

Press release: Drug detection technology arrives at 10 prisons

- Prisons Minister announces arrival of drug detection scanners in all 10 prisons
- Machines able to detect drugs on clothes, paper and mail
- Part of new approach to tackle violence and improve standards

The technology can detect invisible traces of drugs, including psychoactive substances, soaked into clothing and paper – a technique increasingly used by criminals attempting to smuggle drugs into prisons.

Staff have undergone training to operate the machines, and will be taught how to handle and preserve evidence. A positive result gives officers grounds to carry out further investigation, which could result in sanctions or criminal prosecution.

The Prison Service and Ministry of Justice are now considering whether the technology should be rolled out across the entire closed male prison estate.

The introduction of the scanners is the latest development in the '10 Prisons Project', which aims to reduce drugs and violence, while improving standards, in the country's most challenging jails – providing a template for the wider estate. The roll-out of x-ray body scanners at the 10 prisons is also underway.

This project is part of a much wider £70 million drive to restore stability to the prison estate.

Prisons Minister Rory Stewart said:

Drugs in prison, particularly psychoactive substances, have been a game-changer – they drive self-harm and extreme violence, putting both prisoners and prison officers at risk.

My key priority has been to toughen security and searching. We need to make it much more difficult for anyone to get drugs into prisons. So, in the 10 priority prisons, I am emphasising the use of technology to search letters, bags and people – including visitors and prison officers – as well as netting to prevent drones and throw-overs.

This improved physical security combined with good existing work on intelligence and drug treatment is already making a difference in some of our most challenged prisons. And, if this pilot is

successful, I would hope to introduce the same measures across all our local prisons.

The machines will allow staff to observe emerging drug trends, providing them with intelligence which can be passed on to security colleagues who will investigate and act. They will also help prisons identify where, and by whom, drugs have been stored and handled. This will assist decisions on which prisoners and cells require further investigation.

The 10 Prisons Project was announced in August 2018 and is being funded by an initial £10 million investment.

Various measures have already been implemented. Each prison now has extra specialist staff and teams in place, including a drugs strategy manager, additional entry searching staff and more dog handlers.

These prisons are also investing in changes to the prison environment to improve decency and provide clean and appropriate sanitation as well as refurbish cells and shared areas.

The wider estate is benefitting from a range of investments, including £16 million to improve conditions for prisoners and staff and £7 million on new security measures, such as security scanners, improved searching techniques, phone-blocking technology and a financial crime unit to target the criminal kingpins operating in prisons.

This has come against a backdrop of rising prison officer numbers, with more than 4,300 now recruited since October 2016 and staffing levels at their highest since 2012.

Notes to editors:

- Geographical groups of prisons in Yorkshire, the north Midlands and London have been selected for the project. The prisons are: Hull, Humber, Leeds, Lindholme, Moorland, Wealstun, Nottingham, Ranby, Isis and Wormwood Scrubs.
- We are on course to spend the full £10 million budget by the end of this financial year.