

Coronavirus (COVID-19) prison preparedness: Lucy Frazer statement

The Government is doing everything it can to combat the COVID-19 outbreak, based on the very latest scientific and medical advice. This includes in our prisons, where we are working closely with Public Health England, the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care to manage the challenges we face.

The safety and wellbeing of staff, prisoners and visitors is paramount and at the heart of our approach.

Prisons have existing, well-developed policies and procedures in place to manage outbreaks of infectious diseases. This means prisons are well prepared to take immediate action whenever cases or suspected cases are identified, including isolating individuals where necessary.

Basic hygiene is a key part of tackling the virus and good practice is being promoted on posters throughout the estate. Handwashing facilities are available to all prisoners – not just in cells but other shared areas such as education blocks and kitchens. Staff and visitors also have access to handwashing facilities and we have worked closely with suppliers to ensure adequate supply of soap and cleaning materials.

We understand that prisoners and their loved ones might be concerned about the situation. But we can assure them that we will continue to operate normal regimes, with the minimum disruption, for as long as we can. This will include visits to prisoners but, in line with Public Health advice for the general public, we urge any friend or family member not to come to a prison for visit if they have any symptoms associated with COVID-19 – a fever or new, persistent cough. We are also looking into ways to keep prisoners in close contact with their families in all eventualities, and will share further information as and when necessary.

We have procedures agreed with our public health colleagues for protecting staff in the workplace but, like any member of the community, some prison staff may need to self-isolate in line with public health advice, or may become infected. We are taking steps to boost staff availability and so enable us to look after prisoners properly and minimise the impacts on prison regimes of staff absences.

There is a huge amount of work taking place, and I want to thank all those who have been striving tirelessly to make sure we are ready to do all we can to respond over the coming weeks.