

Note to Prisons Minister, Lucy Frazer QC MP re covid-19.

Some immediate practical considerations 25 March

Dear Lucy,

Thank you for your kind note of reassurance about helping to maintain vital family contact by increasing use of phone handsets in those prisons without in-cell telephony. And thank you for suggesting we speak on the phone. I should very much welcome a conversation with you as soon as this can be arranged with your office.

Meanwhile following our IAP meeting, I am writing with specific advice about immediate priorities which we hope you and your officials will find useful. We appreciate that much of what we recommend will be known to you and colleagues and thus supports action you are already taking.

The first is consideration of cohorts of people in prison for expedited and planned release. These include:

- Those serving short sentences for non-violent crimes
- People nearing the end of their sentence
- Those eligible for HDC or ROTL
- People held in the open estate
- Numbers held on custodial remand or technical breach recall
- Pregnant women and numbers of non-violent women in prison
- People under consideration for compassionate release, and individuals approved for, but waiting, transfer from prison to psychiatric care – this work should be expedited (smaller numbers but disproportionate calls on staff time).

A large-scale release programme should be operated, on a case by case basis to protect lives and keep people safe. We place an emphasis on 'planned' because risk posed to the public clearly needs to be assessed. We recognise that some people, those facing homelessness or women returning to domestic violence for instance, might elect to continue serving their sentence in custody rather than face higher risk in the community. There is a risk of drug overdose or exploitation on release – particularly for those currently undertaking detox and drug treatment in custody. If at all possible, additional support should be provided to recently released prisoners in the community.

Overall, we understand that this is an exceptional exercise in balancing risk. The IAP will support you and your officials in whatever way we can.

To manage the prison population during the epidemic, it is vital to:

- Protect staff with good, considerate management and adequate supplies of PPE and testing equipment and support them to be compassionate and kind in face of mounting anxiety
- Provide everyone, prisoners and staff, with clear, accurate information regularly updated and in forms easily understood. Consideration must be given to prisoners with second language/literacy needs. Prisoners should have access to TV's and radios (no removal under basic IEP). Use should be made of Prison Radio broadcasts and Inside Time paper and website
- Increase opportunities (additional phone credit/free calls/incoming calls from approved numbers) for phone contact with families, friends, counsellors, volunteers
- Focus with rigour on hygiene and cleanliness
- Improve diet and fluid intake and increase food budgets/give canteen credit

- Identify and support Samaritan Listeners as 'essential workers' alongside prisoners on kitchen and cleaning duties
- Provide distraction packs and exercise sheets for in-cell activity.
- Make careful monitoring, observations and provision of emotional support to prisoners at risk of suicide and self-harm and those on ACCT processes at a time of increased isolation and reduced family contact
- Ensure access to lawyers and complaints processes where possible
- Shield the most vulnerable, by focussing energy on prisoners aged over 50 with co-morbid health conditions such as respiratory illness and diabetes.

Looking forward to speaking soon. As ever, Juliet