

Coronavirus preparedness in prisons

In March the government introduced temporary restrictions in prisons to prevent the virus taking hold – a decision that has saved the lives of staff, prisoners and children in custody, and protected the NHS.

These measures, backed by Public Health England, included:

- Putting in place an effective system in all prisons and youth custody establishments to limit the spread of the disease – meaning they now have distinct areas where vulnerable prisoners can shield, the symptomatic can isolate, and new arrivals can quarantine
- Creating an additional 1,200 temporary cells so people are better able to social distance and we can limit the spread of infection
- Making important adjustments to prison life – including placing prisoners in social ‘bubbles’ so they could safely spend more time out of their cells for vital education and work, introducing video calls with family and friends, and exercise.

In April, Public Health England endorsed this approach as being effective in limiting the spread of the virus, and ultimately in saving lives.

With new national restrictions in force, we are further bolstering our defences to reduce the risk of transmission.

These actions include:

- Introducing routine testing of frontline staff and prisoners who arrive from court or transfer from other jails to catch infections earlier, and hugely improve our ability to identify, contain and limit outbreaks where they occur.
- Making more Personal Protective Equipment available to staff who come into close contact with offenders, so they can protect themselves and the offenders in their care.
- Temporarily stopping social visits for adult prisoners in England in line with the new national restrictions. However, visits for compassionate reasons, visits to children in custody and official or legal visits will continue.

Prisoners will still be able to see friends and family via secure video calls, with this game-changing technology now in place at over 100 jails. Staff are also helping offenders to keep in touch through phone calls, with more than 1,200 mobile handsets distributed as well as extra phone credit.

Staff will continue to support prisoners with vital rehabilitation work, such as access to education and exercise as they have throughout the pandemic. Face-to-face education for children in custody will also continue, as it will for children around the country.

Prisons Minister, Lucy Frazer QC MP, said:

The decisive action and tough decisions we took in March have undoubtedly limited the spread of the virus in our prisons and saved lives.

This is in no small part due to the tireless work of our dedicated officers working closely with outstanding NHS staff and public health experts.

Now, as the government takes further action to control the rapid spread of the virus, we too must take further steps in prisons and temporarily suspend social visits.

Our priority is to limit the spread of the virus and to protect the lives and wellbeing of those who live and work in our prisons and in youth custody.

The significant challenge continues but we now have more tools at our disposal – we have learned lessons and taken every opportunity to refine our strategy -and will continue to do so.

Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service national frameworks can be read on GOV.UK: