



Ministry
of Justice



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Department
of Health &
Social Care

Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody

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**Board members
Ministerial Board on Deaths in Custody**

2 June 2020

Dear all,

In the face of the unprecedented challenges posed by Covid-19, the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP) has focused on providing clear advice on how Ministers can meet their human rights obligations and protect the lives of people detained in all forms of state custody. We recognise the exceptional work being done by all members of the Board to keep people safe during this time.

As you know, one of the IAP's guiding principles is to include the voice and views of people in custody and their families in our recommendations and advice. We have just published a rapid review of the experiences of people in prison under Covid-19. The review, available at <https://www.iapondeathsincustody.org/covid-19>, draws on prison radio messages from over 200 prisoners across 55 prisons to shed light on a period of heightened isolation and uncertainty, mitigated for some by positive staff relations, good communication and small acts of kindness but blighted for others by bereavement, bleak conditions and dashed expectations.

The title of our briefing – “*Keep talking, stay safe*” – is taken from one of the messages received and underlines the need for good, honest communication and provision of clear, accurate information at a time of fear, risk and ambiguity. The review also highlights important prisoner concerns about the impact of regime restrictions on mental health, as well as concerns about prison hygiene, cleanliness and protective equipment.

Many prisoners expressed appreciation for the dedicated care and support that most prison staff have shown during this unprecedented time. The review shows the benefit of ensuring prison staff are given the support, supervision and resource they need to keep people safe in their care. In particular, it has underscored the value of the keyworker scheme.

Risks remain – from the spread of the virus to an upsurge in prison numbers as courts resume; from growing instability to a rise in suicide and self-harm. It is vital to preserve and expand the headroom in terms of physical space and staff time that has been secured and

could, so easily, be lost again. The messages from prisoners remind us too of the privations of loss of liberty and damage done by extremes of lockdown which cannot, and should not, be sustained over time.

The review has relevance for all places of detention in this period. We have written to Ministers and senior leaders within the prison service and urged them to take forward ten specific recommendations, which cover prisoner engagement, independent scrutiny, mental health, care of the most vulnerable, and family contact.

Following the welcome news that the Ministerial Board on Deaths in Custody will be reconvened in the next few weeks, we plan to discuss the review with you all. Meanwhile, I hope that you and the organisations, agencies and departments you represent will find it interesting and useful and that you will share it with colleagues.

As ever,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Juliet', is positioned below the text 'As ever,'.

Juliet Lyon CBE, Chair, Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody