



National Offender
Management Service

Policy Team
Equality, Rights and Decency Group
National Offender Management
Service (NOMS)
4th Floor, Turquoise Zone, Post point
4.16
Clive House
70 Petty France
London SW1H 9EX

Mr Mark Hawthorne
Via email: mark.hawthorne@gloucestershire.gov.uk

09 September 2014

Our ref: TO14/2895

Dear Mr Hawthorne

ACCESS TO BOOKS IN PRISONS

Thank you for your letter of 10 June to the Secretary of State regarding prisoner access to books. Your email has been passed to the National Offender Management Service for reply. I am sorry for the long delay in you receiving a response.

The Government has not banned prisoners from having access to books. There is a legal obligation for every prison to provide a library and to allow every prisoner to borrow and exchange library books. The majority of prison library services are provided by Public Library Authorities, affording prisoners access to a catalogue of books similar to that available to readers in the community, through a request and loans service. Prisoners can also use their prison earnings or money sent in by their families to buy books.

The changes which were made to the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) policy framework last November have helped ensure consistent rules right across the prison estate, which should be less disruptive for prisoners when they move to other prisons for operational reasons. In addition, we wanted to ensure that access to privileges in prison, such as wearing non-prison clothes, the level of prison earnings and extra access to the gym, was linked to how well a prisoner engages in rehabilitative activity, such as active participation in education and training.

As part of the changes to IEP, consistent rules on the sending or bringing in of items were introduced. This was to ensure that the IEP scheme is not undermined and to enhance existing security measures.

There have always been restrictions on the items prisoners can possess in prisons, and on the receipt of parcels. There is good reason for this. Prison staff fight a constant battle to prevent illicit items, such as drugs, extremist materials, mobile phones, SIM cards and pornography getting into our prisons. The routes used to try to do so are wide-ranging and ingenious. We see drugs and weapons sewn into the lining of shoes, concealed in clothes and hidden in essential household items. We have even seen drugs concealed inside a hollowed out Weetabix.

We are working hard to make progress in the battle against drugs in our prisons. We carry out regular random drug tests in prisons, and the proportion which are positive is well under 10%, when historically the rate has been much higher. But it remains a tough challenge keeping drugs out. Huge efforts are made by drug dealers, and those trying to get mobile phones in particular into prisons, to get round the security measures we take.

The arrival of thousands of unknown parcels in our prisons each day, whether containing books or anything else, would completely undermine these efforts. It would present very considerable difficulties to check them all in the level of detail that is needed, to properly explore whether apparently innocuous items contain drugs or other illegal items.

It is inconceivable that we could impose the additional operational burden on staff of carrying out detailed assessments of an unlimited number of parcels coming into prisons. For operational reasons, it would not be practical to impose a general presumption against access to items sent into prisons from outside sources and instead allow unlimited parcels containing books to be sent to prisoners. We now have simple rules that allow everyone one parcel of items from home when they first arrive in prison, and then only further parcels at the Governor's discretion in exceptional circumstances.

In complying with the requirements of the IEP policy, prisoners gain increased access to privileges, including greater access to their private cash and eligibility to obtain better paid work; such prisoners are also permitted to have a greater range of items in possession. Prisoners who do not comply have much reduced access to private cash and are allowed fewer items in possession. It is therefore the case that, in addition to the security concerns outlined above, to allow families and friends to bring or send in property would undermine our efforts to ensure that prisoners are rewarded for positive behaviour and engaging with efforts to address their offending behaviour.

The standardised facilities list which has been introduced identifies and limits the items of property that prisoners can retain in their cells, subject to their IEP level. The list is available for each Governor to select from, as considered suitable for the specific population, the physical fabric and the regime of the prison. The list does not restrict access to books but imposes general limits on the number a prisoner can retain in possession (i.e. in their cell). There is no variation across the different IEP levels and a prisoner's access to books is not linked to their behaviour.

The Government fully recognise the importance of encouraging learning and reading in prisons and wants to see better standards of educational support for offenders to ensure that they have a greater chance of sorting their lives out when they leave prison. That is why, among a raft of reforms to improve the rehabilitation of offenders, changes are being made to more than double the level of education available in our youth offender institutions from the current average of 12 hours a week. The most profound reading challenge in our prisons is not whether prisoners have access to enough literature, but how we help people who in all too many cases lack the literacy skills they need. That is why we work closely with the Shannon Trust

to support schemes such as 'Toe by Toe', which includes peer mentoring to improve reading levels.

Items purchased from legitimate sources have been - and will continue to be - available to prisoners but the public have a right to expect that items are not being sent into prisons that could be a potential threat to security or undermine the rehabilitation process.

Yours sincerely

Policy Team
Equality, Rights and Decency Group