

PROTOCOL FOR HOSTING VICTIMS IN THE PRISON

Requests for Information

The victim may want information about what happens in the prison that is readily available and could be provided.

There should be some contact with the probation service if the sentence of the offender is for a year or over for a sexual or violent offence. The request should be discussed with the probation service and information could be relayed through that contact.

If the information is about the offender then the matter will have to be discussed with him/her to get their permission and agreement for information to be made available, such as location, likely date of release, any progress being made, and thoughts about the offence. Should the prisoner wish to send a message – this needs to be negotiated with the victim, through a contact person, from either the probation service or Victim Support.

Requests for a Visit

If this is to see what happens in the prison then due consideration should be given to facilitating this, perhaps through the probation service or the chaplaincy. It might be that part of this visit is to learn about the impact on the offender through the experience. This should be explored in the context of permission from the prisoner.

There may be regular opportunities for visitors to the prison, either through an open day event or through a focused visit such as with magistrates. The possibility of joining such a group could be considered and offered, so that the victim was not so obviously a special visitor. There should be a supporter for the victim before, during and after the visit.

Requests to meet the offender

Such requests must be taken seriously but will need to be carefully planned if the meeting is to take place to both parties' benefit. The victim should be referred to the probation service to ensure there is support and preparation for the visit. Ideally the visit should be facilitated by one person who prepares both the offender and the victim.

Key principles include voluntarism at all times, good preparation so that both parties are aware of the possibilities in the situation, confidentiality – in that no one else needs to know what happens between the two parties apart from the facilitator, mutual agreement about the conclusion, and respect for each others wishes. The boundaries of confidentiality need to be clearly defined and adhered to.

Differing needs of family members of either party need to be respected and facilitated.

The request should be considered by both victim and offender with their support person. The agreement of the suitability of the facilitator should be obtained from both parties.

The facilitator should make certain arrangements agreeing the date, time and venue. If it has to be in the prison then suitable arrangements for the length of the session may have to be made – usually at least one and half hours – with the possibility of carrying on if more time is needed rather than waiting for another day. The room should be private with just the two parties, their supporters and the facilitator in it. The need for privacy is paramount as is the need to ensure that other prisoners are not aware of the meeting. There should be refreshments available for the participants, and preferably the opportunity to have something to eat together at the end of the session so that there can be informal contact.

There will be a need for a debriefing session after the conference and this may be straight after the session or a day or so later.

There may be a need for internal support arrangements (short term) for offenders through a service or person identified to the facilitator pre and post meeting e.g. personal officer, probation, chaplaincy, medical colleagues.

Some prisoners may be released for the purpose of meeting with victims. Suitable liaison arrangements need to be in place for negotiation regarding issues such as risk assessment, supervision, transport and emotional support to take place.

Arrangements in Prison for Mediated Visits

A liaison officer who understands what restorative work between victim and offenders is about – to make dialogue and communication with prisons much easier

Quiet, safe areas within the prison where victims and offenders can meet in dignity and talk with one another as comfortably as possible (considering their anxiety levels)

Facilities to provide them with basic refreshment (tea, coffee, biscuits, water)

A trained officer to assist the administration of victims and mediators entering the environment (examples have been known of staff being so anxious about the offender meeting the victim that they have intervened in the meeting, thus necessitating the return of victim and mediator for another meeting later)

A trained officer who can escort offenders to the meetings within the community where risk assessments will allow

Trained staff who can assist in supporting prisoners after the meetings whilst they re-adjust

Quiet areas which are as confidential as possible in which the group can undertake all the prior preparation and assessment meetings. In many prisons interview areas have to be used where prisoners are in full view – much of the work is emotionally painful. Despite doing the work with care it is not unusual for prisoners to break down or become distressed. It is difficult to go back into the prison environment if this has been witnessed.

Some trained personnel to 'keep a supportive eye' on those involved in restorative work. Greater reassurance comes when prisoners are so supported and where there is a system to alert mediators if there are any problems.

Trained staff who are able to welcome victims into prisons, help support them into and in the environment, without being officious, patronising or embarrassed. They should be aware of comfort areas to which victims can be shown to collect themselves on arrival and in breaks from meetings if necessary and prior to departure.

Time allowances if possible for meetings to run at their own pace rather than having to finish exactly to prison routine and having to come back later.

Arbitrary decisions about how long a meeting should take are impossible to work with. It is not possible to determine how long any meeting may take. It may take time to break down reserves and remove blockages before victim and offender can communicate usefully. Restorative meetings take place usually just once. We need to maximise every moment for their future well being. The 'moment' can easily be lost if it is 'end of visit' time and it has to break.

If people feel hassled and pressured it will increase the anxiety level and decrease the optimum use of time.

Participants in meetings are prepared to own the meetings themselves – mediators will hold a supportive but 'back seat' position. Just because they are not talking it does not mean they are not working. They will be very alert and watchful about what is happening.

Mediators have to be honest, respectful and non-judgemental with everyone with whom they work. In restorative situations they need others to be working in the same way. All parties including professionals need to communicate and work with one another respectfully at all times.