

HM PRISON SERVICE

HANDBOOK FOR OFFICIAL PRISON VISITORS

This booklet was produced by the Prison Service in partnership with the National Association of Official Prison Visitors Website: www.napv.org.uk Email: info@napv.org.uk

INTRODUCTION

1. This booklet can offer no foolproof recipe for success in prison visiting, since visiting is simply an attempt to form a friendly relationship in circumstances which are far from ideal. The booklet does however offer advice and guidance which aims to be of help while you, as a new official prison visitor (OPV) become more familiar with your surroundings and duties. It should be referred to as required.

2. As far as resources and conditions permit, time in prison should be used to prepare the prisoner for return to the world outside equipped to play an acceptable role in the community. In this task governors and uniformed staff have the co-operation of specialists who work with the prisoner in addressing his/her offending behaviour. These staff include psychiatrists, psychologists, education officers, chaplains and probation officers on secondment. Volunteers such as OPVs also play a valuable part.

ROLE OF THE OFFICIAL PRISON VISITOR

3. You will not be involved in the treatment and training programme for prisoners, although you have been formally appointed by the prison governor. Your trustworthiness is vital to the governor and staff, who may allow you entry to the prison at times when other visitors are not permitted, and movement around the prison with a freedom which other visitors do not enjoy. As an OPV, you may be permitted to visit the prisoners allocated to you without supervision. It is a great asset to both the prisoner and you to enjoy such independence within the prison regime. Neither you nor the prisoner need feel that your meetings have an ulterior motive.

4. A simple definition of your role as an OPV is to offer a friendly relationship to those visited. Often, but not solely those with few relatives or friends who visit regularly, thus enabling regular contact with a sympathetic and sensible person independent of the prison and its staff. An OPV is first and foremost someone with whom the prisoner can talk and establish some degree of mutual understanding and trust. The prisoner may choose to discuss personal problems and confidences about family and friends, past behaviour, future plans, grievances whether real or imagined, prison life, fellow prisoners, or a member of staff. Above all in listening to those many aspects of a prisoner's life you must be non-judgemental.

5. As an OPV you are not a part of the closed prison community. You are a representative of the outside world, whose outlook, attitudes and interests can be refreshingly different, and who demonstrates that the prisoner has not been forgotten by the outside world.

6. Your role should not merely be that of a passive listener, nor on the other hand should the role of the staff be usurped.

OFFICIAL PRISON VISITOR LIAISON OFFICER

7. You are accountable to the governor who usually delegates to the chaplain or an operational manager with responsibility for organising this part of their work. The OPV

Liaison Officer will arrange for your introduction, usually under the guidance of an experienced OPV. In due course you will be allocated a prisoner to visit.

8. Local arrangements for OPVs may vary considerably. The OPV Liaison Officer should brief you clearly on points such as where you will visit, the days and hours when visits may be made, gate procedures, the custody and use of cell keys - if these are issued, the reporting of any untoward incident or cause for concern, the record of visits to be kept by you. If in doubt, it is best to ask the OPV Liaison Officer or other prison staff for clarification.

9. In male prisons where women may be appointed and vice versa, special arrangements to accommodate visits may have to be made if visits in cells would present difficulties. This will be especially so if you are the opposite sex to the prisoner.

10. Your conversations with a prisoner are private. However if you learn anything which may represent:

- a threat to the security of the prison
- a threat to the safety of a member of staff or a prisoner
- a risk of a prisoner harming him/herself
- a concern that a prisoner is being victimised or bullied including any specific nature of the victimisation, e.g. racial harassment, homophobia etc.

you must report it in confidence to the OPV Liaison Officer or the Governor. It is important to note that you must only visit those prisoners allocated to you by the OPV Liaison Officer.

RELATIONS WITH PRISON STAFF

11. You will usually find uniformed staff courteous and helpful towards prison visitors, and friendly towards those who have become well known to them. However, staff will change because of shift duties and job transfer, and there are often occasions when their job is particularly trying. Thoroughly familiarise yourself with the regulations and the accepted local practices. Try to get to know the staff and understand any difficulties they face, and ensure that you do not inadvertently cause any problems. On arrival at the wing it is essential that you tell the officer in charge the name of the prisoner you will visit.

12. Specialist staff, as mentioned in paragraph 2, have their various responsibilities for a prisoner's present problems and future plans. You should refer the prisoner to them on any matter raised which seems to be within their field. If you think that a new venture, perhaps an educational course, would be beneficial it is best to encourage the prisoner to take the initiative rather than yourself making an approach yourself because this may cause embarrassment all round.

REGULATIONS

13. Under the Prison Act 1952, it is an offence to bring tobacco or liquor into a prison without authority, and to bring in or take out without authority any article, and this includes letters and other documents. These regulations are strictly enforced, and you must not attempt to circumvent them by, for example, writing on a prisoner's behalf a letter which he would not receive permission to write. It may be possible, with the governor's permission, to arrange for you to bring into the prison some article such as a book for the prisoner, but be quite sure that you have checked beforehand what is allowed with the OPV Liaison Officer. A "nothing in, nothing out" policy is the safest option and will allow a better, uncomplicated relationship to be established.

RELATIONS WITH PRISONERS

14. It is important that you should maintain a regular routine of visits, weekly or fortnightly. A predictable routine is helpful to staff, and prisoners come to rely upon your appearing. Give them warning of absences of which you know in advance, and try to get word to them if you have to cancel a visit unexpectedly.

15. Remember that the prisoner is your host, so observe visiting courtesies. Initially the prisoner may seem suspicious or defensive, and may be sensitive to any criticism or attitude which may appear patronising to them. Your task of gaining their confidence and being accepted may not be easy. Simply attempting to establish a degree of friendship is often the best route to achieving it.

16. Be cautious of a prisoner who attempts to make use of you, either by doing them favours or fighting their battles with authority. Some have had long practice in trading on sympathies of unwary visitors, not just OPVs. There are established means by which a prisoner may make a request or a complaint about treatment in prison - to the governor, to the Independent Monitoring Board (formerly known as the Board of Visitors), or by petition to the Home Secretary. If the prisoner has failed to have a grievance remedied by these means, they may wish to contact a Member of Parliament, or a solicitor particularly if civil action in the courts is envisaged. On matters concerning the policy and courts - evidence, conviction, sentence appeal - again there are recognised procedures. You must not attempt to bypass these procedures, or to approach an outside person or body on the prisoner's behalf. If you believe they have a genuine case, consult the OPV Liaison Officer, or write a personal letter to the governor.

17. Although your duties are limited to one prison, you may on occasion wish to keep in touch with a prisoner who has been transferred. Exceptionally you may do so but it is advisable before making contact with a prisoner to first consult your own OPV Liaison Officer. In the case of transfer a letter, to the new governor to ask his/her consent is a courteous move.

18. Family problems are a common source of concern to prisoners. You must not communicate directly with his/her family.

CONDITIONS OF APPOINTMENT

19. (a) Your appointment is subject to a three-month probationary period, and is initially for one year. All appointments are reviewed annually and, provided the duties have been satisfactorily performed, are renewed for a further year without a formal letter of re-appointment. An appointment may be terminated at any time by your written resignation, or by notice of termination by the prison.

(b) Most OPVs are between the ages of 21 and 70, but there is some flexibility and all appointments are at the discretion of the governor, or operational manager responsible for Official Prison Visits.

(c) The Prison Service is committed to racial equality. Improper discrimination on the basis of colour, race, nationality, ethnic or native origins, or religion is unacceptable on the part of any member of staff, prisoner, or visitor, and neither will it be tolerated.

(d) You must observe the statutory regulations and any local instructions of the governor. He/she will exercise due care in all matters affecting security of the prison and the safe custody of the prisoners, and in the use of official pass and

keys. You must return the pass and any official documents to the governor when your appointment ends.

(e) You must not discuss with persons outside the Prison Service information you acquire about the prison or individual prisoners, nor publish or broadcast material about prison visiting without the consent of the Prison Service.

(f) Travelling expenses up to 15 miles each way between your home and the prison will normally be reimbursed by the prison.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF OFFICIAL PRISON VISITORS

20. All OPVs are welcomed as members, for a modest subscription, of the National Association of Official Prison Visitors. The OPV Liaison Officer will provide the name of the local chairman or secretary if there is a branch of the Association at your prison, and the address of the General Secretary. Local branches offer an opportunity to meet fellow OPVs and members of the prison staff, to hear guest speakers, and to discuss various aspects of the prison system. The Association co-ordinates and fosters the work of prison visiting, circulates a newsletter on matters of national and local interest to members, and holds an annual conference.

POINTS OF CONTACT

21. If you have any queries you should approach your OPV Liaison Officer. If there are issues which cannot be resolved locally Prisoner Administration Group has policy responsibility for the Scheme and can be contacted on 020 7217 2929. You may also wish to visit the Prison Service website at www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk .

[scanned by JND 23 August 2006; booklet undated but believed to have been issued in 2004]