

Human Rights Select Committee Children Heard and Seen: Evidence Summary



Children Heard and Seen have supported children and families impacted by parental imprisonment for 6 years, offering family support work, 1-1 support, volunteer mentors, Drawing and Talking therapy sessions, holiday activities and more. The quality of our work has been recognised consistently throughout our development. In 2019, we were awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service. More recently, we were awarded the Outstanding Regional/Local Organisation Award by the Criminal Justice Alliance in 2020 for our innovative approach to supporting families online during the pandemic.

Over the last twelve months, children and families impacted by parental imprisonment have faced unprecedented challenges flowing from a lack of meaningful contact with the imprisoned parent. Families have reported that this has manifested in a deterioration of children's mental health that has severe knock on effects on education, eating, sleeping, emotions and behaviour. Many believe that these difficulties are often heightened in cases where a mother has been imprisoned, as children are more likely to have their primary caregiver taken away from them.

The disruption in family contact as a result of imprisonment raises serious questions with regard to Article 8 and the Right to Family Life. This month, our director, Sarah Burrows, attended the Select Committee on Human Rights to give evidence on the subject: "The Government's response to covid-19: human rights implications of long lockdown". Whilst we were honoured to be asked to provide evidence on behalf of families, we were extremely concerned that we were the only organisation deemed to have 'on the ground' experience and knowledge of how families have been impacted, as many other organisations were forced to halt services completely during the height of the pandemic.

Sarah spoke at length about the high levels of emotional strain placed on children and families in the context of visitation. Social visits were only allowed in limited locations and for a very brief period during the pandemic. Many families opted not to attend as the thought of not being able to hug or touch a parent who had not been seen for months at a time would be too traumatic for young children. Whilst the prisons have done a good job in keeping prisoners safe during the lockdown, this has unfortunately come at the cost of the wellbeing of families and family contact. The quality of the visits was seriously inhibited by the fact that many prisons only allowed for 2 or 3 children to attend the monthly visits. This forced larger families to choose which children would be able to see their parent, causing a great deal of distress for those left behind. Such issues also raised logistical problems for families attempting to visit, as organising childcare and travel arrangements proved very difficult.

The situation was unfortunately not improved much by the limited introduction of video calls, which were permitted on a monthly basis for families and were fraught with technical glitches and difficulties. As each monthly call was limited to 30 minutes, it placed too much pressure on the limited contact to be perfect, meaning that any perceived negatives caused extreme distress. On each call, only 4 people could attend, this had to include one adult (the account holder) meaning that families with more than 3 children

would have to choose which children could see their parent after months of no contact. There were also reports that any sudden movements could cause calls to glitch and the identities of those in attendance would have to be re-verified. This could eat away at the limited and precious time that families had with their loved one, causing further stress. Children Heard and Seen have suggested that making these calls available for longer periods and at a higher frequency would remove the immense amount of emotional pressure families put on these calls to be perfect. As the calls are rife with stress and high emotionality, families reported that it was incredibly difficult to have any meaningful contact with the imprisoned parent during this time. Maintaining relationships with family members is about sharing in the minutia of life and communicating in an environment where you feel safe and secure. This kind of quality contact has unfortunately not been made available to many children during the pandemic.

It is also important to note the high degree of inconsistency based on which prison a parent is being held. Those whose parents had in-cell access phones were much better equipped to have consistent and reliable relationships with them. One family we support had a father with in-cell phone access while the mother was forced to share a mobile phone with over 30 women. The difference is so marked between different prisons and therefore children's experiences are so varied. A lack of a consistent and coherent approach across prisons has left families confused and upset that their right to contact is influenced so heavily by arbitrary factors outside of their control.

Everything Sarah spoke about before the committee came from children and their parent/carer.¹ The views of families are key to the service provided by Children Heard and Seen. Throughout the pandemic, our charity has seen an unprecedented number of families referring themselves to us, in dire need of support. Sarah outlined a series of recommendations to improve the situation that families find themselves in, and help to alleviate their feelings of being forgotten and left behind. Briefly, these included:

- Increasing the frequency of video or telephone calls to reduce the high levels of emotional pressure put on monthly contact. Increasing the length of this contact for more than 30 minute periods would also take away the pressure
 - This would also reduce the damage caused by limiting the number of children who can attend each call, as children in larger families would not have to be excluded from contact
- Clearer and more consistent communication with families about what decisions are being made and why
- Dedicated support with letter writing, helping children to stay in contact with their parent and make sense of their feelings of loss, isolation and shame
- Recognising the importance of family ties, not only in reports but in reality, ensuring that families are engaged and involved in decisions that affect them and don't feel left behind

This has been an incredibly challenging year for us all. Children with a parent in prison have suffered immensely, and it is essential that adequate support is provided in order to protect their Right to Family Life and emotional wellbeing.

¹ Information regarding families with children under age 2 was provided by Birth Companions.