

## Notice to families

When I last wrote to you, we were planning for the next stage of our prison regime recovery. I told you that I was keen to begin easing restrictions and running more activities as soon as it was safe to do so within establishments. I am really pleased that because of the generally improved national picture and the current position in prisons, many establishments have begun to make changes so that the regimes available for the people in our care are starting to open up. This is a very careful and considered process because, as closed environments, prisons remain particularly vulnerable to the spread of infection. Each prison environment is different and each governor will be making decisions based on local circumstances, and close working with health colleagues in particular – keeping everyone safe is our number one concern.

### **Visits**

I know how essential visits are to so many of you, and I am therefore particularly pleased that we have been able to run visits in some prisons. Visits are a little different now - we can't run as many as we used to because we need to socially distance and do more frequent deep cleans – and I am sure many of you will find it hard not to give a hug to the person you are visiting. Please know that we are taking advice all the time about the things we need to do to keep people safe.

We are also continuing with introducing more video calling so that in more and more prisons it will be possible for families to see each other even when physical visits are still restricted. I am hearing some really positive feedback about video calls and we will consider how to keep those on offer into the future.

If the prison your loved one is in is not currently running visits, they will do so as soon as it is safe to do so. I know this may cause you some worry or frustration but I want to reassure you that this is a priority for us and we are committed to getting visits up and running in all our prisons as soon as possible.

For those people who have visited loved ones, thank you all for the support you have given us by following these new guidelines. I know that it must be hard to remain distanced from your loved one and to wear a mask but it's these guidelines that mean we can run visits again.

### **Following latest health advice**

Health guidance is changing regularly and one of the areas that has changed in the community recently is shielding. Shielding is for people who are medically vulnerable and who may suffer worse outcomes as a result of getting coronavirus. We will continue to offer shielding in prisons but this will remain entirely voluntary. If your loved one was shielding, prison staff and health colleagues will have helped them decide what the right decision is for them, based on their circumstances and what is happening in their prison.

A consistent and important message throughout this period has been the importance of following health advice. We are only able to consider opening up regimes because of the low level of infection in prisons. When I last wrote to you, I told you that 17 prisons were

subject to outbreak control measures which means they have to take specific actions which are outlined by the local health authority in that area. I am pleased to say we currently only have one prison subject to outbreak control measures at the time of writing which shows the progress made. Maintaining low rates of infection is essential and we are continually encouraging everyone in prisons to contribute to this by following guidance on social distancing, hand washing and avoiding touching their faces.

I know support from families has helped many of our prison residents cope with lockdown – thank you for helping us keep them safe and well in these difficult times. I have seen some humbling examples of staff and prisoners working together to do good in their community during lockdown – with fundraising and food bank collections and sewing scrubs for the NHS. I know many of you will have helped make that happen – thank you.

We continue to make careful and considered plans, and I will keep you informed of these through my letters. I write to prison residents too and they will also be kept up to date through prison radio and notes from their own governor on local plans. We want everyone to know our plans for how we will further open up life in prison when it is safe to do so, and how we make sure we are ready for outbreaks in individual prisons or in the local community that may mean we have to reintroduce restrictions.

As always, if you are worried that your family member in prison is struggling to cope at any point, please call the prison or contact the Prisoners' Families Helpline on 0808 808 2003 or by email on [info@prisonersfamilies.org](mailto:info@prisonersfamilies.org). Please also encourage your family member to speak to someone about it – such as a member of staff, a Listener, The Samaritans or other sources of support.

Finally, I just wanted to say that some of the services provided in prisons are run by charities who may also have had very different experiences of dealing with coronavirus. Their income, staffing levels and ways of working may well have changed as a result of what has happened in recent months. This will obviously then have a different impact on different prisons and we will need to think about how we manage that as we make plans for the future. Some of you may be involved in these organisations that provide support to people in prison and their families and I want to thank you for that contribution – it makes such a difference.

Thank you all for your ongoing support and I look forward to continuing to work with you during this recovery period.