

Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs
Rùnaire a' Chaibineit airson Ceartas agus Cùisean
na Dùthcha

Angela Constance MSP
Angela Constance BPA



F/T: 0300 244 4000
E: scottish.ministers@gov.scot

Professor Nancy Loucks OBE
Chief Executive, Families Outside

By email - Nancy.Loucks@familiesoutside.org.uk

20 June 2024

Dear Nancy

Travel to Scottish Prisons for Families Affected by Imprisonment

Thank you for your letter dated 23 May 2024 to me, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport regarding the challenges families affected by imprisonment are facing in terms of travel to visit their loved one in prison.

Firstly, I would like to thank you, and those who have supported your letter for drawing attention to the issues faced by families affected by imprisonment in relation to travel. I am grateful to you and those who have contributed to the Families Outside new report 'No Easy Journey' looking to influence further action, nationally and locally to help address the challenges. I am responding but can assure you we recognise the cross-portfolio nature of the issues you identify.

Children and families are hugely motivating factors that can influence behaviour change and the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) are committed to working with families, and community and voluntary sector partners in order to maintain meaningful family contact throughout a period of imprisonment. The Scottish Government support this practically through funding to support the work of Families Outside and Prison Visitor Centres. Through work in collaboration with others, including Families Outside and many of the organisations supporting your letter, we are keen to ensure that issues relating to families affected by imprisonment are better understood and acted upon. This can be specific to issues relating to families affected by imprisonment or in the context of broader action to eradicate child poverty, tackle the climate emergency and to support our Vision for Justice.

As you'll be aware, we are operating in a challenging fiscal environment and there are also significant pressures in relation to prisons. The number of individuals within our prisons was already at a high level but an increase of around 400 prisoners in just two months has created a situation which is unprecedented.

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The high population has been placing substantial operational pressure on SPS and partners and we recognise that this will be having an impact both on those in prison and their loved ones. SPS's ability to accommodate an individual in an establishment near their home or families can be impacted by both high numbers and high complexity of needs in the prison population. In a statement to Parliament on 16 May, I set out a range of urgent measures being taken forward to address this issue including emergency release, looking again at how long-term prisoners are released from prison and amending the eligibility criteria for home detention curfew.

The 'No Easy Journey' report, and your letter, set out a number of issues and recommendations, which rely on effective local and national collaboration to help assess and agree practical and sustainable solutions, while recognising the complex and challenging operating environment for national and local partners, including a range of public services, third sector organisations and private transport providers.

Some recommendations fall within the operational responsibility of SPS and I understand that SPS have worked to increase promotion of the Help to Visit scheme and are considering some potential changes how the scheme operates. Their recently published Family and Parenting Strategy is also cognisant of barriers faced by families. This important strategy reflects an increased focus by SPS and its partners on supporting people in custody to develop and build their parenting skills. The strategy sets out how prisons should take account of school hours and public transport constraints, when setting visiting times, and how children with additional needs should be supported to maintain contact with parents in custody.

In relation to public transport, the Scottish Government's National Free Bus Travel Scheme provides free travel on local and long-distance scheduled buses throughout Scotland for those resident in Scotland who are sixty and over, eligible disabled people and those under age 22. In addition, those who are in receipt of certain disability benefits, or are blind, may be entitled to a companion bus pass which allows a companion to travel free of charge with the card holder for the same bus journey.

While the Scottish Government has no plans to extend the eligibility criteria for the concessionary travel schemes at this time, I would encourage families visiting a loved one in prison to check the current criteria to ensure they can benefit from this Scheme if they are eligible.

Our railways also play a role in helping to improve access across Scotland while enabling people to travel sustainably, although it will vary for people how likely a train journey is part of a journey to visit a loved one in prison. Developing rail systems and timetables is an intricate process that strives to balance the diverse requirements of all passenger and freight operators. It involves making trade-offs to fit everything into the timetable, which can be challenging, especially when it comes to providing direct services between every station, particularly on busy routes with limited network capacity.

ScotRail continues to review all services to ensure timetables and train capacity match passenger needs as demand evolves over time. ScotRail can also be contacted directly with feedback or suggestions on improving routes across Scotland, including any suggestions which may help families visiting their loved ones in Scottish prisons.

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More generally, it is important that those who need them can access advice services. These services are critical to Scotland's communities, supporting people to understand their rights and entitlements, maximising incomes and helping to reduce poverty. We know that receiving this advice can help to prevent problems from escalating and can help people to access the help, support and services they need.

In 2024-25 the Scottish Government has allocated over £12 million for the provision of free income maximisation support, welfare and debt advice, to support advice services which are delivered in a range of ways, including face-to-face, telephone and on-line. We provide funding to a range of advice providers including Citizens Advice Scotland and their network of Bureaux, StepChange Debt Charity, Advice Direct Scotland, One Parent Families Scotland and others.

Our investment in advice services includes our continued support for Welfare Advice and Health Partnerships which sees welfare rights advisers embedded within primary health care services including GP surgeries. Building on the success of the Welfare Advice and Health Partnerships, this year we have allocated up to £1.5 million to increase the provision of advice in places that people already go (health, community and education settings) through our advice in accessible settings fund.

I understand that there is no single solution here but we are keen to explore how best to support a collective response to the issues you raise. I am aware that we last met in May last year so I would be happy to arrange a meeting with you to discuss the wider issues families affected by imprisonment are experiencing, including the issues raised in your letter. Please contact my office at CabSecforJHA@gov.scot to make arrangements and I look forward to meeting with you.

Yours sincerely



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