



Ministry
of Justice



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Department
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Social Care

Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody

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Sir Bob Neill MP
Chair of Justice Committee

1 June 2020

Dear Bob,

In the unprecedented circumstances presented by Covid-19, the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP) has focused on providing clear advice on how to protect the lives of people detained in the care of the state. This has ranged from work and correspondence with Ministers and officials to panel member, Professor Jennifer Shaw's, oral evidence to your inquiry on the Ageing Prison Population and consideration of the most vulnerable prisoners.

Today the IAP has published a rapid review of the experiences of people detained in the nation's prisons during the period affected by Covid-19. The review, available here <https://www.iapondeathsincustody.org/covid-19>, draws on 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.

It is vital, as I know you appreciate, that the prison service learns lessons from the positive developments that have occurred during this period. The views of people in custody, presented in this rapid review, express the extent of dedicated care and support that prison staff have shown during this time. It has demonstrated the undeniably clear benefit of ensuring prison staff are given the support and resource they need to keep people in their care safe. In particular, it has underscored the value of the keyworker scheme.

The title of our briefing – *“Keep talking, stay safe”* – is taken from one of the messages received and encapsulates the importance of providing clear, accurate and honest communication at a time of fear, risk and ambiguity. Announcements of the early release scheme have led to confusion as the scheme itself has proved difficult to understand or deliver even for a disciplined service like the prison service.

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.

As attention turns to emergence from a necessarily painstaking and carefully managed recovery phase, the IAP will provide in the coming weeks a more in-depth analysis, drawing on national and international standards and guidelines; current research and relevant reports; and including further material from our contact with prisoners' families and prisoners themselves. We will, of course, ensure that you and your Committee members receive copies of this second briefing.

We have written to Ministers and senior leaders within the prison service and urged them to consider taking forward ten specific recommendations, which cover prisoner engagement, staff support and supervision, independent scrutiny, mental health, care of the most vulnerable, and family contact. In the coming weeks, we hope to discuss its implications at a meeting of the Ministerial Board on Deaths in Custody.

I trust you find this unique review interesting and useful, and will be able to share it with your Committee members. I would also very much appreciate a meeting with you to discuss our conclusions and recommendations, and to explore further how we can work together productively as places of state custody begin the difficult path to recovery.

As ever,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Juliet'.

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