

HMP BIRMINGHAM

PEER LED VISITOR COUNCIL

END OF PROJECT REVIEW

“

The more people
we have
together, that
are on the same
page then we are
more likely to
achieve change.

”





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INTRODUCTION

This review outlines learning from The New Leaf Initiative's peer-led Visitor Council which held regular meetings in the visitor's centre of HMP Birmingham from March 2022 – February 2023.

The primary purpose of the Council is to support the friends and family of prisoners in HMP Birmingham with any issues they faced with prison visits.

The aim of this review is to reflect on the service, and assess any impact of the council on visitors, prisoners and prison staff.

EP:IC were commissioned to produce this review. EP:IC is a research and engagement organisation working within criminal justice to elevate the voices of those involved in the system and contribute to more effective working practices.

This consultation was conducted by a team with lived and learned experience of the Criminal Justice System. Various sources of information were used to support the review including:

- Minutes from the Visitor Council meetings
- Observations of 2 Visitor Council meetings attended by our team
- Interviews with 12 visitors and 9 stakeholders. Interviews were conducted over the phone and through face to face engagement
- Information provided to us directly via The New Leaf Initiative
- Data from 3 consultations led by New Leaf exploring visitor experiences
 - 2020 (n = 248)
 - 2021 (n = 10)
 - 2022 (n = 23)



THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE PEER-LED VISITOR COUNCIL



Rationale and motivation to set up a visitor's council came from a hope to improve the prison visit experience for visitors, prisoners and staff.

"A woman was standing there really panicking that there was a problem with the tumble dryer broken on the wing, and she had learnt from her loved one in prison that there was trouble brewing because of it. And I realised that the prison, prisoners and those on the end of the phone outside would benefit from there being a way to communicate that everyone trusted."

In 2019, The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) reported on HMP Birmingham, following an HM Inspection visit, and highlighted the importance of visitors being able to share their opinions, thus supporting the aims of a visitor council. The concept of a visitor council also helps to realise part of Lord Farmer's 2019 review, where relationships with families were considered to be a 'Golden Thread' of rehabilitation.

A consultation into visitors' experiences undertaken by the New Leaf Initiative CIC in early 2020, showed 61% of 248 respondents wanting to be involved in supporting the prison to develop effective systems, evidencing an appetite for a more active prison-related community, with a purpose of creating positive change in HMP Birmingham and their prisoner and visitor community.

It is our understanding that HMP Birmingham had previously worked to hear from visitors about their experiences, however, feedback opportunities were inconsistent and few formal structures were in place for communication.

The introduction of the New Leaf Visitor Council was an attempt to do things differently. Funding of the council included adopting a peer-led approach, which meant the council would be coordinated by a team member with lived experience of being a visitor to HMP Birmingham, and support can be offered to visitors from someone who has first-hand personal experience of some of the challenges a visitor may face or need, as well as the insight of how these challenges might be managed.

We understand the peer-led and lived experience approach to this council is unique when compared to visitor councils in other prisons.

THE MAKING OF THE VISITOR COUNCIL



The Visitor Council was funded by The Barrow Cadbury Trust.

The initial payment arrived in March 2020, which coincided with the first national COVID-19 lockdown; and this impacted on timescales, significantly delaying the mobilisation of the council.

The first formal meeting took place in March 2022, following two years of disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



The council enables visitors to meet with the senior management team at the prison on a regular basis, so that issues faced by visitors could be addressed and solutions sought and agreed.



KEY FACTS ABOUT THE COUNCIL

- » Monthly meetings were scheduled for the last Thursday of each month.
- » Visitors, New Leaf staff, operational staff and visitor centre staff come together to discuss priority topics.
- » There have been 10 council meetings.
- » 52 individuals have attended council meetings, sometimes attending just one meeting, sometimes attending multiple.
- » A total of 43 matters were raised in the councils.
- » 11 issues were fully resolved within the meeting where it was raised.
- » 24 matters led to actions being taken to support improvements (for example, through staff training). Some were not taken forward because they were being addressed through other avenues, or because they were not achievable.
- » By January 2023, there were two matters still to be fully addressed, but in progress.
- » Alongside any concerns, good practice by officers and visit centre staff has been celebrated during the latter meetings.
- » 9 prison staff were nominated for exemplary work they have carried out in relation to visits through the visitor council.
- » An event and awards ceremony in December 2022 celebrated the visitor council, bringing visitors together with operational staff and professionals from the wider sector.
- » The last council meeting took place in February 2023, after which the funding concluded.



MATTERS ARISING

Issues were raised directly by visitors who attended council meetings but also through informal discussions with peer workers involved in the project. Issues included:

- » The need to raise the amount of money permitted in visits to be spent on refreshments per table.
- » Addressing officers' time keeping when booking in visitors so that visits were not cut short as a consequence.
- » The use of the visitors' car park by contractors and staff, leaving no spaces for visitors.
- » Concerns about awareness and consistency of visitors' clothing policy.
- » Addressing negative behaviour and attitudes in some HMPPS staff.
- » The complexity (inaccessibility) of prison visitor information. Visual tools were considered as an alternative.
- » The need for lockers in key areas.
- » Reducing the cost of refreshments in visits centre.
- » The use of child-friendly language towards visiting children, and how to deal with issues such as the dog trainer around young children.
- » Importantly, visitors were able to ask questions to the senior management team, such as why legal visitors had a different system to social visitors, and how prisoners were supported with bad news received on a visit. Often, where senior management were present, these could be answered then and there.

“Say your visit was 2pm, you could still be outside at 2:20pm so that would waste a lot of time. It was discussed and the governor responded and said why that was, it was brilliant as wouldn't normally get the opportunity to discuss like that.”

- » Additionally, the visitor council was an important forum for messages to be passed back to visitors from the prison staff. For example, one cleaner approached New Leaf to ask for support in keeping the toilet areas clean and sharing requests with visitors.



STAKEHOLDER VIEWS ON THE VISITOR COUNCIL

There is no doubt the visitor council is a welcomed initiative from a range of stakeholders invested in prison visits. We heard positive feedback from visitors and HMPPS staff who spoke of the necessity of such an initiative, as well as remarking on how the council was facilitated.

The council adopted a structured approach. All participating visitors who elected to become members received guidance before joining and minutes were compiled to log attendance and conversation topics. This meant visitors could be kept up to date with the progress of any matters raised. If a matter could not be resolved, New Leaf ensured they are informed why in a 'you said, we did' mechanism.



"I had lots of guidance, when I turned up for first meetings, I did have a long detailed email and I think I had a phone call as well, at the meeting it was fully explained what they hoped to do and what we could do etc, so it was all laid out."

"Minutes issued each time, issues from last meeting have been told back to visitors and governors, so we all know where they are at and where they are going. There is always feedback."

"Whatever is brought up on the meeting, given a copy of last month's minutes at the meeting she goes through them from the last meeting from beginning to end, you know if something has happened if something happened exactly what went on and what is going to happen in the future."



The independence of New Leaf from the prison was seen as an enabling factor for visitor participation. This independence was cited as a contributor to the effectiveness and success of the council. Trust between New Leaf staff and council members was built with comparative ease, their shared experiences of visiting prisons acting as factor in relationships; and this subsequently led to reduced tension between HMPPS and visitors.



"Sometimes, things are prison estate rules, it's the same across the country. Sometimes, visitors think it's the officers or OSGs being difficult when it's not. Sometimes, me talking to them in a soft and independent way, makes all the difference"





“It's helped because with New Leaf being independent not prison staff, they are classed as impartial and that's how visitors see them and that helps. It can be a hindrance at times, for New Leaf, because they get a lot put on them by the visitors”



The visitor council was deemed especially useful by newcomers who had never visited a prison before. There was considerable anxiety felt about not understanding prison processes.



“This was totally new to me, never been to prison never visited a prison before- she said you can join the visitor forum if you like. So if I've got concerns and problems, anything to do with the prison, I can talk about it each month.”

“I wanted some knowledge, I was a complete newbie and its frightening that first time not knowing what to expect. There's fear when you go to that prison when you go as newbie as not sure what to expect, [New Leaf worker] puts you at ease.”

“You are now within that situation being a prison visitor so therefore anything that can educate yourself by and things like that I feel you've got to join in and take part.”



Importantly, some visitors told us of their concerns about attending the council as they were worried about perceived repercussions for their partners in the prison if they were seen to be 'speaking out'.

The perceived stigma in participating in the council and notion of 'keeping your head down' is an important one to reflect on and for the New Leaf Initiative to consider in terms of promotion of the council, confidentiality of members and engaging new participants.



“I was a bit worried that if I said certain things, if officers went back and treated my partner differently.”

“I felt worried that it would affect my partner by me attending the council, I don't trust the officers and now at the meeting I've heard even worst things about them.”





THE ROLE OF THE PEER WORKER

Outside of the monthly meetings, The New Leaf Initiative CIC peer worker spent time at the Visitor Centre speaking to visitors and providing support for individuals who requested or needed it. The original plan was to have multiple peer mentors trained to offer support, but there was limited interest in the role. Two people did take it on, but found personal pressures prevented them from being able to support long term. Instead, New Leaf's Visitor Council facilitator has taken this role on, and is supported by other New Leaf team members.

The role involved providing support to visitors in advance of a prison visit, while on a visit, or following a visit where a visitor might have an issue, concern or question. Sometimes the task can be reasonably small, such as an enquiry over how much money is allowed into the visitor centre.

Other times, it is more involved, such as supporting disabled visitors to receive appropriate care and support, when visits staff do not have the time or resource to provide assistance. This component of the service increases the reach to prison visitors and enables wider feedback to be brought to meetings, beyond the issues raised by council members themselves. Overwhelmingly we heard positive feedback regarding the work of the peer worker, particularly in terms of compassion and commitment.



"We notice the difference in the prison visits staff on the days [New Leaf worker] is in. It does make a positive difference having her there"

"She's very good, she's very impressive she does her absolute best with what she's got."

"If this could continue with some presence in the centre would be good, it wasn't just me I'd often see others talking to her. I go on my own and don't have much to do with the other visitors. I'm a bit wary of others so having them there is great having someone to talk to. I'd just like to say a massive thank you to New Leaf."



Given the number of prisoners at HMP Birmingham, this has evolved into a significant role that benefits the whole prison community.



From our interviews, we understand that accessing support on a prison visit reduces the anxiety visitors have not only for themselves on their visits, but for their loved ones, living behind the wall in a world that is difficult to comprehend.

Another form of support offered was to children, in the absence of a pastoral or family worker in the visits centre



"The staff were telling my child to leave her favourite toy over there, but she was getting upset and didn't want to. So [New Leaf] told her that she would look after the toy until she came back. She knelt down at eye level and connected with her so that my child was happy to let her keep the toy."

"Children are expected to stand and wait in line for the drugs dog to pass, and they are expected to stand still. That's not always easy for a child. So I try to support parents with little games or strategies they can use to help their children stand still just until the dog passes, that are child-friendly and take their mind off what is happening."

"Those visitors need someone there, until all the staff are trained up and processes are changed, they need someone. Who are they going to speak to now?"



Towards the end of the funding period, the peer worker explained her relationships had developed with visiting families to an extent where one family requested her support following a bereavement. When visiting the father of the child who had passed away, the family asked for the peer worker to be present, and she has since provided the details of external services who will be able to provide specialist support. We understand the prisoner has engaged with The New Leaf Initiative since, and is looking to work with the CIC on his impending release.



Some concern was raised by New Leaf as to who will take this role on following the end of the funding period. This is particularly so given that HALOW, who have run the visits centre for over 20 years, have also left at the same time and familiar faces have now gone.



WHAT DIFFERENCE HAS THE VISITOR COUNCIL MADE?

New Leaf has undertaken three consultations with prison visitors since 2020, with 248 respondents, 10 respondents and 23 respondents respectively. From the most recent consultation, completed in Autumn (2022), results indicate some positive changes. The two stand out pieces of evidence are listed below.

In 2021, 50% said they had found visits to be a positive experience.

In 2022, 65% of visitors reported having a positive and welcoming experience.

In 2020, 93% reported the prison needed to improve its communication around visits.

By 2022, only 24% said they had a negative experience with communication and visit-related information.

It would be beneficial to see a further survey with directly comparable questions to the 2020 survey, to see the longer term impact.

Visitors were not the only individuals seen to benefit from the visitor council. HMPPS stakeholders spoke positively about the impact of the initiative.



"We benefited from the council. They took a bit of work off us, helped us towards our family strategy."

"If the prisoner visit goes well, prisoners tend to be calmer. It's a no brainer in that way. Plus, if we can begin to learn what is leading to a hot pot of tension on the wing, then even better."



In interview, we heard that individual support had improved. Notably, one visitor with multiple needs and vulnerabilities was intensely supported to access visits and understand prison processes. Not only was assistance offered within the prison setting, but wider support was often provided to access community services.



SPOTLIGHT ON THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Much of the support offered by the peer worker, and a sizeable proportion of the discussion that took place at the visitor council related to visitors not fully understanding prison processes. This included confusion around timings, searches and delays. One HMPPS staff member felt this had become worse since the COVID lockdowns:

"At the time we started the council meetings, we were coming out of COVID. There hadn't been visitors for a while, then when it opened up, the rules were all changing. We had been in operational mode for so long, just surviving and getting a regime out, that I think we had become a bit desensitised."

The peer worker saw an opportunity to raise awareness to visitors to improve the visits experience for everyone. The council suggested information was shared with new visitors either at the visitors centre or in advance via telephone.

Posters were placed on wings, near to telephones to enable prisoners to provide advice to their visitors directly; and New Leaf produced posters and leaflets for the visitor centre. Himaya Haven CIC were able to translate these posters into multiple languages for inclusivity.

"There's a lot more clarity now about how the visit works when you get there, the rules were changing all the time, one time I would have to show all documents or take certain things over, then the next week it would change. Now it is more set in stone."

As stated previously, there appears to be an improvement in communication with the average score of respondents being 66% for the quality of information given, with this rising to 68% for new visitors. This contrasts with an average score of 48% in the report from a year earlier.

STAFF AND VISITOR INTERACTION



Concerns were raised by visitors about how they were dealt with at the gate when visiting their loved one.

Older visitors, often elderly parents or grandparents, reported feeling as though they had done something wrong when visiting. Some prison processes contributed to this, such as people with mobility issues and walking aids being asked to remove their shoes for searches.

There were also concerns that staff were not trained and confident in how to deal compassionately with children.

Through the meeting minutes, we were able to see evidence of positive action being taken in regard to this. Following a visitor council meeting, SMT responded to negative feedback about staff attitudes by informing the prison with a view to implementing training, including understanding the visits processes. He also stated he would challenge the low pay for OSG staff to reduce turnover and provide constance. Further, one new member of staff has undergone training in Customer Management System (CMS) to improve customer courtesy skills that have been lost as a consequence of staff turnover during COVID.

“[New Leaf has] changed a lot about how visitors are dealt with. [New Leaf] tried hard to push to get the training done so everyone is on the same sheet, but no matter what they do it will never be perfect due to prison staff, there will always be hiccups.

More often than not, we now have staff with a smile and get through much happier because we are dealt with as ordinary beings.”



As stated, in the most recent consultation undertaken by New Leaf in Autumn 2022, 65% of those contributing (n = 23) felt HMP Birmingham was 'welcoming', although this was not broken down into more specific areas (i.e. visits centre, searching etc). While not directly comparable, it is notable that in 2021, 50% stated they had a negative visits experience.



The prison tour

Relating to prison information, many visitors not only experienced a lack of understanding about what prison was like for their loved one, they were distressed at their preconceived ideas about prison, leading to concern for their friend or family members.

To combat this, New Leaf arranged a prison tour for visitors to see the inside of the prison. A tour was facilitated during the lunch time lock up period, where no prisoners were in public areas. This was seen as innovative and was highly appreciated by visitors.

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“It was very beneficial, my son calls me every day and he says where he is and what he's been doing and when I had that tour I can picture where he is and what he's doing.”

“I had never been inside like a lot of visitors so that prison tour I thought was absolutely brilliant and I think it should happen more so visitors can see what goes on inside, that would be helpful to a lot of people.

The way I look at it is the ordinary visitor doesn't know what happens through that door after we say goodbye after a visit, so a lot of eyes would be opened and they probably wouldn't have as many fears as what they do have.”

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Christmas donation

A particularly proud moment for New Leaf was the distribution of gifts (including toys and sweets) to prisoners' children over the Christmas period, made possible by a donation of £900 to New Leaf by the Lumbis family.





WIDER SUCCESSES 2

The following are examples of some of the 'quick wins' for visitors, facilitated by the council. Visitors spoke of how much of a positive difference these made to both themselves and other visitors.

Clothing rail

As previously mentioned it wasn't always clearly understood by visitors what they could wear on visits, with no welcome packs distributed. For example, no ripped jeans, low cut tops or hoodies are allowed. Many first-time visitors were arriving at the prison in prohibited clothing, meaning they were then turned away from their visit. This caused not only distress to the visitor, but also to the prisoner, which can be detrimental to all relationships, including with loved ones; and between prisoners and prison staff.

To help raise awareness to all visitors, New Leaf arranged for posters to be displayed to prisoners and in visitor areas about visit-appropriate clothing.

Further, New Leaf created a clothing rail, with donations from New Leaf employees and public donations, so that a visitor can borrow clothing to enable them to attend a visit if they arrive in something considered unsuitable.

"They can now get clothes to put on. That was a good thing that came out of it."

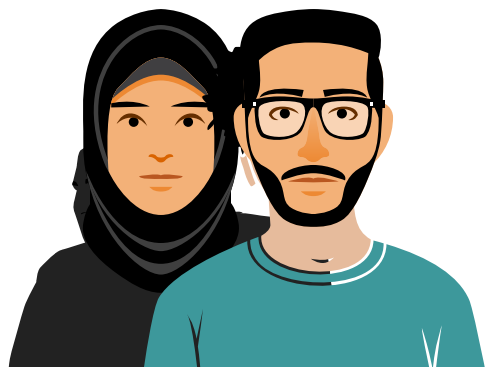
Visitors car park

Visitors' told New Leaf the car park was often occupied by staff or contractors while the prison is undergoing improvements. This means visitors did not have anywhere to park.

The car park is now locked in the evening and reopened before visits, which has largely resolved the issue.

"The visitor car park, every time you went it was full of contractors so visitors couldn't park, it was highlighted in a meeting and New Leaf took it up with the prison and ever since there has been spaces, we went with a problem and it was addressed very quickly by next meeting."

VISITORS' REFLECTIONS

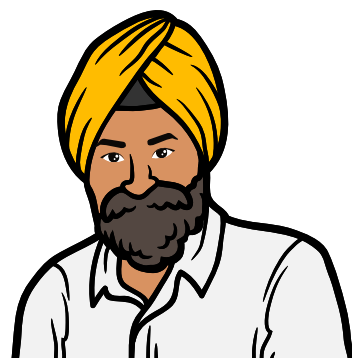


“Seriously good, lots of things that have changed that I have personally seen.”



“As if you are one of the family, I know if I've got a problem they can help. Now got something specifically for visitors and that is what I feel visitors need.”

“The more people we have together, that are on the same page then we are more likely to achieve change.”



“It's definitely worth it, it should carry on as it supports a lot of people. It gives a platform for people to speak out about their issues.”



THE CHALLENGES

Awareness

- » Some visitors explained that they only knew of the visitor council incidentally, and that many others did not know about it. This suggests more visitors could be accessing support from New Leaf than just those engaged in the initiative.

“Prisoners could be more aware about these meetings and then there would be more feedback. Unless a visitor tells prisoner about it how do they know about it, perhaps New Leaf could advertise on the kiosk and then they can pass any feedback on to discuss at meetings, plus they could see minutes.”

» Online participation

Some council members were unable to join meetings remotely in the recent months due to internet issues at the visits centre. This was seen as problematic for visitors who could not attend in person.

“I'd like the option to be able to attend on zoom to carry on, some can't attend due to money or travelling too far.”

» Conflict of roles

The dual role of visitor council facilitator and peer mentor did present some confusion. Some visitors felt council meetings could be used for individual support opportunities rather than 'council business'. Whilst New Leaf provided support for both, this could be a conflict as it was possible for meetings to 'drift', although we were advised that they were swiftly brought back on track.



»» The need for a visitor champion

Prisons are dynamic places. For example, new searching protocols are being enacted in January 2023 for visitors. There is a steady stream of new visitors, especially within a large remand establishment like HMP Birmingham. Stakeholders told us that it was important that there remained a focus on visitors, holding HMPPS to account as well as supporting visitors with their needs. One outstanding action has been pending since April 2022 and may now not be followed up. HMPPS staff explained that operational duties can take precedent.

"If we had been organising ourselves then we would have cancelled a lot more as prison life gets in the way."

»» Staff- Workload

The peer worker role was more intense than anticipated. Lived experience leadership is known for its passion and commitment, but the needs of the prison community are substantial. This was managed within the contract, though required internal resources to ensure the role was well supported.

»» Monitoring and evaluation

More formal monitoring processes would enable more robust evidence to explore, more fully, who was benefiting from this project and how different community members valued the experiences.

»» Fear of judgement

We heard that visitors had been wary of repercussions if they were outspoken about the issues facing visitors and prisoners.

This appears to have intensified following the move of one of the visitors' loved ones to another prison which she felt was related to her participation. Her belief dented not only her own, but her fellow visitors' faith that the council was a safe space.



WHAT NEXT?

As The New Leaf Initiative CIC's funding for the visitor council pilot comes to an end and HMP Birmingham subsequently presses the pause button on its visitor council, this is an opportune moment for reflection in regards to how prisons support and enable visitors to engage.

We have seen there is a demand for a role that supports visitors with their individual visiting experiences and improves communication between HMPPS and those visiting.

HMPPS stakeholders expressed their belief that this takes pressure off the staff in a number of ways, while simultaneously contributing towards the establishment's family strategy. Visitors appeared grateful for advice and support, as well as the opportunity to make change.

And changes were definitely made. From training staff and seeing improvements in information sharing, to the clothing rail and the changes to the car park, there is evidence that solutions can be found to commonly experienced problems through bringing people together.

There is clear value in any visitor forum or council being independent from the prison, and the value of a peer-led approach is evident in the trust being developed and the passion for supporting visitors, both adult and child. Maintaining regular meetings, sharing minutes to keep everyone 'on track' and monitoring progress are all essential ingredients.

New Leaf have encountered barriers and challenges, not least due to the unavoidable restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Other issues have been experienced, such as awareness and fear of judgement, which will be important to reflect on, as the future of the visitor council is considered.

This is clearly important to prisons, given that HMPPS will be judged on their involvement with and engagement of visitors in 2023 and we understand it will be a part of KPIs in the future. It's vital to build on momentum galvanised from the forum, the relationships built, and the lessons learned.



Registered Charity: 1115476

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks, as always to;

Everyone who engaged in the consultation.

To The New Leaf Initiative CIC who provided us with the materials needed in order to carry out a review, and for being so open to discussion.

To HMPPS staff for taking time out of their roles to engage with EP:IC.

To Barrow Cadbury Trust for believing in and funding peer-led initiatives.

And to each visitor who took part through interview. We are very grateful to you for sharing your perspectives.

