

Notice to families

Covid-19 update

On behalf of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, I wanted to provide you with an update on the situation with the Covid-19 epidemic. But I also want to acknowledge some of the epidemic's human impacts. First, though the country is past the peak of infections and deaths and the situation in our prisons has been much better than we dared to hope, as a system we have experienced real tragedies – the Covid-19 related deaths of 10 staff and 24 prisoners. Secondly, we have seen serious illness and suffering amongst many more, and a number of people remain in hospital at this time. My sympathy and condolences are with all the bereaved families and grieving colleagues, and my thoughts and prayers are with those from our prison communities who are seriously ill, and with their friends and families. Thirdly, I am very conscious that the last few months have been very difficult for all of you, with the very severe restrictions in prisons and reduced contact with your loved ones in prison; and particularly so for those of you who have also lost family or friends during this pandemic. I do not underestimate how difficult it must have been, and I am grateful for your patience.

The restrictions we have put in place have been necessary to save lives, but we know – as in the community – they can cause other problems, and we want to minimise any ill-effects on the wellbeing of those in our care, and on you, their families. I want to thank you for your patience during this time.

If you are worried that your family member in prison is struggling to cope at any point, please contact us about it – you can call the prison or contact the Prisoners' Families Helpline on 0808 808 2003 or by email on info@prisonersfamilies.org. You can also encourage your family member to speak to someone about it – such as a member of staff, a Listener, The Samaritans or other sources of support. We have a duty of care to the men, women and children in custody, and we want to help them. Whatever the situation of your family member, whatever offences they are convicted or accused of, our commitment is to look after them with humanity, and to do all we can to keep them safe.

Planning for Recovery

We recently published a national framework which sets out our approach to easing safely the restrictions in prisons once the most severe restrictions on normal activity are no longer necessary. This framework will help us to restart some aspects of daily prison life soon, with adaptations and restrictions to ensure safety.

I know that it is frustrating to see restrictions gradually being lifted in the community while there are not yet similar changes in prisons. The truth is that prisons are high-risk environments for an epidemic because they are closed settings holding many people with health vulnerabilities where it is much harder to maintain social distance. This means we will need to ease our restrictions later than in the community. But we have plans to begin that process in the near future, and we will lift some current restrictions when and where appropriate, based on local circumstances.

We continue to follow expert advice from the public health authorities. As you know, the country as a whole has moved from Alert Level 4 to 3, reflecting recent progress. **Current Public Health advice is that the time is now right for us to consider gradual, well controlled and closely monitored easing of restrictions in the prison system, implemented on a case by case basis at establishment level according to a rigorous risk assessment process.**

The advice also reflected that:

- While the current situation gives cause for cautious optimism, significant threat levels remain. We are still identifying new infections and we must be alert to the risk of a second or even a third wave.
- It will be crucial that fundamental safeguards like social distancing, hand washing, PPE, plus testing and tracing measures, are rigorously maintained.

I want to be straight with you. Progress will be slow, and restrictions may need to be quickly re-imposed in the event of local outbreaks. We need to be prepared for setbacks and for progress that differs across the prison estate, depending on local circumstances. If the country experiences a difficult second wave of Covid-19 later in the year, it may be necessary to revert to restrictions across the system.

Our national framework sets out five different regime stages, summarised within the table below; every establishment is currently at regime stage 4 ‘Lockdown’, and we are planning to move to stage 3 ‘Restrict’ in suitable sites shortly.

Stage	Conditions to operate at this Stage	What could a prison regime operating at this Stage look like?
5 Complete Lockdown	Prison - as ‘Lockdown’, but with an active outbreak ongoing that is not being contained by level 4 lockdown.	Regime focused purely on preservation of life. Minimise time out of cell and social contact – no time in the open air, all meals served at cell door, support from other establishments or external suppliers for essential services like laundry. No transfers in or out of the establishment.
4 Lockdown	Prison – Significant number of infections within establishment or prison unable to implement compartmentalisation strategy. National – Significant number of establishments with new infections, which indicates that systemic risks are not sufficiently controlled. Community - High levels of community infection and transmission (Alert Level 4/5).	Minimum required regime in place to ensure safety and decency. Receptions from courts for some prisons, but routine inter-prison transfers (IPTs) stopped and controlled IPTs agreed via central command structures.

3	Restrict	<p>Prison - Assessment is that infection levels in the establishment are under control.</p> <p>National – Small number of establishments with outbreak control teams in place.</p> <p>Community – At or transitioning to Alert Level 3 (epidemic in circulation) or below.</p>	<p>More inter-prison transfers possible, but still controlled.</p> <p>Highest priority areas of regime (e.g. visits) can start to be reinstated with appropriate restrictions.</p> <p>Reintroduction of stage 3 regime elements such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social visits, but with limited capacity and other restrictions and adaptations. • Offender Management work and Offending Behaviour Programmes, but with restrictions and adaptations.
2	Reduce	<p>Prison - No infection present in the prison, or very low levels where spread is contained.</p> <p>National – Infection present only in small number of prisons.</p> <p>Community – At or transitioning to Alert Level 2 (Covid-19 present, but transmission is low) or below.</p>	<p>Testing and monitoring ongoing, but minimal social distancing required, in line with the community.</p> <p>Inter Prison Transfers closer to normal levels.</p> <p>Implementation of Stage 2 regime elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reintroduction of classroom based education in the adult estate; greater workshops activity in operation; indoor PE; all with restrictions and adaptations to reduce capacity as necessary. • Less restrictive adaptations and greater capacity across all services, such as visits. • Reintroduce communal worship with restrictions and adaptations.
1	Prepare	<p>Prison – No infection within establishment.</p> <p>National – No known infections in prisons.</p> <p>Community – At or transitioning to Alert Level 1 (Covid-19 not known to be present)</p> <p>Staffing levels near target and sufficient for normal regime delivery, including partner services e.g. healthcare.</p>	<p>Ongoing screening, testing and monitoring continues to rapidly detect any new infections in the future.</p> <p>Routine Inter Prison Transfers allowed.</p> <p>Regimes operating without requirements for social distancing or PPE use.</p>

When they begin to move to a lower stage, prisons will transition gradually over a number of weeks rather than adopt all aspects of the relevant regime for that stage overnight. Prisons will move up or down the stages in response to local conditions such as an outbreak of infection in the prison or the local community. We must be prepared for a period of living with the coronavirus, and adapting the ways in which prisons operate – for example, when visits are able to restart, for safety reasons it will be with necessary restrictions rather than as normal.

Timing

There are no target dates for the prison estate to start moving to less restricted regime stages, or for individual establishments to do so. These decisions are based purely on the evidence and public health advice.

This is not a process we can rush, and we will proceed with the necessary caution so we can continue to protect people who work and live in prisons. Preservation of life and the need to maintain safety mean there continues to be a need for patience. Prisons have local planning underway to support regime change when their prison is ready to do so.

I am hopeful that the first establishments ready to transition to regime stage 3 will start to do so from late June and early July. We estimate that this may be well over half of establishments, with others to follow during July if progress is maintained. We still have 17 establishments subject to Outbreak Control measures from the public health authorities, so some establishments will not be ready to progress to stage 3 for a further period.

Further progression to regime stage 2 'Reduce' will depend on future progress in tackling Covid-19 in the country as a whole, as well as within the prison system. The same process of rigorous assessment, public health advice and local planning will also apply to such future decisions and change.

Governors will keep your family member in prison informed of any changes no matter how small, so that s/he has information that s/he can share with you.

Race equality

I also wanted to reflect on the strength of feeling around the world following the recent appalling death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. What has happened in recent weeks has made the UK look at its own history and behaviour, and we need to confront our own struggles in the prison system.

I know that the current restrictions in prison have meant that many black and other ethnic minority prisoners have not been able to share their feelings and experiences as they would wish. I know there are some prisons where residents have shared solidarity through art on t-shirts, and National Prison Radio is working on a series of programmes to capture people's thoughts.

We live in a country where pronounced race inequalities endure – seen in disparities in income, employment, health, housing, education and the criminal justice system. The Covid-19 epidemic has brought these disadvantages into sharp focus – the higher fatality rates of different ethnic minority communities reflect to a significant degree health, social and economic inequalities.

The deep implications of this are often not understood by the white majority. White people do not have the same lived experiences as ethnic minority people, so understanding the feelings that certain events and issues can give rise to amongst ethnic minority people may not come easily to white people. It's not straightforward to have insight into racial discrimination when you've never been on the receiving end of it.

Too often in recent weeks there have been some white people objecting to efforts to stand up to racism by asserting that *All lives matter, not just black lives*, which of course is true but completely misses the point. Campaigners are asserting that Black Lives Matter because there have been deaths of black people at the hands of public authorities, often but not only the police, in numbers and in circumstances that suggest black lives don't matter to the officers and the leaders of those authorities, or to wider society that doesn't do enough to stop it.

I think it's essential that white people are not dismissive of inequality and discrimination and their impacts, but instead try to acknowledge and have empathy for those fighting for equality and basic human rights, and try to reflect on what it might be like to walk in someone else's shoes. This seems to me to be a good time for white people to take a moment, be quiet and listen to ethnic minority people.

I accept that our prisons have race equality challenges that we must commit to improving, and they go deeper and are about much more than the relatively rare overt racism. The white majority in the organisation, including amongst its senior leaders, need to hear and learn from ethnic minority colleagues and people in our custody. As an organisation we need to reflect on how unconscious bias, ignorance, thoughtlessness and stereotyping can disadvantage ethnic minorities, and strive to tackle it and embed change.

To help us in this, we are implementing changes recommended by the recent Lammy Review, an investigation led by the black MP David Lammy into the treatment of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people in the criminal justice system. We are making changes to improve the fairness of our processes and to improve the representation of ethnic minority people in our workforce, but I know we have a long way to go.

I have been clear with my staff that there is no place for racism or any form of discrimination in our prisons from any quarter. It will not be tolerated and action will be taken against those who choose to behave in this way. As the Director General of Prisons I have sent an unequivocal message about my position and my expectations of the people I lead.

There are things we need to change, and it's on each of us in the system to be part of the change that's needed. I want you to know that I have communicated this responsibility to both prisoners and staff members recently.

Phil Copple
Director General of Prisons

22 June 2020