

Community Research Award  
Manchester Metropolitan University,  
Faculty of Health, Psychology and Social Care

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***Evaluation report of families experiences of Partners of Prisoners  
(POPs) prison based visitor centre services***

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Introduction**

In 2016, the authors were awarded a Community Research Award, a Research and Knowledge Exchange initiative by Manchester Metropolitan University (herein MMU). The overarching aim of the community research award was to evaluate the service provision of voluntary organisation, Partners of Prisoners (herein POPS). This report presents an overview of the research project and its findings.

Cross faculty academic researchers at MMU collaborated on this project to enhance knowledge and understanding of the impact POPS services have on families and friends of prisoners who experience POPS services. POPS provides a range of services and interventions to support offenders' families, often stigmatized as 'guilty by association'. These families have to cope with a multitude of stresses when a relative or friend is incarcerated. Everyday issues including finance, ill health, family care and housing can be a complex web to navigate for someone who is also supporting a relative or friend in prison. POPS is committed to supporting these families of prisoners through visitor centres and community engagement initiatives. POPS runs the visitor centres of 11 prisons in the North West of England.

## **Aims and Research Design**

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the service provision of voluntary organisation, Partners of Prisoners (herein POPS). The research aimed to:

- explore families' and friends' experiences of the POPS-run prison based family support services
- identify families' views on the usefulness of POPS run services to families
- capture families' views on non-POPs run family services
- identify good practice examples from families' experiences of family support to inform future POPS service delivery

Following consultations with POPs, the project adopted a questionnaire research design, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data to explore the impact of POPS services to families and friends of prisoners. A quasi-experimental comparison design was included in the questionnaire to compare families' and friends' experiences of how POPs run prison-based visitor centres compared to other non-POP's run prison based visitors centres.

Of the 11 visitors centres that POPs runs, five were selected for data collection. The five selected were chosen to capture data from prisons diverse by their prison category, sex and age of prisoner (adult or young offender)

Between 24th October 2016 and 10th December 2016, 151 questionnaires were completed by visitors to five prisons in the North West of England where POPs run prison-based visitor centres. The prisons were as follows:

HMP Buckley Hall in Rochdale is a male category C prison.

HMP Hindley in Wigan is a young offenders institution.

HMP Liverpool is a male category B prison.

HMP Risley in Warrington is a male category C prison.

HMP Styal in Wilmslow is a female establishment which accepts adult female offenders and young offenders sentenced and on remand.

MMU institutional ethical approval was gained for the research. The MMU research team offered guidance and training to staff based at the five chosen prison sites. This guidance and training included details about the project, details on how to help participants fill in the questionnaire and training on how to support participants if an adverse occasion arises. This meant that whilst the majority of participants chose to complete the questionnaires independently, staff could assist participants with questionnaire completion if they required it.

Participants who were over 18 years old, visiting someone in the prison rather than simply dropping off another visitor were recruited. This was undertaken by POPs staff who were often known to the visitors due to previous visits or other contact. Everyone who accessed the visitor centre during the data collection phase was invited to complete the questionnaire. Staff explained the study verbally and offered participants an information sheet.

In terms of the questionnaire respondents, notably just under half (n=74, 49 per cent) of the questionnaires were completed by visitors at HMP Liverpool. Nearly all (n=125, 95 per cent) of the respondents (n=132) classed themselves as 'English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British'. Three quarters (n=113) of the respondents (n=133) were female. In terms of respondents' relationship to the person they were visiting, just under half (n=69, 48 per cent) were visiting a partner.

Limitations of the evaluation were that there was a lower than targeted response rate. However, given the nature and aims of the study, 151 completed questionnaires gave a rich insight into the respondents' biography together with their views and experiences of the POPs services. The respondents' ratings of the POPs run services and qualitative responses provide a sound resource to build on when considering future service provision and evaluation.

The following section provides an analysis of the findings.

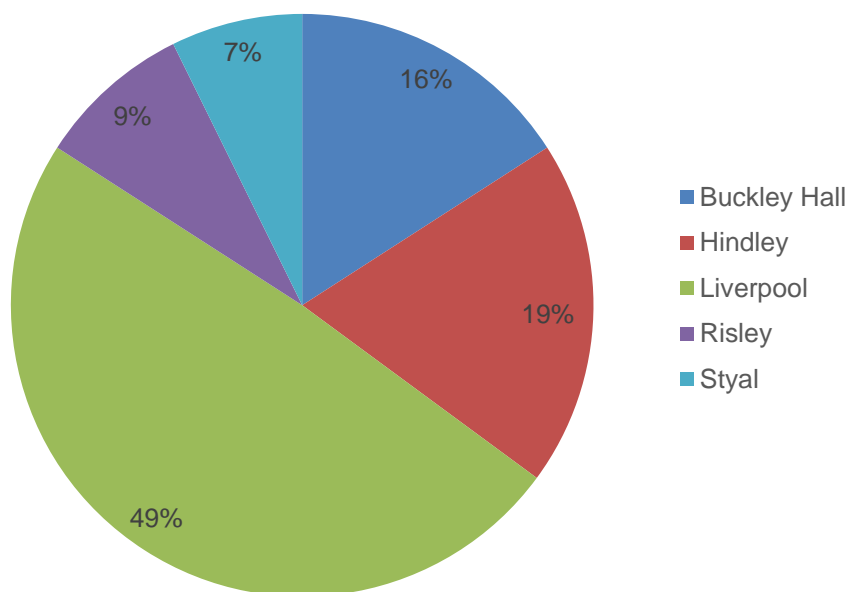
## Analysis of the POPs questionnaire

### Section 1: Profile of questionnaire respondents

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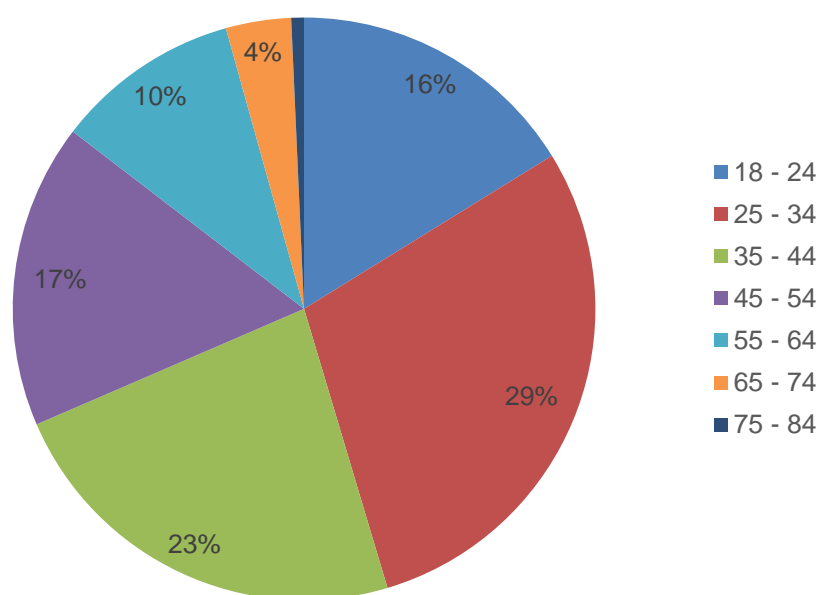
- Between 24<sup>th</sup> October 2016 and 10<sup>th</sup> December 2016, 151 questionnaires were completed by visitors to five prisons in the North West of England where POPs provide support.
- As shown in Figure 1 below, just under half (n=74, 49 per cent) of the questionnaires were completed by visitors at HMP Liverpool.

**Figure 1: Prison where questionnaire completed (n=151)**



- In terms of respondents' relationship to the person they were visiting, just under half (n=69, 48 per cent) were visiting a partner. Just under a fifth (n=27, 18 per cent) were visiting a son or daughter, a tenth (n=15) were visiting a brother or sister, and 11 (7 per cent) were visiting a parent or guardian.
- Three quarters (n=113) of the respondents (n=133) were female. The remainder were male.
- Just over a tenth (n=18, 12 per cent) of the respondents (n=130) reported a disability.
- In terms of ethnicity, nearly all (n=125, 95 per cent) of the respondents (n=132) classed themselves as 'English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British'.
- As shown in Figure 2 overleaf, nearly three tenths (n=40, 29 per cent) of the respondents (n=137) were aged 25-34. Just under a quarter (n=32, 23 per cent) were aged 35-44, and 15 per cent (n=20) were aged 55 and over.

**Figure 2: Age profile of questionnaire respondents (n=137)**



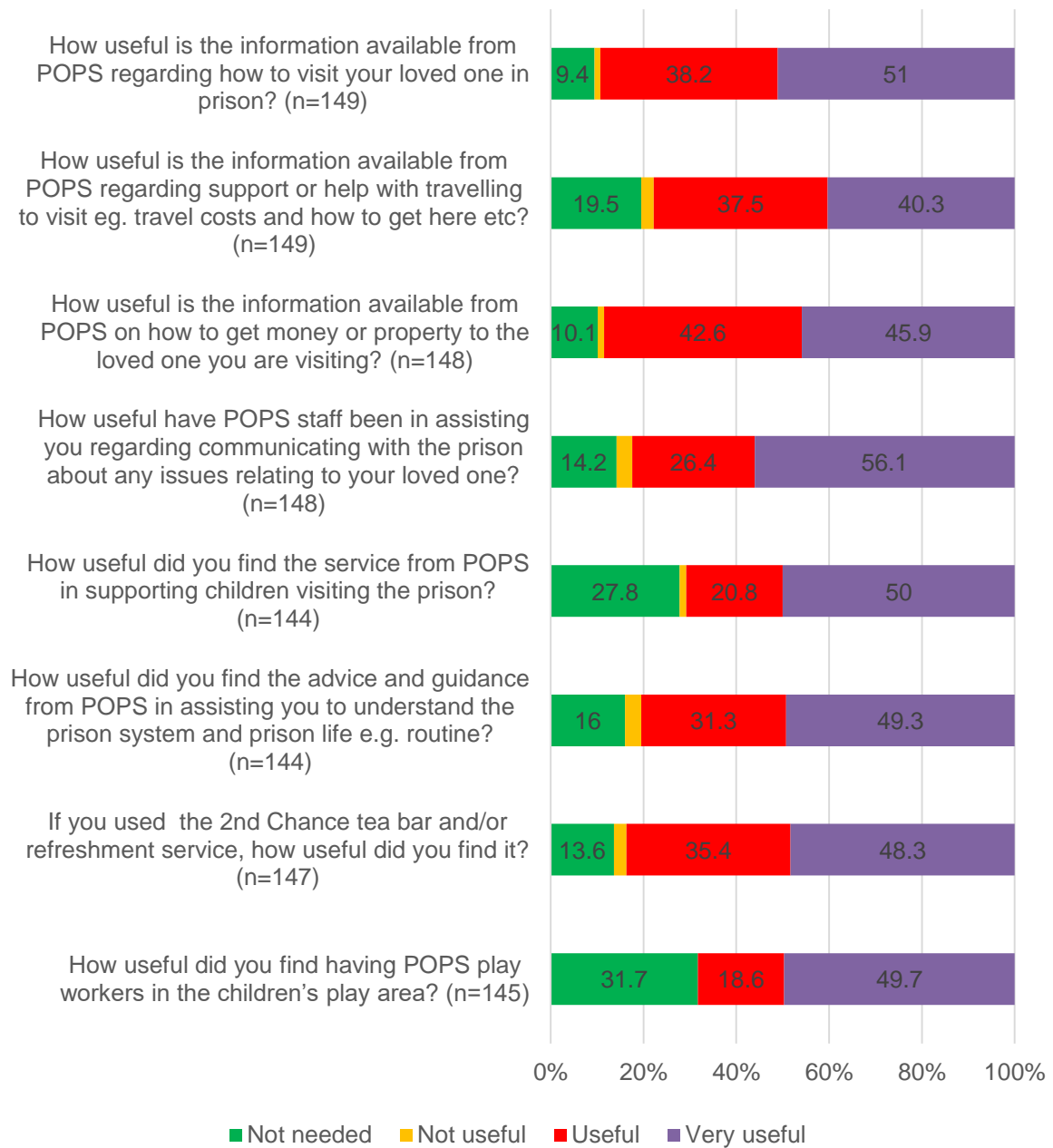
## **Section 2: Usefulness of services offered by POPs**

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- Moving on to look at the usefulness of the services that POPs provide in the prisons in question, as shown in Figure 3 overleaf, only a very small proportion of respondents (maximum n=5) felt that any of the services offered were 'not useful'.
- Although around three tenths of respondents classed themselves as not needing '... the service from POPs that supports children visiting the prison' (n=40, 28 per cent), of those that needed the service (n=104), over two thirds (n=72, 69 per cent) classed the service as 'very useful' (see Figure 3 overleaf).
- Around a third of respondents classed themselves as not needing '... POPs play workers in the children's play area' (n=46, 32 per cent). However, of those that needed the service (n=99), nearly three quarters (n=72, 73 per cent) classed the service as 'very useful' (see Figure 3 overleaf).
- Of those that needed '... information from POPs regarding how to visit a loved one in prison' (n=135), over half of respondents (n=76, 56 per cent) found the information 'very useful' (see Figure 3 overleaf).
- Of those that needed '... assistance regarding communicating with the prison about any issues related to a loved one' (n=127), nearly two thirds of respondents (n=83, 65 per cent) found the assistance 'very useful' (see Figure 3 overleaf).
- In terms of how useful respondents that needed it found the '... information available from POPs regarding support or help with travelling to visit' (n=120), exactly half (n=60, 50 per cent) found the information 'very useful' (see Figure 3 overleaf).



**Figure 3: Usefulness of services offered by POPS**



### Section 3: Issues faced when visiting a loved one in prison

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- Respondents were asked to list the top three things they have difficulty with when visiting a loved one in prison. Just under half (n=68, 45 per cent) of respondents answered this question.
- For those that answered, two fifths (n=27) reported having no difficulties when visiting a loved one in prison. For the remaining three fifths (n=41), reported issues were primarily around:
  - booking visits - primarily related to difficulties booking visits over the phone (n=11);
  - the number of visits allowed each month (n=7);
  - visiting times – primarily a lack of later visits for those working and/or with childcare responsibilities (n=3);
  - the visit itself – primarily the ‘number system’ not being used properly (n=6);
  - the cost of travelling to the prison (n=7); and,
  - getting property to loved one (n=2).
- Other individual issues reported included: “*I was nervous and lost - didn’t know what to do*”; “*Information on release dates*”; “*Having to leave them behind – having to explain to my son*”; “*No choice of snacks*”; and “*Prison staff not polite*”.
- While POPs staff could not be expected to resolve all the issues highlighted, 13 respondents felt that POPs had been successful in helping them to resolve any difficulties they were experiencing when visiting a loved one in custody. Responses included:

*“Explained”*

*“Explained the issues”*

*“Helped me fill in the forms to claim back expenses”*

*“Helped me get through to bookings for me to book a visit - explained why it was so busy”*

*“Helped me to book a visit”*

*“In supporting Family Forum attendance and liaison with prison”*

*“POPS staff can’t help with this as it’s a prison issue, but they advised me on handing underwear in over visits”*

*“POPS staff helped with both issues, explaining them and explaining other options we had re[garding] booking visits online and clothing bank”*

*“Said they would speak to other department”*

*“The girls are very helpful, put me at ease and showed me what to do. Explained the whole process”*

*“The POPS staff helped me and my partner understand who to contact. My partner has now put applications in for relevant info[rmation]. Wouldn’t have known this without POPS help”*

*“Told me to email”*

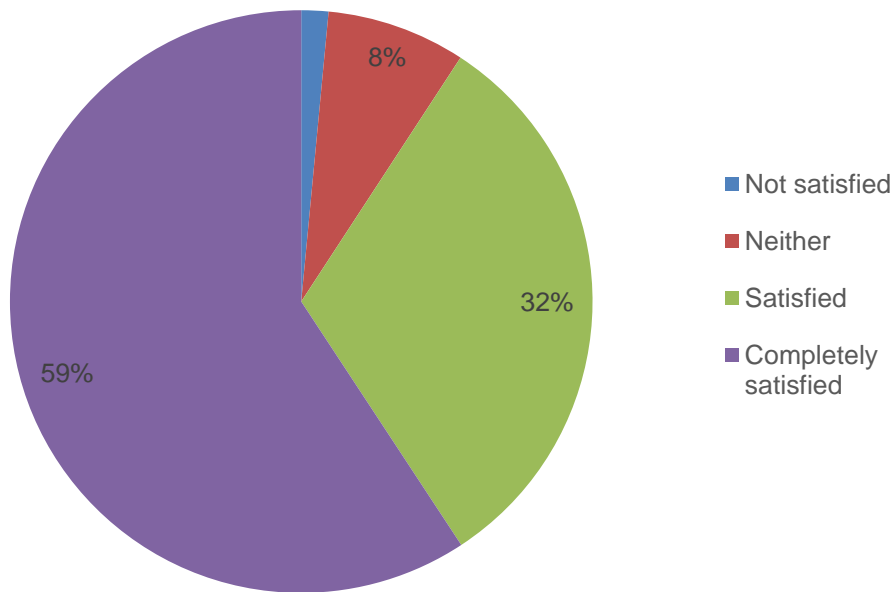
*“Was given numbers and advice and told to ring visit centre. If cannot resolve they will try to help further”*

#### **Section 4: Satisfaction with POPs service provision**

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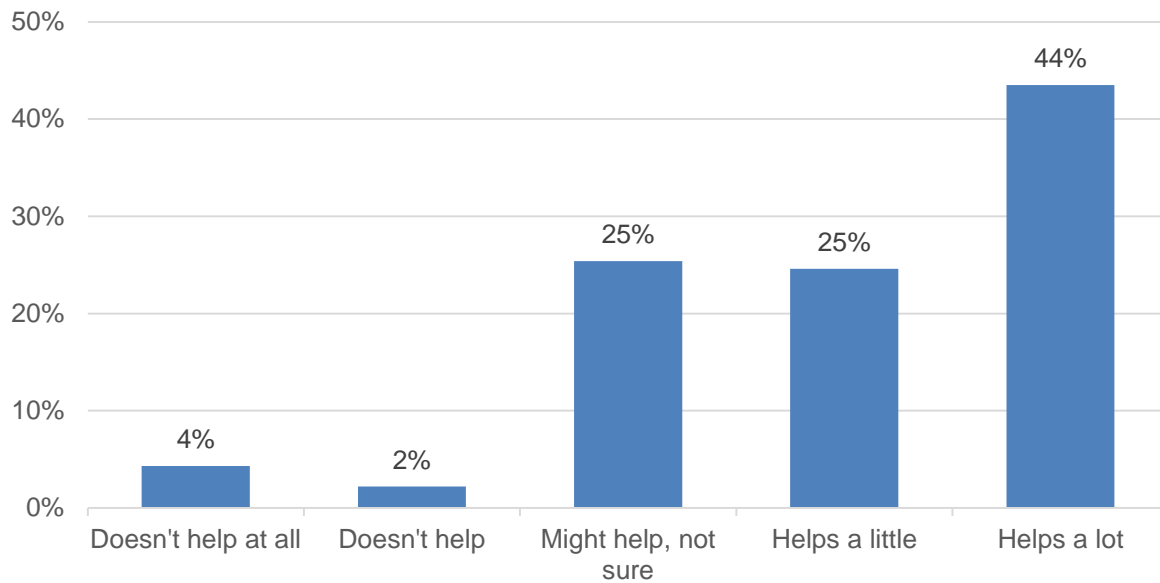
- In terms of how satisfied respondents were with the POPs service provided at the prison they were visiting, as shown in Figure 4 overleaf, the vast majority (n=118, 91 per cent) were satisfied with the service.

**Figure 4: Overall, how satisfied are you with the POPs providers at this prison? (n=130)**



- Over two thirds of respondents (n=94, 69 per cent) reported that the POPs staff had helped them to cope better while their loved one was in prison (see Figure 5 below). A further quarter (n=35) felt that the service might have helped them, but they were not sure.

**Figure 5: Does having access to support from POPs staff help you cope better while your loved one is in custody? (n=138)**



- When respondents were asked 'Is there anything else that POPs can offer to help families with whilst they have a loved one is in custody?', responses included:

*"Cheaper tea/coffee, even complimentary from POPs"*

*"Continued support in liaison with prison and prison issues"*

*"Introduce more POPS run family days. These are a must for prisoners with children and POPS create good family days"*

*"More family visits e.g. Xmas"*

*"More info[rmation] on how to send money to inmates"*

*"More things in the upstairs cafe - other prisons have lots more choice"*

*"More visits"*

*"Move him closer"*

*"Open play group in the morning"*

*"Set up a reply service for email a prisoner. More family days"*

*"Speed up the process of when you can first see them"*

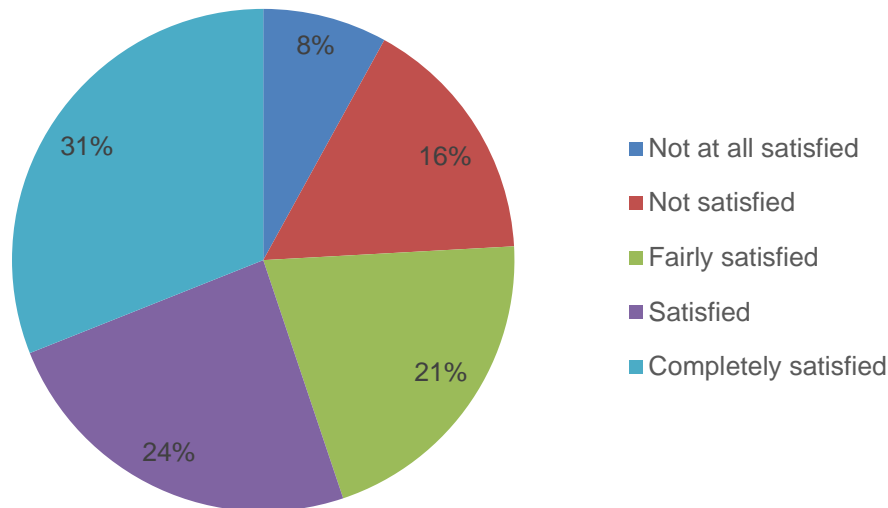
*"The play workers don't attend for as long nor as often as they used to"*

*"Would be great if the prisoners could access POPs. Support is much more helpful and approachable than officers and prison staff"*

*"Transport"*

**Section 5: Services at prisons without where the visitor centre is run by prison staff**

**Figure 6: If you have visited prisons where the visitor centre is run by prison staff, how would you rate your experience of the visitor centre services there by comparison? (n=87)**



- In terms of how satisfied respondents were with the visitor centre/s run by prison staff at other prisons they had visited, around a quarter (n=21, 24 per cent) were not satisfied with the experience (see Figure 6 above).
- In sharp contrast, nearly a third (n=27, 31 per cent) were completely satisfied with the experience elsewhere, and around a quarter (n=21, 24 per cent) were satisfied (see Figure 6 above).
- Although around a quarter of respondents classed themselves as not needing ‘... the service from prison officers/staff in supporting children visiting the prison’ (n=21, 24 per cent), of those that needed the service (n=66), over two fifths (n=28, 42 per cent) classed the service as ‘very useful’ (see Figure 7 overleaf)
- Around a fifth of respondents classed themselves as not needing ‘... the play area supervised by prison officers/staff’ (n=18, 21 per cent). However, of those that needed the service (n=68), half (n=34) classed the service as ‘very useful’ (see Figure 7 overleaf).
- Of those that needed ‘... information available from prison officers/staff regarding how to visit your loved one in prison’ (n=87), just under two fifths of respondents (n=32, 37 per cent) found the information ‘very useful’ (see Figure 7 overleaf).
- Of those that needed ‘... assistance regarding communicating with the prison about any issues related to a loved one’ (n=84), over a third of respondents (n=30, 36 per cent) found the assistance offered by prison officers/staff to be ‘very useful’ (see Figure 7 overleaf).

- In terms of how useful respondents that needed it found the ‘... information available from prison officers/staff regarding support or help with travelling to visit’ (n=85), around a third (n=29, 34 per cent) found the information ‘very useful’ (see Figure 7 overleaf).

## **Section 6: Final comments**

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- At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked if there was anything else they wanted to add about the POPs service at visitor centres that could help POPs to improve, or show the value of the service. Responses to this question included:

*“All the girls here are lovely and helpful and I look forward to my little chats with them all”*

*“I’ve been really happy with the help and support and the way they are with the children when visiting. They make visits much easier and children more settled”*

*“If possible to have the full assisted visit forms from gov.uk”*

*“It was discussed at a visit forum about POPS providing umbrellas for rainy days. The weather and transfer to visit hall does present a problem”*

*“Perhaps need a bigger area for the numbers. Also need better disability access”*

*“POPs do a great job and are always very friendly and helpful”*

*“POPs girl was very friendly and helpful - she even let me use her phone”*

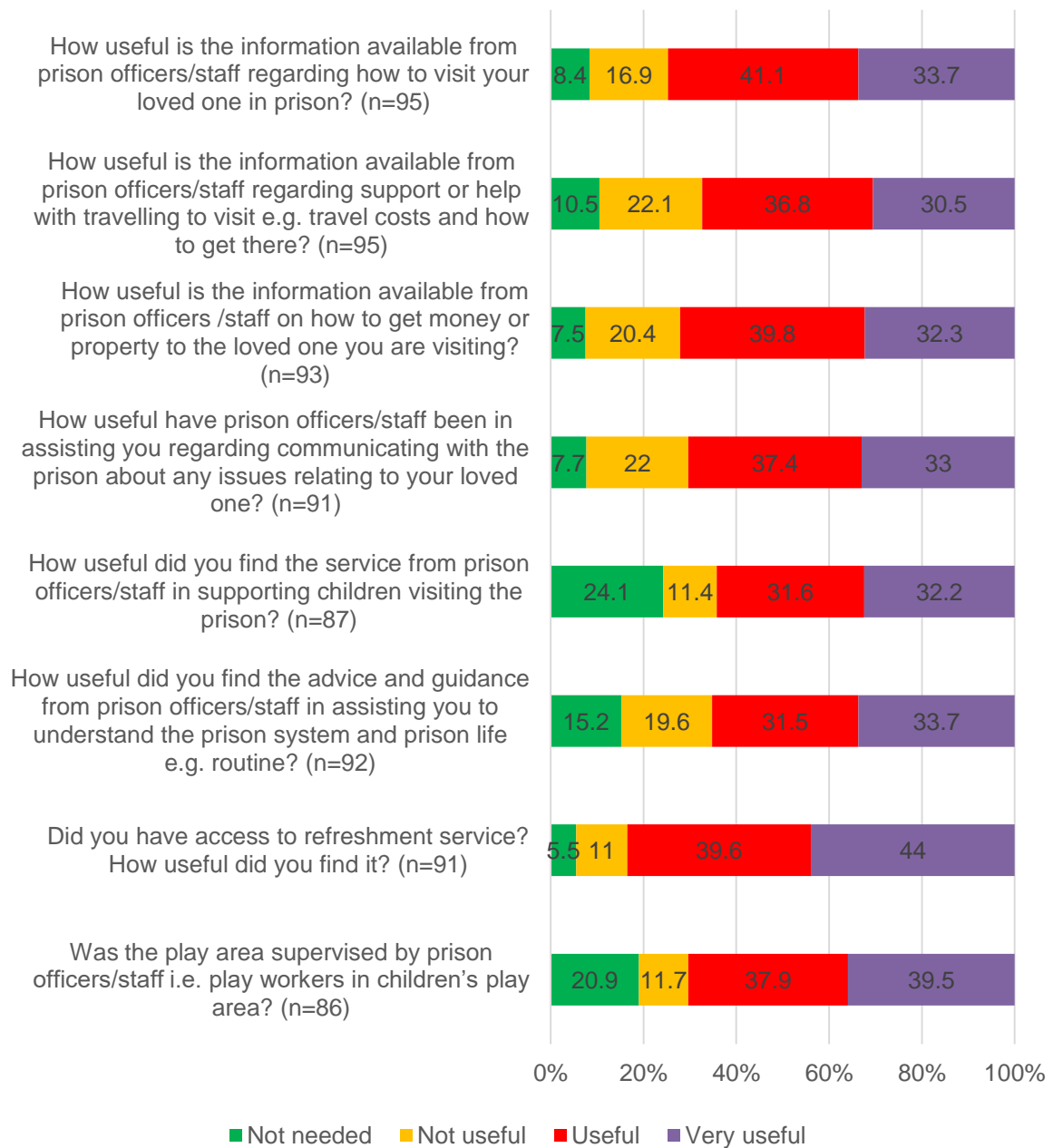
*“POPs staff are friendly and no issue is too small. They listen and care when other staff do not”*

*“POPs staff do a very good service. POPs staff need a medal for all the work they do”*

*“The POPs staff are extremely friendly and helpful. Nothing is too much trouble for them”*

*“They do a much better job than prison ran visit centres much more welcoming”*

**Figure 7: Usefulness of services offered by visitor centres run by prison staff**



## Key Findings

Talbot, Cheung and O'Sullivan (2015) note that, when a loved one comes into contact with the criminal justice system, the supportive role of families, friends and carers cannot be underestimated. Familial relationships can become strained during a loved one's custodial sentence as families struggle to cope with the challenges it brings both to their imprisoned relative and those visiting a loved one (Clinks, 2016; Community Justice Authorities, 2015). Families can experience feelings of separation trauma, financial strain and stigma (i-Hop, 2017).

Based on quantitative and qualitative data analysis, the key findings of this study show that when asked about the usefulness of POPs services, the families deemed a whole range of POPs services as useful. Notably, respondents recorded higher rates of satisfaction with POPs-run prison based services compared to non-POPS run visitor services. Qualitative comments included:

*"They do a much better job than prison ran visit centres, much more welcoming"*

According to Williams, Papadopoulou & Booth (2012) an estimated 200,000 children are affected by parental imprisonment each year in England and Wales with approximately 10,000 children visiting public prisons weekly. In their Banardos' *Just visiting* report, Kalkan and Smith (2014) emphasized the importance of children and parents maintaining meaningful contact with their parents. They noted that, whilst telephone calls and letters clearly fell into this category of contact, the children themselves placed value on visiting their parent for face to face contact. With this in mind, this evaluation was keen to identify key POPs services for children and parents that respondents identified as useful. Prison based POPs run services such as supervised play areas were rated as very useful (by 39.5%) to many families because they facilitate a children focused area which can be used during family visits:



*"I've been really happy with the help and support and the way they are with the children when visiting. They make visits much easier and children more settled"*

Another useful key area was POPs information and advice services to facilitate families' communicating with and providing money and property to their incarcerated loved one.

*"POPs girl was very friendly and helpful - she even let me use her phone"*

*"POPs staff do a very good service. POPs staff need a medal for all the work they do"*

For many families, the prison system can be challenging to navigate as they arrange and attend visits to see their loved one (Woodall, Dixey, Green & Newell, 2009). Whilst evidence recognizes that families play a significant role in the support of prisoners, often their needs go unrecognized and not responded to (Dixey and Woodall, 2012; Henshaw, 2014). POPs services often offer invaluable support by recognizing and responding to the families' needs. Relationship building between POPs staff and families of prisoners is a significant part of the POPs services.

*"POPs staff are friendly and no issue is too small. They listen and care when other staff do not"*

*"All the girls here are lovely and helpful and I look forward to my little chats with them all"*

The findings indicate that the provision of refreshments by POPs services present useful opportunities for families to share a drink or food as part of a family visit to prison. In this sense, the basic provision of a hot drink or other refreshment cannot be underestimated because they are useful services ensuring families have their basic needs met as part of their prison visits.

The notion of family practices is well established in sociological studies emphasising the everyday 'doing' of family life (Morgan, 2014). Families chatting amongst themselves over a cup of tea or sharing a bag of crisps represent family practices and, for many families, these

family practices provide a sense of 'ordinariness' in their interactions with a loved one whilst they are simultaneously experiencing feelings of stress and anxiety of being in a prison environment surrounded by the unfamiliar. Given the growing evidence suggesting the need for a wider understanding of prison visits, including the impact on families, prisoner behavior and future likelihood of re-offending (McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler, and Maruna, 2012; Woodall, Dixey, Kinsella and Braybrook, 2015) the valuable insights presented here can potentially add to knowledge which informs policy making processes about the significant role that family contact plays including how and why people stop offending (Clinks, 2016).

Overall, the qualitative data from respondents in this project made clear that the POPs staff played a central part of their visiting experience through providing refreshments, advice or support through play work with children. For those respondents who provided qualitative comments on the questionnaire, many described the POPs staff as friendly and helpful. Alongside this, respondents' commented on POPs staff demonstrating good interaction skills such as listening and chatting with families during visits.

*"The POPs staff are extremely friendly and helpful. Nothing is too much trouble for them"*

The qualitative comments provided an insight into respondents' suggestions for developments and improvements in POPs services. These ranged from an increased availability of specific visit forms, umbrellas to keep dry during transit from visitor centre to the prison visiting hall, more considered disability access provision and also a need to expand the area for visitors.

*"If possible to have the full assisted visit forms from gov.uk"*

*"It was discussed at a visit forum about POPS providing umbrellas for rainy days. The weather and transfer to visit hall does present a problem"*

*"Perhaps need a bigger area for the numbers. Also need better disability access"*

The environment that POPs use to provide their service is the responsibility of the prison, therefore improvements to the visiting environment is not within the control of POPs. However, information pertaining to the physical environment provides useful evidence for HMPPS to consider the provision of visitor services. Also, given the practical value of these comments, it seems pertinent to suggest that any follow-up research and evaluation should seek to explore these considerations in more depth. Any further exploration could include more detailed discussions with families, friends and carers visiting a loved one in prison to develop a clearer understanding of the practical and ethical aspects of their recommendations for future service development and improvement. Such discussions could be embedded in existing family forums and other valuable mechanisms POPs use to consult their service users. By doing this, POPs could develop strategic priorities on future provision, and provide advice to HMPPS, exploring targeted potential revenue streams and resource opportunities such as disability access provision.

Overall the qualitative comments from respondents indicate that some families, carers and friends are open to working with POPs by making suggestions about service developments or improvements which POPs could pass on to HMPPS. This appears to indicate a sense of partnership and collaboration between POPs staff and service users. Therefore, no matter how ambitious, small or large, the respondent's recommendation may seem; such as disability access infrastructure changes, access to government forms or umbrellas, POPs have the potential to continue to foster partnership working with these families, carers and friends of prisoners. Continuing to listen to the voices of partners of prisoners, engaging them in service evaluation and consultations facilitates open communication and strong foundations for POPs and its stakeholders.

## **Conclusions**

Overall this evaluation helps to inform further developments of the POPs services, demonstrating what families experience as good practice to support families of prisoners. This could facilitate further discussions about which aspects of the service could be developed for future delivery. Given that the impact of visitor centres is difficult to measure due to the facilities varying considerably, this evaluation evidence suggests that centres run by POPs offer a range of services facilitating the empowerment of families through open lines of communication and clear, useful information.

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