



Sir Bob Neill MP
Chair, Justice Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

28 April 2020

Dear Sir Bob,

**UPDATE ON THE PRISON ESTATE: COVID-19 ADDITIONAL ACCOMMODATION AND FACILITIES
MANAGEMENT CONTRACT EXTENSION**

COVID-19 presents a unique set of challenges for the prison service and I wanted to write to you to set out how we are working with Public Health England, the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care to maintain the provision of services in our prisons to protect staff and prisoners.

The safety and wellbeing of staff, prisoners and visitors is paramount and therefore lies at the heart of our approach. HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) is containing the spread of COVID-19 within jails using an approach known as 'compartmentalisation'. New modelling by Public Health England and HMPPS indicates jails are successfully limiting deaths and the transmission of the virus within the estate as a result of the strong measures we have introduced.

To limit the spread of infection and the number of deaths, we are moving towards single-cell accommodation as much as possible. On 9 April, we announced our plans to expand the existing estate by installing the first of 500 temporary, single occupancy cells to mitigate the risk of infection by:

- removing/reducing cell sharing;
- providing accommodation with in-cell sanitation; and
- providing opportunities to shield and protect vulnerable cohorts of offenders.

Priority sites have been identified based on key three factors – the number of shared cells, the number of vulnerable offenders and access to in-cell sanitation. The units are prefabricated, using steel shipping container type frames, with built-in shower and toilet facilities.

So far, over 300 cells have been delivered to nine HMPPS sites and 96 cells have been installed to serve HMPs North Sea Camp (where the first prisoners moved in yesterday), Highpoint and Hollesley Bay. Installation continues at HMPs Littlehey, Moorland (which will also serve HMP Lindholme), Wymott, Coldingley and Hatfield. Delivery has started at HMP/YOI Askham Grange with 16 cells arriving today. Our ambition is to secure and install around 2,000 additional cells to help contain the spread of COVID-19 within our prisons.

While this temporary accommodation remains within the existing prison estate and will be monitored by staff, as normal, only lower-risk category C and D prisoners will be held in the temporary units, following careful risk assessment.

These units are a temporary measure to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. Prisoners will return to their usual accommodation arrangements when safe to do so. Once the units are no longer required, they will be removed.

To further help tackle the spread of COVID-19 within the prison estate, the former Medway Secure Training Centre, which was closed on 31 March, will be temporarily brought back into operation as an annex to HMP/YOI Rochester. The site will provide temporary accommodation for up to 70 category D, adult males, with the provision managed by HMPPS and staffed by HMPPS officers. The first men are expected to be received on 29 April.

The Medway site will be the location of the first secure school, to be run by Oasis, and plans to refurbish the site and designate it as the first secure school are on track. We do not expect the work to be impacted by this temporary emergency measure and Oasis is fully supportive of this temporary emergency measure.

We know further progress is needed if we are to continue to strike a balance between limiting the spread of COVID-19 and protecting the public. We appreciate that unusual measures will need to remain in place for some time and significant challenges remain. But there are positive signs that our carefully implemented approach is limiting the impact of this initial phase of the pandemic – projected cases and deaths so far are much lower than originally predicted. We will continue to do everything possible to make sure this remains the case.

We have also rolled out and tested enhanced video services to enable people to join court and prison video calls remotely. These will be used to support sentencing hearings and custody time-limited cases, including to enable legal representatives to take instruction from prisoners and probation staff to conduct interviews in advance of these priority hearings. To date, 452 video meeting rooms have been rolled out across the prison estate, along with a centralised booking service for defence and probation consultations. Following extensive testing involving the courts, NPS and defence practitioners, the new service has been switched on across the local/reception estate from 27 April. The implementation will take place in phases, beginning with four prisons in the North East and Yorkshire (Durham, Doncaster, Leeds and Hull) and three in London and the South East (Elmley, Wandsworth, Wormwood Scrubs).

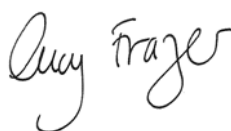
In the context of COVID-19, it is important that we also continue to improve our facilities management (FM) within the prison estate in order to provide a safe, decent environment to enable rehabilitation. Our current FM contracts with Amey (in the North, in the Midlands and in Wales) and Mitie (in the South), are due to expire at the end of May 2020. To enable us to get the requirements right for future FM provision, we have decided that we need to extend these contracts by two years to enable us to have sufficient time to:

- complete detailed reviews of maintainable assets ahead of procurement;
- carry out research and engagement to help design the new contract; and
- allow for an implementation period to ensure better service continuity and minimal operational disruption.

I hope you find this update helpful; I look forward to continuing to work with you and the Committee.

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

Yours sincerely



LUCY FRAZER QC MP