



Prison Safety Learning Bulletin

Issue 38: How to respond to contact from family members and friends of prisoners who are concerned about their wellbeing

Who Needs to See This Bulletin?

All staff, especially those in contact with or taking calls from family members and friends of prisoners, e.g. chaplaincy staff, gate and visits staff, orderly officers and duty governors

Families and visitors of prisoners should be encouraged to share risk information with prisons and be provided with contact details that can be used in emergencies. The intervention of a third party may be crucial in alerting staff that a prisoner is at risk, so it is important that families and friends know that prisons value their input, that any concerns raised about a loved one will be acted on appropriately and that where possible they receive feedback when they do get in touch.

When a member of the public does make that contact to report their concerns about their relative, do you know how to respond and what you can tell them? Here you will find some practical advice about how to respond to a prisoner's family member or friend and what information it is appropriate to share with them.

Actions for Staff

- **Confirm the identity of the person calling**
- **Offer reassurance**
- **Explain what support is available**
- **Take contact information and commit to provide feedback (if appropriate)**
- **Record and share the information promptly and appropriately (a handover may take place at any stage from here onwards, but it is vital that the following are also completed)**
- **Check the prisoner's welfare and take any action necessary (e.g. open an ACCT where you believe there to be a risk of self-harm or suicide, update their case notes on Prison NOMIS)**
- **Check what consent you have to share information and/or seek consent from the prisoner**
- **Provide appropriate feedback to the family member or significant other and/or facilitate contact between the prisoner and that person where possible and appropriate.**

Offering reassurance on first contact

When communicating with a third party with concerns about a prisoner at risk, it is really important to *listen* to their concerns and *reassure* them that the person they have raised concerns about will be appropriately supported and monitored.

- Thank the caller for contacting you.
- Depending on the nature and urgency of the call, tell the person that you will look into the matter yourself, or that you will pass their concerns on to the relevant member of staff.
- Confirm the identity of the person calling, in some cases you may be able to verify this by checking the next of kin information recorded on Prison NOMIS.
- Ask the caller to explain their relationship to the prisoner. The caller should be able to tell you some personal information about the prisoner such as their date of birth, age or last known address.

You may not know at this point whether you can freely discuss the prisoner's welfare and it is appropriate to explain this to the caller. You may need to ask the person to write in to the prison depending on the circumstances for instance where you are unsure of the caller's identity particularly as there could be reasons such as public protection issues to prevent contact between the caller and the prisoner or vice versa.

However, depending on what issue is being raised, you can still talk in general terms to reassure the caller that you will take action following the call and if needed, that you will contact them at an agreed time later that day, or the following morning (depending on the urgency of the call) with an update once you have made relevant enquiries.

Explaining what support is available within a prison

To offer further reassurance you can explain the various support mechanisms available to prisoners:

- **The key worker scheme**, which provides personal support to prisoners and a dedicated point of contact for any concerns they may have while in prison.
- The various **peer support, mentor and Listener schemes** available 24 hours a day for all prisoners if they would prefer not to talk to a member of staff.
- **Samaritans**.
- The **prison chaplaincy**, who can offer support to prisoners and their families and provide links to other avenues of support within the prison or in the community.
- **Healthcare staff**, if the concerns raised are about any aspect of their physical or mental health.

Recording information received from a third party

It is important to record any risk information as soon as possible after you receive it, so the details of the contact are accurate. Prison-NOMIS contains a set of alerts to advise staff of key areas and potential risk. All these alerts must be kept up to date for the safety of both staff and prisoners. You should record as much detail as possible using the case notes facility, including the name and contact details of the enquirer, their relationship to the prisoner and the nature of the call.

Contacting the prisoner

Speak to the prisoner to check on their wellbeing. Where possible this should be done by a Residential Manager or the Key Worker, or if the prisoner is on an ACCT, the case manager. The prisoner should be asked what information they wish to be shared with the third party. It may also be appropriate to facilitate contact directly between the prisoner and the person raising the concern.

Taking action

It is vital that the welfare of the prisoner is checked and that appropriate action is taken to ensure that risk is managed. If you have any concerns that the individual may be at risk of suicide and self-harm, you must open an ACCT. If you decide not to open an ACCT you should document the reasons for your decision.

If the prisoner is already on an ACCT you should record the information that you have received on the ACCT document and bring it to the attention of the responsible manager so that a decision can be taken about whether or not a case review is appropriate or if observation and conversation levels need to be reviewed.

Checking what consent you have to share information

The prisoner may have already given consent to share information, and this may be recorded, for instance on an ACCT form. If they have not given their consent, permission to share information must be sought.

Providing appropriate feedback

It is important to contact the person who has raised concerns and to provide them with feedback.

Before contacting that person, think carefully about what information it is appropriate to share with them.

Decisions on sharing information with third parties must be justifiable and proportionate, based on the potential or actual harm to those at risk and the rationale for decision-making should always be recorded.

After identifying yourself, you must also ensure you confirm the identity of the person you are speaking to, for example using next of kin information available from Prison NOMIS. Public protection measures must also be considered.

We know that contact between prisoners and their friends and families can be a positive experience. We encourage it (where appropriate) as it can be a significant factor in reducing re-offending. A strong support network outside prison can also help to keep a prisoner at risk safe and reduce their risk of self-harm for example when transferring between prisons, after a significant personal event and on release from prison.

However, there can be times when even if you have a prisoner's consent to share information with a named person it may not always be necessary or appropriate to do so. You should not share data, even with consent, if the sharing of that data would cause either the person whose data it is or the person receiving the information any harm (psychological or physical).

It is not proportionate or necessary to share every intimate detail about a prisoner's life on a daily basis, a common sense approach should be adopted in assessing what to pass on (within the boundary of what the prisoner has consented to).

If the prisoner consents to sharing any information about themselves then it has to be clear in what circumstances they are consenting for it to be shared. For example a prisoner may want their partner to know if they move prison, but they might not want them to know anything about their psychology report

Sharing of data with consent does not require a reason to share. However, if you are sharing information *without* consent then it can only be for particular reasons, e.g. to prevent a crime or obstruction of a police investigation or where the person is assessed not to have mental capacity (for more information see [Prison Safety Learning Bulletin](#) Issue 37: Sharing information with a prisoner's family and/or friends: when can it be done and what can be disclosed)

It is important that, following contact from a third party about a prisoner, you *record your decision making process when deciding whether to share information*. Your record should be clear about exactly what a prisoner has consented to being shared and who to. It should also include confirmation that the prisoner understands what that would mean. You will need to bear in mind:

- the prisoner's rights (whether the prisoner has consented and what the prisoner has consented to)
- the information shared should be relevant and limited to what details are necessary
- the respective risks to and safety of those affected
- the urgency
- is it necessary
- is it justifiable

Whatever information you decide to share, thank the caller for getting in touch and make sure that they are aware of the best ways of sharing risk information should this become necessary again in the future.

Further Information

Information sharing is related to a number of different pieces of legislation. More information about that and other relevant guidance documents can be found here:

- [the Human Rights Act 1998, Article 8 \(the right to respect for private life\)](#)
- [the Data Protection Act 1998](#)
- [the Mental Capacity Act 2005](#)
- [PSI 2011/64 - Management of Prisoners at Risk of Harm to Self, to Others and From Others](#)
- [Receiving Emergency Calls: facilitating the sharing of risk information by families, Samaritans and others](#)

Prison Safety Team

More information on suicide and self-harm prevention is available [here](#) on our safety page and also on the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman's website, www.ppo.gov.uk.

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