

Update on COVID-19 in prisons

This follows new modelling by Public Health England (PHE) and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) that indicates jails are successfully limiting deaths and the transmission of the virus within the estate.

The new modelling predicts a drastic reduction in the spread rates of the infection compared to previous forecasts, with each case being passed on to less than one person –and monitoring suggests overall infection rates are falling.

This means that as a result of the strong measures introduced by HMPPS, lives should be saved and the NHS is being protected from the impact of widespread local outbreaks.

HMPPS is containing the spread of COVID-19 within jails using an approach known as ‘compartmentalisation’. Through this approach, staff have isolated those with symptoms, and many prisons have been able to shield the vulnerable and quarantine new arrivals.

Separating those with symptoms has been ongoing since early February and coupled with the wider action taken, this has limited the spread of confirmed Coronavirus cases in jails. The majority of those infected have now made a successful recovery.

HMPPS took decisive action in March to minimise movements between jails to avoid thousands of prisoners and staff becoming infected with the virus. Strong further measures were introduced to ease pressure on prisons with the early release of [low-risk offenders](#), [temporary expansion of the estate](#), and work to reduce the number of those held on remand.

The new modelling shows that reducing the prison population by 5,000 could be effective in limiting the spread of the virus. Thanks to wide measures taken, the population has already reduced by almost 3,000 over a seven-week period. Combining a reduction in the prison population, creating additional headroom in the estate, and managing prisoners through ‘compartmentalisation’, HMPPS can continue to protect life.

Prisons and Probation Minister, Lucy Frazer QC MP, said:

This Government has taken unprecedented action during this difficult period to save lives and protect the NHS. I cannot express sufficient gratitude to the hard-working prison and healthcare staff, and prisoners, who have allowed this to take place. My thoughts are with all of those affected by this terrible virus.

We know further progress is needed if we are to continue to strike

a balance between limiting the spread of COVID-19 and protecting the public. We appreciate that unusual measures will need to remain in place for some time and significant challenges remain.

But there are positive signs that our carefully implemented approach is limiting the impact of this initial phase of the pandemic – actual cases and deaths so far are much lower than originally predicted. We will continue to do everything possible to make sure this remains the case.

Prison staff have continued to ensure the effective running of jails and many hundreds are returning to work after periods of absence to comply with public health guidance.

This is being helped by an increase in staff testing, with over a thousand referred for testing in the past fortnight. Personal protective equipment is also being provided to prison officers and all jails have the soap and cleaning materials they need.

Work to create the additional space in the prison estate will continue at pace, with the installation of hundreds of temporary, single occupancy cells alongside the scheme to release low-risk offenders. Efforts to expedite sentencing hearings for those on remand are ongoing.

All our actions have been informed by the advice of experts from PHE and will be kept under constant review. The [revised model](#) on transmission of COVID-19 in prisons is available.