



Sir Bob Neill MP
Chair
Justice Select Committee

By email.

15 May 2020

Dear Sir Bob,

COVID-19 IN PRISONS: FAMILY CONTACT

As part of our Covid-19 contingency measures, prison regimes have been restricted and all social visits and group activity have been temporarily cancelled, in line with PHE Guidance. We are very conscious of the impact that this may have on prisoners' wellbeing and rehabilitation, and so have invested in various measures to maintain family contact and improve wellbeing during this time. The latest of such measures is the introduction of secure video calls, which we are now rolling out in phases to prisons and young offender institutions across England and Wales.

Secure video calls

Family contact provides a crucial lifeline for those in our care and we are doing all that we can to ensure that prisoners can maintain this contact despite these exceptional circumstances. We have been successfully trialling secure video calls at HMP Berwyn and, following the success of this pilot, we are now making these calls available at 10 establishments with a wider rollout in the coming weeks. The first establishments to make use of this new technology are: HMPs Berwyn, Bronzefield, Downview, Eastwood Park, Garth, High Down, Hull, Wayland, Werrington and Wetherby.

The facility is vital for supporting prisoners to maintain family contact and relationships which we know are paramount to their wellbeing. Many of those in our care are also primary carers, as such, this facility is critical not only for their wellbeing, but also that of their children at a time of such uncertainty and heightened anxiety. We will take a pragmatic approach to rollout but, where feasible, aim to prioritise the women's and youth estate where caring responsibilities and other vulnerabilities are most prevalent, in line with recommendations from Lord Farmer's reviews on family ties.

Video calls will be provided through secure laptops in a designated room in each establishment. Calls can be made either by prisoners making a call request to their designated contact or by families who can request a time slot through a mobile app or directly with the establishment. Each prisoner is allowed one video call per month, lasting 30 minutes.

We have safeguards in place to prevent misuse. All participants will be vetted in advance and prisoners risk-assessed by establishments. Calls will be monitored by prison staff and restrictions have been built into the software to ensure safe use. Any prisoners who misuse the service will be subject to usual disciplinary procedures.

Whilst this current video call service is a temporary measure, intended for use whilst contact with family and friends is limited as a result of social distancing measures, we are considering a longer-term solution for video calls in line with the recommendations of Lord Farmer's 2017 review, and further Review for Women (2019), focussing on those who do not receive face-to-face visits under normal circumstances.

Other measures to support family contact during the pandemic

This latest announcement comes in addition to the wider package of measures that we have introduced to maintain family contact. On 24 March we announced plans to roll-out 900 locked mobile phone handsets for use in those establishments without access to in-cell telephony. All establishments have now received access to these phones so that those prisoners who do not have in-cell telephones (40% of the prison estate) can contact friends and family via the usual PIN phone system but from within their cells rather than the standard phone on the landing. We have provided every prisoner with additional pin credit and have negotiated reduced call rates, allowing more contact with families.

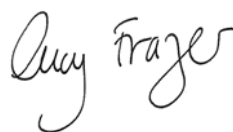
We have also made the decision to allow prisoners in the open estate controlled access to their personal mobile phones. Many prisoners in the open estate have access to their personal (unlocked) mobile phones when they leave the establishment for Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). Since the restriction of prison regimes, ROTL has been significantly restricted and only those in key worker roles have been able to leave their prison. This move has therefore allowed these prisoners access to their phones within a designated area of the establishment and whilst supervised by a Prison Officer. Not only has this increased access to family contact, improved morale and goodwill among the prison population, but it has also enabled us to redistribute the locked mobile handsets sent to 15 open establishments for use in the closed estate, increasing access to family contact there too.

Finally, prisons are also offering access to other measures such as letters and messages being relayed on their behalf by staff to enhance connections. Families are also able to get support and advice through the Prisoners' Families Helpline and contact their loved ones using the Email a Prisoner service.

I thank you for your continued engagement during this difficult time. We are faced with unprecedented challenges but we shall continue to do all that we can to protect the health and safety of those within our care.

I am placing a copy of this letter into the Libraries of both Houses.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lucy Frazer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

LUCY FRAZER QC MP