



ACTION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OF PRISONERS

Ms. Caron McCaffrey, Director General,
Irish Prison Service,
IPS HQ, Ballinalee Road,
Longford

26th August 2022

Dear Ms McCaffrey,

As you will be aware, the *Action for Children and Families of Prisoners* Network was established in August 2020 by the Centre for Criminal Justice and Human Rights, School of Law, University College Cork (UCC) and the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT).¹ The Network aims to provide a unified voice for positive policy change for children and families affected by imprisonment, with an overarching goal of a cross-departmental strategy led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. You can find more information about the Network's most recent activities on our website: www.actionforfamilies.ie.

On 7 October 2021, the Co-Chairs of the Network, Dr. Fiona Donson (UCC) and Sarahjane McCreery (IPRT), met with the Irish Prison Service's (IPS) Head of Care and Rehabilitation, Fergal Black, as well as members of the IPS Operations, Corporate Services and Care and Rehabilitation teams, to discuss issues facing children and families in prison. The discussion focused particularly on the status of IPS strategies and policies for supporting children and families; plans for supporting family contact; and ongoing concerns around family visits.

At this meeting, we were informed that:

- The IPS wish to maximise opportunities for positive engagement with families, and the relevant IPS team would engage with the Network on the development of the next IPS Strategy in early 2023.
- The Families and Imprisonment Group (FIG) was no longer being rolled out in prisons and the IPS were seeking funding for a National Co-ordinator to get this group back up and running, as well as to develop a family strategy and a policy on family visiting conditions.
- The IPS are invested in continuing the roll-out of video calls as a supplement to visits and are trialling staff-free "video booths" on landings which resemble telephone boxes and can be operated by the prisoners themselves.

¹ The Network is supported by the Katharine Howard Foundation, St Stephen's Green Trust, and the Irish Research Council.

- The IPS are committed to developing in-cell phones across the entire prison estate and are also trialling inbound calls where a prisoner can receive a call from one of the numbers on their call list.
- The IPS will engage with the Network on practical steps to improve the visiting process for families.
- The IPS will engage with the Network around updating the Family Information Booklet – particularly around using language that may support families to report drug-related intimidation.

We know that at your recent meeting with IPRT's Executive Director, Saoirse Brady, you reiterated the IPS' intention to continue the roll-out of video booths and develop in-cell phones, in particular incoming calls. This is very welcome and will make a huge difference to supporting contact between people in prison and their loved ones. We are also pleased to learn that the IPS hopes to recruit a National Co-ordinator for families as we believe this is an essential post to ensure consistency across the prison estate. However, we would welcome further updates on the other specific issues discussed at last October's meeting.

The Network recognises the significant work of the IPS in adapting to COVID-19 public health measures and keeping prisoners safe from COVID-19. We welcome the Service's ongoing commitment to facilitating prisoners' contact with their families and the easing of COVID restrictions in prisons, particularly the recommencement of unscreened physical visits after a challenging two years. We hope, however, that visits can return to pre-pandemic levels of one in-person visit per week as soon as possible where that is the family's preferred option. As visits slowly return to their pre-pandemic state, we would like to take the opportunity to flag some key issues that have arisen in our Network meetings over the past few months:

- A number of issues have been raised around the accepted forms of identification for family visits varying from prison to prison. Is there a policy and/or publicly available information which both ensures consistency and states the acceptable forms of identification for families and, if so, could we have access to this information?
- Network members have raised concerns about the ability for individuals to book visits over the phone due to the phone lines being continually busy. Are there any measures being taken to address this and ensure individuals remain able to book prison visits via the phone?
- As raised at our meeting in October 2021, there remains a significant time delay in letters being sent in and out of prison. What measures are being taken to address this?
- There have been reports of family members having to post items of clothing into prison due to COVID-19 restrictions apparently not allowing them to be handed in at the prison gate. This is causing massive delays in people in prison receiving items they need, particularly for court appearances, and is placing additional financial hardship on families. Are there any measures being taken to address this?
- There has been an issue in relation to family contact between prisoners held in different prisons. Is there a policy on facilitating contact between prisoners from the same family who are being held in different prisons?

We would greatly appreciate the opportunity to engage with you on the above issues and have you attend a future Network meeting, and we are ready to make ourselves available at a time of convenience to you and your officials accordingly.

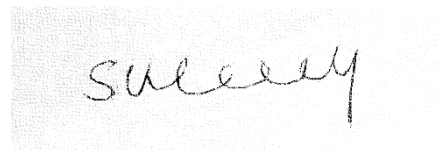
We also wanted to highlight that IPRT has recently secured three-year philanthropic funding to recruit a Project Coordinator for our Children and Families' Initiative which will build on the work of the Network to date. The overarching goal of the project will be to tackle intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and imprisonment through supporting family relationships and return from prison to the community.

We would like to thank you and your IPS colleagues for your ongoing work to address the concerns of prisoners and their families. We look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,



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School of Law,
University College Cork



Sarahjane McCreery
Senior Policy & Research Officer
Irish Penal Reform Trust

(On behalf of the *Action for Children and Families of Prisoners Network*).