

KEEPING

PEOPLE

SAFE  PRISON

The Failure of
Gateway Communication Systems

PRISON
REFORM
TRUST

 **INQUEST**
TRUTH, JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY


Prisoners · Families · Communities
A Fresh Start Together

ABOUT THE PRISON REFORM TRUST

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system; informing prisoners, staff and the wider public; and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. The Prison Reform Trust provides the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Penal Affairs Group and has an advice and information service for people in prison.

The Prison Reform Trust's main objectives are:

- Reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime.
- Improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families.
- Promoting equality and human rights in the criminal justice system.

www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk



ABOUT INQUEST

INQUEST is the only charity providing expertise on state related deaths and their investigation to bereaved people, lawyers, advice and support agencies, the media and parliamentarians. Our specialist casework includes deaths in police and prison custody, immigration detention, mental health settings and deaths involving multi-agency failings or where wider issues of state and corporate accountability are in question.

Our policy, parliamentary, campaigning and media work is grounded in the day to day experience of working with bereaved people. This integrated approach is crucial to families, not only in making sure their voices are heard and holding the state to account for individual deaths, but also in changing policy and practice to prevent future deaths.

www.inquest.org.uk



ABOUT THE PRISON ADVICE AND CARE TRUST (Pact)

The Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact) is a national charity that provides support to prisoners, people with convictions and their families. We support people to make a fresh start, and minimise the harm that can be caused by imprisonment to people who have committed offences, to families and communities.

What we do:

- Build stronger families and safer communities.
- Reduce risk of harm to prisoners and their children.
- Remove barriers and increase awareness in public services.
- Influence commissioning, policy and legislation.

www.prisonadvice.org.uk



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our sincere thanks go to all of the family members who shared their experiences with us as part of this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*“I’m not trying to circumnavigate the system –
I’m just trying to keep him safe.”*

This new joint report by the Prison Reform Trust, INQUEST and The Prison Advice and Care Trust (Pact) maps the provision of safer custody telephone lines across the prison estate - dedicated phone lines which should enable family members and others to pass on information when they have significant concerns about the welfare of relatives and partners in prison.

Since the publication of Lord Farmer’s Report in 2017¹, there has been an increased focus within HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) on the social benefits of supporting prisoners to maintain family ties in cases other than those where this would place children, family members or the prisoners themselves at risk of harm. Thanks to the impetus of that Report, and the work of charities, officials, governors and prison staff, there have also been some notable developments in prison reform in this area: the majority of prison governors now have a Family Strategy in place, and HMPPS and voluntary sector partners are making much-needed progress to improve culture and practice. Although these developments are positive, our report finds that with regard to the most important of Lord Farmer’s recommendations - the effective provision of dedicated safer custody telephone lines - provision is patchy, under-resourced and even non-existent in some prisons. This leaves some families struggling to share their concerns with prison staff and inform the care and safeguarding of their family members in custody.

We found that:

- Of the 119 prison establishments in England and Wales, 44 appeared to have no functioning dedicated safer custody telephone lines for families to get in touch.
- Of the 44, half of prisons had no publicly advertised number for a dedicated safer custody telephone line. The remaining 22 prisons advertised a dedicated line, but when called the number either wasn’t operational, was not answered, or went through to a general prison switchboard.
- Of the 75 dedicated safer custody telephone lines that went through to Safer Custody Departments, only 13 were answered by a member of staff.
- 62 of the 75 dedicated safer custody lines that went through to Safer Custody Departments put the caller straight through to an answer machine.

The safety and wellbeing of prisoners is put at risk when families and friends are unable to share urgent safeguarding information with the staff in prisons who are responsible for their care.

Two years after the Ministry of Justice warmly welcomed Lord Farmer’s ‘ground-breaking report’², and with the last three years having seen unprecedented levels of self-inflicted deaths, incidents of self-harm and violence in prisons, this briefing clearly shows the systemic failure to implement Lord Farmer’s key recommendation that **‘each prison should establish a clear, auditable and responsive gateway communications system for families and significant others; a dedicated phone line that is listened to and acted upon’**.

¹ *The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners’ Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime: Lord Michael Farmer, Ministry of Justice August 2017*

² *The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners’ Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime: Lord Michael Farmer, Ministry of Justice August 2017*

Whilst some examples of good practice were found, and we spoke to some dedicated and hard-working prison staff, the findings of this report are deeply disturbing. **We urge the Ministry of Justice, and HM Prison and Probation Service, to address this critical failure and invite them to work with the authors of this report to ensure that every prison has an effective communications gateway.**

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Safer Custody Prison Service Instruction, published in 2011 (PSI 64/2011), requires staff who receive information from concerned family members to communicate those concerns to the relevant staff and consider opening an ACCT³.

In 2014, INQUEST's evidence to the Harris Review, set up after concern about the self-inflicted deaths of young people aged 18-24 in custody, stated that 'families reported frequent difficulties in contacting prisons to document their concerns with prison staff, with switchboards unanswered and no designated family liaison officer to pass information on to'⁴. The Harris Review published in 2015 recommended that 'there should be a dedicated telephone line for families/friends and others to pass on concerns about prisoners, which should be continuously available over a 24 hour period. Information received should be logged and passed on appropriately to be recorded as part of the SAVRAS. This process should be audited'⁵.

In 2017, Lord Farmer, concerned that families did not have a clear pathway to communicate with prisons, recommended in his Report⁶ that 'each prison should establish a clear, auditable and responsive 'gateway' communication system for families' to ensure that prisons respond effectively to urgent information and keep people safe.

In the same year, a further report by the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP), informed by prisoners from 60 establishments, recommended that 'family contact could be improved by... setting up an emergency contact line for families and friends'⁷.

Following the Farmer Report, Pact and the Prison Reform Trust presented a series of recommendations to HMPPS and safer custody officials on the implementation of responsive Gateway Communication Systems for families. This was followed by a presentation on the recommendations at the first HMPPS Families Conference in 2017.

The Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework⁸ introduced at the start of 2019 states that 'Governors will establish a process that enables family members and/or other people with concerns about a prisoner's safety to contact an identified member of staff without delay' and that 'the process must include prompt feedback to the person who raised the concerns'. Furthermore, the Family and Significant Other

³ Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) is the care planning process for prisoners identified as being at risk of suicide or self-harm. The ACCT process requires that certain actions are taken to ensure that the risk of suicide and self-harm is reduced.

⁴ INQUEST submission to Lord Harris Review: self-inflicted deaths of 18-24 year olds in prison 2007 - 2014, September 2014

⁵ <http://iapdeathsincustody.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Harris-Review-Report2.pdf>, 2015 (p.209)

⁶ The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime: Lord Michael Farmer, Ministry of Justice August 2017

⁷ <http://iapdeathsincustody.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Keeping-Safe-FINAL-Dec-2017.pdf>

⁸ Strengthening Prisoners Family Ties Policy Framework, 2019, Ministry of Justice

Measurement: Shadow Measure 2019-2020 states that good industry practice is for all establishments to include in their Family and Significant Other Strategies details of 'an effective 'gateway communications' system, which is regularly tested'.

In 2019, the MoJ Safety in Custody⁹ report suggests that self-harm incidents reached a 'new record high' (57,968 incidents in the 12 months to March 2019), as did prisoner on prisoner assaults, and cases of self-inflicted deaths are at historically high levels with a total of 86 deaths in the 12 months to June 2019.

Evidence suggests that families continue to struggle to share their concerns to help inform the healthcare (physical and mental), wellbeing and safeguarding of their family members in custody. Earlier this year HMIP's inspection of HMP Bristol found that '... a hotline for the family and friends of those in crisis, to call and report their concerns, had not been checked by staff at all for the two weeks before the inspection.'

Similarly, the Clinks' 'Think Family' project, which consulted 150 families visiting 4 establishments in 2019, found that 29% of the families had attempted to raise concerns regarding their family member in custody, and over half of those families stated they had not received a response from the prison.

And finally, in June this year, the inquest into the death of 19 year old Jordan Hullock at HMP Doncaster heard evidence that "although his mother had contacted the prison on numerous occasions prior to and when Jordan had been hospitalised, she was not told where he was until the following day when he had already been placed in an induced coma"¹⁰.

It is this continued and heightened concern for the wellbeing and safety of prisoners, as well as the desire to give a voice to the many anxious, upset and frustrated families and prisoners who contact Pact, INQUEST and the Prison Reform Trust, that has led us to produce this briefing. We have drawn on evidence from:

- Mapping of safer custody line provision across the prison estate to develop a 'safer custody directory'. We hope that this will facilitate swift referrals to Safer Custody Departments.
- Interviews with family members who have been supported by Pact services and/or INQUEST and have experience of contacting Safer Custody Departments.
- Data collected from calls made by prisoners to the Prison Reform Trust Advice and Information Service.

We have also included some quantitative data collated from calls made by families to the Prisoners' Families Helpline which is delivered by Pact on behalf of HMPPS.

⁹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/820627/safety-in-custody-q1-2019.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.inquest.org.uk/jordan-hullock-closes>

PROMOTION OF SAFER CUSTODY LINE NUMBERS

In order for families to contact a prison with a concern, they need to be aware of who to contact and how. Although some prison Visitors' Centres may provide safer custody helpline information cards or posters displaying the information, many families will become concerned for a family member in custody, not while they are in a Visitors' Centre, but after a phone call at home or because they have not received contact for a period of time. Families will often rely on the internet to find contact details. The 'gov.uk' page on 'Prison Life' states that relatives who are concerned about a prisoner should either 'tell a member of prison staff when you visit' or 'contact the prison's 'Safer Custody Team''. There is, however, no guidance provided as to how to make contact.



29% of safer custody line numbers (35 of the 119 prisons) are listed online either on the justice.gov website, individual prison websites or on Visitors' Centre provider websites. Only **12% of safer custody line numbers are promoted online by the prisons themselves** via justice.gov or their own websites. Safer custody lines were only publicised on prison websites by privately-run prisons. Of the 7 prisons which have promoted their safer custody numbers on the justice.gov website, 2 of these establishments were in the female estate and 2 were YOIs. The remaining 3 prisons were category B adult male establishments.

Number of establishments publicising safer custody contact on justice.gov website	7 (6%)
Number of establishments publicising safer custody contact on own prison website	7 (6%)
Number of establishments where safer custody number publicised on Family Service provider website (voluntary sector agencies)	21 (17%)
Total number of safer custody numbers publicised online	35 (29%)



GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: INFORMATION MADE AVAILABLE ON JUSTICE.GOV WEBSITE

SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF PRISONERS AT HMP WHATTON

If you are concerned for the welfare of a prisoner at HMP Whatton with regards to self-harm or violence, please contact the Safer Custody Team by telephone or email shown below.

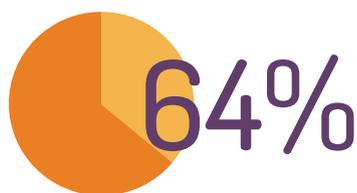
CONTACT SAFER CUSTODY DEPARTMENT:

Tel: 01949 803484 (answer phone available)

E-mail: safercustodywhatton@justice.gov.uk

If no one is in the office, please leave a message with as much information as possible and the telephone number you wish to be called on.

The office is staffed between 08.00-16.00hrs Monday to Friday. At all other times, or if your concern is urgent, please telephone 01949 803200 and ask to speak to the Orderly Officer.



64% of the 94 Family and Significant Other Strategies which were publicly available on the National Information Centre on Children of Offenders (www.NICCO.org.uk), state that they provide a safer custody hotline. **Only a third (33 prisons) publish the safer custody hotline telephone number in their Strategy.** When these lines were called, 3 of the numbers failed.

There is **significant variation in the detail provided in the Strategies** and generally limited information about:

- Whether the hotline is an answer machine or staffed
- How frequently answer machines are checked
- What information families will be required to share
- How prisons will respond to families' concerns
- How calls are logged/recorded
- The definition of 'safer custody'

There is **no reference, in any Family and Significant Other Strategies, as to how the safer custody lines are tested** and reviewed (as required by policy/guidance).

Where safer custody hotlines could not be found online, in Strategies or via the Visitors' Centre provider, attempts were made to ask prisons directly for their safer custody hotline numbers (via the general prison phone number provided). The **prison switchboard provider stated that they would prefer families to be ringing the switchboard rather than the individual prison safer custody lines directly**, so that they can better understand the enquiry and ensure phone calls are getting through to the right people. They said that despite having the safer custody hotline numbers available, they had been instructed, in many cases, not to share them with families (and therefore would not share them with the Prisoners' Families Helpline for their directory). They **described the switchboard role as an 'enquiry and triage' service**. For those families or helpline providers who have urgent safeguarding concerns, this process can be frustrating, time-consuming and acts as an additional barrier to effective and direct communication between families and prisons. It is also **contrary to Lord Farmer's recommendation**, that a 'dedicated phone line' should be available to families.

Safer custody **hotlines are called various different names** across the estate, which could further confuse families who are looking to share concerns. Names included:

- At risk hotline
- Safer custody hotline
- Crisis line
- Welfare and anti-bullying line
- Confidential phone line
- Concern for prisoner care hotline
- Families safety phone line
- Safeguarding line

PROVISION OF SAFER CUSTODY HOTLINES

A systematic search for safer custody line numbers was undertaken for 119 establishments. The following search process was undertaken:

- I. Search on justice.gov prison information page.
- II. Search on individual prison website (if there was one).
- III. Search on Visitors' Centre provider website.
- IV. Search in prison Family and Significant Other Strategy (if published on NICCO).
- V. Contact Visitors' Centre provider (if numbers not identified from sources above).
- VI. Contact prison switchboard (if numbers not identified from sources above. This could not be completed for all remaining establishments as switchboard were unable to provide numbers).

It should be noted that this was a time-consuming process that relied on knowing where to look and existing relationships with Visitors' Centre providers. This rigorous a search process would not be possible for the majority of families trying to identify a safer custody number.

97 safer custody line numbers were identified out the 119 establishments searched, 14 of which were Freephone '0800' numbers. In addition to telephone numbers, safer custody email addresses were identified for 24 establishments.

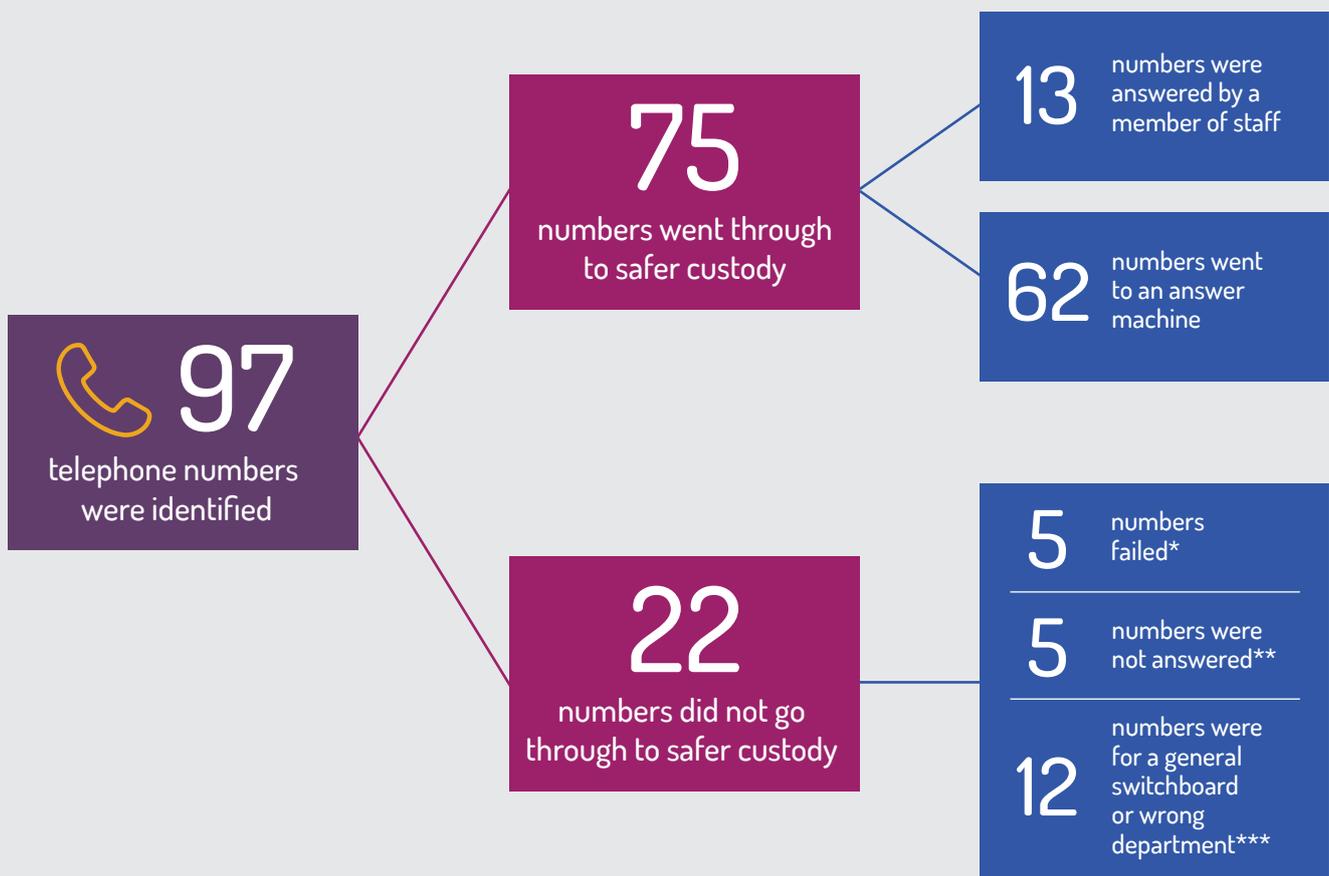


22 telephone numbers could not be found (representing 18% of the prisons).

Each of the 97 safer custody telephone numbers identified was contacted to ascertain:

- Whether the number was correct and operational.
- The nature of the safer custody line provision – whether families should anticipate an answer machine or a member of staff.
- The information requested on answer machine messages (in order to prepare families for the service).

Every number was contacted on a weekday between 10am and 3pm.



*Numbers seemed non-operational with no ring tone when called. These numbers were tested on 2 separate days and only logged as 'failed' if non-operational on second attempt.

**Where numbers were not answered on the first occasion, the number was rung again on another day. It was only logged as 'not answered' if there failed to be an answer on the second occasion.

***If numbers went through to a general switchboard, they were only recorded as such if the prison could not provide an alternative safer custody hotline number.

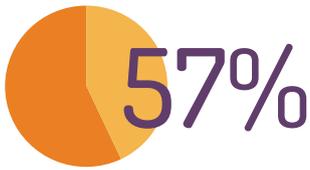
Of the 13 calls answered by a member of staff in a Safer Custody Team:

- 7 establishments said that the line was supported by an answer machine when staff were not available or out of office hours.
- 3 establishments said that the line was always staffed 7 days a week; one of these was a female establishment, the other 2 were adult male prisons.
- 2 establishments said that if the phone was not answered the call would be re-directed to the main switchboard.

When the figures are disaggregated into establishment type, a far lower percentage of calls were successful in reaching a dedicated safer custody line in the female estate. Using the safer custody numbers identified for the female estate, only 60% of calls successfully went through to safer custody compared to 81% in the male estate and 84% in the YOI estate. This is particularly concerning given that women are often placed in establishments significant distances from families and therefore many families have less frequent opportunities to visit prison, see the prisoner they may be concerned about or speak to prison staff face to face. Levels of self-harm are also significantly higher in the female estate. An effective Gateway Communication System is therefore vital.



23% of the 97 numbers which were provided as safer custody lines did not provide access to a dedicated safer custody line. This figure rose to 40% for the female prison estate.



57% (36) of the 62 safer custody answer machine messages that we listened to, provided no alternative number or signposting should the caller have an urgent safeguarding concern or was calling outside of office hours.

The quality of answer machine messages varied significantly:

- 4 answer machines had no recorded message from the prison.
- Only 23 (36%) of the answer machine messages informed the caller how regularly messages were checked. Where they did provide information, this varied from 'every morning' to 'daily during weekday office hours' to 'twice a day'.
- Only 13 (20%) of the answer machine messages said that they would call the caller back. One message stated that 'we may not be able to call you back due to data protection'.

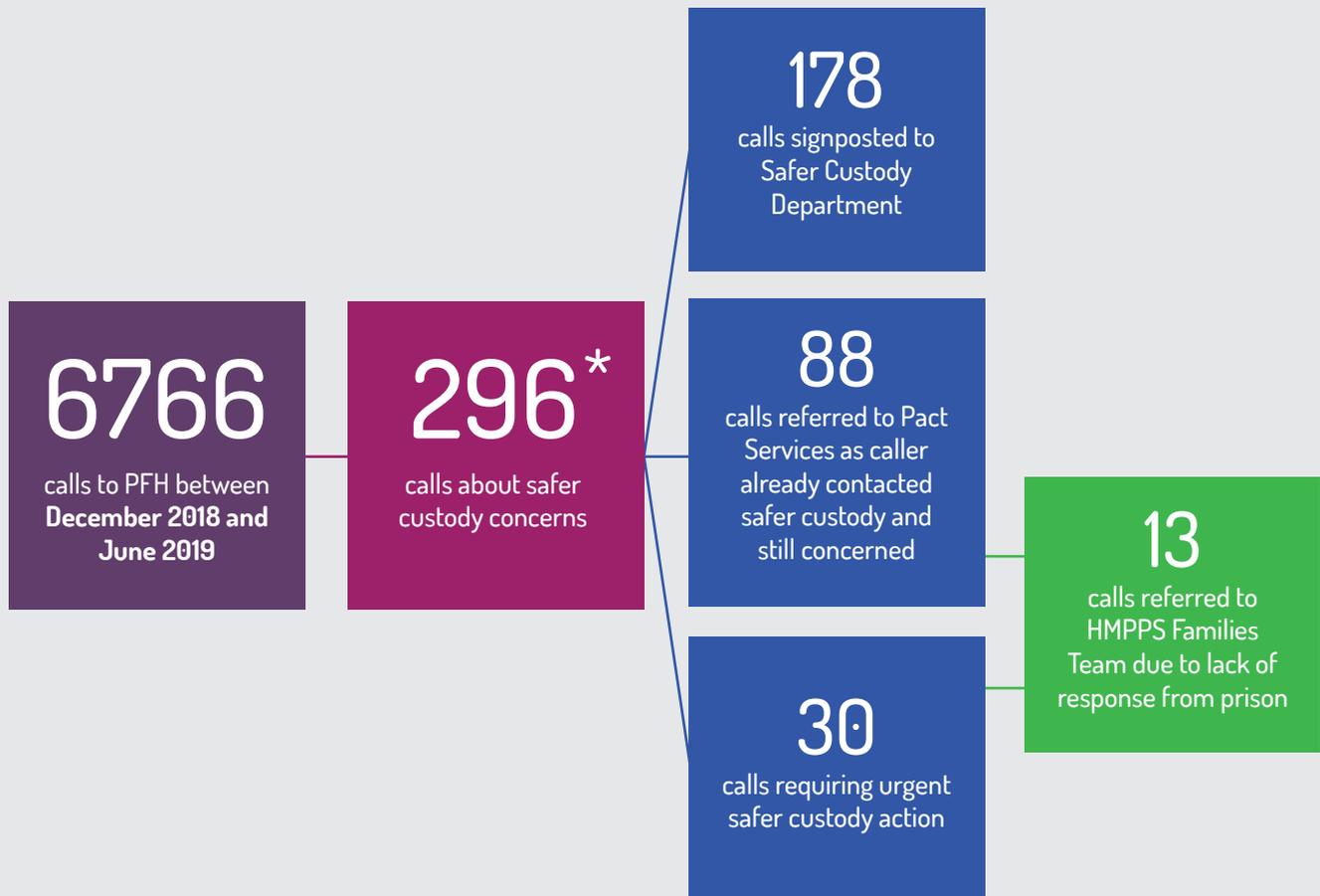


GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: ANSWER MACHINE MESSAGE ON A SAFER CUSTODY LINE

Hello and welcome to the prisoner safety line at HMP Erlestoke. This line is in place for you to leave a message if you have concerns about a friend or family member here at the prison. This mailbox is monitored throughout the day and someone will contact you, if required, within 24 hours. Please could you leave the following details: your name, a contact telephone number if you would like someone to ring you back, your relationship to the prisoner you are ringing about, their name and their prisoner number. Should you have any immediate concerns about a prisoner's safety then please ring 01380 814250 and ask to speak to the Duty Manager. For all other enquiries then please leave a message. Thank you.

FAMILY, PRISONER AND HELPLINE EXPERIENCE OF SAFER CUSTODY LINE PROVISION

The Prisoners' Families Helpline (PFH) receives a significant number of calls from family members who are concerned about a family member in custody and either do not know how to make their concern known or have already attempted to share a concern with a prison.



*It should be noted that these are only the calls that **relate to prisoner safer custody concerns** and **do not** include the significant number of calls received relating to the safety and wellbeing of the family members/significant others in the community.

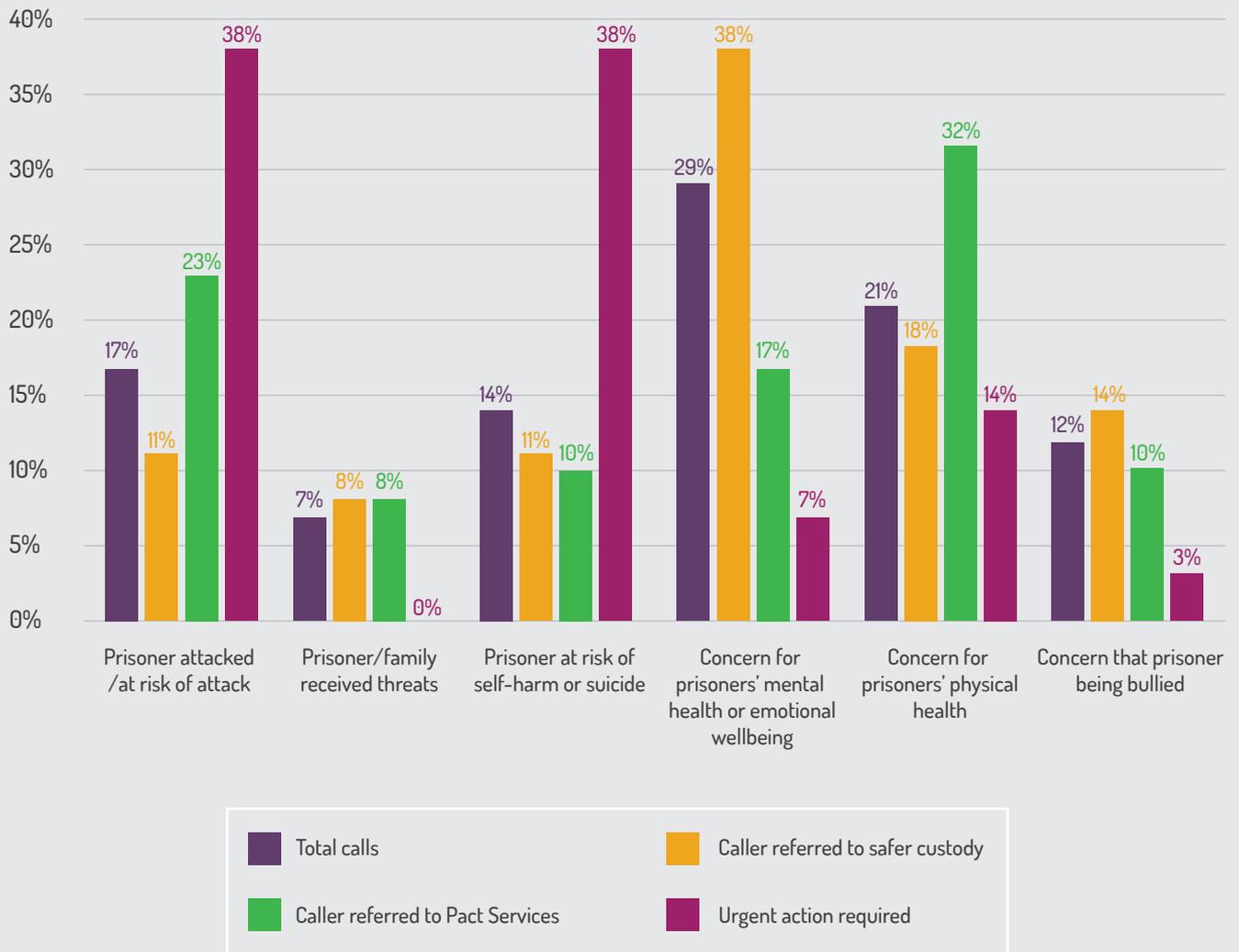


42 calls a month, on average, relate to safer custody concerns. In 60% of cases callers are referred to prison Safer Custody Departments. In 30% of cases the caller has already tried to contact prison safer custody and has called the PFH as they still feel their family member is at risk. In 10% of cases callers have concerns that are believed to require immediate action to protect a prisoner from harm.



13 calls were referred to the HMPPS Families Team under an agreed escalation procedure for cases where neither Pact nor the caller had been able to contact the prison and receive sufficient reassurance that their concerns had been responded to. Calls are escalated after three failed attempts by Helpline staff to contact the prison, or a failure to respond for 48 hours, or an assessment of immediate serious risk.

NATURE OF SAFER CUSTODY CONCERNS TO PRISONERS' FAMILIES HELPLINE



 39

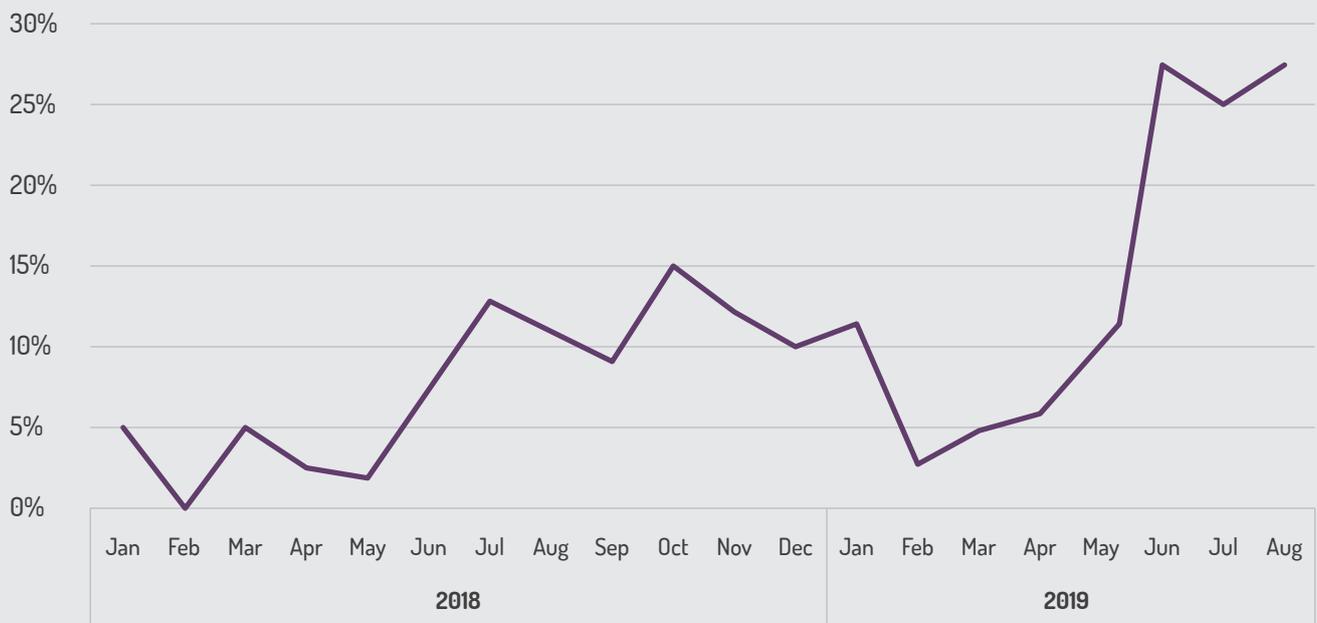
39 calls were received by the Prisoners' Families Helpline over 7 months, where the caller was concerned the prisoner was at risk of suicide.

 50%

50% of all safer custody concerns made to the Prisoners' Families Helpline are concerned about the physical or mental health of a prisoner.

The Prison Reform Trust's Advice and Information Service also receives a significant number of **calls from prisoners with safer custody concerns**. The chart below demonstrates how the number of safer custody concerns being raised has been increased significantly in the past 6 months:

SAFEGUARDING CALLS MADE MONTHLY



 81

81 safer custody referrals to prisons were made by the Prison Reform Trust Advice and Information Service between January and July 2018.

 25%

25% of the 81 safer custody referrals made by the Prison Reform Trust experienced barriers or delays in sharing the information with the prison. This included 3 cases in which they were unable to pass the information on in appropriate time, or not at all. In 13 of the cases the prisoner was deemed to be at immediate risk of harm (for example, from suicide, self-harm or attack). Barriers included having to ring the prison on multiple occasions to reach anyone, only being able to reach a voicemail or reluctance of Safer Custody Departments to speak to the helpline directly.

The following chronology details a real case study of the Prison Reform Trust attempting to pass on safer custody concerns to a prison:

Time	Phone call
12.00	Call from prisoner who sounded distressed and reported that he was experiencing bullying from other prisoners and was fearful for his safety. He said he was finding it difficult to cope and did not feel that it was safe to come out of his cell. He was worried that things were going to escalate into violence which he did not want. With his permission, we agreed to contact the prison and speak to the Safer Custody Team about this issue. He was happy for us to do this, although was keen that this was done discreetly to avoid placing him in more danger.
12.10	Call on prison main number, no answer on switchboard
12.12	Call on prison main number, no answer on switchboard
12.42	Call on prison main number, no answer on switchboard
12.57	Call on prison main number, no answer on switchboard
13.00	Call on prison main number, used menu to go through to a resettlement charity and asked for them to direct the call to Safer Custody. They were very helpful and tried to do this twice but there was no answer from the Safer Custody office. We were redirected back to a resettlement charity, who gave us the extension for the Safer Custody Team to try again.
13.05	Call to safer custody extension - no answer
13.26	Call to safer custody extension - no answer
13.30	As we had still not been able to speak to someone, we left a voicemail on the safer custody number. We left our contact number and requested confirmation that message had been received.
16.10	Had not received any contact so made further call to the safer custody extension and spoke to a member of the team. She had not heard the message yet because they only check the messages at the start and end of every day. She was very helpful, took the concern seriously and understood his anxiety about being seen to be speaking to officers on the wing. She said they could manage it discreetly and that she would action this straight away.



GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: SAFER CUSTODY GATEWAY COMMUNICATION SYSTEM SHARED BY HMP GUYS MARSH

PROMOTION OF THE SAFER CUSTODY HOTLINE

- The identified next of kin for every resident at HMP Guys Marsh is sent a letter from the Deputy Governor informing them of the prison's commitment to engaging families. The letter includes the following paragraph:
'If you have any concerns about a person in our care we have a safer custody hotline. This allows you to leave a message at any time of the day or night. The hotline is monitored regularly and staff will investigate your concerns thoroughly. The number is 0800 4961438, but if you have serious and immediate concerns about a person in our care then please contact 01747 856 400 and you will speak to the most appropriate person.'
- The first time visitor booklet provided in the Visitors' Centre includes the safer custody number.
- There are laminated pocket cards for families in the Visitors' Centre which list 'useful' contact numbers and emails including the safer custody number.
- The prison is planning to establish an automated return email system so that every time a family member emails the prison (whether it is to book a visit or via 'Email a Prisoner') an automated email is sent out confirming receipt of their email and including details of the safer custody hotline should they have any concerns.
- Prisoners are also encouraged to ring the safer custody hotline with concerns and the number is included on their PIN.

SAFER CUSTODY HOTLINE PROVISION

- The safer custody hotline is a 24 hours a day, 7 days a week answer machine.
- In addition to the hotline, there is a general 'family support' email address for families should they have any questions (not safer custody related) they want to raise. This email address is monitored daily.
- The answer machine message confirms it is the HMP Guys Marsh safer custody hotline, provides an alternative number for urgent or immediate concerns, confirms that the messages are checked every day and that, if you leave your contact details, your call will be returned.
- All answer machine messages are returned (unless the caller has not left contact details) within 24 hours, even where information cannot be shared with families.
- Messages are checked routinely every morning and every night (and may be checked more frequently, particularly when calls from family members are expected).



RECORDING OF SAFER CUSTODY HOTLINE CALLS

- Since 2014 the Safer Custody Team have had a 'vulnerable prisoner' database, where every safer custody call (whether received via the hotline or the switchboard) is recorded.
- The database records: date of call; prisoner name, number and wing; nature of the concern; actions taken in response to call including details about return call to caller and whether call was referred to alternative department such as healthcare. Emails that are sent to inform wing staff or other departments of concerns are also logged and saved.
- It is the responsibility of wing staff to then update prisoner files on NOMIS when they have responded to the concern. Safer Custody Team members will only update NOMIS for particularly complex or severe cases.

RESPONDING TO SAFER CUSTODY CONCERNS

- Information from the 'vulnerable prisoner' database is shared, where relevant, at 'complex prisoner' meetings.
- It is a standing agenda item at 'complex prisoner' meetings to ask whether families have been contacted and whether there is an opportunity for them to be involved – for example through ACCT meetings.
- The information sheet for the daily meeting, held every morning, includes a section on 'safer custody hotline' where concerns raised overnight are shared with the staff team and Oscar 1 will ensure that a member of staff is identified to action and follow up on each of those concerns.
- The Safer Custody Team will often proactively engage with families regardless of whether they have recently contacted the hotline. For example:
 - ◇ Being present at visits so that families have an opportunity to speak with them.
 - ◇ Inviting them to ACCT reviews (where consent from the prisoner is in place).
 - ◇ Proactively ringing families, where prisoner consent is in place, to inform them of developments – such as their family member being put on constant watch.
 - ◇ If a prisoner is moving establishments and the prison have had significant engagement with the family via Safer Custody, they may contact the new establishment to inform them of the families' concerns and recommend that they contact the family themselves.

TESTING OF THE SAFER CUSTODY NUMBER

- The regional HMPPS team 'test' the safer custody hotline on a routine basis to ensure that the answer machine is being checked and that calls are returned.

KEY ISSUES RAISED BY FAMILY MEMBERS

The following key issues were raised by families who have had experience of attempting to share safer custody concerns with prisons. Seven family members (an ex-partner, a grandson, a daughter, 3 mothers and 1 father), were interviewed from 6 separate cases.

RECOGNITION OF THE IMPORTANT ROLE THAT FAMILIES PLAY

Families emphasised the vital role that they play in safeguarding and informing the care of prisoners. They suggested that prisoners will often not disclose to prison staff the extent of their concerns/ill-health and that, as a result, families play a valuable role in advocating for them. They also stressed that families have important knowledge and understanding about their family member, such as what is 'out of character' and what signifies that they are not coping:

"They have only known the prisoner a few weeks and because of shift patterns some have known them even less. I knew my son for 25 years, we brought him into this world and we watched him grow up... we knew him, not them."

"He has been sectioned 3 times in the community and every time... they have sat down with me and listened to me talk about his symptoms. He is just not going to share with the prison how he is feeling, what he is seeing - they need to speak with me."

NOT KNOWING HOW TO CONTACT SAFER CUSTODY

Only two of the families we spoke to had found the prison safer custody number online or via the prison Visitors' Centre. The remaining families had contacted the general prison switchboard (which they had found via internet searches or contacting the Prisoners' Families Helpline) and requested safer custody:

"I didn't realise what safer custody was and that it was a separate thing. They confuse you with a lot of what they do... even their titles are misleading."

USE OF THE PRISON SWITCHBOARD

Families felt frustrated at having to contact safer custody via the switchboard and resented having to disclose information to individuals who were not based in the prison:

"They just asked me lots and lots of questions and I felt like I was disclosing information to people who didn't really need to know - they weren't the right people, they weren't even in the prison."

LACK OF RESPONSE

Families reported having to **repeatedly contact prison Safer Custody Departments** in order to receive a response, and even when call-backs were promised they were not always followed through:

"I have probably contacted the safer custody line about 20-25 times between January and June this year. About 40% of the time someone picks up and says that they will check on him and then ring me back... but they have never rung me back."

“On one occasion I left a message 4 times before they rang me back. You have to push it to the ‘n’t degree. It’s only when you take it to ‘threat to life’ do they return your call.”

“The Chaplaincy never rang me back and I left a message over and over.”

NATURE OF RESPONSE

Families described being **‘fobbed off’ or disregarded** when speaking to Safer Custody Departments. They felt that there was a **lack of understanding** about the impact on families and their desire to keep their family member safe **and/or empathy for the prisoner him/herself:**

“They never had what I would call a conversation with me when I rang up – it was always just one or two word answers. There was no empathy or understanding or care.”

“I’d asked them to check on him and they just said to me on numerous times: ‘this is not a hotel’.”

“I think the staff become hardened to it... I heard one of the prison officers at the inquest say ‘well yeah he did self-harm, but prisoners do that’.”

“I just don’t feel that I was taken seriously. There was just no empathy, understanding or assurance, or even just kindness. There was no consideration or respect. I am just his mother who is concerned for her son!”

“If my washing machine broke down and I had to ring the Whirlpool helpline I would get a better service than ringing that line!”



“I rang the general switchboard and asked for safer custody. I told the woman on the switchboard all my concerns and she said she wouldn’t put me through for something like that. I said I thought he might take his own life and she said, ‘well has he told you that?’ I said he needed an urgent psychological assessment – he was unkempt, withdrawn and hearing voices. She said that we needed to write a letter to the healthcare department...”



Families also reported being **made to feel like they were ‘asking for something above and beyond’** what their family member was entitled to:

“They think that I am asking for special treatment for him – I’m not, I just want him to be kept safe. He has a right to be kept safe and the prison have a duty of care towards him whatever his crime is.”

“I’m not trying to circumnavigate the system – I’m just trying to keep him safe. He’s my father and he’s the only one I have got.”

IMPACT ON FAMILY MEMBERS

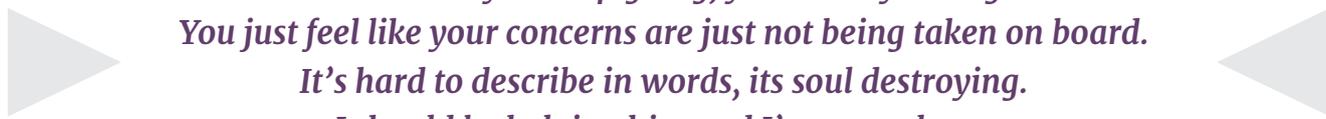
Families are already suffering the far-reaching impact of being separated from a family member who is in custody; they often experience stigma and isolation as well as the financial, practical and emotional implications of separation and/or making prison visits. When that family member is suffering or at potential risk, that strain is magnified, and families described the significant impact on their lives.

The lack of feedback or response from prisons **heightened their concern** for their family member:

“While you are sat there not knowing, you are sitting a sentence yourself, you have no control, no way of protecting them. It is like a sitting time bomb. It’s just horrendous. It’s the feeling of what could happen, the feeling of him dying and you can’t do anything to protect them. I’d got to the stage where I thought I was going to get a phone call any day to say he had taken his own life.”

“I just found it difficult to do anything, to get on with my life, I was just going through the motions trying to get through the day. I just felt absolutely helpless...”

Family members also described **feeling frustrated and powerless** as they felt their concerns were not being heard or responded to:



“It is absolutely awful, it is soul destroying. I’m a practical person but with this, no matter how much you keep going, you know you might not win. You just feel like your concerns are just not being taken on board. It’s hard to describe in words, its soul destroying. I should be helping him and I’m powerless... ..it’s like screaming behind a glass screen and no-one can hear you.”

Equally, families described feeling **powerless but forced to trust what the prison may be saying** as they had few other options available to them:

“You don’t know no better so you take what they are saying as gospel... you put your trust in them, because you have no choice.”

Families also described **feeling stigmatised** by prison staff:

“You are spoken to as if you are just as guilty as the people in prison. Everyone is tarred with the same brush.”

Unfortunately, for those families whose family member died in custody the impact is **lasting and devastating**:

“The hardest thing is that it has really hardened my child’s heart... they don’t want to feel emotions after the hurt of their dad dying like that.... All because the prison didn’t listen to 3 members of their dad’s family saying he wasn’t okay, my child’s dreams have been shattered.”

“I feel so guilty now because I feel like I should have been able to do more. You get peace of mind with them telling you everything is okay... but we shouldn’t have trusted them and taken it at face value... I don’t trust people anymore.”

LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

None of the families felt that prisons were making **adequate records of their concerns** and often took it upon themselves to record call time and dates, as well as staff names:

"I didn't get any feeling that they were logging anything I was saying, that's why I took down as many names as possible – I did all my own logging – when I'd spoken to them, who I spoke to..."

"I have asked whether the calls get logged and he just says 'yeah' – but nobody wants to be accountable if anything happened, do they?"

"When I phoned and raised concerns and I asked them if the phone call was being recorded and they said 'no, but it is being logged'."

"It's all about accountability, if something's gone wrong then I haven't really got any proof I have sent it or they have received it – it all contributes to having no faith in the system."

IMPROVED SYSTEMS

Families identified a number of ways in which Gateway Communication Systems should be improved:

1. ENSURE THAT FAMILIES ARE AWARE OF THEIR RIGHTS AND THE DUTY OF CARE OFFERED BY SAFER CUSTODY

"The voicemail messages need to change. They should let you know your rights and that they are duty bound to respond in xx hours and they should also tell you alternative ways to make contact like by an email or text message system."

"Families need to be made aware of their rights – they need to explain things like what an ACCT review is and that you can go to it."

2. STAFF SAFER CUSTODY PHONE LINES

"For immediate concerns an answer machine is not enough, you need a dedicated 24 hour line that someone answers, and I know that is difficult for resources, but if you have a serious concern it could save someone's life!"

"There should be a number in place in the prison which you can ring and speak to someone. That person should then be able to go down and talk to them and check they are okay – it has to be someone they will speak to. And they need to come back to you as soon as possible."

"What I felt would have been beneficial was to have had someone in the prison who I could have phoned and who could have gone and talked to my son and then get back to me. Someone who had the skills and who is supportive and understanding of the families."

3. ACKNOWLEDGE CONTACT

"It would be good that when you leave a message you get an acknowledgement text so that you have proof that I have called."

4. PROACTIVELY AND WIDELY PROMOTE SAFER CUSTODY PHONE LINES

"Particularly for prisoners with a vulnerable marker on them like mental health, families should be given the safer custody number when they go into custody."

"The letters that you get from the prison – they should have all the numbers written on them that you can ring – it should be on every letter."

"The gov.uk site could be a lot more helpful with your rights and how to raise a safeguarding issue with a prison."

5. OFFER ALTERNATIVE METHODS FOR SHARING SAFER CUSTODY CONCERNS

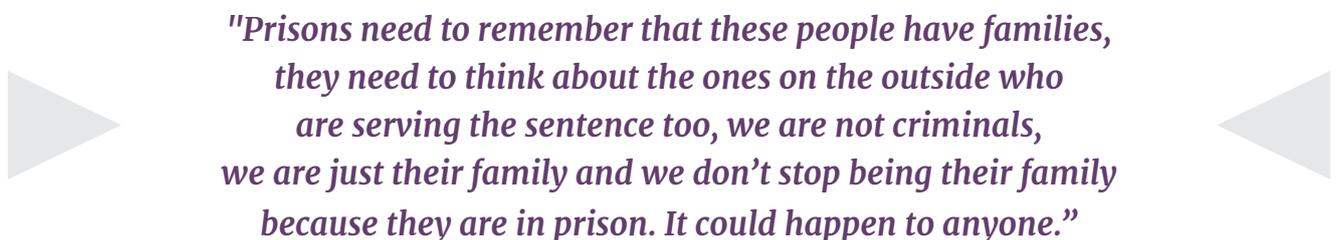
"If you are raising a safeguarding concern in the community there is a form that you can fill in and email – so there is a trail... I would much prefer an email portal that we could use."

"It would be good if once a month there was a meeting you could go to with the senior staff from the prison where you could raise your concerns as family members."

6. TRAIN CALL HANDLERS TO BE COMPASSIONATE, HONEST AND PROFESSIONAL

"If they are going to use a call centre then there should be a professional person who answers... they were very unprofessional, very uncaring and very uncompassionate."

"They need to be more transparent and honest and not try and say to us what they think we want to hear to stop us worrying. They need to be transparent, tell us what is going on so we can say whether it is in his character or not – make us question things."



"Prisons need to remember that these people have families, they need to think about the ones on the outside who are serving the sentence too, we are not criminals, we are just their family and we don't stop being their family because they are in prison. It could happen to anyone."