

Pause to prisoner early release scheme

The temporary release of low risk prisoners, which was one of the first steps taken as part of a wider strategy to protect the NHS and reduce the virus' impact on the prison estate, will be paused at the end of August.

The scheme, introduced in April, allowed for the early release of stringently assessed low-risk prisoners who were within two months of their release date – freeing up space across the estate so that all prisons could effectively control the spread of the virus by quarantining new arrivals, isolating those with symptoms and shielding vulnerable offenders. This was based on advice from Public Health England and was necessary to protect life and avoid thousands of prisoners becoming infected, overwhelming local NHS services.

Further decisive action has also proven successful in limiting infections among the thousands who live and work in prisons, including restricting movements between jails to avoid prisoners and staff becoming infected with the virus, an increase in staff testing; and creating over 1,000 additional spaces.

Taken together, these measures have meant the pandemic has been thwarted from taking hold in the prison estate; prevented local health services from becoming overwhelmed; and saved thousands of lives.

With the virus in prisons under control, we no longer need to continue the temporary release of prisoners. Throughout the pandemic our response has been based on public health advice and this decision will be kept under constant review over the coming weeks and months.

Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, Robert Buckland QC MP, said:

This has been an unprecedented situation but thanks to the hard work and dedication of our staff we have stopped coronavirus taking hold in prisons, which means we can now pause the early release scheme.

We continue to keep this decision under review, but independent public health experts have judged our approach effective and we continue to do all we can to help the NHS and prevent our staff and prisoners from being at risk.

Public protection has remained the number one priority throughout the pandemic. Only those prisoners who were low-risk and who passed the stringent criteria were granted temporary release.

No high-risk offenders, including those convicted of violent or sexual offences or those who posed a risk to national security – were considered for release.

Current cases will continue to be worked through, with releases being made until Thursday 27 August 2020.