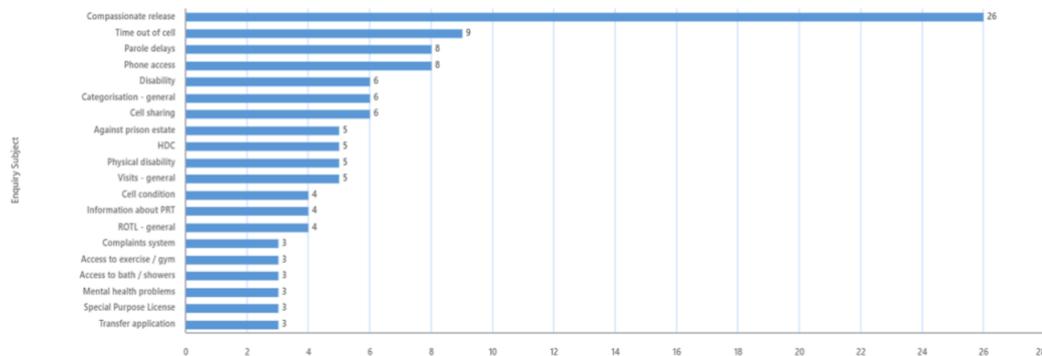


Prison Reform Trust submission on Covid-19 to the Justice Committee – 21 May 2020

What we are hearing

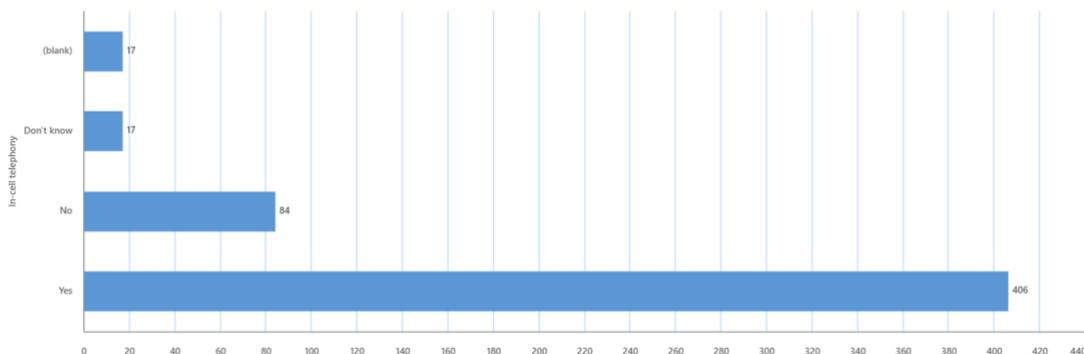
The committee may be interested to see what prisoners and their families have been contacting us about during the crisis and where coronavirus is specifically mentioned. It's not surprising that, overwhelmingly, people have been anxious about their health and the risks to it of being in prison. As many contacts show, those risks remain severe and compounded by the overcrowded conditions in which so many are held. But the wider impacts of the lockdown are also evident.

Top 20 enquiry subjects related to coronavirus
● CountAll (Enquiry Subject)



We also track how prisoners contact us. The availability of in-cell telephony has made a significant difference in the extent to which prisoners can get external advice and support. It's good to see IMBs and the Inspectorate making use of the opportunities it affords. Of course, that's positive for those who have it, but it highlights the inadequacy of phone provision for those who don't. There's no indication from these figures that the provision of temporary handsets in prisons without in-cell telephony has done anything more than substitute for the loss of already minimal access to phones on the landings.

Enquiries since 24 March by in-cell telephony
● CountAll (Contact Enquiry)



One very obvious conclusion from this crisis in prisons must be that prisoner access to technology has to change beyond recognition in the future, as we have argued for many years. It is tragic that it takes a crisis of this sort to make the case.

A recurring theme in what we are hearing is that prison staff can be the least disciplined when it comes to not observing social distancing. The inspection of 3 local prisons mentioned that staff continued to gather in wing offices, and this letter describes something worse:

“Officers aren’t keeping 2m distance. A prisoner just asked an officer not to come close and an officer said, throw him in his pad. If he did what the prison officers are doing and breached social contact, outside in the community, he would be arrested. Why shouldn’t officers do the same.”

We are hearing from multiple sources that staffing levels on wings are now high in many prisons. Yet in one prison where we know residential staffing levels are now even higher than they were before the crisis, the provision of even the most basic service appears to be lacking:

“He’s in quarantine because he’s shown signs of covid but it’s hayfever. There’s no cleaning kit, cleaning materials for the cells, no dustpan, no mop, beddings not been changed. He has to stay in his cell in these conditions for seven days with one shower a week. Horrible environment to be living in. 24 hours in the cell apart from the shower once a week. Some of the cells are two men in a cell.”

At least anecdotally, the evidence suggests the prison service is in a position to start offering more than it is.

Legitimacy

The Inspectorate report on 3 local prisons rightly highlighted the crucial role of legitimacy in what has been achieved so far in prisons. Overwhelmingly, prisoners have made the sacrifice required by such extreme restrictions on their freedom because they have understood why it has been necessary. But that legitimacy is under significant pressure. We would highlight three problems in particular – all capable of being remedied:

- The early release scheme has produced a much smaller reduction in numbers than ministers announced as possible – around 1 release for every 50 eligible prisoners. Prisoners and their families have had their hopes cruelly raised then dashed. There is a sharp contrast with Scotland, where three quarters of eligible prisoners have already been released, and with Northern Ireland, where the authorities followed best practice and released prisoners before the virus was first detected in a prison.
- There is still no plan for a relaxation of restrictions. Indeed, the only announcement has been that prisons will go slower than the community. We know that a plan is promised, but the principle of open and transparent communication which has underpinned best practice in prisons has still not penetrated the ministry or HMPPS headquarters.
- HMPPS has decided to go back on its public undertaking to a pause in the rollout of PAVA spray, and issue it immediately to all trained staff in the adult male closed estate. No reason has been given in public so far as we are aware. Quite apart from the breach of faith involved, the decision represents confrontation when consent has been at the heart of all the service’s success to date. The decision creates rather than reduces risk and needs to be reversed urgently.

Peter Dawson
Director, Prison Reform Trust