CAPPTIVE

Covid-19 Action Prisons Project: Tracking Innovation, Valuing Experience

How prisons are responding to Covid-19

Briefing #1
Families and communications
About the Prison Reform Trust
The Prison Reform Trust is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective prison system. For further information about the Prison Reform Trust, see www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/

About the Prisoner Policy Network
The Prisoner Policy Network is a network of prisoners, ex-prisoners and supporting organisations. It is hosted by the Prison Reform Trust and will make sure prisoners’ experiences are part of prison policy development nationally. Contact ppn@prisonreformtrust.org.uk or call 020 7251 5070 for more information.

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the world for everyone. We have all had to give up freedoms that are precious to us. We have all been asked to do so for the sake of a common good. No-one is immune from the risk of infection or the anxiety that can cause.

Prisoners are no exception. But being in prison does make a difference, as it does for the families prisoners have left behind. In ordinary times, the state has a particular responsibility for the care of people whose liberty it has taken away, and external scrutiny of how it acts is especially important. In the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, and the response it has required in prison to prevent mass loss of life, the state has exercised its power in an unprecedented way. At exactly the same moment, external scrutiny has been hamstrung by the difficulty of maintaining physical access to see first-hand what is happening in our prisons.

Since mid-March, almost all prisoners in England and Wales have spent 23 hours or more out of every day locked in a cell, typically around 3m by 2m in size, eating, sleeping and defecating in that space. Two thirds have done that in conditions that amount to solitary confinement. The other third have had to share with a cell mate not knowing whether or not they may be carrying the virus. All remain subject to the authority of staff who are travelling in and out of the prison every day, maybe bringing infection in, and maybe taking it out with them to their own families. All living and working in an environment that has the potential to be a perfect incubator for a deadly disease.

This briefing, and the others that will follow, have drawn on evidence from a wide range of sources to try to give a frank account of what life for prisoners and their families has been like in this double lockdown. Above all, we’ve tried to listen to what prisoners and their families have had to tell us – the good, the bad and the ugly. It’s not a plea for special treatment, but it is a plea for understanding. Because the more we understand, the better we may be able to rise to the challenges that lie ahead.
CAPPTIVE is a new project by the Prison Reform Trust, building on our innovative Prisoner Policy Network (PPN). CAPPTIVE aims to listen to prisoners, their families, prison staff, and others to build a picture of how prisons are responding to the pandemic.

Like the PPN, CAPPTIVE is based on the insight that prisoners are experts in the experience of serving a sentence. That expertise is a vital component of making any change for the better. Right now, during the Covid-19 pandemic, when every aspect of prison life has been affected, it is vital that prisoners are heard. We want prisoners to be involved in capturing the experiences of living under these conditions and to explore what we can learn from the “double lockdown” in prison.

In early June, PRT launched CAPPTIVE with an appeal in Inside Time and Converse – prison newspapers – and National Prison Radio. We asked people to tell us how the prison was managing under Covid-19. In addition to serving prisoners, we gathered information from families, prison staff, the Independent Monitoring Boards, voluntary sector agencies, and social media. We drew on the short scrutiny visits (SSVs) by HM Prisons Inspectorate. Pact and New Leaf CIC provided evidence from families and children, for which we are very grateful. Further insights were gained from the Joint Committee on Human Rights’ recent report on the impact on children with a mother in prison.

We are preparing a series of briefings, which will provide timely updates on the experience of living in prison under Covid-19 restrictions. The themes are:

- Families
- Communications
- Regimes
- Progression
- Health, and
- Innovation.

This first briefing focuses on the first two themes – families and communications.
Background: Preserving life and meeting needs in response to a pandemic

Prisons are a distinct social environment from that of the community, with people interacting in close proximity, high population vulnerability and unique pressures . . . with each prison and function having its own challenges, and some establishments being more vulnerable to outbreaks than others.

(Public Health England, Interim Covid-19 Assessment Summary Addendum)\(^1\)

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the government took radical measures in prisons. The risk of transmission is affected by the number of people one comes into contact with daily. To minimise this risk, HMPPS imposed restricted regimes and suspended family visits. An epidemic requires a delicate balance between restrictions on liberty that help to prevent transmission and minimising the harm that those restrictions cause. Achieving that balance is categorically different in prisons, as both the risks and the unintended collateral damage are shaped by the total institution within which they apply.

In late March, the government appeared to take this balance into account. Prisons and Probation Minister, Lucy Frazer QC MP stated:

*The decision to end prison visits has not been taken lightly. We know these are important to many prisoners and that they will be concerned for the wellbeing of their family members. It is therefore right and proportionate that we provide other, controlled ways for them to stay in touch so that they can maintain the close bonds that will ultimately reduce their chances of reoffending when they are released.*\(^2\)

To compensate for the loss of personal contact, the government announced on 24 March:

*Secure phone handsets will be given to prisoners at 55 jails. This will enable the approved use of 900 locked SIM card handsets...*\(^3\)

The same announcement raised the possibility of video calls, albeit in a small number of prisons. In addition, 50 prisons already had in-cell telephones, enabling prisoners to contact their loved ones without waiting for their limited time out of cell.

On the 31st March and 4th April, the government announced an early release scheme suggesting that up to 4000 prisoners would be released early.

The promises landed in the midst of a highly charged social upheaval. People in prison and their families – like the general public – accepted that profound changes to their lives were required to minimise the health risks posed by the pandemic. While calls by phone or video could not replace the physical presence of a visit, these offers did recognise the urgent need to develop other ways of meeting the needs that visits fulfilled.


\(^3\) https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prison-visits-cancelled
By 27 May, the government was able to announce that video calls were available in 26 prisons, including eight women’s prisons, and six holding children or young people.

Thus, the government claimed:

_In recognition of the importance of continued contact with family and to ensure stability in our jails the government has moved quickly to keep prisoners in touch with their family members by other means._

This briefing discusses CAPPTIVE’s evidence about the experiences of families and about how prisons have communicated during the pandemic. Before turning to the evidence, however, we should question the suggestion that what was being provided was a sufficient response to the needs generated by the cancellation of visits. It amounted to in-cell telephones in fewer than half of the prisons; 900 mobile phones distributed among the remainder; and video calls, initially at six prisons, rising to 26 by the end of May.

Even if all of this worked as intended, the inadequacy of the compensation is obvious. With up to 40,000 prisoners given very limited time out of cell, the demand for 900 mobile phones spread over 55 prisons was certain to overwhelm the supply. The additional phone time these provided could never offset the profound impact of cutting off family contact.

There was always a risk that this set of compensations – rather than meeting families’ urgent need for contact – would result in two outcomes: first, a post-code lottery of treatment, where one family could be treated in a sensitive and supportive way, while others were woefully neglected, depending on which prison was holding their family members; and second, expectations which seemed reasonable, given the Minister’s assurance, raising hopes but leading to frustration, distress, and anger when the promises could not be delivered.
Families: having a family member in prison during the Covid-19 pandemic

The pandemic has fundamentally changed the conditions under which families maintain relationships and support loved ones in custody. The main areas identified by the CAPPTIVE analysis are:

- Impact of loss of visits on families
- Impact of loss of visits on prisoners
- Keeping in contact: phone calls, mobile phones, video calls

1. Impact of loss of visits on families

The move to the Exceptional Regime Management Plan on the 24th March saw most activities, including prison education, non-essential employment and family visits, stop with immediate effect. This restricted regime has resulted in prisoners spending up to 23 and a half hours a day in their cells. For many, being confined to their cell made it harder to maintain family contact. The cessation of visits means many families have gone without seeing their loved ones for over three months. From the evidence, this extensive period of separation, which initially induced feelings of frustration, is now causing extreme distress and desperation.

My little people don’t understand why they can’t see daddy, they don’t understand why home leave has been cancelled or why they haven’t seen him for 14 weeks.
(Children Heard and Seen [CHAS], Twitter, 3 June)

My three-year-old grandson hasn’t seen his dad for 11 weeks and yesterday he said, ‘Daddy has gone now’. The impact on the children (and the parents) is heart-breaking.
(Penal Reform Solutions, Twitter, 6 June).

The last time I saw my son was on the 20th of March, then lockdown happened. He has also not seen his fiancée and his two-year-old son since then. The distress and heartache this has caused us all is incalculable.
(Email to PPN, Family Member, 10 June)

Media reports about the threat Covid-19 posed to life increased families’ anxieties about people in prison, as well as concerns prisoners had for their families. Families described high levels of stress and sleepless nights, when a lack of contact from their loved one reinforced the fears they already felt about the dangers of Covid-19. The quality of face-to-face contact is irreplaceable, as despite their limitations, families recognise prison visits as meaningful family time.

His time on the telephone is rationed between us all before his credit runs out, therefore difficult to have deep meaningful conversations. We have an exchange of conversation squeezed into a short call but the need for my son to receive a mother’s counsel to support his mental wellbeing is constrained. My heart aches for him.
(Email to PPN, Family member, 10 June)
It is fair to say that I am worried about my husband’s health as well as already having the stresses of making sure my children are fine, too.

(Family member, 17 April)

When video call facilities are lacking in the prison and prisoners only have access to phones for a very limited time, it raises questions as to how meaningful this contact with loved ones can be. Family members are acutely aware of how restricted their contact with their loved one is, and it demonstrates that many prisons are lacking a child-centred approach in enabling family contact.

Children of women held in custody may be particularly vulnerable to the loss of contact. Separation from their mother by imprisonment is known to have a significant negative impact on children’s long-term health and wellbeing, their school attainment, and later life experiences.¹

For children who are too young to understand the impact of Covid-19, having the physical presence of a parent abruptly taken away can be traumatic and distressing. While older family members may, at the beginning of the lockdown at least, have been able to understand the rationale for the cessation of visits, young children are left bewildered and lost, wondering if their parent has forgotten about them.

I used to take my toddler grandson to see his dad, my son, every weekend. We all look forward so much to this important family time. The prison has no video-call facility, I would be ecstatic seeing my son and grandson having a video-call, as not seeing each other’s faces for 11 weeks since Mother’s Day is hard.

(CHAS, Twitter, 6 June)

I know for a fact [my son] won’t know who he is (when he can visit again). He was just getting to know who his dad was. He’s started to walk and talk, he can’t see any of that. I don’t understand, people say that when someone is in prison they are allowed basic rights to see people. It’s the law that you have basic human rights. It’s absolutely horrible. It has put a strain on our relationship.

(Manchester evening news, 23 June)

Prisoners’ families are also suffering from the restrictive prison regimes that are currently in place. One prisoner told CAPPTIVE that the times he was out of cell did not correspond with those that his family was available. A family member wrote:

With no in-cell phones if we miss his call, its 24 hours until we get the opportunity to speak to him again. Family bonds are being severed and this is very cruel and unhealthy for all.

(CHAS, Twitter, 6 June)

My little human doesn’t understand why dad can’t call her every day. He has to split his phone calls and his time with his other family, she feels like she is being punished for her dad’s mistakes. It’s not fair on any kids to be feeling how they feel. She feels like she is the one serving the sentence herself.
(CHAS, Twitter, 13 June)

There were pockets of good practice. At HMP Eastwood Park, a women’s prison, residents were enabled to read bedtime stories to their children. HMP Peterborough increased the number of letters residents can send to four a week. While these supportive responses depended on staff to facilitate, they show how prisoners must rely on the goodwill of staff in order to maintain family contact.

2. Impact of loss of visits on prisoners

For many prisoners, feeling connected with their family is often what makes prison survivable. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, loss of contact with family was felt acutely by most prisoners. Prisoners were aware of the serious health threat posed by the pandemic, amplifying their concerns regarding the wellbeing of their family, worsening feelings of hopelessness and loss.

The most terrible part about being in #prison whilst the #coronavirus takes over the world is not being able to be there to protect and look after my own family! #prisoner #jail #hemp #coronavirusuk #CoronaLockdown #prisonerspeopletoo #prisonerslivesmatter.
(Secret prisoner, Twitter, 30 March)

I haven’t seen my kids in months. I might as well be dead with the CORONA.
(CAPPTIVE respondent, male prison, 15 June)

The cessation of visits had a particularly acute impact on women in prison. Around 60% of women in prison have children. PRT received a letter about an infant whose mother was returned to prison on a recall just before the Covid-19 measures were put in place. She was still in prison eight weeks later, while the child – whose only contact was now through phone calls – was displaying signs of serious separation anxiety.

Prisoners with young children were concerned about whether their children would recognise them when they are eventually reunited. They were intensely aware that by missing out on social visits, their children would reach certain milestones without their parent being present. This signifies how the pandemic is having many lasting and painful consequences for prisoners, not only around health concerns but also regarding familial relationships and their roles as parents.

The last time I saw him was 4 March. He’s found it really difficult not seeing our one-year-old son who is now at the stage where he’s developing his little personality, saying words and just changing everyday but my partner has struggled with how much he’s missed out. He’s worried the bond has been damaged and our son won’t know him when we do eventually visit.
(Email to PPN, Family member, 10 June)
Like (surely) many other prisoners, I have been finding it extremely hard to be kept apart from my family, and not even allowed to see and be seen by my one-year-old daughter.
(CAPPTIVE respondent, male prison, 15 June)

I miss seeing him, talking face to face with him, giving him a hug, seeing him interact with his young son.
(Our Empty Chair, Twitter, 4 May)

These concerns surround the damage that might remain after Covid-19 to family relationships and to the connection prisoners have with their children. Again, this indicates that the measures taken in prisons to offset the loss of visits have not been sufficient to ensure prisoners are able to maintain meaningful contact with their families through this difficult time.

Personally I feel contact with family/friends is really hard. To start with, we were only allowed 10 mins phone time a day, which has now progressed to 20 mins a day, which isn’t enough. . . . I think everyone’s main issue is family contact and maintaining family ties. This includes family members outside, they find it upsetting and are as frustrated as us.
(CAPPTIVE respondent, women’s prison, 10 June)

3. Keeping in Contact

Phone call charges
Much of the evidence has indicated how, now more than ever, phone calls provided prisoners with a much-needed lifeline to their loved ones. People in prison must pay for their own phone calls out of their private cash or wages. Costs are high – calling mobiles can cost over 13p at the weekend, and 20p on weekdays. Prisoners in employment can be paid as little as £4 per week, and those not in work can earn as little as £2.50 a week.5

Some prisons used Twitter to announce reductions in the cost of phone calls, highlighting their recognition of the importance of family contact. While this has been welcomed by prisoners and families, the impact this can have is limited, when access to phones is restricted, as prisoners will still experience difficulties in maintaining contact with families.

Those at Coldingley and Portland had largely relied on communal wing phones, which made it difficult for prisoners to speak to family or friends at length given the brief period they had out of their cells. This was made worse on some wings at Portland due to some communal phones being broken.
(HMIP, Short Scrutiny Visit Report, 5 May)

Family contact is difficult due to limited access to phones and only 4 phones for 160 people on a wing or 40 people per 45 mins association time.
(Email from a prisoner, HMP Channings Wood, 15 June)

Reality, more selfish people hogging the phones, harder to get on the phone and more communal phones been used which has been breathed on by many men = breeding ground [for Covid-19].
(Secret prisoner, Twitter, 1 April)

In suspending visits, the government announced a £5 phone credit, each week, for prisoners. While the offer was widely appreciated, its implementation varied across prison sites:

_In response to the lack of visits all three sites provided additional phone credit: £5 a week at Parc and £20 a week at Cookham Wood and Wetherby... While all children we spoke to had enough credit to make calls, we could see no good reason for the disparities in payments of all kinds between establishments._
(HMIP, Short Scrutiny Visit Report, 21 April)

This demonstrates a lack of uniformed approach, which has resulted in unequal treatment for prisoners, rendering some less likely than others to have the resources to make regular phone calls home.

This change in policy has raised questions to why it took a global pandemic for prisons to make the cost of phone calls more accessible for all. It is unclear whether this reduction in cost is a temporary response to the cessation of social visits, or whether there will be widespread acceptance of the benefit of this change in policy after Covid-19.

**Mobile handsets**

On 31 March, the government announced that it had provided mobile handsets to “all prisons that do not currently have in-cell telephony”.6 This again raised hope of a family-centred approach to the crisis. In reality, once again families have been left disappointed. The number of handsets in any given establishment was meagre in comparison with those prisons where phones are available in cells. In addition, however, the functionality of the phones lines was limited to 4.5 hours per day, which further restricted the times during which a prisoner could contact their family.

One family member noted that prisoners were told that whilst mobile handsets were available at the prison, they were yet to be distributed by staff. For those isolating, mobile handsets were not available and instead they had to rely on the goodwill of fellow prisoners to pass messages to their loved ones regarding the state of their health. As noted by HMIP, particular prisons, such as Coldingley, provided prisoners with mobile phones to use. Unfortunately, as phone signal was so poor, prisoners were only able to make phone calls on exercise yards, which potentially compromised the privacy required to discuss personal matters. Mobile handsets looked to be an imaginative solution to the antiquated system of telephones on the landings. In practice, it is clear that 900 handsets are insufficient, and actual use has revealed problems that prisons will need to resolve (as Coldingley has done by using them outdoors).

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**In-cell phones**

On 31 March, the government estimated that “around 60% of cells” had in-cell telephones at the time. Through the Advice and Information service at the Prison Reform Trust, we were able to determine that, on 11 March 2020, 52 prisons did not have in-cell telephony. Six other prisons at that time were in the process of installing in-cell phones.

In-cell phones could lessen somewhat the pains of the loss of family visits. While phone calls cannot replace face-to-face contact, prisoners are able to feel safe in the knowledge that they can contact family on a daily basis. Arguably, this is a basic necessity that should be afforded to all people in custody. The IMB noted the importance of in-cell telephones while there are restricted regimes and access to support:

*Prisons with in-cell phones have been able to provide access and some support for those at risk of self-harm and with mental health concerns, access to psychology and probation for progression and parole hearings, and greater access to legal advice, Samaritans, IMBs, families and friends. Prisoners without this facility can be restricted to as little as ten minutes a day to make calls. These discrepancies are creating both unfairness and heightened risk for prisoners without in-cell phones.*

(IMB, findings letter, 3 June)

Those who do not have access to these facilities are left in their cells for 23 hours a day with no means of updating their family about how they are coping. Speaking to the Joint Committee on Human Rights on 8 June, Prisons Minister Lucy Frazer disclosed that, at that time, only five of 12 women’s prisons had in-cell telephones. Of the remainder, she said:

*Four will complete by the end of this financial year, [April 2021] which will mean that the whole of the closed public women’s estate will provide phones in rooms.*

Thus, during the Covid-19 restrictions from March to the present, many women did not have access to in-cell telephones. Further, the Prisons Inspectorate’s SSV to category C prisons found that one of these had 14 mobile handsets which were not made available to prisoners. Inspectors described this as a ‘missed opportunity’.

The gap in the provision of in-cell telephones highlights the inadequacy of the accommodation in prisons, as contact with families is a basic need. Many prisoners were allowed only 30 minutes out of their cell every day. During this time, they may need to have a shower, get outside for exercise and make a phone call to their family. Prisoners have had to weigh up which of these they needed most in the small amount of time they were out of their cell. Therefore, prisoners could potentially go days without speaking to family. In addition, limited access to phones may have increased tensions between prisoners.

*Coldingley and Portland had largely relied on communal wing phones, which made it difficult for prisoners to speak to family or friends at length given the brief period they had out of their cells. This was made worse on some wings at Portland due to some communal phones being broken.*

(HMIP, Short Scrutiny Visit, 5 May)

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7 [https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/475/pdf/](https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/475/pdf/)

An added disadvantage for those in prisons lacking in-cell telephony was cited in a prisoner’s letter to CAPPTIVE. He observed that when phone use was high, the phones were not sanitised between calls.

Many organisations have called for prisons to allow incoming calls to in-cell phones. One of the main reasons prisoners seek to get hold of illicit mobile phones is so that families can call them – avoiding the inflated cost of calls on the pin phone system, and allowing them to have conversations at times that suit families. Allowing incoming calls to legitimate in-cell phones would remove that problem and that incentive to illegal behaviour, with all its attendant risks of bullying and corruption. Resettlement charities too have wanted the facility to contact clients directly when face to face meetings have been impossible because of the pandemic. Incoming calls would allow a great deal of resettlement work to continue which has been interrupted, as well as a range of other services, including mental health support. Despite repeated requests, the prison service has refused to contemplate making this change.

**Video calls**

Outside prisons, a striking feature of the ways people responded to the lockdown was the massive increase in the use of video calling technology for both social and professional purposes. For many people, applications like Zoom and WhatsApp have provided a free, reliable way of maintaining face to face contact when physical proximity has been impossible. The long standing refusal to allow prisoners’ controlled internet access meant that this secure and free service was not possible in prisons.

While phone calls are appreciated, the need for young children to see their parent or loved one face-to-face is paramount. On its website providing information for families, the government announced on 31 March that video calling had been introduced in some prisons and young offender institutions. Helpfully, the website featured a list of prisons where video calling was available. By 27 May, the government was reporting that HMPPS had introduced video calling in 26 prisons.

Video calls offered some hope of an alternative means of maintaining family contact. Seeing a parent on screen would ease the stress of separation and loss of visits somewhat and reassure children that their parent is still there for them. Over time, the pains of separation led many to hope that video calls would soon be launched in the prison holding their loved one.

Implementation was more of a challenge. One family member reported that a prison was delaying video-link visits, as the iPads they had were broken. Another family member said that she and her children waited in front of the screen for 30 minutes, only to be told the prison had been unable to connect them with their loved one.

A family member described a video call between her daughter and a little child:

> Video calls are 30 mins but only once a month. Her visit entitlement is almost once a week so this is a far cry from that and there has been four months without any contact. The reality too is that any movement stops the video call and you have to begin the whole reverification process again. Therefore video calls are more like 20 minutes. It is impossible to keep a toddler still so the call is disrupted.
> (Family member, email to CAPPTIVE, 3 July)
One of the prisons the government listed on 27 May was HMP Send. Yet, on 10th June, a woman wrote in to CAPPTIVE, saying:

> Naturally visits have stopped and we are unaware when they will begin. We were informed that video calling will be introduced, however as of yet that is still a no-go.

(email a prisoner, HMP Send, 10 June)

Another respondent, writing late in June, explained delays at his prison:

> “Very quickly the prison organised software and purchased computers to organise virtual visits. However, before this could be put in action, permission had to be obtained to do this from the MOJ. This was stalled, as the MOJ preferred us to use the system they were developing. But this wasn’t yet available. After a number of weeks’ delay and a trial of this at HMPPS prisons, we have recently got the ok to use their system. Unfortunately, this cannot use the computers purchased so more have had to be ordered.

(CAPPTIVE respondent, male prison, late June)

The uneven provision was partly acknowledged by the government on 30th June:

> Some establishments have encountered local network and connectivity issues which have required bespoke technical solutions to be developed to allow them to commence live calls.\(^9\)

In its SSV to local prisons, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons reported:

> Not enough had yet been done to expand the use of video-calling to better compensate for the loss of face-to-face contact.

(HMIP, Short Scrutiny Visit, 28 April)

The SSV to women’s prisons (18 May) concluded that managers had been slow to provide video calls. Further, HMIP reported:

> HMPPS were unable to give us timeframes on the roll-out of video calling across the rest of the women’s estate. The delay in implementing a solution meant that at the time of our visits, some prisoners had not seen their children for two months.\(^10\)

The offer of video calls reflected an awareness of how families and children would be hurt by the loss of social visits. Despite HMPPS pledging to ‘manage expectations carefully’ the government’s public announcement ignited hope among prisoners and families that they would soon be able to see each other on screen. As time has progressed, this optimism for what the service would provide has been lost, with many prisoners, partners and their children being left feeling hugely disheartened.

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\(^9\) House of Commons written question 61691, answered 30 June 2020

Most days I feel like I’m suffocating because no one seems to be listening. Nearly four months now since my five Grandchildren have seen their mum and dad. My daughter was coming home on ROTLs every two weeks for 5 days before the COVID lockdown. No video calls, nothing, no visits. It breaks my heart listening to them crying, begging to see mum and dad.

(CHAS, Twitter, 6 June)

I haven’t seen my partner’s face in over 12 weeks...11 weeks ago they said they were piloting video visits. 20 prisons have the service out of 117. Some that have received video visits also have in cell phones! How is that fair? We have no clear plan on exit strategy. The framework just like the phones, video visits is a lip service document to keep us quiet and give us false hope.

(Family member, Pact, 8 June)

A third family member described feeling hopeful at the promise of video-calling, only to be left ‘heartbroken and struggling’, feeling like they are in a ‘never-ending nightmare’ (Family member, Pact, date unknown).

The slow and ineffective roll out of video-calling facilities has had a substantial impact on prisoners and their families. The government could claim, with some justification, that video call technology had been rolled out quite quickly. However, as was the case with mobile handsets, what has been provided is completely inadequate in comparison to the losses felt by families when visits were stopped. Three months on, and most families are getting neither visits nor video calls.

The uses of video technology in prison raises two other aspects. The first demonstrates sensitivity to losses prisoners incurred under the restrictions. Under normal circumstances, people could be released from prisons (when security-cleared) to attend funerals. The Prisons Minister, Lucy Frazer, stated her hope that every prison would have an iPad, enabling any bereaved prisoner to use Zoom for a funeral. The Prisons Inspectorate’s SSV to women’s prisons found that each of these prisons had two tablets, ‘to allow urgent compassionate video calls.”

The second aspect is a recognition that the value of video calls will remain after restrictions can be eased. During the Covid-19 pandemic, video calls will be free, for those who can access them. However, on 30 June, replying to a Parliamentary Question by Lyn Brown, MP, the Prisons Minister, Lucy Frazer, commented that the provision of video calls after Covid-19, “may include a competition for such services”. What we do not yet know is whether the cost of video calls will be passed onto prisoners and their families, or borne by government in recognition of all the benefits laid out in Lord Farmer’s two report on the family relationships.

11 Pact – the Prison Advice and Care Trust, Andy Keen-Downs, CEO, worked closely with us to gather evidence from families.

4. Tentative Findings

The Joint Committee on Human Rights, having heard evidence about the impact on families, concluded:

*The current lack of meaningful contact between mothers in prison and their dependent children due to the suspension of visits to prison risks breaching both groups’ right to private and family life. The government must not impose blanket restrictions on visiting rights. In order to comply with Article 8 ECHR, they must ensure that any restriction on visiting rights is necessary and proportionate in each individual case. Children must be allowed to visit their mothers in prison on a socially distanced basis, where it is safe for them to do so.*\(^{13}\)

Many of the promised compensations for the loss of visits have not reached the majority of families, exacerbating their heartbreak and disappointment. The ways that prisons have responded to the needs of families after social visits were suspended show a postcode lottery, insufficient responses to the stresses arising from Covid-19, and a communications system using antiquated technology struggling to catch up.

The gaps between ministerial announcements and what prisons have been able to provide has damaged trust and caused families and prisoners distress. Added to this, prisoners and families can see that internet and other technology has eased the pains of lockdown in the community, but not for them. It is not that the system has done nothing, or failed to recognise the importance of family ties, but our evidence shows that the system’s response has been slower and less ambitious than the public presentation of it would imply. As a result, the harm caused to families and prisoners is likely to be deeper and more long-lasting.

Lack of family contact has had major consequences for children and other family members. There is a sense of feeling forgotten about and disregarded by the prison service, being left to deal with the heartbreak themselves. As time has progressed, these negative emotions and experiences have been exacerbated by broken promises, resulting in feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, and anger for prisoners and family members.

**CAPPTIVE evidence shows that, as a result of the Covid-19 measures, families and prisoners have lost:**

- Parents’ personal presence with children
- Opportunities for meaningful conversations between prisoners and their families
- Compassionate leave (to attend funerals or visit dying relatives)
- Parents keeping up to date with their children’s development.

**Helpful practices:**

- Bedtime story calls and CDs
- Added weekly phone credit
- In-cell telephones
- Zoom attendance at funerals; compassionate use of video

Communications

During March and April, prisoners and their families were apprehensive about the threat of Covid-19. They understood the urgency of protecting the NHS and were anxious that prisons were a high-risk setting. The initial handling of the Covid-19 response had widespread backing from prisoners and their families. They understood that the restrictions, including loss of visits, were designed to prevent transmission of Covid-19. During this time, communications played an important role in responding to prisoners and their families.

This section will report on how well families and prisoners were kept informed about the risks of Covid-19, policy changes to minimise the risk of transmission, and arrangements to enable families and prisoners to stay in touch. There are five topics:

- Providing information to prisoners
- Providing information to families
- The role of staff in communicating with prisoners
- Listening to prisoners (consultation)
- Social media

1. Providing information to prisoners

At their best, some prisons put considerable thought into being transparent, addressing prisoners’ anxieties, and explaining the reasons for imposing restrictions.

*Communication is key at this time and we produce a daily staff and prisoner bulletin to keep everyone up to date thanks to our Comms Manager. Our governor will record his second voice message tomorrow that is played via Wayout TV on the in-cell TV system.*
(Twitter, HMP Onley, 8 April)

*We are committed to staff and prisoner wellbeing and psychological health, this is at the forefront of our minds. We are addressing this by regularly communicating with prisoners and staff so they have the right information to ensure cooperation and understanding. Positive and timely communication is key in helping prisoners cope with longer periods of isolation and important for staff to work safely.*
(Twitter, HMP The Mount, 7 May)

A range of media were employed to inform prisoners about Covid-19 and how the prison would manage the risks it posed. These included: TV, radio, briefings, newsletters, and cascading information through prisoner reps.

*… communication with prisoners and staff was good. They spoke positively about the amount of information that they were receiving, for example through daily bulletins, prison radio and television broadcasts and COVID-19 prisoner representatives.*
(HMCIP: SSV Local Prisons, 28 April)

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At least one prison produced a weekly newsletter, open to submissions from prisoners, focused on Covid-19 and how the prison was responding.

The desktop publishing department [was] temporarily re-christened the Prisoner Information Centre. The PIC published a near weekly ‘Corona Bulletin’ featuring state of the world lists, news from the management, Ministry of Justice, plus a smattering of cartoons/satire.

(CAPPTIVE respondent, male prison, 8 June)

Information and honesty had the potential to reduce anxieties and frustration among prisoners and families. In April, HM Prisons Inspectorate found that three young offender institutions gave clear messages about why restrictions were needed. Health care staff spoke with children to impress upon them the importance of hygiene. The inspectorate also commented on the local prisons they inspected that prisoners were kept well informed about current knowledge about the Covid-19 virus.

The feedback to CAPPTIVE suggests that keeping prisoners informed helped to foster a sense of unity among staff, managers and prisoners against the virus.

Two prisoners reported that their governors were making regular use of the prison council to cascade information to all prisoners. On 1 June, HMP Featherstone tweeted to celebrate its prison council, writing:

Communication is important during this restricted regime and the prison council have helped to keep prisoners informed of our current situation. Thanks . . .

(HMP Featherstone, Twitter).

But the evidence suggested that provision of information was very uneven – some prisons were efficient in keeping people up to date, while others were not.

Limited information about the virus has been provided, in the form of notices around the buildings. However (in the absence of direct advice, guidance and updates) rumours have been rife about how the prison is responding to the challenge of Corona. . .

(Family member, 28 April)

A few prisoners suggested that the prison they were in did not see communication as a priority:

COVID has put everybody in an unprecedented position, one of uncertainty and worry ... and in times of change (lockdown) clear consistent communication is needed, we needed our governors to be honest and open, consistent, factual, express feelings and highlight the benefits for the change (save lives). The communication has always been and remains poor from the Senior Management Team.

(CAPPTIVE respondent, male prison, 5 June)
In some prisons, the normal sources of information dried up. For example, prisoners could not find out about education, because education staff were furloughed. A prisoner rang PRT’s Advice and Information line in early April asking for help with accommodation. He explained that probation staff were working from home and he had no way to ask if probation would be helping him find a place to live after release. He added that officers did not know, either. Another prisoner described his futile attempts to contact the OMU through the kiosk system. As prisoners were locked behind their doors, they were even more dependent on staff (or kiosks) to get responses to urgent questions. For prisoners such as these, the loss of communication may have impeded progression or preparation for release.

The Short Scrutiny Visits by HMIP that described good communication, which we cited above, were published in late April. Some prisons started well but did not sustain their information-sharing. A man from a BAME background wrote to CAPPTIVE, describing the change in communications:

*To give respect where it’s due, we was informed to the best of their ability in the start but as the weeks go by we all feel as if we are just being left to rot. The word rot sounds extreme, but it’s exactly how we feel 23 hours in our cell blistering hot, not enough contact with family, wanting to know when you can see them again, worrying if today was the last day you will ever speak to them again. ... At first we would hear on the news at least twice a week something about what they’re doing for the prison system and now it’s almost as if we have been forgotten about, as if we are not as important as the outside world, as if our life doesn’t mean as much to the powers that be compared to the lifes of people on the outside.*

(CAPPTIVE respondent, male prison, 25 June)

To some extent, less frequent updates from a prison could be explained by a lack of news to pass on.

*At the start, ... wing ‘corona reps’ had daily meetings to get info, ask questions etc. however when they could give no answer they quickly stopped.*

(CAPPTIVE respondent, male prison, 10 June)

But communication was just as important in early June, when restrictions had been endured for over two months, as they were in March when news of the virus raised anxieties.

*There is no news on when visits will reopen and you can see the frustration building on the wings. We were told they were looking at video calls for families but gone dead. The feeling among many now is that even though things are beginning to open up outside, inside no change is in sight.*

(CAPPTIVE respondent, male prison, 8 June)

There were also concerns about inconsistent messages. Two people had been given mixed messages about the early release scheme (which is not surprising, given the lack of clarity from the government).
A common cause of anxiety was uncertainty about the future. Questions included: How long would the restrictions be in place? When would visits be brought back? How long would shielded prisoners have to be kept apart? These topics highlight how hard it would be for any governor or officer to reassure the prisoner – and speculation would only make matters worse.

*Every meeting the lads will ask if there is an update or what is the plan going forward. The lads were told to watch the news.*
(CAPPTIVE respondent, male prison, 5 June)

*He has been put on a shielding wing & an update has been put onto the wing . . . The last part of the update is that shielding will continue till March 2021.*
(Family member, PRT Advice and Information line, March)

### 2. Providing information to families

CAPPTIVE received limited evidence about how prisons were communicating with families. Almost half of the 14 responses addressing this topic were provided by prisons. Consequently, we cannot provide strong evidence about how families viewed the efforts of prisons to communicate. The few examples we received indicate two extremes – very caring practice at best, and disregard for their needs and anxieties at the other end of the scale.

*The country has been on lockdown for 6 weeks now, during this, there has been great emphasis drawn to the various elements of daily society during the pandemic. Yet, over the last 6 weeks, no news has been shared on prisons, prisoners or their families.*
(Family member, PRT Advice & Information, 30 April)

*We have had no interaction from the governor regarding what will happen or if anything will happen regarding visits and normal regime no library books no education just bad management from prison officers.*
(Family member, Pact, No date)

Much of the feedback from family members focused on a failure to provide them with basic information and reassurance. Families with partners who were nearing the end of their sentence told us they exhausted hours and days trying to find out about the process for applying for temporary or compassionate release. Families who knew their loved one’s health was vulnerable feared that the spread of Covid-19 through prisons would result, effectively, in a death sentence.

In contrast to these fears, the promise of the early release of 4000 prisoners seemed to demonstrate a genuine commitment to preserve life. Failing to deliver it suggested the opposite. Families described the uncertainty and anxiety caused by the sluggish action following the announcement of early release. Families’ input also showed how rumours (which may or may not have been accurate) filled the gap when communication was neglected.
A few respondents said that they feared for the health of their loved ones, having heard that officers were not practising social distancing. One wrote that her partner regularly observed staff coughing.

A few prisons wrote directly to family members to explain how the prison would respond to Covid-19. There were also attempts to reassure families; for example, one prison sent a photograph of servery areas to show families that extra attention had been given to hygiene. Another prison was working with a voluntary sector organisation to provide a regular newsletter to families. Both examples could be universally applied.

The gap between public statements by government on the response to Covid-19 and delivery in prisons undermined trust and caused anxiety among prisoners and their families.

3. Officers’ role in communication

Rightly or wrongly, officers are expected to know prison policy. Their credibility can be undermined when they receive mixed messages or no information at all. Evidence about how well prison officers were kept informed came to CAPPTIVE from establishments, prisoners and their families, and HM prisons inspections.

The prisons inspectorate’s SSV report on three local prisons concluded that staff had been well-informed about what was known of the risks of Covid-19. In April, one of those prisons established a Covid-19 team and was running daily briefings. Officers there felt that the restrictions were proportionate.

On 12 May, HMYOI Deerbolt tweeted that the officers were ensuring that every young person in their care had a one-to-one conversation with an officer every day.

There were others who felt that officers should have been better informed, including this family member:

*Prison officers have even commented on the fact that they have no idea what the safety measures are, besides making sure that prisoners are locked up in their cells for the majority of the day.*

(Family member, A&I, 30 April)

CAPPTIVE also received evidence of a callous attitude from some officers. A prisoner who asked to make a phone call described his despair when the officer ignored his request. Another respondent reported witnessing an officer’s aggressive response to another prisoner’s request:

*With everyone being locked up away from their family members and loved ones, trying to cope and deal with their own demons of mental health as well as serve their sentence, the last thing that he needs is an officer who lacks empathy, people, and communication skills in their faces . . . getting into their personal space and shouting at or raising their voice in an abrupt and borderline aggressive manner.*

(CAPPTIVE respondent, male prison, 14 June)
Another prisoner who responded to CAPPTIVE praised officers:

*Humane staff – definitely impressed by the staff’s humane and sensitive treatment of us, including making time to talk and listen to us. Genuine sense of being in it together.*

Prisoner demand for information often falls on the officers on the wing. The Prisons Inspectorate’s SSVs to three young offender institutions found that communication with staff and the children had explained the need for the restrictions and had achieved a sense of solidarity among all parties (‘We’re in it together.’)

### 4. Listening to prisoners

On 10 June, Lyn Brown, MP, asked the prisons minister, Lucy Frazer, about consultation on the National Framework for Prison Regimes and Services:

*To ask the Secretary of State for Justice, if he will amend the document entitled, COVID-19: National Framework for Prison Regimes and Services, published on 2 June 2020 to include an undertaking to consult with (a) prisoners and (b) other stakeholders on the content of Extraordinary Delivery Models.*

The practical benefits of consulting prisoners (service user involvement) have long been obvious to prison governors. Through our Prisoner Policy Network and CAPPTIVE, we will continue to encourage government to include prisoners’ insights in their policy making.

Most of the evidence sent to CAPPTIVE about consulting prisoners about Covid-19 was very positive. In May, we learned about one prison where feedback was sought from prisoners about their experience of living under Covid-19 restrictions. Forms were available on all wings for prisoners to write in with ideas, or requests for support or help. The governor and deputy governor met daily to review the submissions.

In two other prisons, prisoners had opportunities to submit questions directly to the governor. Replies were given via the prison TV. Such active attempts by management to ensure clear and direct communication with their populations, resulted in prisoners feeling that they had been heard.

The CAPPTIVE evidence is slight on prisons where consultation was weak. But an exception to the positive feedback about consultation is worth recording:

*The governor holds a weekly forum (limited to 6 people) but most prisoners have stopped going as they feel it is just a paper exercise. Some meetings are finished within 5 minutes. The communication is abrupt, non-factual, no innovation … or problem solving.*

(CAPPTIVE respondent, male prison, 5 June)

This illustrates that dialogue must be genuine and demonstrate a willingness to make changes with clear outcomes. If not, it undermines relationships between prisoners and staff – possibly creating more unease and hostility.
One prison quickly established a group of Covid-19 co-ordinators (prisoner reps). Their role was to ask others what problems they were encountering as a result of Covid-19 so that these could be fed back to the governor. (Prisoner, personal communication, 5 May)

CAPPTIVE evidence included at least five prisons where surveys were sent to all prisoners for feedback about how the prison was managing. Two of these explicitly promised to include the feedback in those prisons' recovery plans. One of these asked for feedback on food, the regime, showers, telephones, exercise, cleanliness, and any other area. One respondent suggested that the prison should publish photos of prisoners working in support of the NHS; the prison welcomed the proposal.

Some prisoners praised governors who ensured that the management of Covid-19 was informed by prisoners’ experiences and insights. They recognised the ways that consulting prisoners had improved the morale during the crisis:

> It has been a pleasure to be involved in the Covid-19 forums... The policy of transparency and the opportunity to get accurate and honest answers from senior management has gone a long way to [relieve] many of the frustrations of those who are subject to the restrictive nature of this new regime...I would certainly encourage you to evolve the existing prisoner council meetings to something more resembling the Covid-19 forums in the future.

(Resident, quoted in HMP Stocken Twitter, 4 June)

5. Outward Facing Communication

The evidence CAPPTIVE received highlighted the important role that social media is playing in communication about Covid-19 in prisons. Twitter, the micro blogging and social network platform, has been the main medium, used by everyone from the CEO of HMPPS, to governors, to prison staff, as well as family of prisoners, people with experiences of imprisonment, reformers, academics, journalists and politicians. In addition to informing others, some made clear that they were responding to feedback.

Governors were demonstrating care for families and the importance of communication by using social media to inform people about their responses to Covid-19. A number of prisons have been ahead of the curve, using social media to improve transparency and to share good practice. Well before the pandemic, in 2019, HM Prison Liverpool reported via Twitter, with images and updates, their progress from being one of the country’s ‘worst’ performing prisons to ‘improving dramatically’.

2020 saw a growth of prison Twitter accounts, with many even displaying the highly coveted blue tick that lets people know that ‘an account of public interest is authentic’. Scanning these public facing Twitter accounts gives good insight into how some prisons communicate outwards their response and adaptations to Covid-19. These prisons were using social media to maintain clear communication with prisoners’ families and to reassure family members of the processes that have been introduced with their loved ones in mind.
To state the obvious: the benefits of social media in providing information quickly, demonstrating transparency, and building relationships of trust and mutual support, are denied to prisoners. Even under these circumstances, when Covid-19 requires innovative management, prisons do not allow prisoners any access to the internet, though this could easily be securely provided. Therefore, updates shared on social media are unlikely to trickle down to prisoners on the landings – the public may receive more regular updates than the prisoners themselves.

From the moment the government announced the Exceptional Restricted Regimes on 24 March, many prisons were quick to use social media to describe how lockdown would impact prisoners and their families:

**HMP Liverpool #ThisIsLiverpoolWeWillPrevail**

In line with a National instruction, social visits are all temporarily cancelled. To help our men adjust to this we have gifted each PIN account with £5.00 to help men and families adjust in these uncertain times. We wish to thank everyone for their ongoing cooperation.

**HMP Whitemoor**

We have spent the day developing emergency plans to help those at Whitemoor Stay safe whilst maintaining contact with families. A very limited regime is in place giving essential calls, but in line with gov’t decisions no visits will take place at this time. #StaySafeSaveLives

**HMP YOI Bronzefield**

In line with Gov guidance we’ve cancelled social visits with immediate effect. Please don’t travel and stay safe. We know family contact is really important so keep the letters, voicemail & emails coming! Extra PIN phone credit has been added so you can have more calls too.

One establishment tweeted that prisoners had been provided with ideas about ‘hopeful’ or reassuring messages they could send home. Some prisons used social media to share valuable information on Covid-19, including the numbers of suspected infections among prisoners and staff, and those needing to isolate.
These are some examples of prisons using social media to update on their Covid status. Beyond using social media, one governor wrote to families of staff and prisoners in April, reassuring them about the measures that were being applied to keep people safe from Covid-19. Another used their social media to announce that they were keeping people informed:

With the constant media stories on death rates, and projections from Public Health England in April suggesting there could be as many as 77,800 cases and 2,700 deaths\(^\text{15}\) across the prison estate, social media accounts, if used much more widely as above, would prove to be a valuable source of reassurance and direct factual updates for families and stakeholders.

Another good practice for outward communication was the use of social media to offer families and followers a glance inside their prison. The twitter account for HMYOI Swinfen Hall has a rich feed visually showing how they are adapting and responding to Covid-19:

HMP&YOI Swinfen Hall 🛡️ @HMPSwinfenHall · 6 May

#swinfenconnect day 3 of our series of photos showing life and the environment on the inside. @OMICSPO did a great job taking them again, so much so people are now asking her to go to their areas to take some #proud #InitTogether

HMP&YOI Swinfen Hall 🛡️ @HMPSwinfenHall · 4 May

#swinfenconnect Every day for the next week we will share photos from inside the prison walls not only to show you how we are working together to manage Covid-19, but also to show what our environment is like for the people living and working here.

HMP&YOI Swinfen Hall 🛡️ @HMPSwinfenHall · 12 May

#swinfenconnect it's amazing what a game of socially distanced Bingo can do to bring staff and residents together. Well done to @Gashy5 and the team on F wing for creating such a buzz that many more now want to play. This is now becoming a regular fixture. #HiddenHeroes @hmpps
HMP Stafford, too, have been proactive in sharing visually how they are operating to mitigate the harms and risk of Covid-19:

A few prisons used social media to foster two-way communication. HMP Long Lartin consulted widely on its recovery plan, announcing it through Twitter:

CAPPTIVE also identified a ripple effect: prisons monitoring social media to learn about innovations developed at other prisons. For example, HMP Ranby posted an idea for enhancing family contact, then Stafford tweeted:

Similarly, families who learn about good practice in one prison may be more confident about suggesting that other prisons adopt similar ways of working.

While the use of social media was varied, its benefits for instantly providing vital information to a large audience makes it one of the most positive aspects in the response to Covid-19.
Problems with communication:
- Government claims, including video links and early release, which the HMPPS could not deliver
- Tokenistic consultation with prisoners in a minority of prisons, leading to loss of trust
- Loss of staff (eg furloughed probation officers and teachers) left urgent questions unanswered
- Lack of clarity about the future.

Helpful communication:
- Regular newsletter, with updates about regimes, knowledge about Covid-19, and space for prisoner comments
- Surveys of prisoners and families
- Information on Covid-19 for non-English speakers
- Governors taking questions from prisoners on prison TV
- Covid-19 reps, prisoners gathering evidence about needs arising, and liaising with managers
- Use of social media to keep people informed and reassured.
The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the world for everyone. We have all had to give up freedoms that are precious to us. We have all been asked to do so for the sake of a common good. No-one is immune from the risk of infection or the anxiety that can cause.

Prisoners are no exception. But being in prison does make a difference, as it does for the families prisoners have left behind.

This briefing, and the others that will follow, have drawn on evidence from a wide range of sources to try to give a frank account of what life for prisoners and their families has been like in this double lockdown.

Above all, we've tried to listen to what prisoners and their families have had to tell us – the good, the bad and the ugly. It's not a plea for special treatment, but it is a plea for understanding. Because the more we understand, the better we may be able to rise to the challenges that lie ahead.

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