JUSTICE 1 COMMITTEE

Wednesday 22 September 2004

Session 2

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JUSTICE 1 COMMITTEE
29th Meeting 2004, Session 2

CONVENER

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Mr Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con)
*Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

*attended

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Roseanna Cunningham (Perth) (SNP)
Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con)
Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD)

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Kenny Cassels (Prison Officers Association Scotland)
Andy Hogg (Scottish Prison Service)
Adrienne Hunt (Families Outside)
David Melrose (Scottish Prison Service)
Angela Morgan (Families Outside)
Derek Turner (Prison Officers Association Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Alison Walker

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Douglas Wands

ASSISTANT CLERK

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 5

Scottish Parliament

Justice 1 Committee

Wednesday 22 September 2004

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 11:04*]

Rehabilitation Programmes in Prison

The Convener (Pauline McNeill): Welcome to the 29th meeting in 2004 of the Justice 1 Committee. We have apologies from Marlyn Glen, who unfortunately cannot be with us today.

The only item on today's agenda is our inquiry into the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes in prison. I welcome our first set of witnesses, from the Scottish Prison Service trade union side and from the Prison Officers Association Scotland. Thank you for coming along to this morning's meeting.

The panel is made up of four witnesses: David Melrose, Kenny Cassels, Andy Hogg and Derek Turner. Derek Turner has been with us on many occasions, so we welcome him back.

We have about an hour for this morning's session. It would be helpful if witnesses would give one reply to each question, so that we can get through as much as possible.

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): Good morning. For the committee's information and for the record, how would you define rehabilitation?

David Melrose (Scottish Prison Service): The trade unions and prison officers take the view that it is about making a difference to a prisoner's life while he is in custody and presenting him to the public, when released, in a better frame of mind, a bit better educated and with some skills and a better idea of how he should run his life in society.

Derek Turner (Prison Officers Association Scotland): Rehabilitation is about addressing offending behaviour and drug habits. It is not always easy to do that in prison—it is sometimes easier in the community.

Bill Butler: Does the SPS invest sufficient resources in rehabilitation? David Melrose mentioned education, skilling up and reskilling. Does the service do enough to tackle offending behaviour?

Kenny Cassels (Prison Officers Association Scotland): At the moment, the Scottish Prison Service invests a significant amount of money in the delivery of offender-related programmes. However, because of budget constraints and so on it is becoming increasingly difficult for the service to do that. At the moment, we are operating with flat-line budgets and efficiency drives. In our view, there is no doubt that that is having a significant effect on programme delivery.

Bill Butler: You say that significant money is being invested, despite the fact that you are operating with a flat-line budget. How would you use that significant resource differently so that it is targeted more effectively on rehabilitation?

Kenny Cassels: In our view, the programmes that are delivered in prison to prisoners are the most that we can deliver at the moment. The purpose of those programmes is to effect change in prisoners. Difficulties arise when a prisoner does not want to change. How we direct resources to improve service delivery is a different matter. I do not know what else we can do in a prison environment to improve programme work.

Bill Butler: Are there any best models of rehabilitation that you could use?

David Melrose: I do not think that there are any best models at the moment, because rehabilitation has not been fully evaluated. I cannot say how we should do that. The issue of resources has been raised. At the moment, resources in the service are being diverted from one area to another in order to provide programmes. In some cases, the cost of programmes is exactly the same. The issue is how resources are diverted, because by losing one thing we may gain another. As trade union officials who have limited input into programme delivery, we do not have a measure that would allow us to assess where rehabilitation is effective.

Derek Turner: About 15 years ago, we had a system called throughcare, under which we were supposed to liaise with the social work community outside the prison in order to follow the prisoner's progress once he went back into the community. However, because of a lack of resources—in the outside community rather than in the prison service—the prisoner's progress was never followed and the system fell through.

With the introduction of our core plus models and so on, we are attempting to follow prisoners as they go back into the community. Up to now, we have simply stopped at the gates and been done with the prisoner until they came back through them again.

Bill Butler: Is the core plus model a good one to follow? How is it performing in practice?

Derek Turner: It is still very early days. After all, it is not in place in many prisons. For example, on Tuesday, we attended a seminar at Edinburgh prison at which we were shown the prison's

attempts to introduce the model. However, the difficulty is that because the private escorting contract is not yet in place, regime staff are still being used for escorts. As a result, the prison is not yet involved in the core plus model.

Bill Butler: Will the model have a part to play in future if the teething problems can be sorted out?

Derek Turner: As it is a new way of looking at things, we need the tools to test and evaluate it. I do not think that that will happen for a long time.

Andy Hogg (Scottish Prison Service): You have touched on one of the greatest dilemmas for the trade unions in this particular area. In particular, we are not best qualified to evaluate the effectiveness of the rehabilitation programme. Indeed, having read last week's evidence, I think that there is some doubt that the Scottish Prison Service can truly evaluate whether the programme will lead to the reduction in reoffending that the Scottish public and the Scottish Executive want.

Of course, it is difficult for us to express a view on this matter because, traditionally, we do not get involved in that type of policy. Instead, we concentrate on the impact of policies on the staff, on how the staff operate, on the general environment within establishments and so on. I concur with Derek Turner's remarks. We do not doubt the research that suggests that the core plus model is the correct way forward at this time. However, I do not know whether the approach will remain focused on such a model. I hope that the evaluation will support such a conclusion.

Bill Butler: How can your members have a more effective involvement in developing the core plus model? For example, what elements would you like it to include?

David Melrose: Historically, the core role of prison officers is to maintain custody and good order. Without those two elements, it would be very difficult to deliver rehabilitation programmes. However, in general terms, prison officers have always been anxious to be involved in the delivery of skills, programmes, interventions and whatever else is available, and to form an integral part of any on-going programme. As my colleague Derek Turner pointed out earlier, the problem is how to develop programmes and interventions that follow prisoners through release and into the public sector. That said, prison officers are proactive in their involvement in these programmes.

Mr Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP): I was interested in your comments on the role of prison officers in the delivery of rehabilitation programmes. However, I want to go back one step. Are prison officers involved in devising the programmes that they have to deliver?

David Melrose: I cannot give a 100 per cent answer to that question. Prison officers have a fair input when they become involved in rolling out programmes to prisoners, because they are trained in the skills that they need to deliver those programmes. However, they currently do not play a significant role in planning, preparing or developing programmes.

Mr Maxwell: Do you think that they should play such a role? Given that prison officers are delivering the programmes on the front line, do they want more input into them?

Andy Hogg: The degree to which prison officers would directly input into the development of a programme is an interesting question. I think that we would take the traditional view and leave that to the researchers and experts in that field. There is a place for some degree of input, but perhaps that place is not at the start of a programme. I am unsure about this matter so I will give you a snap response rather than a trade union view. It would seem more appropriate for prison officers to identify strengths and weaknesses in a programme once it is up and running, and to feed their thoughts back into the programme at that stage, rather than to contribute at the earlier stages of development. I am not sure how much they could contribute at that stage.

11:15

Mr Maxwell: Given that, as you have said, a programme is devised by experts and delivered by prison officers, would it not be useful if the prison officers could bring their expertise to bear on the programme before it starts? That might help to iron out some of the deficiencies that would otherwise be identified only later.

Andy Hogg: That is a good point. Given the degree to which prison officers are involved in the running and delivery of the programmes, I would certainly not be averse to the idea that you suggest. I am not sure how early prison officers should get involved, however.

Mr Maxwell: What is the relationship between a prison officer's primary task of keeping people in custody and their secondary task of delivering rehabilitation programmes? Does the fact that they are responsible for delivering those programmes have an impact on their primary task?

Kenny Cassels: There is a significant link between the two roles that you outline. For example, unless the relationships between staff and prisoners in the day-to-day living environment in the residential areas are extremely good, it will be difficult to deliver the rehabilitation programmes.

Mr Maxwell: I accept that. I was curious about whether the current emphasis on rehabilitation programmes has had an impact on the general running of prisons and on their primary purpose, which is to keep people in custody.

Kenny Cassels: There is no doubt that there is a link between a prisoner being involved in any programme and their behaviour in a gallery setting. In the main, their involvement in the programme brings about a change in their behaviour in the prison setting. Where the system falls down is in ensuring that that person's behaviour remains changed when they return to the community. There are issues about how that is monitored, supported and evaluated.

Mr Maxwell: Do all prison officers take part in rehabilitation programmes? Is there an overlap? Do prison officers do both custodial work and rehabilitation work or do they specialise in one area or the other?

David Melrose: Historically, there have been specialisms—I would place inverted commas around that word—in the prison service. For example, an instructor might specialise in giving instruction in joinery, concrete work and so on. I would suggest that the delivery of programmes is slightly more specialised work and involves a more one-to-one approach.

On occasion, there can be a crossover between a prison officer's core role and the specialist role of programme delivery. My vision is that all prison officers should be able to deliver some form of programme or other proactive work in relation to education, rehabilitation, drugs programmes and so on.

Mr Maxwell: I agree that it would be desirable for prison officers to have both roles because the link between the two roles is quite clear. Given the ever-increasing complexity of some of the programmes that are being delivered—not so much the joinery and workshop-based programmes that you mentioned, but, for example, education and addiction programmes—is it feasible that that link will be maintained or is it more likely that there will be a separation of roles?

David Melrose: There may well be a separation. I could not honestly say whether prison officers are the ideal people to deliver the high-level programmes. A vast number of officers in the prison service are specialists, but I do not know how far that can go. It might not always be possible for prison officers to deliver certain types of programme.

Andy Hogg: We believe that all prison officers are capable of delivering programmes, given that the people who are brought into the organisation are of a high calibre. However, substantial resources are required to provide training. It would be a significant step to train all prison officers to be capable of delivering all the programmes that the service provides, but to tell the truth, we could not afford that. Instead, officers are identified and take on specific training. That is often seen as part of their self-development because they choose subjects in which they want to specialise, to use David Melrose's term. For other staff, that opportunity will not be accessible. They can apply for the training, but we cannot train all of them.

Mr Maxwell: Given your response and our discussion about specialism, how do prison officers communicate with one another about rehabilitation programmes? How do they discuss programmes with their fellow prison officers in an establishment? Is a communication strategy in place to pass information between establishments?

Kenny Cassels: Within establishments, a clear link exists between the sentence-management function that residential prison officers have in relation to the prisoners for whom they are responsible and the work that is being done in offender-related programmes. I am sure that the committee is aware that the sentence-management model involves an annual case conference. When a prisoner first comes into the prison environment, risks and needs are taken into account and used to build up a sentence-management model. The personal prison officer links into the prisoner's progress in programme work through the annual case conference, when all the parties come together to discuss the prisoner's progress. There is a clear link between the personal prison officers and the programmes in which prisoners are involved.

Mr Maxwell: That sounds like what happens within establishments.

Kenny Cassels: It is.

Mr Maxwell: Best practice and new ideas can be shared within establishments, but how are they transferred to officers in other establishments throughout the service?

Kenny Cassels: The basic sentence-management model is used in every establishment, as is the basic risk and needs assessment.

Mr Maxwell: I understand that. However, you said in answer to my colleague Bill Butler that the programmes have not yet been properly evaluated and that some have not been running for long. Given that, and the point that you made about identifying weaknesses and sharing best practice in the programmes that you deliver, how will best practice be transferred from one establishment to another, rather than within establishments?

Andy Hogg: There is probably not a formal structure for that—I certainly cannot identify one. The communication line may ultimately be through the monthly meetings of the GICs—governors in charge—which are based on two geographical areas: north and east and south and west. I assume that the type of discussion that you are talking about takes place during those meetings. They may form a semi-formal mechanism between the GICs and senior management to input back into the service. However, I do not know of other formal structures to allow that to happen.

Mr Maxwell: I have a final question about the review and accreditation of programmes. We discussed the continual evaluation of programmes. Does that process have an impact on programme delivery? We seem to be feeling our way in the dark. Are the programmes sufficiently robust to be delivered quickly and efficiently because we are confident that they do the job that they are supposed to do, or is continual evaluation interfering with programme delivery?

Kenny Cassels: Offender-related programmes in the Scottish Prison Service are young in development terms. For example, we have started to deliver accredited programmes only in the past 10 to 15 years. Prison and social work staff developed the STOP programme at HMP Peterhead, although we have moved on from that. The programme became accredited and we adopted the English model, to be honest. As for evaluating programmes, it is too early to say what impact they are having.

The Convener: Kenny Cassels said to Stewart Maxwell that if a change is seen in a prisoner as a result of the regime, a weakness arises when they leave prison and go into the community. Do others share the view that that is the weak link in some cases?

David Melrose: I do not know whether the view is shared. The issue is reporting back on what happens outside. If a prisoner is in a programme with social work involvement, whatever it may be, little feedback about the result goes to the establishment and the area from which the prisoner came, so doubt is felt that any good work that is undertaken in prison continues. It probably does continue, but little feedback is provided—I do not know whether there is any.

The Convener: I appreciate that a weakness in the system is that you do not know about that, but I thought that you had identified a weak point when you had seen changes in a prisoner, because the system meant that you could lose that good work. Is that the case?

Derek Turner: We take people into prison, we do whatever work we can do with them in that time and we might address their offending behaviour, but after completing their sentence, they leave prison and go back into the same community that they left with the same peer pressure from friends with whom they were perhaps involved in criminal activities. The difficulty that we must deal with is that they are under pressure to conform by engaging in their old criminal activities.

The Convener: That is an important point. You say that what you achieve in some cases in the prison regime could be lost because of the lack of continuity.

Derek Turner: Prison is almost a clinical environment. Prisoners are in a microcosm of society that is without the involvement of what is going on outside. We try to work in that environment. When people are released into the outside world, the situation goes awry.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Is the development of the links between the Scottish Prison Service and outside agencies one way to address the situation? I was interested to hear mention of the work that is going on in HMP Edinburgh, which I have visited two or three times in recent months. Your colleagues are doing great work in that prison, where good working relationships exist with prison officers and instructors on the custodial and non-custodial sides. They work with outside agencies so that people from those agencies who work in prisons are available when prisoners are released back into the community. Do you need to provide a seamless service for people?

Kenny Cassels: The view has emanated recently that a prison officer's role in managing prisoners should not finish at the prison gate and should be extended somewhat from the prison environment to managing prisoners on release. A personal officer might have worked with a prisoner during a long-term sentence of 12, 14 or 15 years. On release, that prisoner just walks out of the gate. He might have limited support in the community, but he would have no further contact with the prison officer who had dealt with him for those years. The prison officer's role might well need to be widened and better links for prisoners on release might need to be developed so that there is a clear link between custody and release into the community and all aspects are managed by the people who are involved. Obviously, there are financial implications, but that is an option for a joined-up correctional service.

11:30

The Convener: Much has been said about what can be achieved in rehabilitating short-term prisoners. I know that the definition of a short-term sentence is four years or less, but I am talking

about shorter sentences. The management side of the Scottish Prison Service told us about the impossibility of achieving things in six weeks or less. Do you have a view about what can be achieved—if anything—with prisoners who are serving short-term sentences?

Andy Hogg: I speak with some experience, as I worked at HM Remand Institution Longriggend for a number of years. As Longriggend is a remand centre, the longest that we had anybody for was around three months. Supplying any kind of programme in such situations is difficult. People cannot be compelled to work or attend anything in remand situations and things had to be done by encouragement. Over such a period, trying to run awareness sessions—on issues such as HIV and AIDS and some social life skills—and identifying where input could be made to improve people's general ability levels is essentially all that can be done. It would be impossible, in such a period, to deliver a programme with a beginning, middle and end for which an outcome could be evaluated and as a result of which someone could say that they had made a significant difference to a person.

The Convener: Given your experience at Longriggend, do you feel that a short-term sentence serves another purpose? Being in prison for six weeks might be a shock to a person's system. Does such a sentence have any impact on the likelihood of future reoffending?

Andy Hogg: In many ways, we are talking about an inquiry into the purpose of prisons and the extent to which a judge will remand people or give them short-term sentences. Is the intention to rehabilitate the person and effect a fundamental change in him by putting him into prison, or does it go back to the old short, sharp shock approach so that the life is frightened out of him and he will never reoffend? If we consider the current reoffending rates, it is clear that that approach has never worked and it is not particularly appealing.

There are far bigger questions about the purpose of prison for short-term prisoners and about categorising short-term prisoners as those who are in prison for four years and less. It is questionable whether that categorisation should represent short-term prisoners. Perhaps we should consider some of the terms that we use. Our current concepts of short term and long term—for sentences of up to four years and more than four years—probably go back some 20 years, so they are not too old. I do not know whether I have answered your question.

The Convener: You have if you are saying that we should question the purpose of a prison sentence. You are right to say that terms such as "short term" and "long term" are meaningless in the context of a service that may be looking towards tailoring systems for individuals rather than for a group of prisoners.

I do not have much evidence about people who are serving life sentences. Everyone talks about rehabilitation, but I wondered whether there is a point at which you stop trying to rehabilitate a person because they are serving too long a sentence.

Andy Hogg: I would simply say that we should never give up hope. Perhaps a psychologist would be better placed to answer questions such as the extent to which we can effect change.

As far as prison officers are concerned, we would never give up hope for an individual. We try to provide opportunities for people and we hope that we turn out into Scottish society somebody with a completely different set of attitudes to those that they came in with. We would not want to give up hope, but I could not answer a question on when the effect stops taking place.

The Convener: Is the approach towards prisoners who are serving a life sentence the same as the approach towards others?

Kenny Cassels: The needs of an individual who is sentenced to a long-term sentence or a life sentence are identified through the risk/needs process on admission to prison. In practice, the long-term prisoner's sentence is chopped up into three specific sections in which certain aspects of the programme are delivered and certain needs are addressed. Section 1 covers education needs and the other immediate needs of the prisoner. Section 2, which is the middle part of their sentence, concentrates on the offence-related stuff. Section 3 is about re-evaluating the prisoner and preparing them for release. That process allows long-term prisoners to identify their needs over the term of the sentence.

The Convener: Does the trade union side have a view about whether that programme is satisfactory?

Kenny Cassels: It is difficult with long-term prisoners. On the day of sentencing and admission to prison, we could just bombard them with absolutely everything and deliver all their offence-related needs up front, but would that be a practical approach to the management of a long-term prisoner who is serving a very long sentence? I would suggest not. It is appropriate that a long-term sentence be divided into sections and that certain aspects of a prisoner's offence-related needs be delivered at specific points during the sentence.

David Melrose: I hate to be negative, but we have to be realistic. When we are dealing with long-term prisoners or those who are imprisoned for a life sentence, which is a long period of time,

there are some individuals who will not get involved. There are prisoners who become involved in the programmes, continue their education and, to some extent—although this may not be the right terminology—use the prison as a college or further education establishment. However, I am sorry to say that there are other prisoners who do not conform and who are very difficult to manage. I am sure that the committee appreciates that. There are a limited number of long-term prisoners who participate consistently in such programmes, so it is difficult to maintain those programmes throughout people's sentences.

Kenny Cassels: I would like to make another comment about short-term sentences. In the main, the number of offences that somebody might have committed prior to ending up with a custodial sentence is a significant element in determining that sentence. A sheriff does not just impose custodial sentences of six, nine or 12 months on a first offender; there is a background in the lead-up to that sentence.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): I want to ask about short-term sentences before we leave that topic. Would a period of a year be a reasonable time in which to achieve some rehabilitation?

Derek Turner: The sentence would have to be two years, because prisoners get 50 per cent remission. A prisoner who was given a 12-month sentence would be there for only six months. There is a quandary. To say that prisoners can complete modules and then get released, then come back into prison and complete another module is an admission of defeat. If we are trying to address their offending behaviour, we are trying to keep them out of prison. For really short-term prisoners, a modular training record, such as we keep for officers, might be the only way to do it, until the position had been reached at which the prisoners' offending behaviour might have been addressed. One would hope that that would have an effect, but it is a catch-22 situation, because if there are modules for prisoners who come back into prison, that is an admission of defeat.

Margaret Mitchell: Are there sufficient resources for that kind of programme?

Kenny Cassels: We may need to focus resources up front to address an individual's offending behaviour when it first starts rather than once multiple offences have been committed and that person is in custody. Once we have reached a custodial position, we have failed to deliver in the community what that individual needs.

Margaret Mitchell: Does overcrowding impact on your ability to deliver rehabilitation programmes?

David Melrose: It is common knowledge that overcrowding has an impact. I have been in the service for 26 years and the prisons have always been overcrowded, which has always had a severe impact on morale, regimes and whatever is being delivered in the prison. Overcrowding, I am sorry to say, is nothing new, but it is at an all-time high, as I am sure you are aware. Overcrowding has a severe effect not only on the delivery of effective programmes but on the running of the prison system.

Derek Turner: I joined the Scottish Prison Service in 1975 and the numbers once fell below our capacity. We had a really low number of prisoners, and we were told that it would never rise again, so the SPS wanted to close Friarton prison. We thought that that was a bad move because the numbers would go up again as they always do. Sure enough, the numbers went back up.

We never get any additional resources when the number of prisoners exceeds the number that we can hold. We have to maintain the service with the exact same resources—the same number of officers and everything. Prisoner numbers are at a record high of 7,000. Three prisons were closed two or three years ago because it was said that numbers would go down, and again we see numbers hitting a high. We must seriously consider the alternatives to prison. We must consider how to deal with people without putting them in prison.

Margaret Mitchell: What about prison lifestyle? There is evidence that, when prisoners enter prison, there is a loss of self-worth. How does that impact on their ability to participate in rehabilitation programmes?

Kenny Cassels: It differs from prisoner to prisoner, as I am sure you will accept. However, in the main, a short-term prisoner coming in for their first sentence will be down; they will have no self-worth and their confidence will be hit. It is extremely difficult to work with such characters. A long-term sentence has a significant effect on a prisoner's confidence, and we must build up that confidence.

There is no doubt that the prison environment can have a negative effect on prisoners, but our work is about encouraging them to do better. That is one of the main roles of a prison officer, who must have the interpersonal skills to work with prisoners and identify issues for them. There is no getting away from the fact that there is an impact.

Andy Hogg: It goes back to the question on the impact of overcrowding. To try to work on prisoners' confidence, re-establish their self-worth and get programmes to work requires the most positive environment that we can generate.

However, prisons, by definition, are not regarded as positive, so we have to create a peculiar type of environment in the prison's culture. We go right back to establishing good relationships between staff and prisoners so that, ultimately—or as soon as we can possibly manage it—we get the prisoners to feel comfortable in the environment that they will be in for some considerable time. That is difficult to achieve if the numbers are bursting through the walls, because we cannot dedicate as much time as we would like to a prisoner on a gallery.

It is much of a muchness: one aspect has an impact on the other. There is little in a prison environment that we can separate and say that it does not have an impact on anything else, because it almost certainly does.

Margaret Mitchell: Would keeping the three prisons open, as well as considering alternatives to custody, have helped with overcrowding and rehabilitation?

Andy Hogg: Yes.

Margaret Mitchell: Are health and nutrition considered? Is prisoners' general health—psychological as well as physical—monitored and a balanced programme of nutrition provided?

David Melrose: That is well monitored within the organisation. There are all sorts of interventions on the medical side and the prisoners' health and dietary requirements are considered and concentrated on more now than they have ever been. I am sure that some of the menus in the prisons that you have visited are quite impressive, and the level of complaint about the quality and nutritional value of food has certainly decreased. The medical and dietary measures in prison establishments are the same—probably better—as those that one would find in fairly standard hotels.

11:45

Margaret Mitchell: How do you deal with psychological problems? When people are admitted to Cornton Vale—this may be true for all prisons—they are monitored and a 24-hour watch is kept on them, because that is the point of greatest impact. Can you elaborate on that issue?

Kenny Cassels: Long-term prisoners, in particular, are monitored. On admission to a prison environment, they are put through an assessment process that identifies medical needs and so on during the reception and induction phases. Prisoners are monitored closely and supervised during the induction process, in the course of which significant risks are identified and addressed.

Margaret Mitchell: What happens thereafter? How would you deal with someone whom you regarded as a continuing potential risk?

Kenny Cassels: In the main, such issues are addressed as part of prison officers' sentence-management role and by psychological and psychiatric intervention, on referral. If on admission a prisoner is identified as having a significant psychological need, action is taken straight away. There is no delay in doing that.

Margaret Mitchell: Maintaining family relationships is an important factor in cutting dramatically prisoners' chances of reoffending. How do you think that family relationships can be maintained and supported in the prison environment?

Kenny Cassels: The member is right to say that family links are fundamental for prisoners. If someone is given a custodial sentence, the most important issue for them is probably maintaining those links. That is very difficult with certain sections of the prisoner population, because of their offence. We need to consider the overall role of prisons, especially local prisons. Is it right that local prisons are cut off from the community? Should they adopt a more community-facing approach, which would allow family links to be supported?

Margaret Mitchell: Is the only issue links with the community, or is there also an issue of the distance that relatives and friends have to travel to visit prisoners?

Kenny Cassels: There are a number of factors. Families from the central belt must travel to Peterhead to visit prisoners who are located there. Similar examples exist throughout the Scottish Prison Service. A long-term prisoner may be admitted to Shotts to be assessed and then transferred to another establishment. In circumstances where travel is an issue, it is difficult for families to maintain links with prisoners. There are plenty of opportunities for communication, but there are difficulties with visiting.

Margaret Mitchell: What happens to families when they visit prisons? What atmosphere or ethos within prisons would allow them to make the most of their visiting time?

David Melrose: On a recent visit to Polmont, I was very impressed to see that transport facilities were made available for visitors and that it was indicated where the bus would pick them up to take them directly to the prison. I am sure that that happens in a number of outlying prisons. There has been intervention to make distant prisons more accessible, so that families can visit them. In most establishments there have been significant moves to set up family areas where prisoners can

sit openly with their families at visiting time. There is provision of cafeterias and of drinks and play areas for the kids. There are also people available to look after the children if the parents want to talk without them there. There have been significant moves to bring families into prisons more.

Derek Turner: Accessibility must be balanced with security. Most drugs that are introduced to prisons come in through the visiting areas. Children's nappies and so on are used to smuggle in drugs. There needs to be a heavy hand, but the prison environment should also be conducive to visits.

Margaret Mitchell: That brings me neatly on to my next question, which is about how drug and alcohol problems are addressed in prison. What is your view?

David Melrose: Drugs have always been a problem in prison, just as my colleague was saying, and the problem has increased since the introduction of open visits. I am not against open visits, but they have a significant risk. If there is one thing that visitors do not like—and prison officers do not like having to do it—it is prison officers standing over and monitoring closely a family visit, so there is always a supervision risk.

It is difficult to deal with drugs in the organisation. For example, drug testing was a significant move to challenge the use of drugs in the establishments, but I do not believe that drugs will ever be effectively eradicated from prisons.

Andy Hogg: There has been a two-pronged approach to the tackling of drugs in prisons. Many years ago, we came around to accepting—and got the public to accept—that drugs are coming into prisons and that they are there because prison is a reflection of society. It was a significant step forward for us to say that we had better do something about the problem rather than just deny that it exists.

Over time, and given that there have been certain initiatives such as the mandatory drug test, which was introduced several years ago—I cannot remember the exact date—we have moved away slightly from concentrating on trying to catch everyone who is taking drugs, because that generated a number of difficulties. If I remember correctly, one of the major concerns about the mandatory drug test was that a drug such as cannabis, for example, can stay in the system for something like 28 to 30 days. We could catch that fairly easily. However, prisoners are not daft; they just moved to a different type of drug and so—this is anecdotal—we saw a significant shift to the use of heroin, which stays in the system only for something like two or three days. When most mandatory testing was taking place between Monday and Friday, prisoners would quite happily get away with using heroin on a Saturday or Sunday because they knew that nothing would happen until Monday.

We have recently taken a far more pragmatic approach in addressing why prisoners take drugs and trying to minimise the harm. If we cannot get prisoners off the drugs, we can at least try to stabilise them to the degree where we can pass them back into the community outside where someone else can try to continue that work until the prisoner ultimately comes off drugs. Obviously, that has to be balanced with everything else in society, such as access to employment. Generally we would then have a different individual.

There is a limit to what we can do inside the jail, but we are going in the right direction by addressing why prisoners take drugs rather than just trying to catch them doing it.

Margaret Mitchell: Mr Melrose, you said that it would be impossible to manage the problem properly. Is there a reason for that? Would more resources or manpower help? What would help you to manage the problem effectively?

David Melrose: I assure you that I am no expert in managing drugs. Resources would help. I suppose that more technology would help, as would a greater understanding of the individuals coming in and why they take drugs, as my colleague said. Interventions have a great impact on drug use. No matter what we do, it will not be an easy job to eradicate drugs within the prison system.

Margaret Mitchell: Can I ask—

The Convener: We have to move on to the next and final set of questions.

Margaret Smith: Should there be a balance between the programmes that are available to everyone, such as induction programmes and pre-release programmes, and the more interventionist programmes for drugs and alcohol that you have just been talking about? Should programmes be tailored to individual needs or are you quite happy that they are more general than that? What input do prison officers have in suggesting programmes that might be helpful to a particular prisoner and in providing feedback once a person has been on a programme? Do personal officers have the chance to say whether someone has benefited from a programme? For example, can individual officers provide feedback on the effectiveness of programmes that have been brought in from an outside agency?

David Melrose: That is a very difficult and very long question. My colleague Kenny Cassels will start off.

Kenny Cassels: There are a number of generic programmes on things such as cognitive skills and

anger management. However, prisoners' needs are identified through the risks/needs process and if a prisoner needs a specific type of programme that we operate, he will be directed towards that programme to address that specific need.

However, we need to start looking at the whole life of prisoners rather than individual aspects. Their whole life is what is important. It is fine for the Prison Service to deliver programmes to address alcohol abuse, but we need to address other areas of the prisoner's life. If the individual who comes into prison is homeless and without a job and his family links have broken down, we need to address more than just the alcohol element. Considered in isolation, the individual programmes for alcohol, drugs and whatever might be very good, but we need to address not just those specific needs but the whole life of the prisoner.

Margaret Smith: Are prison officers or personal officers asked to give feedback at the end of those programmes?

Kenny Cassels: Yes. Through the risks/needs process, prison officers have an input, along with psychology and health staff, in identifying the prisoner's needs and risks. A plan is then drawn up to address those needs and risks. The prison officer has an input into that.

Margaret Smith: Do prison officers have an input into the evaluation of programmes that are bought in from outside agencies?

Kenny Cassels: Yes. That happens at the moment.

Margaret Smith: What opportunities do prison officers have to develop their skills and knowledge of the latest interventions and programmes that are available? Can prison officers get the training that they need to gain qualifications in those fields?

Kenny Cassels: At the moment, the service seems to be going down the road of buying in programmes. In the early days, we developed our own programmes. In the mid-1990s, we ended up going down the accreditation route whereby programmes had to be accredited. The answer to your question is that prison officers have very little opportunity. When a programme is bought in from an agency, the training modules and so on that are linked to that programme are delivered to staff who then deliver the programme. However, the staff have very little input into assessing whether the programme should have been bought under the contract.

Andy Hogg: At the SPS college open day that I attended yesterday—at which the Minister for Justice was present in connection with learndirect Scotland accreditation—it was interesting to see the number of programmes that were on display. Visitors to the college were informed about the considerable efforts that the Prison Service takes to provide training opportunities for its staff. Staff can access the programmes by applying for a course in the prospectus, although the course must be specific to the area in which they work, as there would be no point in training staff for a course that was not being delivered in their institution.

However, it is equally important to note what the head of training told me yesterday, which was that a considerable number of people cancel the course that they have applied for after they have been accepted for it. The external pressures are felt in the prison environment. Because we have too many prisoners and not have enough staff, the last thing that people need is for somebody to go away for two weeks' training when they are needed for those two weeks on a particular gallery.

The Convener: Finally, I want to pick up on your earlier comments about the plan to involve families more in visits. How big a factor is family involvement in rehabilitation?

12:00

David Melrose: I cannot give an expert view, but my colleagues have demonstrated during this morning's meeting that family contact plays a major role in every prisoner's life. Being confined in prison for a period of time is a significant deprivation for a prisoner's family life; it is therefore important that we keep that family life functioning as best as it can during a custodial sentence. Family contact with prisoners plays a major role in keeping families together—which, in itself, can help to prevent reoffending.

Andy Hogg: However, we have to acknowledge that family contact is not always welcome—either to the prisoner or to the family. We have to cope with that dilemma. Although we acknowledge that family contact can be important in the rehabilitation of prisoners, both parties have to welcome that contact. Encouraging each party to reach a degree of empathy with the other can be difficult and time consuming.

The Convener: I appreciate that final point. We have heard the point before, but it is important to note it.

That ends our questions. I thank you all for your evidence, which has been valuable. We have managed to get through our questions in an hour, which is great.

Derek Turner: May I ask the committee one question?

The Convener: Sure.

Derek Turner: What role do you think that victims groups play in challenging offending behaviour?

The Convener: That is obviously a big consideration, particularly in short-term sentences. You said earlier that we should be clear about the purpose of prison. You might come to the view—and this is my own view—that if a person has committed 25 offences, they are just going to have to be punished for what they have done and we are just going to have to accept that we cannot rehabilitate them. The issue is of primary concern to politicians. We cannot consider only rehabilitation; we have to consider the wider context.

Margaret Smith: Mr Cassels said that we should look beyond the prison and consider the cross-over period. There are already some prisoner rehabilitation programmes and I hope that they involve the prisoners' families more, because that can benefit rehabilitation. We also have to involve communities, because they are affected by offences. We have to consider not only the immediate victims of the offence but the wider community.

Two or three of the witnesses said that, by the time people go into prison, we have failed all round—we have certainly failed the victims. We have to address problems before people are given a custodial sentence. Some restorative justice programmes have shown good low recidivism rates. The programmes are not soft on people; they challenge their offending behaviour. The hope is that the victim will be the last victim. An awful lot of work can be done outside and inside prison and that work could benefit the general community.

Mr Maxwell: Victim support groups obviously have a critical role to play with the victims themselves, but I also think that the groups—as we said earlier—can help prisoners to confront their offending behaviour. The rehabilitation programme can be helped by the prisoners understanding that behaviour. We have talked about the shock of prison, the change in mood and the problems that arise. However, one of the most difficult problems in rehabilitation is getting people to understand the effects of their actions on other people and getting them to take responsibility for those actions. Victim support groups have a role to play in that.

The Convener: Why do you ask the question?

Derek Turner: In some programmes, the victim of the crime confronts the person who committed the crime, to help the victim to understand why it happened and to help the prisoner to understand what he has done to that person. People confront their emotions and feelings. I know that that happens in some places in England, but I do not know whether anything like that happens in Scotland.

The Convener: The Executive stated earlier this year that it regards restorative justice as part and parcel of the wider system. Therefore, you might expect to see a bit more on that.

I must close this session now because we are well over our hour. Thanks again for your evidence, which is valuable.

Our second set of witnesses is from Families Outside. I welcome Angela Morgan, the director, and Adrienne Hunt, the support manager. It is useful that you heard the earlier evidence. We have a few questions for you and we will start with Bill Butler.

Bill Butler: Good morning, colleagues. For the record and for the committee's information, can you outline what Families Outside does and whom it represents?

Angela Morgan (Families Outside): I would be pleased to do so. First, we are delighted that the committee is willing to give time to this issue, which has been completely overlooked in every policy area prior to this, as far as we understand. I will start by explaining why we exist.

We exist as an organisation because the impact of a family member's imprisonment on a family is severe and can be damaging. The effect includes the emotional impact on the family members as they deal with the shock of the imprisonment and, possibly, the type of crime. Of course, as your previous witnesses pointed out, families can also be victims in some cases.

The imprisonment of a family member has practical effects on people's economic situation and housing. There are also the practical difficulties involved in maintaining contact with an imprisoned person, where that is appropriate. Travel is a big issue and we would like the chance to tell you more about it, if that would be helpful.

The imprisonment of a parent can have a particularly damaging effect on children's educational, social and emotional development. In addition, research shows that the length of sentence, in terms of the length of separation of a child from an imprisoned parent, is not a key factor. A short separation can be as damaging to a child as a longer one. That is an important point.

We exist as an organisation because of those effects on families. Families' needs have never been recognised within the justice system. However, we believe that the issue extends far beyond criminal justice, although the criminal justice system is crucial; it is an issue of social inclusion and of vulnerable children and families.

We are the only organisation in Scotland with an exclusive focus on families, so we have a national remit. We are an independent organisation. The heart of what we do is the Scottish prisoners' families helpline, which is the only such service in Scotland. I think that the witnesses from the Scottish Prison Service referred to it at last week's meeting. However, I want to clarify that the helpline is an independent service that is run by Families Outside. The SPS makes a financial contribution to it, but our independence is important in terms of our accessibility to family members.

The helpline service is an important point of contact for the individual family members who use it. I hope that Adrienne Hunt, who manages the service, will be able to tell you more about it. The service allows us to analyse the themes and issues that are of concern to families.

As a specialist organisation, we would not claim to have a clear picture of the needs and concerns of families affected by imprisonment. Anecdotal evidence is useful as people's stories illustrate the difficulties that families are going through. The work that we do to analyse the themes that come to us gives us a picture of some of the difficulties that families face, which is useful and helps us to work with the Prison Service, which will, hopefully, make improvements as a consequence. However, there is not a systematic approach to collecting the views of families. I say that to sound a note of caution and to explain what we can offer, which is information based on contact with families. It must be remembered, of course, that families do not generally telephone us to tell us about the good experiences that they have had.

Bill Butler: How many families does your organisation assist? What practical help does it offer other than the helpline?

Angela Morgan: Susan Milligan, who is also here today, and I pretty much make up the staff resources of Families Outside. That shows you the limits to what we can do. Our work is done through the helpline. We are not in a position to offer direct support.

I took up my post at the beginning of last year and one of my tasks has been to focus our resources to ensure that we have the greatest impact possible. We are keen to develop local services that can directly respond to families. HOPE—Helping Offenders Prisoners Families—is one of the only organisations that we know of that is doing any work with families. Its view is that families need help in their local communities. We support that. We do not see ourselves as the providers of services; we are keen for mainstream services that do not currently think about the group of people with whom we are concerned to become more accessible and to offer support in the community.

Bill Butler: How many families access your helpline?

Adrienne Hunt (Families Outside): In the financial year 2003-04, we had nearly 2,000 calls to the helpline. In the six-month period from January to June 2004, we had about 900.

Bill Butler: How many families do those figures represent?

Adrienne Hunt: It is quite difficult to ascertain that because some families ring the helpline a number of times over a period of time. That might be because there are a lot of issues to deal with. Families usually ring us from court, which is when our involvement starts.

I would guess that the figure of 2,000 calls represents at least 1,500 separate families.

Bill Butler: Do you direct them to other services or agencies that can be supportive?

Adrienne Hunt: Yes. Part of our remit is to send callers to more specific national and local agencies. Although we are unique in what we do, we cannot claim to be experts in every field, such as housing or benefits, which, as Angela Morgan has already mentioned, are quite significant factors for the families we deal with.

Bill Butler: How would your organisation define rehabilitation?

Angela Morgan: We welcome the debate in Scotland about prisons and rehabilitation. We approach the issue from the family's perspective and are also interested in families who, for whatever reason, do not maintain contact with the prisoner.

From what we know about families' needs and interests, which we have gathered from the helpline and the research that was circulated to the members, we are aware that many families want to maintain involvement with the prisoner.

Nancy Loucks's work with family members in Tayside showed that top of their list of requests was for help to find out how to support the prisoner on release. They wanted pre-release work to help them to find out what they could do to stop the prisoner getting into trouble again and what agencies were available to support the prisoner.

12:15

We have a narrowly defined view, which is that relationships should be maintained where possible and appropriate. Where reasonably robust family relationships exist when somebody goes to prison, the starting point should perhaps be, "First, do least harm." Especially with short-term sentences,

a lot of damage can be done in a short time. Visiting facilities must be adequate and an environment should be provided in which children can have time with the imprisoned parent and the adults can have time to have a proper discussion while the child is suitably occupied.

Prison officer attitudes must also be appropriate. I appreciate that, as was said before, a balance must be struck with security issues but, unfortunately, we hear stories from many callers that reveal that officers start off with a view of family members that is not positive. As my submission states, a prison governor has said to me that many of his staff see family members as the prisoners who have not yet been caught. That sort of response to families when they visit will not encourage them. However, I say again that we have contact with excellent staff at all levels of the service and in all parts—including chaplaincy and social work staff—who are committed to their work. However, the situation is not consistent because there are no standards or monitoring, which is why we end up being dependent on anecdote.

Bill Butler: Does your organisation or the SPS have a communication strategy with the aim of raising awareness among families about rehabilitation opportunities in prison?

Angela Morgan: Not to my knowledge. We have seen and commented on the new inclusion policies that the rehabilitation and care directorate recently developed. A section of the policy document refers to families, but more work needs to be done. The policy includes the development of a complaints procedure for families, which we are pleased about because that element has been missing. Particularly in calls that Adrienne Hunt has taken, it has been difficult for us when families have had a concern, because there has not been a route to guide them down.

We are keen for families to be more involved in sentence management. There is scope for families to be involved in supporting employment and training initiatives. Families should also be made aware of addiction and treatment programmes. Many families, although not all, would like to offer support and be part of the regime that the prison is trying to develop.

The Convener: Do you detect a change in the Scottish Prison Service's approach to involving families?

Angela Morgan: That is a difficult question for us to answer fairly, given that we are relative newcomers. I have heard colleagues say in meetings in the past few weeks that there has been a huge change in the past 10 years and I have no reason to doubt that. Our organisation started off as the Scottish Forum on Prisons and Families. In fairness, I must say that the Prison Service was partly responsible for initiating that development when it recognised that there was a gap, and we have received a lot of support from the Prison Service to develop the organisation.

Recently I looked back at one of the first reports that the forum released, which was called "Scottish Prisoners and their Families: the impact of imprisonment on family relationships". The issues that arose then, which were about families' need for information, support and involvement, are exactly the same issues now. I cannot provide a scientific analysis, but my impression is that pockets of good practice have been developed.

The Convener: Where are those pockets?

Angela Morgan: The situation seems unreasonable because different things happen even within each prison. Cornton Vale is an obvious example of good practice and it is fair to single it out. Adrienne Hunt will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that Cornton Vale is probably the only prison at present that has family contact development officers, which are dedicated posts. In most other prisons, officers might have the same responsibility, but it is over and above other duties. With the pressures on the service and the need for other duties to be carried out, those officers cannot be as proactive.

The governor of Cornton Vale has made a huge commitment to family work and we value her membership of our board. We see in practice the bonding work that women are encouraged to do with their families and that spreads throughout the culture of the prison.

We make the case that one cannot undertake such work in isolation. It is fantastic if parenting programmes are offered, but if the visiting experience for the family or child is not positive, the prisoner loses out on their best opportunity to put those newly acquired skills into practice. However, taking a programme approach to involving families in rehabilitation is a bit limited. Perhaps Adrienne Hunt has a different impression based on her longer involvement.

Adrienne Hunt: I have been in post for nearly three years. My experience in that time is that there has been some change in the involvement of families in prisons. From our side of things, some of that change has been due to the relationship that we have been able to have with certain prison staff and particular governors who place more of an emphasis on family work in their prison. The relationship that I have through the helpline with family contact officers and senior management staff is crucial to being able to access change for those families when they phone the helpline with a problem. Intervention is required or offered by us when there have been problems with visits—for

example, when families travel from Sheffield to Edinburgh and are 10 minutes late and are not allowed into the prison. That sort of situation calls on the good relationship that we have with the family contact officers and senior management to effect a change. In the same way, we can intervene where concern has been expressed by a family member who has perceived a risk that the prisoner will self-harm or attempt suicide following something that has been said during a visit. The success of that intervention is also down to the relationship that we have with prison staff and the hierarchy.

The Convener: Is it fair to say that there has been a slight improvement in the approach of the Scottish Prison Service towards the involvement of families, albeit through your intervention?

Adrienne Hunt: That is appropriate.

Angela Morgan: That is a fair comment. Our main anxiety is that that improvement is lost because some of the key people who have achieved it move on or away. Our anxiety is that involvement of families is not embedded.

The Convener: Is there any anecdotal evidence to suggest that prisoners face difficulties in the rehabilitation process?

Angela Morgan: I am not sure that we can comment on that. The concerns of the families who call us tend to be more basic; apart from their concern about the prisoner, they have to deal with their own issues.

Adrienne Hunt: The concern for families is their lack of involvement in the rehabilitation process, as Angela Morgan indicated. For example, we might have a call from a family member who wonders what programmes are available in prison, as they have not been told.

The other aspect of rehabilitation is pre-release issues, where somebody is going on home leave. Often on Monday mornings we get calls from families who say, "My son was home for the weekend for the first time in two years. Thank goodness he's gone back, because we didn't know how to cope." We hear from prison staff that prisoners come back from home leave and say, "Thank goodness I'm back where I feel safe." That is because nobody has sat down and talked about the expectations of the home leave, particularly if it is only for a couple of days and particularly if it is the first home leave. The rehabilitation work that needs to be done between families and prisoners is crucial, but it is neglected.

Margaret Mitchell: What impact does prisoners' contact with their families and their families' support have on the likelihood of reoffending?

Angela Morgan: I refer you to the evidence, which has been consistent over the past 50 years or more, that it can reduce the likelihood of reoffending by up to six times, and seems to be one of the key protective factors, along with employment and accommodation.

Margaret Mitchell: How can there be better interagency working between custodial and non-custodial agencies to achieve the goal of rehabilitation?

Angela Morgan: Listening to your previous witnesses, I was interested to hear the focus on criminogenic programmes. That is one part of a much broader understanding of the social welfare context of the prisoner. Their family context—sorry, I am not being clear about this. I suppose that our starting point is that we should take a much more individualised approach. I know that that is easy to say, but there are huge numbers of people in some parts of the system. For example, Barlinnie, with which we have a good working relationship, has huge numbers of people going in and out. How can it be helped to adhere to the principle that I mentioned earlier—first do least harm—let alone do anything productive with those people?

Our agenda is to raise awareness of the family perspective among all the key agencies so that, at least when they come across a family, they have an understanding of the impact of imprisonment on the family, particularly on children. We have not even started on the education sector. Your colleagues in that sector need to know about that, because children can lose opportunities and their lives can be blighted if teachers do not pick up on and support them through a difficult period.

I am sorry that I do not have a clear answer for you. It has to be about joining up aspects of the criminal justice system with the social care and inclusion system to meet the individual needs of the family and the prisoner together.

Margaret Mitchell: So, as Mr Cassels said, is it about the whole-life approach?

Angela Morgan: Absolutely. To put it simply, it is about the whole-life approach.

Margaret Mitchell: It is not just about the sentence; it is about the causes and bringing in the agencies.

Angela Morgan: Yes. It is also about understanding what motivates people. If maintaining contact with the family or wanting something different for the children are motivators for somebody in prison, positive use should be made of them, and hopefully there will be a shift. One of our aims is to increase the perception that families can be a resource and a partner. That is not the case for all families in all situations, but to achieve that aim it must be recognised that

families have their own needs that need to be met. There needs to be some principle of reciprocity.

Margaret Mitchell: So they should be included automatically in the process.

Angela Morgan: That is right, and they should get the support that they need.

Margaret Smith: You said that information was important; I will tease out what you mean by that.

I told the previous group of witnesses that I was at Edinburgh prison recently.

Margaret Mitchell: Just visiting.

Margaret Smith: Yes—I was just visiting. That prison has started induction programmes and pre-release work with families. Will you take us through the prisoner's journey? At what points should families receive information? What is the reality of what happens?

12:30

Angela Morgan: Those are great questions, which I will ask Adrienne Hunt to answer.

Adrienne Hunt: People certainly need information from the time of arrest, but our experience is that they need it more from the time at court. By information, I mean facts as basic as the name of the prison to which somebody has been sent. Many families who phone us from court when somebody has just been sentenced have not been given even that information, which nobody is responsible for giving them. That is the first requirement.

The second requirement is for basic information about the prison itself—even just a phone number or the name of the person to contact. That is where family contact development officers can come into their own. We are asked first whether, when and how visits can be made, where the prison is and how to go there. People who have worked in the system for a while might take such questions for granted, but I am grounded in them every day, because 80 per cent of our callers are experiencing the criminal justice system for the first time and have no access to that information. We are talking about basic and simple information that we are working with the Scottish Prison Service to provide at courts.

Margaret Smith: What access to information do people have all the way through a sentence? You have said that families do not receive much information pre-release.

Adrienne Hunt: We are encouraged by the fact that some prisons are holding induction sessions for families and are inviting families in. I understand that Polmont, Cornton Vale and Edinburgh are doing that and that the information that I mentioned is being given to families at that stage. Leaflets for families are not standardised in the prison estate, but families are given some information at that time. Sometimes, the information is given to a prisoner to pass on to their family.

Margaret Smith: That is about as useful as giving information to my 15-year-old son.

Adrienne Hunt: Our experience is that such information is not always passed on to the family. It is better to send information directly to a family, and we understand that, under the new throughcare arrangements, it is hoped that when a social worker is in touch with a family, they will be able to provide the information.

As for the situation throughout a sentence, our experience is that once people have the information that I described and have entered into a routine of making visits, the situation is easier for them to deal with, even if the prisoner has shifted from being on remand to being convicted. You were right to mention the different points of information, such as information about programmes, as we said. Some prisons could find ways of sitting down with families to explain those programmes. To be honest, I am not sure whether that happens at some of the induction programmes—it might well do.

On pre-release information, we were encouraged recently when a prisoner from Noranside wrote a leaflet for families by way of a poem, which explained some of the changes that happen when prisoners go home and the impacts of that on prisoners and on families. We hoped to pursue that as a way of giving out information.

Angela Morgan: Adrienne Hunt is modestly overlooking the set of fact sheets that she has produced in response to the basic questions that come up, such as how to get to prisons, what a visit is like, how to prepare a child for a visit—that is a very important area on which we want to extend information, because it is neglected—and how to claim travel expenses. Claiming travel expenses is quite complicated; I cannot understand the form, which is quite tricky to work through. The fact sheets also contain information about transfers and time in custody. It is necessary to have something standard, because people raise questions with us about those matters at different points.

Margaret Smith: The thorny matter of travel raises a number of issues. What is your view on access to visits and transportation? The figures that you supplied to us state that 40 per cent of families spend between five and 12 hours going on visits, which, if they have young children, is quite substantial. How can those problems be addressed, and do you have any sense that the

SPS is working to address any of them by, for example, linking prison visit times with transport timetables?

Angela Morgan: Much as we have criticisms to make of the SPS, we also want to be encouraging. The response that we got to the report that Adrienne Hunt produced was encouraging in that it was accepted that there was an issue and that the SPS has a role to play. The question is how we make progress on that. We hope that the new member of staff who will take up the national co-ordinating post for family work in the SPS—we think that that person comes into post on Monday—will have a role in helping the prisons to consider matters such as their visit times and how they link up with bus times, although visit times are obviously affected by operational concerns. For example, one visitor said, "Could they not just shift the times a bit when it's winter and dark, as I have to stand at the bus stop with two small children?" If the SPS could put a process in place even just to keep such matters under review, that would be good.

The fundamental problem is that many prisons are in really awkward places and public transport services do not link up. We are extremely pleased that Polmont has introduced a bus link between the station and the young offenders institution—we understand that that has been introduced this week. That is a model that could be developed throughout the SPS estate. We continue to have discussions with the SPS, finding out where services exist and considering the gaps, but that will not cover every case. For example, during our research, some examples came up of people who were at far extremes of the country and, in such extreme circumstances, it is difficult to meet those people's needs. That is a much bigger issue, which comes back to sentencing policy, the use of imprisonment and how understanding the damaging effects of creating such a separation needs to be offset against anything positive that comes out of the sentence. Access and transportation remain key areas of focus for the helpline.

Margaret Smith: When my colleague and I visited Edinburgh prison, the big issue that prisoners raised with us was the fact that visits had been switched from daytime to night time. Prisoners who had young families certainly felt that that had a detrimental impact on children, who sometimes did not get home until 11 or half past 11 at night. The very reasonable explanation given by the governor was that, during the day, prisoners said that they expected visits but people did not come, so those prisoners got out of doing any work or taking part in programmes. The governor was trying to make use of the time during the day to rehabilitate the prisoners through programmes and workshops. That is the sort of balance that he was trying to strike, but it meant that families had to make night visits. Do you have a view on that?

Angela Morgan: This week, I had the opportunity to have a meeting with the governor, not specifically about that issue but about family work in general. We had a free and frank discussion and I said that we had concerns about the impact that night visits could have, for exactly the reasons that you have outlined. I hope that prisons will now monitor the effect of that change on visits and do some analysis. I see from the SPS's own statistics that the number of visits to remand prisoners went up during August and the number of visits to convicted prisoners went down. I hope that the SPS will look in more detail at whether that means that there are some families who are not able to maintain those links, particularly where there are children.

The other aspect of the issue—and it is something that the governor and I talked about—is whether it is employment or family that comes first. I know that the committee had some discussion about that last week. Perhaps there is an opportunity to link the two together and to consider what options exist for bringing the family into the process. If a prisoner is working on literacy, numeracy or life skills, what scope is there to bring the family into that? That could be done either because the family might also benefit from learning those skills, which could create a more robust family unit, or because the family could play a role in encouraging and supporting the prisoner's learning. I hope that we will continue to have that dialogue.

As a general principle, the SPS needs to develop awareness so that the impact on families and family relationships is flagged up when any decisions are made. I would even cite the example of the location of new prisons in Scotland. In the process for selecting the site for the new medium-secure unit in the west of Scotland, one of the criteria was accessibility for families. I may be wrong, but as far as I know, nobody has thought about whether accessibility for families is possible in selecting sites for any other prisons. At the moment, that awareness does not seem to be there. When we ask people whether they have thought of the effect on families, they often say no. They may be open to considering that, but it is a question of making them aware of such considerations at an early stage, so that families' needs are taken into account.

Margaret Smith: That is a question that we can ask on your behalf.

I would like clarification on the point that you raised about family contact development officers. What is the role of family contact development officers? My understanding is that there has been

a diminution in the number of such officers recently. I think that you also said that only Cornton Vale had dedicated officers. What is happening across the Scottish Prison Service in relation to FCDOs?

Adrienne Hunt: My understanding of their role is that they are prison officers who have a special responsibility for being there for families—for providing families with information and for being a point of contact for any family visiting a prison or who have a relative in custody, whether they wish to visit or not. As Angela Morgan has indicated, the situation varies across the prison estate. My understanding is that there are dedicated FCDOs at Cornton Vale and at Edinburgh. In other places, officers have numerous roles, one of which might be to act as a family contact officer. Who those family contact officers are, how they work and how much of their work time is allocated to dealing with families seems to depend on the priority that the governor gives to family work. However, we know that the prison officers who take up the role of family contact officer are very committed to it. They go above and beyond the call of duty to provide information for families and to develop a family strategy within their prison.

We now have national meetings for family contact officers across Scotland's entire prison estate. Both we and the SPS are involved in those meetings, which are a relatively new initiative that has happened in the past couple of years. The meetings are a forum in which consistent family strategies can be developed for use across the prison estate.

12:45

The Convener: I want to ask who counts as family for the people that you assist. I understand the argument that you have made, and it makes sense to me. You try to rehabilitate prisoners who spend some time in an enclosed environment by allowing them to continue being in contact—this is the key point—with those with whom they wish to be in contact. That helps to keep them motivated and it also lets the family see that the person is safe. You have talked a lot about families and children this morning, but some prisoners do not have a family in the traditional sense, although they might have relationships with other people. Are you prepared to accept that definition of family, given that your principal argument is about helping to rehabilitate the prisoner?

Angela Morgan: Absolutely. We have a definition in one of our pieces of research. By family, we are talking about people who are meaningful for, and who have some sort of sustained relationship—whatever that may mean—with, the prisoner. We do not start off with a rigid definition of family. It means those people who are meaningful for the unit, for the person and for those outside the prison walls.

The Convener: I thought that you would say that, but I wanted to finish with that point.

Those are all our questions. I thank you both for your evidence, which has added an important dimension to our work and has given us something different to listen to. The excellent research that you provided will certainly be used when we come to draw up our report on our inquiry. Thank you both for coming to speak to the Justice 1 Committee.

We have no further items of business on the agenda. I remind members that our next meeting will be on Wednesday 29 September at 10am, when we will take further evidence on our inquiry into the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes in prisons and when we will also have a number of Scottish statutory instruments to consider. Thank you for your attendance.

Meeting closed at 12:48.

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