

**Prisoners' Families Helpline
External Evaluation Report**

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by

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M & E Consulting

Some comments made by callers to the Prisoners' Families Helpline

They were wonderful.

They were very understanding and kind and made me feel better.

A brilliant service. I wish I'd have known about it earlier.

They were very understanding and offered lots of information which arrived the next morning. I was astounded.

They do a marvellous job. I couldn't fault it at all. Thank God they were there.

Make sure it doesn't disappear!

Now that I know I can speak to them, I will call them again to talk about how to deal with my children.

They were efficient, quick and helpful. A useful link in terms of dealing with the prisons.

I think they are absolutely wonderful and wouldn't be able to cope without them.

Everything I wanted and asked for, I got from them.

They delivered 100%. An absolutely fantastic service. Lots of people like myself wouldn't know what to do if it wasn't there.

Evaluation of the Prisoners' Families Helpline

Executive Summary

The Prisoners' Families Helpline

The Prisoners' Families Helpline provides a free and confidential service for people who are affected by the imprisonment of a close family member or friend. The Helpline is delivered by a consortium of three organisations; it is co-ordinated by Action for Prisoners' Families and the Helpline services are provided by the Ormiston Children & Families Trust in Cambridge and Partners of Prisoners' Families Support (POPS) in Manchester.

The evaluation

Following on from an earlier external evaluation carried out by the Telephone Helplines Association in 2004 and subsequent internal evaluation, the consortium decided to commission an external evaluation focusing on the value and quality of the Helpline service. In particular, it wished to find out more about:

- the difference the Helpline has made to callers i.e. the outcomes of the service received
- levels of satisfaction with the service provided
- the type of people calling the Helpline.

M & E Consulting was commissioned to carry out this evaluation which was conducted primarily through a series of in-depth telephone interviews with a sample of callers to the Helpline.

Key findings

This evaluation has sought to answer a number of key questions about the service provided by the Prisoners' Families Helpline.

Is the service needed?

It is clear from this evaluation that the Prisoners' Families Helpline is providing a much-needed service for the families and friends of prisoners. The statistics show that there is an ever-increasing demand for the service and most of the callers we interviewed during this evaluation said they could not imagine how they would have coped without the Helpline.

Who uses it?

Over three-quarters of callers said they had called the Helpline for the first time. Not surprisingly, parents and partners of those in prison constituted the largest proportion of callers to the Helpline.

Can callers access it easily?

The service is easily accessible. The fact that it is a free Helpline was extremely important to the majority of callers as many are coping with difficult financial situations. Almost all callers reported that they got through to the Helpline straightaway. The Helpline also provides a service to an ethnically representative group of people.

What help do callers want from the Helpline?

Callers appear to view the Helpline primarily as a source of information however almost half had also sought support from the Helpline. The vast majority of callers had rung the Helpline in a state of distress, confusion or frustration. Almost half of the calls taken by the Helpline were complex in nature, requiring a high level of involvement and skill from the call-takers.

Is the Helpline providing a high-quality service?

All callers felt that the call-takers had dealt with them in a polite, sensitive and supportive manner and over 90% of callers said they had received the information and support they wanted from the Helpline. As a result, levels of satisfaction with the level of service were extremely high. This was clearly reinforced by the fact that there were no significant suggestions made for improving the service.

Were there any differences in the services provided by the two call-centres?

Some significant differences emerged in the way in which the two call-centres provided their service. The Ormiston Trust seemed to have signposted a far higher proportion of callers to other organisations, sent out a much larger amount of follow-up information and taken action on behalf of more callers than POPS. However, levels of satisfaction and outcomes achieved by callers were consistently high across both call-centres.

What difference does the Helpline make to callers?

Calling the Helpline appears to make a considerable difference to callers in a range of ways. For many people, calling the Helpline had made an immediate and positive difference to how they were feeling and over two-thirds of callers described feeling better in the longer-term as a result of speaking to the Helpline. The fact that someone had listened to them and understood what they were going through had been enormously helpful and had relieved a lot of stress and frustration.

Almost two-thirds of callers felt better supported having contacted the Helpline and over half of this group told us that knowing they could go back to the Helpline when they needed to made a real difference to them. As a result, some callers felt that they could cope better with their situation and were more in control.

For a smaller number of people, calling the Helpline had not only resolved some issues for them but also for their relative in prison. In addition, a small number of callers said that contact with the Helpline had led to a positive effect on children in the family.

Recommendations

This external evaluation has confirmed and reinforced the value of the service provided by the Prisoners Families Helpline and no significant recommendations for improving the service emerged from the interviews with callers. However, some suggestions for improvement were identified through discussions with staff and analysis of the Helpline's own monitoring data. These focus on improving the

quality and consistency of the monitoring data gathered by the call-centres and reviewing its mechanisms for gathering user feedback. It is also recommended that the consortium consider the differences in service-provision between the two call-centres in order to achieve a greater level of consistency of service.

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Evaluation of the Prisoners' Families Helpline

1. Introduction

1.1 The Prisoners' Families Helpline

The Prisoners' Families Helpline was set up in January 2003 and provides a free and confidential service for people who are affected by the imprisonment of a close family member or friend. The Helpline is delivered by a consortium of three organisations; it is co-ordinated by Action for Prisoners' Families (the national federation of services supporting families of prisoners), and the Helpline services are provided by the Ormiston Children & Families Trust in Cambridge and Partners of Prisoners' Families Support (POPS) in Manchester.

Following on from an earlier external evaluation in 2004¹ and subsequent internal evaluation, the Helpline decided to commission an external evaluation focusing on the value and quality of the Helpline service. M & E Consulting was commissioned to carry out this evaluation.

1.2 M & E Consulting

Diana Parkinson and Avan Wadia work together as M & E Consulting, providing specialist advice, training and support with monitoring and evaluation to organisations in the voluntary sector.

1.3 The evaluation

1.3.1 *The evaluation focus*

This evaluation covered three key areas:

- the difference the Helpline has made to callers i.e. the outcomes of the service received
- levels of satisfaction with the service provided
- the profile of callers.

The emphasis of the evaluation was on a qualitative investigation into the views and experiences of callers and this report therefore draws heavily from the interviews carried out with callers. It aims to provide material to support the consortium's reporting to the Big Lottery as well as for other fundraising or awareness-raising activities.

1.3.2 *The evaluation process*

We held an initial meeting with the National Helpline Manager in order to clarify the outcomes, outputs and processes to be evaluated. This was then followed by meetings with call-takers at the Ormiston Trust and at POPS in order to make sure staff and volunteers were closely involved with the

¹ An evaluation of the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the Prisoners' Families Helpline was carried out by Linda Thomson of the Telephone Helplines Association.

evaluation. These meetings also enabled us to get their input into the type of information to be gathered and the process by which this would be done, and to gather their views on the quality and outcomes of the service they provide.

Each call centre was then asked to collect a sample of callers who had given their permission to be interviewed.² All callers during the evaluation period (8th – 30th April) were asked whether they were willing to participate unless it was judged that:

- the caller was too distressed for this to be appropriate
- or their call was inappropriate (e.g. their query was not within the remit of the Helpline).

We drew up a set of interview questions³ and consulted on this with call-centre staff and the National Helpline Manager to ensure the questions were sensitive, appropriate and would generate the most useful information.

The aim was to interview 75 callers. In order to gather this sample, almost 200 callers were asked to participate in the evaluation. Of these, 77% agreed and 23% refused. Of those that agreed to participate, interviews were carried out with 47% (i.e. 71 callers). This interview sample was selected to provide a representative distribution of callers in terms of the call centre they had spoken to and the nature of their call as it was felt that the callers' experience of the service might be affected by either of these factors.⁴

1.3.3 The evaluation sample

In total, we carried out interviews with 71 callers.⁵ 70% of the callers who gave permission to be interviewed had spoken to the Ormiston Trust and 30% had spoken to POPS. This represented:

- 6% of the 694 calls taken by the Ormiston Trust during April
- and 6% of the 538 calls taken by POPS.

We sought to ensure a balance of interviews with callers who had been in contact with the different call centres and therefore:

- 55% of the interviews we carried out were with people who had spoken to the Ormiston Trust
- 45% were with those who had spoken POPS.

1.3.4 The interviews

We carried out semi-structured interviews with callers by telephone over a three-week period. The interviews explored:

- the quality of callers' contact with the Helpline (e.g. sensitivity and politeness)
- the promptness of the Helpline in dealing with their call

² Call centre staff were asked to exclude professionals from the sample as the focus of the evaluation was on the main service users, i.e. family and friends of prisoners

³ For further information, see appendix 1

⁴ For further information, see appendix 2.

⁵ Please note that we refer to the interviewees as callers for the sake of simplicity therefore all statistics given refer to those interviewed rather than to all callers to the Helpline.

- the adequacy of information provided during and following the call
- the usefulness of any signposting.

The interviews also sought to find out about callers' outcomes such as:

- callers accessing support
- callers being better informed
- callers improving their wellbeing
- callers being better able to cope with the imprisonment of a relative or friend.

We also asked callers about any other outcomes that might have resulted from their contact with the Helpline.

The evaluation also drew upon the Helpline's own data-collection systems in order to compile a summary of the programme's outputs and the profile of its callers during the evaluation period. This was necessary in order to provide a context for the analysis and reporting of the Helpline's outcomes.⁶

1.3.5 Key challenges for the evaluation

We identified a number of key challenges and risks in advance of carrying out this evaluation and took steps to reduce the effect of these.

The short timescale available to carry out the evaluation

The evaluation was commissioned on 19th March 2008 with a completion date of the end of May 2008. This meant we were working to a tight timescale to set up the evaluation, receive details of callers who had given their permission to be interviewed, carry out interviews, analyse the data and write up the report. As a result, everyone involved with the evaluation was asked to prioritise meetings and keep to deadlines. We reviewed our progress of the evaluation regularly and kept Action for Prisoners' Families closely informed of our progress. Fortunately, the call-centres were able to gather details of a large enough number of callers quickly so that we were able to make good progress in carrying out the interviews.

Availability of callers for interview

We were concerned that there might not be enough people to interview for a variety of reasons including getting hold of people over the Easter holidays and the number of callers willing to take part. To mitigate against this risk, we asked the call-centres to provide us with a large sample of people to contact (approximately 200). We also set up a system by which the call-takers could securely transmit details to us immediately a caller had given consent for interview.

Limited evidence of longer-term outcomes

We were also concerned that outcomes information would be limited as the period between the call and the interview was very short and that this would allow little chance for longer-term outcomes to occur. This report therefore focuses on the short-term outcomes evidenced through our interviews.

⁶ For further information, see appendix 3.

2. The profile of callers

In this section of the report, we look at the profile of the callers to the Helpline and the nature of the calls:

- their relationship to the prisoner
- the complexity of their call
- the type of help they had sought from the Helpline
- how many were previous callers
- callers' levels of distress at the time of the call.

2.1 Relationship to prisoner

Of the 71 interviewees, 38% were parents of prisoners and 34% were partners of prisoners. 6% were other relatives such as a grandparent or aunt; one interviewee was a friend and one person was facing a potential prison sentence themselves. Information on the background of 20% of callers and on the email respondent was not provided by the Helpline.

Monitoring data supplied by the Helpline revealed that of all the calls taken in April:

- 27% were from parents of prisoners
- 19% were from prisoners' partners
- 33% were from other relatives of prisoners.

It is clear that a higher proportion of callers interviewed were parents and partners compared to the overall background of Helpline callers.

2.2 Nature of the calls

51% of the calls taken during the evaluation period were recorded by the Helpline as being straightforward in nature (e.g. information on how to arrange a visit) and 46% were recorded as being complex.⁷ 3% of the calls were not categorised.

There was a marked difference between the proportion of calls categorised by each centre as either straightforward or complex as:

- 64% of the complex calls were taken by the Ormiston Trust and 36% were taken by POPS
- 47% of the straightforward calls were taken by the Ormiston Trust compared to 53% taken by POPS.

⁷ This figure includes calls that were categorised by the call centres as 'both complex and straightforward'.

2.3 Purpose of the calls

55% of callers said they had called for information and 45% of callers had called for both information and support. Two people had initially called for information but said they had received support as well.

2.4 Previous callers

79% of callers said that this was the first time they had contacted the Helpline whereas 21% had called the Helpline before.

2.5 Levels of distress

We asked callers if they remembered how they were feeling when they had made the call to the Helpline. The vast majority of them (86%) described feeling distressed, confused or frustrated at the time of calling the Helpline.⁸ More specifically:

- nearly half (40%) said they had been feeling upset
- about a quarter (24%) had been feeling stressed or anxious
- 17% had been feeling low or depressed
- 12% had been feeling confused
- and 9% had been feeling frustrated.⁹

2.6 Analysis

Over two-thirds of the callers interviewed were parents or partners of prisoners whereas just under half of calls taken during the evaluation period were from parents and partners. It is probable that those most closely affected by the imprisonment were more likely to consent to participating in the evaluation than those who were less directly affected. Callers seemed to view the Helpline primarily as a source of information. However the vast majority of callers described feeling distressed, confused or frustrated when they called the Helpline and almost half had also sought support from the Helpline.

The calls were split between those that had been recorded by the Helpline as straightforward in nature and ones which had been recorded as being complex. However, it would appear that the Ormiston Trust categorised a much higher proportion of calls as complex than POPS. Although the categorisation of calls was left to the discretion of the call-takers, this disparity might suggest that call-takers at the Ormiston Trust are going into greater depth in their calls than call-takers at POPS. This was an issue raised in the previous external evaluation which asked whether there might be 'a lack of consistency with regard to how the service is being provided'.

⁸ 9% of callers said they were feeling fine before calling the Helpline; many were just calling for basic information.

⁹ Some callers described more than one emotion.

3. The effectiveness of the service provided by the Helpline

This section of the report considers the overall value and effectiveness of the Helpline, including issues such as:

- how easily callers were able to access the Helpline
- the quality of the response they received
- and whether it met their needs.

3.1 The need for the service

The evaluation carried out by the Telephone Helplines Association noted that the Helpline was taking an average of 885 calls per month in the period from January to October 2004. Recent monitoring information shows that the Helpline is now taking an average of 1200 calls per month (in the period from January to April 2008).

Many callers described how the Helpline had been vital in helping them during difficult times. For example, callers described how:

I think even if you don't want any information you can call and they would make you feel better and not feel like a damn fool for feeling low.

They were great. If I hadn't phoned them I wouldn't have slept last night.

They were a real solace.

We also asked callers what they would have done if the Helpline had not existed. The vast majority said that they could not imagine what they would have done without the Helpline, with some adding:

I have felt so low that I even thought of contacting Samaritans - there is no other help out there for me and my kids.

It would have caused unnecessary distress to me and my son as I wouldn't have been able to get in touch with him.

I wouldn't have got the information I needed. I didn't know where else to turn to as I phoned the prison everyday and they wouldn't give me the information I needed.

3.2 Getting through easily

Almost all callers (92%) said they got through to the Helpline straightaway. The other 8% said that the line had been busy or that it had taken a long time to be answered.

The Helpline is usually available on weekdays from 9.00 am until 5.00 pm and on Saturdays from 10.00 am until 3.00 pm. Although callers were not asked

specifically about whether these opening hours met their needs, one person suggested that more evening opening hours would be helpful.

3.3 Accessing a free helpline

We asked callers whether having a free helpline had made a difference to them. 68% said that it had made a difference that their call to the Helpline was free and many said that this was due to financial difficulties:

My partner has been in prison for a while and things are hard financially.

It was a godsend as we are both on pensions.

For others, it was important that the call was free because they felt they could call when they needed to and could speak for as long as necessary. A few callers acknowledged that they would have been prepared to pay for the call but that it was helpful that it was free. For example, one person said:

I would have paid if I'd had to but obviously it was beneficial that it was free.

Four callers said it had not made a difference to them that it was free but recognised the importance of this for other people. One person said:

It means everyone can use it - rich or poor.

Three callers were not aware that the Helpline service had been free.

3.4 Providing a service to all

Although this evaluation did not collect information on callers' ethnic origin, previous data gathered by the Helpline shows that 76% of the callers were White and 24% were from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds.¹⁰

3.5 The quality of the Helpline's response

All 71 callers said they found the call-takers polite, that they had listened well to them and given them enough time to talk. They all also felt the call-takers had made them feel safe to ask what they needed to ask and callers particularly valued how the call-takers had put them at their ease. For example, a number of people described how they had made them feel, making comments such as:

I was a bit wary at first...but they were brilliant.

It was like speaking to an extended member of your family.

¹⁰ These figures represent an average taken from the snapshots carried out by the Helpline from September 2006 to December 2007.

They also appreciated the way in which the Helpline had been able to answer their questions promptly and fully and had given them the time they needed. Their comments included:

I was able to ask questions I couldn't ask anyone else.

I absolutely needed someone to talk to yesterday and they were great.

They were brilliant, absolutely brilliant. We were on the phone for about an hour. They explained everything.

They are never in a hurry - they listen.

Almost all callers (94%) said they had received the information or support they wanted from the Helpline. For example, one person said:

I couldn't have got through without them. Everything I wanted and asked for, I got from them.

3.6 Signposting

We asked callers if they had been referred to the Helpline's own website for further information or if they had been signposted to other organisations:

- 14% of callers had been referred to the Helpline's website. Of these, seven people said this had been helpful, three people had not looked at it yet and one had visited it before.
- 30% of callers had been referred to other organisations. Of these, 67% said that this had been helpful (33% had not yet contacted the other organisations). One person said:

It was great that they could give me that access to someone.

Further analysis of the data revealed that:

- Of the 14% of callers who were referred to the Helpline's website, 60% were referred by the Ormiston Trust and 40% by POPS.
- Of the 30% of callers who had been signposted to other organisations, 67% were signposted by the Ormiston Trust and 33% by POPS. This is supported by internal monitoring information which showed that 12% of callers who spoke to POPS in April were signposted to other organisations whereas 24% of callers who spoke to the Ormiston Trust were signposted to other organisations.

3.7 Taking action on behalf of callers

We also asked callers if the Helpline had taken any action on their behalf. About a fifth (18%) of callers said that the Helpline had taken action on their behalf. For example, some callers described how the Helpline had called a prison chaplain or had arranged transport for a visit.

All of these callers said that this had been helpful although one caller explained that the Helpline had not been able to get through but had phoned her back to let her know this.

Of the 18% of callers who said that the Helpline had taken action on their behalf, 54% of these had been dealt with by POPS and 46% by the Ormiston Trust. However, internal monitoring data shows that 91% of all action taken by the Helpline on behalf of callers was taken by the Ormiston Trust compared to only 9% taken by POPS.

3.8 Follow-up information provided

About a third (32%) of callers had been sent further information in the post following their call, although 3% had not yet received the information when interviewed. Of those that had received information, all said it had been helpful, with one person commenting:

The information came immediately. I was amazed - it came so quick.

Further analysis showed that of the callers who received follow-up information, 52% were dealt with by the Ormiston Trust and 48% by POPS. However, this is not reflected in the internal monitoring data supplied by the Helpline, which shows that POPS sent out 52 pieces of information during April whereas the Ormiston Trust sent out 160 pieces of information.¹¹

3.9 What was most helpful about the service received

We asked callers what they had found **most** helpful about their contact with the Helpline:¹²

- Over half of callers (55%) said that above all they valued the information that the Helpline had provided and over a quarter (27%) appreciated the specific advice or contacts they had been given.
- Almost half (44%) of the callers said it was the way in which the Helpline dealt with them that was most important to them. Over a quarter (27%) of callers particularly valued the way in which the call-taker had put them at their ease and 23% said that what was most important for them was the way in which the Helpline call-takers had listened to them and understood them.
- 11% of callers particularly appreciated the reassurance they had gained from speaking to the Helpline.
- 4% of callers could not single out any particular aspect of the call that had been most helpful but simply felt that everything about it had been helpful.

¹¹ The internal monitoring information provided did not allow us to assess the number of callers who had been sent follow-up information.

¹² Some callers identified more than one aspect as being most helpful.

3.10 What other help callers wanted from the Helpline

Almost all callers (94%) said they had received the information or support they wanted from the Helpline and again almost all (90%) felt that they had received all the help they needed. 10% of callers said there were ways in which they would have liked more help.

Of these, three callers would have liked more information. Their comments included:

I would have liked more support in terms of organisations that can help you financially.

It would have been nice to have had more information that was more specific to my brother who has special needs.

Four callers would have liked the Helpline to have taken some specific action relating to their own or their relative's situation. However, it would appear that their requests lay outside the scope of the Helpline. For example one person said:

I wanted to find out about a coach to the prison, when it left etc and cost. They gave me another number but it was shut.

Of the seven people who would have liked more help, five were dealt with by POPS and two by the Ormiston Trust. As the numbers in question are extremely small, it would be unsafe to draw any firm conclusions from this.

Many of those who did not feel there was any more help they could have had made comments such as:

I don't think they could have done anything more. It was absolutely excellent.

3.11 Improvements suggested

We asked callers whether they had any suggestions for improving the service and seventeen people made suggestions. The main themes that emerged from these were that:

- the Helpline should be better advertised
- more information should be available (e.g. on local support groups or specific issues such as mental health)
- the Helpline should have more influence such as providing legal representation or having more sway over the prison authorities.

3.12 Analysis

Callers are clearly able to access the Helpline easily with 92% reporting that they got through straightaway. This is a significant improvement on the findings of the previous external evaluation which reported that just over 50% of callers were getting through on their first attempt. Internal monitoring

information on the ethnic background of callers also demonstrates that the Helpline is providing a service to a representative group of people as national data shows that 25% of the prison population is from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.¹³

Comparing recent statistics with those gathered during the 2004 evaluation shows that there is a distinct and increasing need for the service; most callers said they could not imagine how they would have coped without the Helpline. Although the information and advice provided was what was most important to callers, the way in which the Helpline responded to them was also very significant.

It would appear that call-takers at the Ormiston Trust are signposting more callers to other organisations, sending out more follow-up information and taking action on behalf of more callers than those at POPS. However, we found high levels of satisfaction with the service provided by both call-centres. The fact that there were no significant suggestions made for improving the service reinforces this finding.

¹³ Prison Reform Trust, May 2008.

4. The outcomes of the Helpline

This section of the report considers the difference that the Helpline made to callers in terms of their general wellbeing but also in terms of helping them to feel better informed, better supported and ultimately better able to cope with the imprisonment of their relative or friend.

4.1 Better informed

The vast majority of callers (89%) said that calling the Helpline had helped them access the information they needed. For example, callers said:

They had answers to everything I needed.

I'm now aware that there is a family contact within the prison. My son's been there seven months and no one told us until now.

Many of these callers felt that the call had increased their understanding of their situation and helped them feel less confused, making comments such as:

They knew what they were talking about. It was my first time and we didn't know what to do or where to go. They were a big help.

4.2 Improved wellbeing

4.2.1 Immediately after the call

We asked callers if they remembered how they were feeling when they had had contacted the Helpline. The vast majority of them (86%) described feeling distressed, confused or frustrated at the time of calling the Helpline.

When asked if calling the Helpline had made a difference to how they were feeling at the time of their call, 76% of callers said they had felt better after the call, with some of them commenting:

I was relieved that someone else was dealing with the problem.

They phoned someone in the prison and then phoned me back that evening. So after that, I felt a bit better.

I went from feeling depressed, desperate to being elated, pleased.

Many of those who did not feel differently having called the Helpline acknowledged that this was for reasons beyond the scope of the Helpline. For example, one person explained:

I probably didn't feel differently after the call but this wasn't down to them. My husband had attempted suicide.

4.2.2 In the longer-term

We then asked callers whether calling the Helpline had made a difference to how they were feeling or coping in the days following the call. Over two-thirds of callers (68%) described feeling better in the longer-term as a result of speaking to the Helpline. Their comments included:

My husband said I seemed much better since I spoke to Helpline. I was soothed and felt someone cared.

I'm happier now because I know he's safe. Someone has taken notice and now they understand. I'm not worried now.

The fact that someone had listened to them and understood what they were going through was clearly an important part of helping callers feel better. For example, some callers described how:

They really understand what you are going through and they really do help you - their name speaks for itself.

Many callers also commented how speaking to the Helpline had helped them feel less anxious. For example, one person said:

It relieved a lot of stress and frustration.

Others reflected that the Helpline had helped give them some perspective on their situation. One person said:

They made me feel we weren't being singled out, that this is just something that happens. They gave me information about how things actually happen. Sometimes you take things personally.

About a quarter (24%) of callers felt that speaking to the Helpline had given them some reassurance. Their comments included:

It makes you feel calmer and reassures you that you are not the only one.

They reassured me that things were going to be all right.

4.3 Better supported

Almost two-thirds of the callers we spoke to (63%) felt more supported after their contact with the Helpline. Over half of these callers (51%) told us that knowing they could go back to the Helpline when they needed to made a real difference to them.

Some of their comments included:

It's made me feel that I'm not on my own, even if I just need to get something off my chest, I can call them... I don't feel so much on my own having to find out all these answers.

It's a safety net for me. Having someone independent to speak to so I don't burden my partner.

I have the number stored in my phone for when I need them. It means I've got back-up.

4.4 Better able to cope

As a result of feeling more supported, more informed and generally feeling better in themselves, 21% of callers felt that the speaking to the Helpline had helped them cope better with their situation. One person summed it up:

It's like having a friend at the other end of the phone... Even if I don't want anything in particular doing, many times I've rung up sobbing and breaking my heart, and they were there to talk to us... Lots of people couldn't cope if they didn't have that.

Some callers we spoke to also said that speaking to the Helpline had helped them to feel more in control of their situation. For example:

It made me feel I was doing something to help. I took back a bit of control that I felt the prison had taken from me.

When you speak to the Helpline, they can give you advice and tell you what they think you should do and that's important because I can't always make a decision. I need that little extra push.

Having someone to fight for you can really help.

4.5 Resolving issues

As a result of the Helpline taking action on their behalf, 15% of callers felt that speaking to the Helpline had enabled them to resolve some issues. For example, people commented how:

It made a big difference to how far I've got on with sorting things out and getting in touch with contacts I'd never have known were out there.

It made it possible for me to make the prison visit. He's in a prison that's difficult to get to. I don't drive and public transport is very difficult. They put on a mini bus but no one else was booked on so they got a driver to collect me, take me there and bring me back.

4.6 Helping the prisoner

A small number of callers (7%) believed that speaking to the Helpline had also made a difference to their relative's situation in prison. This was explained by some as:

Now my son is getting the medical treatment he needs.

My partner was going crazy; I needed the information to give to him to ease his mind and my mind.

For my husband, it has helped him in terms of how he's been treated in the last few days.

I phoned my son and he feels better knowing that I can speak to someone.

4.7 Helping children in the family

The Helpline was also keen to find out whether contact with the Helpline was making a difference to any children who were affected by the imprisonment. Where appropriate, we asked callers if this was the case.

14% of the callers we spoke to thought that their contact with the Helpline had had a positive effect on children in the family. For many of them, it had helped them to explain to the children what was happening and had increased the children's understanding of the situation:

I had kept a lot back from him but he knew about the crime. So now I have explained it and he understands it. The leaflets they sent helped me do that. I read them before I spoke to him.

My kids know a lot more about what's going on. My eldest was thinking it was his fault which was why I decided I needed to tell him but I didn't know how. The Helpline sent me a leaflet for me and for my partner. Now both of the kids know it's not because of them.

For others, it had helped give the children some reassurance:

We told him that his brother is all right. He's not worried now.

For some, it had helped parents cope better, which had been beneficial for their children:

I'm not stressed so he's less stressed. I know they feel it when I'm agitated so they get more agitated.

It made me stronger so I could help my son more, putting his mind at ease and being more positive.

4.8 Analysis

Calling the Helpline makes a big difference to callers. The majority of callers felt that calling the Helpline had increased their knowledge and understanding of their situation and related issues. Over three-quarters said that calling the Helpline had made an immediate and positive difference to how they were feeling.

Almost two-thirds of callers felt better supported having contacted the Helpline and just over half of this group told us that knowing they could go back to the Helpline when they needed made a real difference to them. Some callers also said that speaking to the Helpline had made a difference to their relative's situation in prison and for some, it had had a positive effect on children in the family.

As a result, over two-thirds of callers described feeling better in the longer-term as a result of speaking to the Helpline. They explained that the fact that someone had listened to them and understood what they were going through had been enormously helpful and had relieved some of their stress and frustration.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

5.1 Key findings

It is clear from this evaluation that the Prisoners' Families Helpline is providing a much-needed service for the families and friends of prisoners. The statistics show that there is an ever-increasing demand for the service and most of the callers we interviewed during this evaluation said they could not imagine how they would have coped without the Helpline.

The service is easily accessible as almost all callers reported that they got through to the Helpline straightaway. This is a significant improvement on the findings of the previous external evaluation which reported that just over 50% of callers were getting through on their first attempt. The fact that it is a free helpline was extremely important to the majority of callers as many are coping with difficult financial situations.

The evaluation found that calling the Helpline made a considerable difference to the lives of prisoners' families and friends. The key outcomes were:

- callers felt better informed and had increased their understanding of their situation
- callers felt better supported
- calling the Helpline had helped people feel less stressed and frustrated
- for some people, calling the Helpline had helped them resolve some issues either for themselves or for their relative in prison
- as a result, some callers felt that they could cope better with their situation and that they felt more in control.

A small number of callers also said that contact with the Helpline had had a positive effect on children in the family.

Levels of satisfaction with the service were extremely high. All callers felt that the call-takers had dealt with them in a polite, sensitive and supportive manner and over 90% of callers said they had received the information and support they wanted from the Helpline. Although some significant differences emerged in the way in which the two call-centres provided their service, levels of satisfaction and outcomes achieved by callers were consistently high across both call-centres.

5.2 Recommendations

This external evaluation has confirmed and reinforced the value of the service provided by the Prisoners' Families Helpline and no significant recommendations for improving the service emerged from the interviews with callers.

Some minor suggestions for improvement have arisen through discussions with staff and analysis of the Helpline's own monitoring data. These focus on improving the quality and consistency of the monitoring data gathered by the

call-centres. In particular, monitoring systems should enable the Helpline to report on the number of callers supported with additional signposting, information and further action rather than just on the number of times these services are provided. In addition, the current system for gathering user feedback through postcards sent out to callers does not appear to be a particularly effective method and the Helpline might wish to review this.

The consortium might also wish to discuss the differences in service-provision between the two call-centres that emerged in this evaluation. Although the evaluation shows that there is no significant difference in the outcomes and levels of satisfaction shown by callers to the two centres, there may be ways to achieve a greater level of consistency without losing effectiveness.

5.3 In summary

The Prisoners' Families Helpline is providing an extremely valuable and effective service which is meeting the needs of a disadvantaged and vulnerable group of people. It is doing this in a highly sensitive and caring way, providing callers with clear, focussed information which helps them to understand and cope better with their situation. For many, it is both a lifeline and a safety net, alleviating some of the distress and difficulties faced by those with a relative or friend in prison.

Appendices

Appendix 1: The interview schedule

1. Roughly how long ago was it that you contacted the Helpline?
2. Was this the first time you called them?
3. Were you able to get through straightaway? If not, how many times did you have to try before you got through?
4. Did you find that the person you spoke to...
 - (a) was polite?
 - (b) listened to you well?
 - (c) gave you enough time to talk?
 - (d) made you feel it was safe to ask what you needed to ask?
5. Do you remember how you were feeling when you called the Helpline?
6. Did this change at all as a result of speaking to the Helpline?
7. I don't need to know what you called the Helpline about, but was the reason you were calling because you wanted some information, some support or a bit of both?
8. Did you get the information you wanted?
9. Did you get the support you wanted?
10. And how about after the call, did they send you any information by post or email? (If yes) Was this helpful?
11. Did they refer you to any information on their own website? (If yes) Was this helpful?
12. Did they refer you to any other organisations? (If yes) Was this helpful?
13. Did they take any action on your behalf? (If yes) Was this helpful?
14. Was there anything else they could have done for you?
15. Overall, what did you find was most helpful about speaking to the Helpline?
16. So what actual difference would you say calling the Helpline has made to you?
17. And what about if there are any children affected, would you say that the support you got has made any difference to them?

18. So, what would you have done if the Helpline hadn't existed?
19. Did it make a difference to you that it was free?
20. Are there any ways you think the service could be improved? (If yes)
How?
21. Is there anything else you would like to say about the Helpline?

All interviewees were offered a summary of the evaluation.

Appendix 2: The interview sample

In total, 194 callers were asked by the two call-centres whether they would be willing to participate in the evaluation. Of these 77% accepted and 33% refused.

Table 1: Callers' willingness to participate in the evaluation

	Ormiston Trust	POPS	Total
Accepted	105	45	150
Refused	11	33	44

Of those who accepted to be interviewed, 51% had been straightforward calls, 43% had been complex calls¹⁴ and the call type had not been recorded for 6% of calls.

Table 2: The type of calls made by the evaluation sample

	Ormiston Trust	POPS	Total
Straightforward	50	26	76
Complex	54	11	65
Not known	1	8	9

Interviews were carried out with 71 callers of whom 55% were dealt with by the Ormiston Trust 45% were dealt with by POPS.

Table 3: The distribution of callers in the interview sample

	Ormiston Trust	POPS	Total
Interviewed	39	32	71

Of the interviews carried out, 51% were with callers whose calls had been straightforward, 46% were with callers whose calls had been complex and 3% were with callers whose call type was not known.

Table 4: The type of calls made by interviewees

	Ormiston Trust	POPS	Total
Straightforward	17	19	36
Complex	21	12	33
Not known	1	1	2

¹⁴ This figure includes 8 calls that were categorised by the call centres as 'both complex and straightforward'.

Of the interviewees, 38% were parents of prisoners and 34% were partners of prisoners; 6% were other relatives such as a grandparent or aunt; one interviewee was a friend and one person was facing a potential prison sentence themselves. Information on the background of 20% of callers was not provided by the Helpline.

Table 5: Interviewees' relationship with the prisoner

Relationship	Ormiston Trust	POPS	Total	% of total
Parent	13	14	27	38%
Partner	10	14	24	34%
Other family member	3	1	4	6%
Friend	1	0	1	1%
Prisoner	1	0	1	1%
Not known	11	3	14	20%

Appendix 3: Enquiries received by the Helpline during the evaluation period

The Helpline received 1232 calls and 16 emails during the month of April 2008. Of these, 56% of the calls were dealt with by the Ormiston Trust and 44% were dealt with by POPS. Almost half of the emails received by the Helpline were dealt with by the Ormiston Trust.

Table 6: Enquiries taken during the evaluation period

April 2008	Ormiston Trust	POPS	APF	Total
Calls received	694	538	0	1232
Emails received	16	9	9	34

Of the calls received, 27% were from parents of prisoners, 19% were from prisoners' partners and 33% were from other relatives of prisoners.

Table 7: Callers' relationship with the prisoner

Relationship	Ormiston Trust	POPS	Total	% of total
Child	12	0	12	1%
Parent	266	68	334	27%
Partner	161	78	239	19%
Other family member	71	336	407	33%
Friend	50	15	65	5%
Professional	25	12	37	3%
Prisoner	8	2	10	1%
Didn't know / ask	116	27	143	11%