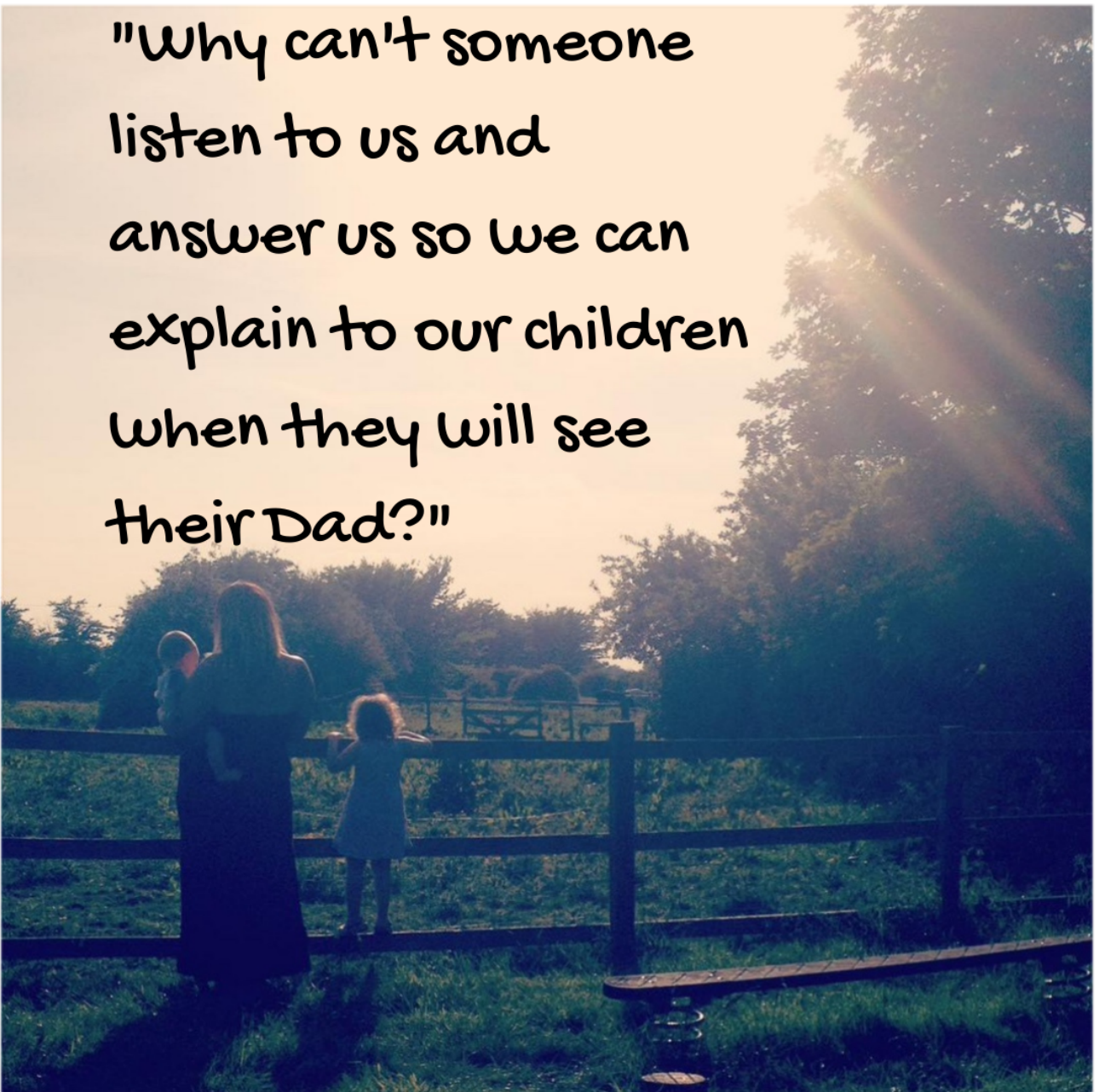


## Life In Lockdown

*How prison lockdown impacted the children and families of prisoners.*

"Why can't someone listen to us and answer us so we can explain to our children when they will see their Dad?"



## Introduction

Children Heard and Seen was founded in 2014 in response to the number of children with a parent in prison who were coming into contact with Youth Justice services in Oxfordshire. Our aim is to support children who are experiencing parental imprisonment and to reduce intergenerational offending. In response to lockdown we moved all our services online offering remote support to children and families by running activity groups, a youth advocate group for older children and parent/carer sessions. In total we ran 240 groups, supporting 150 children with 1429 attendees across all groups. The work we are able to do is the tip of the iceberg, there are thousands of invisible children that are unidentified by statutory services who are not receiving the support they need. This can lead to difficulties that not only impact on their childhood but can also be carried into adulthood. The statistics surrounding children with a parent in prison make grim reading. We believe this has to change. The statistics should not dictate the future for children with a parent in prison.

To gauge feelings about lockdown and its impact on children and families we ran a small-scale consultation between the 10th and 21st of August 2020, in order to gain a better understanding of the experiences of families and children with a parent in prison. The survey was distributed online to families we support and via social media and received a total of 18 responses from adults caring for a child with a parent in prison. It is estimated that these 18 carers have responsibility for a total of 38 children. The vast majority of responses came from families that are already known to our charity, however, for those who have not previously accessed our support, we have applied a conservative estimate of one child per response. This means that, in reality, the 18 responders may be caring for a higher number of children than we have suggested. Families were asked to share their experiences in relation to the following headings: progression, regime, probation, health, innovation, video calls/socially distanced social visits and other general issues focusing on the experiences of the family, the children and their loved one in prison.

The responses describe the difficulties children and families have encountered during the prison lockdown and the enforced separation from their loved ones. Children and families are often forgotten and their voices not heard, by producing this report we hope to amplify their voices. We have made recommendations as a result of our consultation and based on our understanding of the issues children and families confront daily. It can be assumed that a lack of access to visits is the sole concern of children and families but the impact of having a loved one in prison has a far greater reach than visits. There are emotional, financial, physical and mental health concerns that must be acknowledged. In failing to do so, we fail children and families. This must not continue. We must do better.

## Progression

*Q – How has your family member's progression been impacted by lockdown? Please tell us if there have been any issues with sentence planning, access to programmes/courses that need to be completed prior to parole boards/ release, access to pre-release planning.*

65% of respondents reported that lockdown had impacted on their loved one's progression through their sentence.

Examples of these included:

- Courses that are required for re-categorisation being cancelled, leading to applications for a move to a category D prison being refused
- An appeal hearing being delayed
- A sentence plan not being completed which will impact on contact with children post release
- Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) that was due to start in April being delayed
- No therapy being available on a therapeutic community unit

***“Got refused Cat-D as he has not done the course that he has been waiting a year to do but everything is put on hold”***

***“There hasn't been any progression. No help available to help the prisoners reform”***

These negative impacts on a prisoner's progression through their sentence are particularly concerning as this progression gives those in custody and their families hope for the future, allowing them to find comfort in the fact they are working towards release. Any delays incurred through no fault of the prisoner can cause anxiety and stress and lead to unwanted behaviour, self-harm or worse. For the children and families at home, dealing with this level of uncertainty often exacerbates existing feelings of helplessness in an already difficult situation.

## Probation

*Q – Have you had any concerns about access to Probation for your family member, either in the prison or in the community?*

53% of respondents reported there had been a negative impact on access to Probation during lockdown.

Examples of these negative impacts included:

- No legal visits
- No Probation report prior to appeal hearing
- Gaining access to Probation being difficult with wrong numbers and names being given
- No contact with Probation

- Telephones not being answered
- A sense of everything being put on hold
- Concerns raised about where a loved one will live post-release as the release date gets closer

***“Yes, they don’t answer the phone and we have been given incorrect phone numbers and incorrect names multiple times”***

Whilst we appreciate that Probation has been impacted by COVID-19 and many staff are working at home there should still be clarity and ease of access to staff for families and those in prison. This is particularly concerning when there are decisions that need to be made about progression and access to resettlement services. If the concerns raised by the respondents are an indication of a wider problem then steps would need to be taken to implement swift and effective change.

## Regime

***Q – Can you tell us how the suspension of the regime in the prison has impacted on you, the children and your family member in terms of access to work, education, association, telephone calls, visits?***

82% of respondents to this question told us the regime being locked down had a negative impact on children, families and their loved one.

Examples of these impacts included:

- Suspension of ROTL meaning five-day home leaves were stopped
- Paying for additional phone credit at a cost of forty pounds per month
- Concerns raised for the deteriorating mental health of the prisoner
- Family relationships being tested
- Very young children forgetting the parent in custody
- Negative impact on children
- Children choosing not to take part in video calls or socially distanced social visits as it would be too distressing
- A mother seeking mental health support for herself and her child
- The lack of phone access, 23-hour lockdown, no access to video calls or social visits

***“I’ve had to seek help for my children’s mental health and my own as this has been one of the hardest things we have ever had to deal with.”***

***“No visits has had the biggest impact on my family ever I have a 12 year old making herself sick another who has lost weight and no education has meant he’s been knocked back for his Cat-D. I have a little girl who is nearly one who now will not have a clue who her Dad is and a disabled boy who is upset all the time and says why has Daddy left me.’***

The impact of the lockdown of prison regime is clear for children, families and the person in custody. Deterioration in mental health for both those outside and inside our prisons, the difficulties of maintaining family and parent/child relationships has been compounded by what

the families feel has been limited information from the prisons. Whilst some have utilised social media positively, communicating with families regularly and clearly, others have not.

The cost of additional phone credit for some families has been significant but the burden for meeting these costs has been met as a means of ensuring loved ones are safe and to provide additional support to men and women who are experiencing twenty-three-hour lockdown. Even where additional credit has been provided access to telephones has often been inconsistent and call times limited.

Whilst the majority of families have been impacted by the suspension of visits and the lack of access to video calls, for families and children who do not have contact with the parent in prison or contact by letter, lockdown has not significantly impacted their experience.

## Health

### *Q – How has the lockdown impacted on your, the children and your family members physical and mental wellbeing?*

The vast majority of respondents, 82%, confirmed there had been a negative impact on both the physical and mental health of both those inside the prison and those outside.

Examples of these negative impacts included:

- Deteriorating mental health and self-harm
- Distress at length of time lockdown has continued
- Worry about the safety of the prisoner
- Increase in stress and anxiety
- Eating disorders in children
- Lack of sleep
- Negative impact of witnessing distress in children and hearing anxiety of loved one in prison

***“Anxiety of partner contracting virus, really upset and exhausted and tired by it all. Just not knowing and no communication leaves us feeling ignored and unimportant.”***

***“increased anxiety, worsening mental health of the person in prison and sadness in my child.”***

The physical and mental health issues for children, families and their loved one in prison is of significant concern. For parents/carers of children, this time has been particularly difficult as they manage the distress caused to children at not seeing their parent whilst also managing the difficulties faced by those in prison. Families are the main source of emotional support to prisoners where there is contact and the toll this has taken during lockdown should not be underestimated. The longer term impact cannot yet be measured but the psychological scars that will be carried by all must be recognised and support provided where necessary both in the community and in our prisons.

**Q – What are your main areas of concern?**

Of the respondents, 88% detailed concerns about the impact of lockdown. Major points of concern focused on the lack of visits, the impact on children, the safety of prisoners if the virus were to spread and the mental health of the prisoner. As social visits have begun to be reintroduced some respondents raised the issue of the limits on children allowed to attend. Families with more than one child are left in the position of not taking up a visit or choosing which child to take. This is an impossible position for any parent to be placed in.

***“No consistent contact phone calls far and few. At different times, no contact at all with daddy.”***

***“Trying to explain to the children why they can’t make sure their daddy is safe and trying to calm them down before bed every night when they just want to see him. They wake up every morning to set out their clothes for a visit and having to explain to them to put them away again. This causes heartache every day.”***



CHILDREN HEARD AND SEEN

***“I don’t like feeling scared because it makes me feel like I’m not brave enough to face it.”***

For parents/carers with young children, helping them to understand why they are not able to see their parent in prison is an impossible task. Limited and short telephone calls are not a reasonable replacement for children, particularly those who are pre/non-verbal. The risk of a breakdown in parent/child relationships as a result of lack of contact is clear and work will need to be done to repair those bonds as our prisons open. As soon as it is safely possible to do so, family days must be reintroduced so work can begin on rebuilding these relationships and healing the hurt and distress that has resulted from lockdown.

*Q – What have been the most difficult things for you and the children to deal with?*

82% of respondents told us that lack of contact, worry about their loved one, and the negative impact on the children were the most difficult areas. The inconsistency of contact either by phone, video calls or social visits led to anxiety and stress for both children and those that care for them.

## **Innovation**

*Q – Has there been anything introduced during lockdown that you think has been helpful and that you would like to see remain after lockdown?*

Almost half of all respondents, 47%, recorded that there had been no innovation that had been helpful and should remain. 6% felt the introduction of video calls had been positive whilst 35% felt the online support they had been offered by Children Heard and Seen had been positive. 6% also felt lower call charges and the additional phone credit that had been provided had been beneficial. As a side note to the matter of additional phone credit, families have also reported that they have been financing phone credit for their loved ones during lockdown with sums ranging from forty to five hundred pounds a month.

***“In terms of prisons, no.”***

***“The Children Heard and Seen virtual support groups are brilliant and have been very helpful for my daughter and I.”***

Despite some technical difficulties, the introduction of video calls was also highlighted as an innovation that should be kept.

***“Purple visits ... it’s an amazing addition to the system”***

## **Video Calls/Socially Distanced Social Visits**

*Q – If you have had a video call since lockdown, what was it like in terms of access? Were there any technical difficulties?*

Only 29% of respondents had experienced a video call with 100% reporting difficulties to a greater or lesser extent. There was also praise for video calls despite the difficulties.

***“It’s a nightmare, always pausing. Children too scared to blink in case it pauses again.”***

***“The first didn’t work second and third were brilliant.”***

Whilst video calls have provided an opportunity for some children and families to see their parent/loved one we must be careful not to see them as a panacea. Technical difficulties have created some frustrations and even when they are available some children will not take them up.

***“My daughter doesn’t want to see his face as she said it will upset her when she hasn’t been able to see him and doesn’t know when she will.”***

**Q – If you haven’t had a video call, can you tell us the reason why?**

42% of respondents told us video calls were not available in the prison their loved one is in, whilst for 17% their loved one had moved prison during lockdown, causing a delay in being able to access a video call. 8% did not have contact prior to lockdown so would not use the facility and a further 8% had not accessed video calls as the child(ren) felt it would be too distressing to see their parent. Another 8% described difficulty with downloading the necessary software. A further 8% had not accessed a video call due to their unease at calls being recorded and being unsatisfied at the response regarding this from the provider.

**Q – If you have had a social visit since lockdown, how did the social distancing measures impact on the visit?**

Only 17% of respondents had been on a socially distanced social visit and felt that the measures implemented for social distancing did have a negative impact.

***“Our visit was with a Perspex screen and we struggled to hear anything and didn’t want to shout a private conversation. It was very difficult for the boys not to have a hug and heart-breaking to leave, if only we could have heard each other it would have made the visit a lot easier but now we have to wait another month before we go again.”***

***“We struggled to have any private conversations due to the fact the seating was around 4m away, also the fact we were wearing masks made it difficult to hear.”***

Whilst the reintroduction of some social visits is a positive, again, we must be careful not to see them as a panacea. Social visits are limited in time and in the numbers of children who can attend. Social distancing measures are having a negative impact and some families have reported that although they have attended one, they will not be doing so again until social distancing measures are lifted as they find them too difficult under current arrangements.

**Q – If you have not had a social visit, can you tell us why this is?**

A broad range of reasons were given for not having social visits, with half of respondents not having access to them as visits remain suspended. Over thirty percent had made the decision not to attend a visit as they felt the social distancing would be too difficult, especially for the children, as not being able to hug their parent after not seeing them for up to six months would be too distressing.

***“My daughter doesn’t want to see her dad if she can’t hug him. She said that will be too upsetting and her dad feels the same.”***



In some establishments, we have seen restrictions placed on the number and ages of children who can visit. For 8% of respondents, not being able to take children meant they had decided not to visit and a further 8% had taken the decision not to visit as they were only allowed to take one child from the family.

***“I have four children and I can’t just pick one child to go what if they think the child that is picked is loved more, 2 meters distance in place no cuddle after no seeing them for half a year is just cruel how will a 3-year-old understand.”***

A further 17% do not have contact with the parent in prison so the situation for them remains unchanged. This group are often overlooked under the assumption that all children with a parent in prison will visit and therefore access a Visitors’ Centre and any support that may be available to them via that route. For a significant minority, for various reasons, there is limited or zero contact. This group also require support and may have complicated emotions around a parent who they do not see but continue to have concerns over.

### **Q – If you have attended a social visit, were children allowed to attend?**

Of the 17% who attended a social visit, all brought children but not without some anxiety:

***‘Yes, I took 2 four year olds, was very anxious how it would go.’***

For young children, attending a social visit under current arrangements could be confusing as they are not allowed to have physical contact with their parent on the inside. They are also expected to sit in one place for the duration of the visit with no access to toys or refreshments. For a toddler, these are high expectations.

## **General**

### **Q – If there are any specific good or not good incidents/ experiences for you/ the children could you please tell us about them?**

The suspension of ROTL has been difficult for families who were used to their loved ones being at home at regular intervals:

***“He was due home for a 5 day ROTL on the Friday and we went into lockdown on the Tuesday, that was very upsetting for us all. He was also due home around the time of my mum’s anniversary in the April too so that wasn’t very good time for us at all.”***

As part of the suspension of social visits, Family Days have not been able to take place and this is a significant loss for some families:

***“The family days were very important to us. They had a good amount of time to play freely with daddy. He could interact properly.”***



A lack of communication from some prisons was also highlighted as a difficulty for some families:

***“Just feel so helpless no control and no answers.”***

The issue of disconnection from loved ones and the increased worry that accompanies this was also raised. The introduction of video calls was rated as a positive:

***“Good is purple visits that is an amazing piece of technology.”***

The online support provided by Children Heard and Seen was also highlighted as a positive experience:

***“Have met more people in various groups that I probably wouldn’t have if it were office based meetings only. More groups can be set up remotely so have benefitted from that but really miss seeing people in the flesh and chatting and mingling.”***

## **Our Comment on Video Calls and Socially Distanced Visits**

It is important to remember that limited video calls and social visits are not a solution to the lack of meaningful contact between families, children and a loved one in prison. There are various reasons why they are not accessible or where they are, why families chose not to use them. As demonstrated by the survey responses, difficult decisions have had to be made regarding attending social visits and using video calls. Aside from the emotional toll of visits under socially distanced restrictions there are other reasons we are aware of that have not been highlighted by the survey results that are detailed below:

### **Social Visits**

- Social visits are only available on weekdays in most prisons. Some families work during this time and are unable to take time off, meaning visits are impossible for them.
- Families are fearful of COVID-19 being brought into prisons, so they decide not to visit.
- What could amount to a four-hour round trip, or more, for some families for a 45-minute visit is too much to ask of some.
- If the other parent was the victim of the offence and another responsible adult from a different household was bringing a child on visits this may not be possible under lockdown and new visitation rules.
- If the child/children are being cared for by grandparents, their guardians may have underlying health conditions which prevent a prison visit.
- If a child/children are in care, a prison visit may not be permissible under rules governing that care or foster care may be being provided by adults who have underlying health conditions that mean they cannot visit a prison.

- Not everyone has access to a smart phone or internet connectivity in their home, either one of which are required to access a video call.
- Not everyone has the IT skills required to set up and manage a video call.
- For some families English may not be their first language and they may have difficulty with completing the application process. Although video call apps can often be used in various languages, and guidance can be requested, families whose spoken language is not supported face obvious difficulties.
- Some people do not have access to a passport, driving licence or other government-issued photo ID and the cost of obtaining a passport may be prohibitive
- Video calls, similarly to social visits, are largely available during weekdays meaning anyone who is at work is unable to access them if they are unable to take time off work. Employers and colleagues may not be aware that a loved one is in prison so accessing a call at lunch break may not be possible.
- Where families work during the week they may all work in different locations and children will not be at work with them which precludes a call with the child/children present or any additional members of the family.
- If the other parent was the victim of the offence and is the only adult in the household they may avoid video calls as seeing the perpetrator in their home may be traumatising.
- Facial recognition software and the recording of calls has also meant some families have not felt comfortable accessing virtual visits. There are concerns about the storage of data and what the outcome may be if there is a breach of data security.

## Conclusion

The overwhelming message articulated by the findings of this recent survey indicate that lockdown has impacted the majority of responding families negatively across all areas questioned.

The lockdown was initiated five months ago and although some social visits have re-opened and video calls are now available in some prisons, a consistent approach has yet to be established to allow children and families to access meaningful contact with their loved ones. This lack of consistency, exacerbated by a lack of clear communication from a number of prisons, has fostered an overwhelming sense of confusion and hopelessness in many of the families with whom we have worked. The scope of long-term detriment suffered by these children as a result of this trauma is not yet measurable but remains deeply worrying. The impact of experiencing parental imprisonment is already resoundingly negative, however, this enforced lack of contact and the woefully slow response of the government to initiate meaningful and consistent alternatives has left already vulnerable children exposed to additional and compounding trauma.

Current estimates indicate 312,000 children experience parental imprisonment each year in England and Wales (Crest Advisory, 2019). Children with a parent in prison are at a much greater risk of experiencing mental health problems, often manifesting in the form of depression, anxiety, insomnia, and eating disorders. Negative school experiences such as bullying, persistent truancy and a failure to achieve in educational settings are also common in

this demographic. Despite this, there is currently no statutory framework in place designed to support, or even identify, these children. Children Heard and Seen are the only charity in the country established to specifically support children experiencing parental imprisonment and the services we offer and the children and families we support are merely the tip of the iceberg. There are thousands of children who are not identified and as a result have no access to support that they desperately need.

Three years have passed since the Farmer Review and whilst COVID-19 has had a negative impact on the experience of the families of prisoners, truly little has changed in this time. Families and children of prisoners are still experiencing stigma and social isolation and are still being judged as guilty by association with their loved one. They were still experiencing the indignity of prison visits, at times greeted by hostility and suspicion by prison staff with small children being frightened by dogs and strangers conducting searches on them. As a result of being forced to provide a fingerprint and leaving all their belongings outside in a locker, innocent adults and children are being stripped of identity and personal freedoms to visit someone they love.

The importance of family bonds and meaningful contact as a tool for prisoner rehabilitation is consistently cited as a key factor in improving prisoner wellbeing and reducing the likelihood of later recidivism. Despite this, the current systems fail to adequately support these families and provide them with the necessary tools to maintain and strengthen these essential relationships with the prisoner on the inside. As lockdown restrictions continue to ease, it is important to recognise that the problems faced by these families before COVID-19 will continue to exist. These problems must be adequately dealt with to improve the mental and physical wellbeing of the vast number of children and families experiencing parental imprisonment.

A number of key issues that must unite any discussions regarding the betterment of the experiences of these families include:

- Recognising the importance of family ties, not only in reports and strategies but in reality, ensuring families are engaged and involved in a meaningful way.
- Recognising the thousands who have no contact with the prisoner and moving away from the assumption that funding Visitors' Centres is all that is needed.
- Recognising that children experiencing parental imprisonment are not currently identified and as such, do not get the support that they require to offset the negative consequences of parental imprisonment and reduce the risk of intergenerational offending.
- Recognising that the work of small charities is having a significant, positive impact and that with the right financial resources, they could achieve so much more.