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Sent via E-mail

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Dear Cabinet Secretaries,

### **Travel to Scottish Prisons for Families Affected by Imprisonment**

We are writing to you collectively, in view of your respective responsibilities for justice, social justice, and transport, to ask for urgent cross-portfolio recognition and response to the challenges facing families when travelling to visit loved ones in Scottish prisons.

Families Outside has recently published a new report, '[No Easy Journey](#)', which paints a stark picture of the costs and impacts of imprisonment to families and calls attention to the issues families face when trying to maintain contact with a loved one in prison. Key findings include:

- Families are struggling with the financial costs of visiting. Travelling to visit a loved one in prison often involves significant financial cost. For some, the costs of travel are prohibitive and they are simply unable to visit, whilst others are accumulating credit card debt and finding themselves unable to pay other bills so as to cover the costs of visiting.
- Very often, people are not placed in the prison closest to their family, which can result in families having to travel significant distances to visit. Some families have reported moving area and giving up their homes to be closer to the prison where their loved one is placed. Where families are making the journey to visit, it often means huge costs in terms of both money and time, which can prevent families from visiting as regularly as they would like, or in some cases at all.
- Public travel options to prisons are lacking and do not effectively and fairly service all prisons. In addition, visiting times are often not coordinated effectively to take into account local travel options. These issues are resulting in families having to cut visits short, having to walk significant distances to and from train / bus stations, having to use multiple methods of transport, and having unduly long journeys.
- The Help With Prison Visits Scheme is not reaching everyone who needs it. Many families are unaware of the scheme, it can be difficult to apply to, and the process for claiming can take too long, leaving families out of pocket. The scheme also fails to take account of many specific situations facing families, such as those living in rural areas and those unable to travel by public transport. For those claiming mileage, the payments also fail to reflect the current costs of travel, reimbursing only 13p per mile. Quite simply, the scheme is not fit for purpose, and a review is urgently needed to ensure it meets the needs of families.

Given the importance of maintaining meaningful contact between families and their loved ones in prison for the health and wellbeing of all involved, as well as the positive role it can play in reducing reoffending, we are sure you will agree that the report findings are highly concerning. The findings echo those raised in previous reports on the issue of travel, but the need to address these challenges is ever more pressing in the current context of a cost of living crisis which has laid bare the role of imprisonment in creating, sustaining, and deepening poverty amongst children and families, as highlighted in the 2022 '[Paying the Price](#)' report from Families Outside. What is also clear is that the challenges facing families are undoubtedly cross-portfolio in nature, encompassing issues relating to justice, social justice, and transport.

We know that the Scottish Government recognises the damaging impacts of imprisonment for families as well as the importance of supporting meaningful contact. The Scottish Government's commitment to supporting families is made clear in the [Vision for Justice](#), which also explicitly recognises the need to work across the boundaries of public services

to deliver on the vision of a just, safe, resilient Scotland. Moreover, specifically in relation to travel, we were encouraged to hear the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs speak in Parliament recently of her awareness [“that many families are finding it difficult to make visits to their loved ones in custody”](#), noting that the Scottish Government “are assessing current issues with partners and will consider practical ways to make travelling to visit family members easier”. We were further encouraged to see the issue of travel directly addressed in the Scottish Government’s recent [response](#) to the Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which stated: “We are engaging with the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) and Families Outside about issues raised in the Families Outside Paying the Price report (2022), which highlighted challenges families face when travelling to visit loved ones in prison. Equitable and sustainable models of support are being explored which take account of existing schemes.” Commitments from the Scottish Government to work collaboratively with partners, including Families Outside, to address the challenges facing families are most welcome.

Indeed, Families Outside is currently working closely with the Scottish Government Prison Policy Team, the Scottish Prison Service, and the National Prison Visitor Centre Steering Group on the issue of travel, and positive progress *is* being made. However, collaborative discussions are increasingly serving to illustrate that the challenges facing families can only be addressed effectively by a cross-portfolio response. At present, there are unfortunately gaps in this response, with the issue very much appearing to fall largely, if not wholly, within the Justice portfolio. This approach, however, will not adequately address the challenges facing families. Policy commitments within the Social Justice and Transport portfolios, such as those set forth in the [Best Start, Bright Futures](#) child poverty delivery plan and the [National Transport Strategy](#), are also key to addressing this issue, and we must see a joined up approach across these policy areas.

Only by taking a cross-portfolio approach to the issue of travel can we deliver meaningful change and improve outcomes for families affected by imprisonment. We look forward to continuing to work with the Scottish Government to support greater cross-portfolio recognition and response to the travel challenges facing families and would welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue in more detail.

Kind regards,



Professor Nancy Loucks OBE

Chief Executive

Supported by:

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