HMPS. Almost anything a prisoner says to an OPV is confidential – except if she makes a statement of intent to self-harm, or hurt another prisoner or member of staff etc. [All these rules are listed in the HMPS handbook]. We are there primarily, as listeners although some prisoners encourage us to talk. Although we cannot reveal anything which would jeopardise our anonymity, prisoners do like to hear about our families, pets, holidays and our daily lives. They like to share their troubles too. It's this kind of sharing in 'normality' which means such a lot to them and they often take on board our personal ups and downs, enquiring about problems we may have mentioned, such as a sick friend or relative or a bereavement, the car breaking down, the washing-machine flooding the kitchen.... the serious and the trivial – this sharing of experiences builds up trust and trust is the foundation of our work in the prisons. Through our conversations with the prisoners we visit we learn very much about the chain of events which has led them to prison – the dysfunctional families, being raised 'in care', drugs, violence, etc. – and of course the other side of the coin – those who have led straight, hard-working lives until something has gone pear-shaped and has resulted in a custodial sentence.

Life is never the same after prison and we cannot promise them that all will go well when the door slams behind them. We can only be there.

The company a prisoner keeps is restrictive. Her cell mates are prisoners like themselves. The staff have their duties to perform. Family and friends visit and some of these visits are far from pleasant and successful. An OPV comes for no financial gain; we are not a threat; we have not come to probe, question or censure; we can be trusted with a confidence. A prisoner comes to us with a clean slate and this helps put both sides at ease. We aim to bring a little of the outside into the restrictive regime of the prison – and the fact that we bother to do this means a great deal to most prisoners.

OPVs come from all walks of life. Before we are accepted, we have a security vetting. We must provide referees and attend an informal interview. All this can take several months.

OPVs visit their prisoners regularly during Visiting Hours. The Visits Room has a pleasant atmosphere and there visitor and prisoner can share a coffee and chat in an atmosphere of hospitality. The prisoner is visited until she is released or transferred to another prison. OPVs are aware that prisoners need help and support on release, but to give this support is not an extension of their commitment to the prisoner. There are other groups, both official and voluntary, who do this work.

OPVs are not part of the chaplaincy – they are an independent, non-evangelistic organisation. We work alongside and usually very amicably with the Chaplaincy, due to the humanitarian nature of our work. At HMP Foston Hall a member of the Chaplaincy is Beatrice Lance, a member of the Chaplaincy team is our Liaison Officer.

There will always be those who see OPVs as ‘do-gooders’ and those who cannot understand why we give our time voluntarily to visit ‘that lot’, the ‘scourge of society’, the ‘bottom of the heap’ (to mention a few epithets often applied to prisoners). But prison visiting has survived, in its present form, for over 80 years, so there must be a place for us and a reason to do this special work.

The National Association of Official Prison Visitors – if accepted as an OPV it’s not mandatory to join the NAOPV, but it helps the cause. The NAOPV is a registered charity which works at Government level and with staff at Prison Service HQ, supporting and maintaining prison visiting in as many prisons as possible in England and Wales. The NAOPV is the ‘voice’ of prison visiting.

[adapted from “Prison Visiting – a personal and informal view of our work” by Barbara Crompton, Northern Regional Secretary NAOPV. 2008]