

scottish justice matters

CYBERCRIME



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ... A PRISON VISITS VOLUNTEER DRIVER

Donald Dickie

FOR MANY YEARS Sacro has provided transport for families visiting their relatives in prisons across Scotland and the State Hospital at Carstairs. I am one of seven volunteer drivers for Sacro Edinburgh's Travel Service. During 2015-2016 we drove 24,000 miles on 250 journeys using our own cars. One quarter of our 415 passengers were children. The service is made possible by funding from the City of Edinburgh Council and by the Scottish Prison Service through the Assisted PrisonVisits Unit (APVU).

There are several good reasons for providing this service. Some argue convincingly that maintaining family contacts makes it more likely that the prisoner will desist from offending on release. For others the key issue is that the families of offenders are themselves victims of the offenders and also of a criminal justice system that penalises the families of prisoners, especially women, children and those on low incomes. Few would dispute that family members must experience emotional and relationship difficulties resulting from the separation, and housing and financial problems are very common. Difficulties in getting to visit is one more problem to face, especially if you are older, not well or have small children in tow and the prison is far way or difficult to reach by public transport.

I started driving for Sacro nearly nine years ago and find it rewarding. I like travelling, driving and meeting people who usually have had very different life experiences from me. The passengers vary greatly but 99% warmly express their appreciation of the service so I know I am doing something useful in my retirement.

My passengers have included a woman with severe anxiety problems visiting her son in Glenochil, a mother visiting her son for many years in Carstairs, a teenage lad visiting his lifer father in Shotts, and a mother of three children taking them to see their father in Kilmarnock. Other passengers include a young man visiting his brother in Carstairs and a disabled woman travelling to Greenock. A guide dog has also been a regular visitor and a popular passenger! We also go to Addiewell, Polmont, Low Moss and Barlinnie.

The Service Co-ordinator receives telephone referrals from agencies such as Families Outside and from family members who have learned about the service through prison staff, other visitors or posters in prison waiting rooms. The co-ordinator checks driver availability and, as far as possible, finds a driver



not too far from the passenger pick up point. I live near the centre of Edinburgh so most of my passengers come from the east and south of the city and from East Lothian. The co-ordinator also arranges fare payment with the APVU so that the passenger does not have to pay in cash up front before the journey.

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With new passengers the co-ordinator and driver take care to make sure the travel arrangements match the passenger needs: pick up time, journey time, child seats when needed, and the preferred arrival time. Prisons differ in their expectations about when families should arrive for the visit as do the families. Some want to get there well in advance to book in items for the prisoner and settle themselves while others want to restrict their time in the prison to the minimum.

I drive four or five times per month (some drivers do much more) and a typical driving day lasts about five hours including travel to and from my home and the duration of the visit. When the visitors are in the prison I usually find a nearby cafe and read newspapers or a book.

I get to know some passengers very well if their family member is doing a longish sentence and I think they like their driver to be a familiar face. Many share details about themselves and their family and my role is simply to listen. It is not a formal support role but I believe that for some a sympathetic and non-judgemental listening ear is welcomed. I hear about many of the issues they face and never cease to be impressed by the commitment and love for their partners, sons and grandsons. Their resilience can be inspiring.

I know that Sacro and Families Outside would like to see this type of service available across Scotland. I very much hope they can make this happen.

Donald Dickie, now retired, has been a children's panel reporter, criminal justice social worker/manager and a member of the Parole Board for Scotland.