Behind closed doors…

During a recent visit to the city of Bath, a bookshop assistant apologised for having kept me waiting at the counter. A tourist had asked her if she had known the population of Bath. She hadn’t, but being in a bookshop, the information had been easy to find. It was 85,000.

If the prison population in England and Wales hasn’t quite reached that figure yet, it is predicted to do so, soon. In September 2008, (at the time of my visit to Bath) it stood at 83,703, including detainees in three Immigration Removal Centres operated by HM Prison Service. It was astounding to think that if all those people were in one place, you would need a city the size of Bath to accommodate them. It’s little wonder that the prison system is under stress. It stretches the dedication of its staff to the limit.

Quite naturally, society expects the wrongdoer to face justice and for some offenders, there is no alternative to prison. However, a prison sentence amounts to deprivation of liberty – nothing more. If we regard ourselves as members of a civilised nation, people in custody should be treated with decency and respect, whatever their crime. Anything less would be a shameful reflection on society.

Safeguards are in place to ensure that prisons and other closed establishments operate to high standards. Each has a scheduled inspection every five years with an unannounced visit in the meantime. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons publishes reports accordingly. Official procedures permit prisoners and detainees to complain about unfairness. If they feel their problem remains unresolved after investigation, they can refer it to the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman.

These measures might seem to be adequate except that two and a half years between official inspections is too long for detailed attention to be given to the personal concerns of individuals. Being held in confined conditions, alongside someone about whom they have complained, may deter prisoners or detainees from making written accusations. The process of referring a case to the Ombudsman is not only stressful but lengthy.

Yet there remains one further channel of communication. By law, every closed establishment must be monitored independently. Members of its monitoring board visit regularly and have complete freedom of access. They talk to the people in custody and to staff. Except for staff personnel details and medical information on prisoners or detainees, they can examine any of the establishment’s records. They are appointed by Ministers. They are not part of the prison service, nor do they represent the immigration authorities. They monitor the running of the establishment and prisoners or detainees can bring their problems to them privately.

November 2008
Is this a voluntary role which appeals to you? Would you be able offer even-handed support to these people? Could you understand their situation on the basis of whether you would like to see a member of your own family in the same circumstances?

If you would like further information, please contact…