

22 September 2020

The Rt. Hon. Sir Bob Neill MP
Chair, Justice Select Committee

(via email to: Holly Tremain TREMAINH@parliament.uk>)

Dear Sir Bob,

Update on Independent Monitoring Boards' findings

I said that I would provide a regular update on the findings of independent monitoring boards (IMBs) during the Covid pandemic.

At the time of this update, prisons were moving on to level 3 of the recovery phase. This, however, masks considerable variabilities among prisons. The most recent reports from Boards during August are raising growing concerns about frustration at the pace of change. There were also reported rises in self-harm and continuing concerns about mental health and the delivery of the education contracts.

Some specific points:

- Access to time out of cell and exercise has increased in most, but not all prisons, and in at least one prison is below the legal minimum: we are following this up with HMPPS and with our other boards.
- Social visits are being introduced, though sometimes with relatively low take-up, probably due both to the restrictions and concerns about travel. There is a need for video visits to be available as soon as possible in all prisons, and we are urging the MOJ and HMPPS to ensure that the current model is evaluated to see how this can best work in practice, including the levels of security needed.
- There continue to be serious concerns about the delivery of education. We were surprised to learn that HMPPS had issued guidance that education staff should not go on the wings to have one-to-one conversations with prisoners to re-motivate them, and have been unable to find the reason for this. We are concerned about the management of these contracts both centrally and locally.
- Boards are reporting an increase in prisoners' frustration: self-harm appears to be rising again, along with assaults and incidents at height. Frustrations include

concerns about progression and progress towards parole, and we have continuing concerns about the cumulative mental health impact of lockdown.

- Some boards are also reporting governors' frustration at the slow pace of change and the slow and bureaucratic processes for agreeing local delivery models. We are aware that during the next stage there are proposals for more local autonomy, and boards will monitor the outcomes for prisoners as this new approach beds in.

In addition, there are growing concerns about a likely rise in the prison population, particularly in local prisons, as courts begin to resume, and the difficulty in maintaining Covid-safe cohorting arrangements.

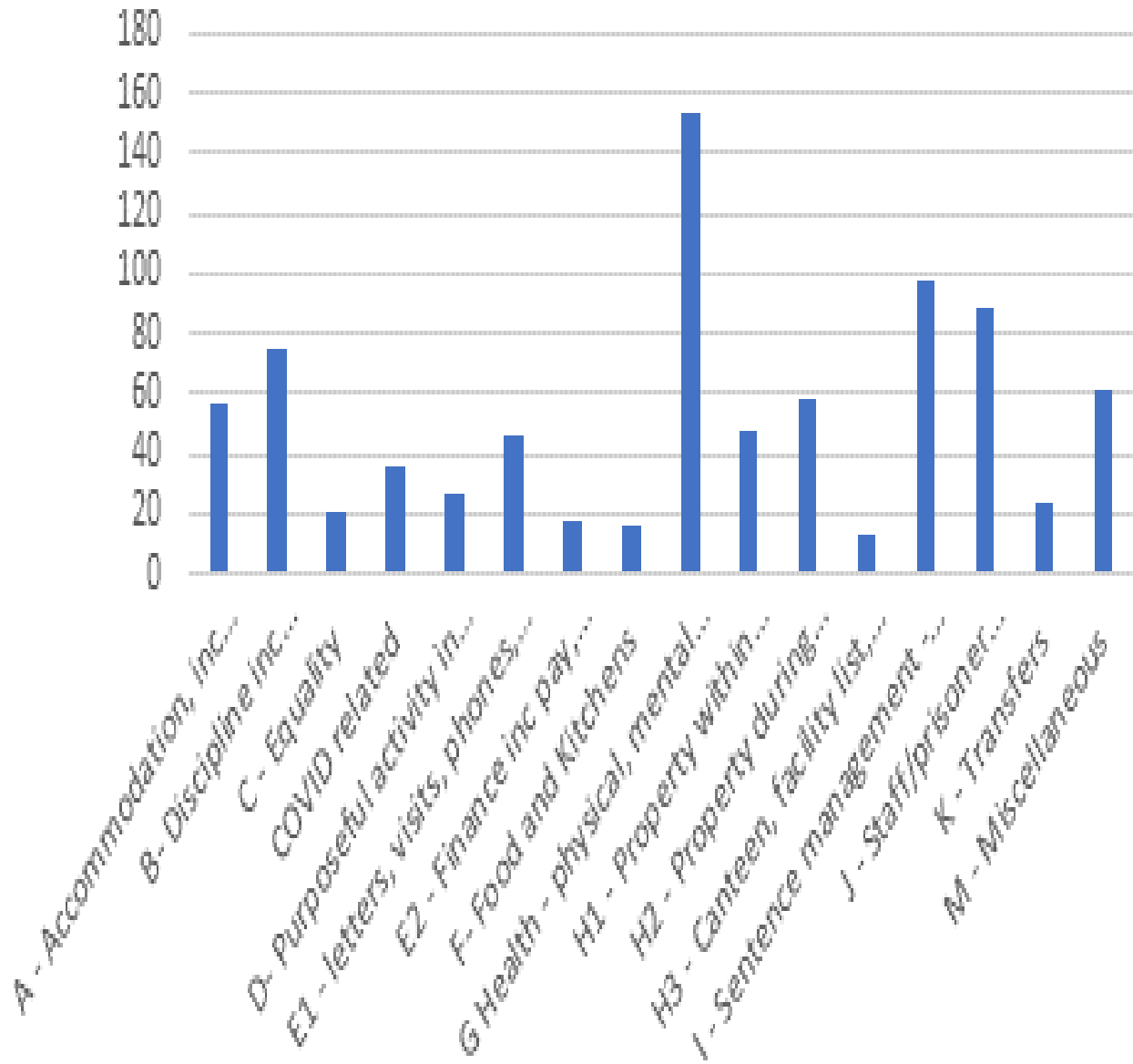
Overall, the recovery process is still slow and patchy, and the risks during the autumn will need careful management.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Anne Owers".

Anne Owers – National Chair, Independent Monitoring Boards

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*graphic excludes repeat/follow up calls about one application