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## **Design students redesign prison visits**

Redesigning the prison visit could benefit inmates, their families and reduce re-offending according to a paper published today by the RSA. Evidence shows prisoners who maintain strong family relationships while inside are less likely to re-offend when they leave.

The paper argues that relatively simple and inexpensive changes to how family visits are designed should be considered by prison governors and government, and that the value and importance of design in shaping the new prison estate should not be ignored.

The suggestions emerged from this year's RSA's Design Directions award competition in which students worked with prison staff, family support organisations and prisoners' families to develop new ideas for prison visits.

*Social Animals: tomorrow's designers in today's world* includes a number of powerful suggestions on how prisons might dramatically improve the visitor experience.

- **Children and Partners.** Around 165,000 children across the UK have imprisoned parents and they often find visiting time traumatic and difficult: many student designers focused on how the conversations that took place within prison could be made easier, more intimate and less upsetting. One solution was a journal, to be filled in by prisoners and their child, each taking turns between visits to document what they're up to. This would allow parents inside to play a more constant role in their child's life. Imprisonment curtails parents' means of expressing their love for their children: another suggestion was a service whereby the offender parent is able to recreate part of the normal parenting role using a service designed to allow the giving of a gift to their child.
- **Improving the prison visit environment.** Some of our most profound and charged interactions take place within the four walls of public institutions: for families with relatives inside, this includes prisons. One designer proposed a system of visiting 'pods'

that offered enhanced privacy without compromising on security, and enabling families to interact in a more comfortable and 'home-like' environment.

- **Minimising stress.** Family journeys leading up to a visit can be stressful and can reduce the chances of a positive visit. One student considered the many touchpoints that make up the process of reaching the visits hall: from interactions with staff, to the use of signage, to information provision, to the use of colour and decoration. By aligning all these touchpoints, and seeking to make each of them less impersonal and more human, her idea set out to ensure that families arrived at the visit calm and relaxed.
- **Virtual Visits.** One entry called for virtual visits via a secure internet connection. As well as the emotional benefits of being able to stay in touch more informally, the virtual visit eliminates the risk of things being 'passed'. This would increase the chances of staying in touch where prisoners are - as is often the case - held long distances from home.
- **Gardening.** Another proposal was to use prison gardens to enable prisoners and families to grow produce, learn to cook and then eat together. This would require changes in the layout, culture and routines of prison life but would have help strengthen relationships between prisoners and their families.

The RSA's paper highlights a wider debate about the value of design and use of design skills in designing public services. It concludes that design educators risk failing to equip students to work in public services if it remains solely focused on product and industrial design.

RSA Head of Design, Emily Campbell said:

"Recently announced plans for new prisons holding 1,500 offenders each to be built in the next decade provide government with a real opportunity to 'build in' recognition of the importance of design in modelling and prototyping facilities. There is an on-going debate about the role designers could have in improving health and education services. Here is an opportunity to bring those skills to the prison environment, which provides us all with an essential public service."

Philip Emery, Head of Learning and Skills at Kalyx said:

"Kalyx is delighted to have supported this RSA project. With major plans announced for expansion and modernisation of the prison estate, those with responsibility for commissioning in this area have the dual challenge of delivering environments that are safe and secure, and

that actively address re-offending rates. In this context, positive visiting experiences are crucial and so it has been fascinating to see the range of opportunities that the involvement of young designers identified for prison visit improvement.”

### Notes to Editors

1. **For more information contact Luke Robinson, RSA Head of Media on 020 7451 6893 or [luke.robinson@rsa.org.uk](mailto:luke.robinson@rsa.org.uk)**
2. The observations and conclusions made in the report emerged in response to a brief set by the RSA for students as part of its Design Directions scheme: *Design a service or other solution around the experience of the prison visit and the challenges of maintaining meaningful family relationships with partners and children*
3. This project was made possible through the generous support of Kalyx
4. Design Directions is the RSA’s annual design awards in which students are challenged to address intractable social problems through innovative new design
5. Design Directions is the UK’s leading competition for ‘socially responsible’ design. The RSA established its first awards scheme for students in 1924 and today this unique scheme identifies, supports and rewards the most promising and creative students
6. Worth over £60,000 in prize monies, comprising cash and work placements, the awards provide financial and practical assistance to student designers starting out in their careers.
7. This year Design Directions received 800+ entrants. There were 30 winners. There was a choice of 11 briefs to which students could respond, proposing solutions to ways in which design could make useful and meaningful interventions in a variety of situations.
8. Later this summer the RSA will publish the final report of its Prison Learning Network which has looked at innovation and good practice in relation to prison education. For more information contact: [Rebecca.daddow@rsa.org.uk](mailto:Rebecca.daddow@rsa.org.uk).