

Prison Governors Association

Representing: The Prison Governors of the United Kingdom since 1987



6 April 2020

Prison Governors' Association (PGA) Evidence to Justice Committee on COVID-19

The Prison Governors' Association (PGA) remains concerned about the ability to safeguard and save lives in the prison setting.

Last week, HMPPS published guidance in line with instructions from Government on cohorting prisoners to delay the spread of the virus. These included creating three distinct units for groups of prisoners.

- 7-Day Isolation Unit - This unit will house those prisoners presenting with the symptoms of the virus.
- 14-Day Isolation Unit - This unit will house those prisoners not displaying symptoms but who may have been exposed and those new into the prison.
- Shielding Unit - This unit will house those extremely vulnerable to the virus who could lose their life if infected.

The PGA does not disagree with this position, but we have significant concerns in the ability to achieve this if prisons are full and cells remain doubled. Our members have reported to the PGA National Executive Committee that the challenge is immense. They have also reported to us that Public Health England and HMPPS require a reduction of 15,000 prisoners in order to truly safeguard prisoners and staff.

The announcement on Saturday that early release would be granted for those with fewer than two months to serve while also meeting a strict criteria is not as attractive as it sounds. 4,000 prisoners would be eligible, but following

application of the stringent criteria and risk assessment, the number eligible would be far less, possibly as low as 2,000. This is woefully short of the alleged 15,000 required.

The PGA does not understand why there is a need for tagging of early released prisoners. At their normal release date, which would be no more than two months after this early release date, they would not be tagged. The country is in a semi-lockdown scenario and crime is falling. It seems that this is unnecessary bureaucracy which will build in delay at a time when speed and efficiency is of the essence and saving life is the purpose. We also understand from members that capacity in the tagging contract can only cope with around 2,000 extra tags.

There are other possibilities to reduce population. We already have many risk assessed Category D prisoners out in the community released on temporary licence (ROTL). Could a less strict criteria be applied to them and a significant number ROTL'd until the level of risk from the virus allows them to return to their establishment? This would allow those Category D's in Category B & C conditions, following virus testing, to be transferred into the spaces created in Category D prisons. Reducing numbers in Category B & C prisons would support the cohorting initiatives.

This is about saving the lives of staff and prisoners and brave decisions must be made to achieve this.

HMP Pentonville is an example of a prison that has 786 men in overcrowded conditions. A reduction of 393 prisoners is required to reduce its overcrowding.

- **Certified Normal Accommodation (CNA):** 694
- **Population:** 1087

This can be illustrated by the following from the Howard Leagues weekly Population updates: -

Most overcrowded prisons in England and Wales



Andrea Albutt
President