

# Prison visits cancelled

- Prisons across the estate to receive 900 secure phone handsets as visits cancelled
- Part of plans to maintain family contact during COVID-19 outbreak – ensuring stability in jails
- All calls monitored and restricted

This is to ensure prisons are complying with social distancing rules and to protect staff and prisoners.

In recognition of the importance of continued contact with family and to ensure stability in our jails the Government has moved quickly to keep prisoners in touch with their family members by other means.

Secure phone handsets will be given to prisoners at 55 jails. This will enable the approved use of 900 locked SIM card handsets, allowing risk-assessed prisoners to speak to a small number of pre-authorized contacts. The phones will not have internet access.

Strict measures will ensure the phones are not misused with calls being time-limited and monitored closely. Additionally, handsets will include measures to prevent non-secure SIM cards being used.

Prisons and Probation Minister Lucy Frazer QC MP said:

These are uniquely challenging times and the decision to end prison visits has not been taken lightly. We know these are important to many prisoners and that they will be concerned for the wellbeing of their family members.

It is therefore right and proportionate that we provide other, controlled ways for them to stay in touch so that they can maintain the close bonds that will ultimately reduce their chances of reoffending when they are released.

I also want to pay tribute to the thousands of staff working tirelessly to keep our prisons safe.

Visits were suspended after the Government took vital steps to limit travel and social interactions in order to limit the spread of the virus.

As well as helping prisoners connect with their families, the phones will give prisoners access to support services such as the Samaritans, therefore reducing their risk of self-harm.

A [2017 review by Lord Farmer](#) found that close ties between prisoners and key family members can significantly reduce their risk of reoffending and creating more misery for victims.

Currently more than 50 prisons across England and Wales have [in-cell telephony](#) which allows prisoners to stay in touch with their family members in a controlled and safe manner. The new handsets will make sure this ability is balanced across all prisons, and promote stability in jails without existing in-cell phones.

Alongside the handsets, the Prison Service is also exploring the use of video calls at six pilot sites, to allow prisoners to be called by their families in a secure environment with strict safeguards.

The Ministry of Justice is working closely with Public Health England, the National Health Service and the Department of Health and Social Care to manage the challenges COVID-19 presents.

As with all Government policy at this time, the priority is to protect lives and HMPPS has put in place robust and flexible plans designed to keep all both staff and prisoners as safe as possible. These are reviewed continually.

## **Notes to editors**

- The handsets are a temporary measure, intended only for use during the current period where contact with family and friends is limited as a result of the Government's social distancing measures.
- Ministry of Justice research shows that strong family ties are linked to a 39% reduction in the likelihood of reoffending. Less reoffending means fewer victims in the future.