

The official prison visiting scheme

There is occasional confusion in the minds of prisoners and their families between IMB members and prison visitors. Roy Hanley, chair of the National Association of Official Prison Visitors, sheds light upon prison visitors and their work.

We are very fortunate in the UK in having such a veritable army of unpaid volunteers dedicated to committing time and energy for the benefit of a whole array of worthy causes.

Those volunteers who are active within the criminal justice system, however, may well be deserving of special praise especially when considering that giving support, help or guidance to offenders, would not necessarily be high on the list of priorities of many members of the general public.

Clearly not everyone is blessed with the qualities required to visit and engage with a prisoner as a representative of the outside world, and with whom they can relate. In this respect, Official Prison Visitors (OPVs) probably have similar characteristics to members of the IMB, although the commitment on the time of IMB operatives is distinctly more demanding. In fact, it was not unusual before 2003, when the term IMB was first coined (having previously been known as 'Boards of Visitors'), for OPVs to be confused with independent monitors and even now, it is not unusual for an OPV who visits on wings to be asked "are you IMB?" Some prison staff also confuse OPVs with other voluntary groups, notably chaplaincy volunteers.

It is not uncommon for members of the IMB on leaving their board to become OPVs and vice versa. At one time it was considered inexpedient for an OPV to be an IMB member at the same time, but more recently the view is that an individual

can fulfil both roles providing they are not in the same prison.

What is an Official Prison Visitor (OPV)?

"Official Prison Visitors (OPVs) are independent volunteers appointed by governors to visit and offer friendship to prisoners. They are neither paid civil servants, nor religious volunteers. OPVs are a valuable resource in the efforts to become aware of a prisoner's risk of self-harm. OPVs offer valuable opportunities for prisoners to talk confidentially (albeit with a duty to disclose risk of harm to self or others), and may help prisoners to come to terms with difficult situations."

"The National Association of Official Prison Visitors (NAOPV) exists to promote, maintain and support Official Prison Visiting. It also helps to encourage and co-ordinate the work of OPVs both at local and national level."

The above two clauses, taken from a Prison Service Instruction (PSI) that covers the OPV scheme, summarise concisely the role of an Official Prison Visitor and the function that the National Association of Official Prison Visitors (NAOPV) serves in facilitating the scheme.

Role of the NAOPV

The NAOPV is probably exceptional in the

voluntary sector associated with prisons, in that it is a non-faith-based association that is neither a pressure group, nor a mentoring organisation, with no specific targets to achieve. Its purpose is principally to promote, maintain and support the OPV scheme in prisons in England and Wales.

The NAOPV receives a modest grant from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and financial support through member subscriptions, and is managed by an executive board of trustees; this incorporates ten regional secretaries who cover geographical regions that roughly equate to those used by HMPPS. Ideally there is an optimum number of six OPVs active in every prison, but this can vary depending on location of the prison and localised demand. Generally, there is a greater need for our service from longer term prisoners and those with few or no social visitors, rather than from those in category D establishments. The objective is to have a formal NAOPV branch established in each prison, to meet periodically to aid any coordination issues with prison staff, on-going training, or any individual OPV concerns.

Being a non-faith-based association is particularly relevant when considering that 25 to 30% of prisoners on reception indicate that they are of no faith. Consequently, those in this category are unlikely to seek solace from a chaplain, or engage with other staff members for meaningful social interaction, which could lead to them being at greater risk of self-harm.

Whilst similar visiting schemes have operated in the Scottish Prison Service (SPS), these have tended to falter, possibly due to a lack of coordination or clear regulation. Prior to lockdown, however, and at the request of HMPPS, the NAOPV

National Association of Official Prison Visitors (NAOPV)

The NAPV was formed in 1924 under the auspices of the Home Office, with origins traceable back to 1901 when prison visiting was first officially recognised. The first national AGM was held in 1925 at the Home Office and this practice continued for many years. In 1962 the then Home Secretary, R.A. Butler, gave the address to the meeting and handed out the life membership certificates. The NAPV became a registered charity in 2003 and was renamed the National Association of Official Prison Visitors (NAOPV).

The patronage from the Home Office changed in May 2007 when the then Prime Minister Tony Blair split the Home Office creating a new Justice Ministry, which was responsible for controlling prison, probation and sentencing and the NAOPV came under this new Ministry. The NAOPV President had been the Right Hon. Secretary of State for the Home Office and this

split left the NAOPV without a President. The then Chairman arranged with the Ministry of Justice for the then Lord Chancellor, Lord Falconer, to take over as the NAOPV President. The patronage has remained with the Lord Chancellor ever since and is enshrined in the constitution which states: "The President shall be the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, ex officio".

In 2025 the NAOPV will be celebrating completion of 100 years of service to prisoners.

NAOPV Patron: Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal.

NAOPV President: The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice – Rt. Hon. Robert Buckland QC.

Vice President: Lord Ramsbotham of Kensington GCB CBE.

provided advice to the SPS resulting in a trial scheme to be run in a selected prison, based on OPV scheme guidelines.

Since 2008 the NAOPV have, with the agreement of the MoJ, enjoyed friendly links with our French counterparts the ANVP (L'Association Nationale des Visiteurs de Prison), as well as other European prison visiting groups. Bipartite prison exchange meetings have been arranged and held in prisons in France & England, often including participation of HMPPS and consulate staff, as well as representatives of associated external agencies.

Role of the Official Prison Visitor

All OPVs whether they visit in social visits halls, along with prisoners' family and friends, or draw keys and visit on wings, are required to be security vetted to enhanced level 1, plus CTC screening if visiting in the high security estate. Additionally, for those visiting in Young Offender/Juvenile prisons (<18 years), DBS checks are mandatory.

OPVs are formally appointed by the prison governor, but are not involved in any treatment or training programmes for prisoners and they may be allowed entry to prisons when other visitors are not and with a freedom that other visitors may not enjoy. A simple definition of the role is to offer a friendly relationship, often to those who receive few or no visits from relatives or friends.

How a prisoner can engage with an OPV

In every prison operating the OPV scheme, a designated liaison officer (LO) is formally appointed. The LO should be a senior member of staff, or at least someone specified by the latter. Although the NAOPV is a non-faith-based charity, invariably the LO will be the Managing Chaplain, or a full-time chaplaincy staff member, which is usually a good fit as the chaplaincy is responsible for pastoral care in the loosest sense.

The rule is that a prisoner has to request to receive a visit from an OPV by putting in an application, rather than the service being foisted on them. This is only possible, however, if the inmate is aware of the service provided and so a little gentle encouragement may occasionally not go amiss. Some prison staff, for example those in safer custody or offender management departments, can be very proactive in motivating prisoners to apply to see an OPV, accentuating the "official" tag so as to differentiate from any other voluntary group.

Should an IMB member envisage that someone they encounter could benefit from a meeting with an OPV, the "put

in an app" request would be the correct initial advice, which could be followed up by a mention to the LO in the chaplaincy.

Effectiveness

Measuring the apparent effectiveness of the OPV scheme has always been challenging, with number crunchers preferring statistics to justify the existence of any process. It is, however, more a case of quality over quantity with the OPV scheme. For example, a regular one hour meeting every fortnight with a long term prisoner is likely to be far more beneficial to that individual's needs than six ten minute chats with short term remand prisoners. However, the NAOPV continues to strive to develop key performance indicators to assist in meaningful evaluation of the scheme.

Probably the best marker of the success and appreciation of the scheme is from comments received from the recipients themselves, for example:

"I can honestly say that the Prison Visitors scheme saved my sanity. Had it not been for these invaluable volunteers ..., I know, beyond doubt, I would have attempted suicide, and I would have succeeded. I was in absolute despair."

Female former prisoner

"I can't really explain it, but it's like having a dad around that you wouldn't want to let down. I know you will say that you don't really do a lot, but you do more than you probably will ever realise."

Letter to OPV at HMP Frankland from Cat A prisoner on being given Cat B status.

As conversations are largely confidential, however, and in order not to put unnecessary pressure on an individual, any such comments are voluntarily given and offenders are not asked to tick any boxes!

The future

During the various lockdowns, many OPVs have kept in touch with the prisoners they visit by letter writing, email or use of Purple Visits video conferencing, all achieved without revealing their personal contact details – a requirement of all OPVs. As gradual unlocking proceeds, some OPVs may be reluctant to recommence visiting in the shorter term and so may continue with these alternative modes of communication. Whilst these alternatives have been invaluable in the circumstances, there is nothing really to replace the meaningful interaction of a confidential face to face meeting.

With regard to equality and diversity

issues, there is a view that the ethnicity, age range and gender of employees in the prison service, as well as those of companies or charitable associations involved with the criminal justice system, and especially those in contact with prisoners, should reflect that of the prison population itself. As with probably every such organisation, we fail miserably on that count, even when considering only gender. The gender split of male and female OPVs is around 50:50 whereas the number of female prisoners is less than 5% of the total population, so the ideal would never be attainable – nor indeed would we, or indeed the male prison population, want it to be. The NAOPV and HMPPS will however, continue to work toward achieving a more representative ethnicity mix, bearing in mind that OPVs, as with so many voluntary groups, have traditionally come from a white middle class, middle-aged background.

The effects of the pandemic on organisations and charities serving the prison service will become more apparent as restrictions are gradually eased. It is possible that a significant number of volunteers may be reluctant to continue in their role, due to personal concerns or concerns for their family members; this could create a significant shortfall in support for some activities. Similarly, some organisations, dependent on external financial support, may find that they struggle to continue in their existing guise and where some institutions provide the same or similar service, there may be a need for future rationalisation. Some service providers may be covering too wide a range of activities and so may need to focus on what they do best, whereas others may need to widen their brief to maximise their effectiveness.

The OPV scheme is now a well-established unique service and with the NAOPV having enjoyed a special relationship with the MoJ (and its forbears) over the best part of a century, long may it continue.

Footnote

The NAOPV is committed to promoting and valuing diversity in every aspect of the work it carries out. The aim being that our volunteers are representative of the local community, or of its service users; under-represented groups are therefore encouraged to apply to become Official Prison Visitors. We would particularly welcome applications from members of the Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic communities and from those with foreign language or signing skills.

For information about becoming an OPV, visit our website (www.naopv.com) or email info@naopv.com.