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Adam Tomkins MSP
Convener
Justice Committee
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh

By Email

18 February 2021

Dear Convener

PRISONS- COVID-19 OUTBREAKS HMPs ADDIEWELL, DUMFRIES AND KILMARNOCK

There remains no area of the justice system which has not been untouched by the second wave of this pandemic and the new variants. The Scottish Prison Service is operating well in the context of COVID-19 and robust operational measures remain in place to reduce the spread of the virus and to keep people informed.

You received a comprehensive operational update from Teresa Medhurst, Interim Chief Executive of the Scottish Prison Service on the ongoing covid-19 outbreaks which have emerged in HMPs Addiewell, Dumfries and Kilmarnock establishments over the past week and the multi-agency measures in place to ensure the outbreaks are contained and further spread is reduced. The prison service is engaging with Sodexo and Serco, the providers of custodial services at HMPs Addiewell and Kilmarnock and closely monitoring the response to the outbreaks in those establishments.

I have been receiving regular updates from Ms Medhurst on all aspects of the response to the recent outbreaks and I am assured by the contingency plans in place and responsive leadership and steps being taken by prison and health teams to mitigate against further spread of the virus.

As I have seen throughout this pandemic, the prison service and health partners will continue to take rapid and decisive action to limit the spread of this new variant across the estate. To the credit of the multi-agency teams and measures activated, HMPs Addiewell, Dumfries and Kilmarnock continue to operate safely and securely as do all prisons across the estate.

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I recognise that this remains an incredibly challenging time for everyone working across the prison estate- for prison officers, staff and health partners who are working in these complex settings. Prison staff continue to do all they can to mitigate the impacts for those in social isolation by providing in cell support materials. Virtual visits have regrettably had to suspend in Addiewell, Kilmarnock and Dumfries to mitigate against transmission of the virus and these will be resumed as soon as it is safe to do so. Access to mobile phones and in cell phones at Kilmarnock continues to ensure family contact can be maintained.

Independent inspection and remote monitoring of the treatment and conditions in our prisons was temporarily suspended but has now resumed via the remote framework in place by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland from whom I receive regular updates.

I also met yesterday with the Prison Officers Association for Scotland to hear directly from them on the experiences of their Members in responding to the pandemic.

In addition to operational measures in place by the prison service, we have taken a number of steps in response to this second wave including establishing a Clinical Advisory Group for Prisons in November to ensure the prison service is provided with strategic national clinical and public health advice in response to COVID-19. The Group is prioritising work to better understand the operational response required for the new variant including the outbreaks in the three establishments.

In line with national roll out to the wider population, the COVID-19 vaccination deployment was commenced in the prison estate via Health Boards on 22 January for the most vulnerable population in line with priority groups set out by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

This pandemic has disrupted lives like never before and is especially challenging time if you have a loved one in prison. For some the prolonged nature of this pandemic, means the lack of in-person visits has been deeply felt and I know that the provision of mobile phones and virtual visits have been vital measures to ensure maintenance of social contact with families.

My officials are actively engaged with stakeholders to establish what more can be done to encourage and facilitate further use of digital technology in supporting family contact. The use of these new methods of contact will continue to provide support to prisoners throughout the pandemic.

The dissemination of information is of course important to families at this time and to a range of partners who work in prisons. The prison service is keeping the COVID-19 webpages of their website ensuring up to date and have issued information to staff and those in custody. The safety and well-being of all those living and working in our prisons to prevent further spread or the new strain entering our prisons remains the absolute priority.

I will continue to engage regularly with, and receive frequent updates from Teresa Medhurst, Interim Chief Executive of Scottish Prison Service on the current situation and I will monitor the evolving situation with vigilance.

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Finally, may I express my deep gratitude to the Scottish Prison Service staff, staff of Serco and Sodexo, health partners, GEOAmev staff and all partners who work in our prisons for their continued dedication, professionalism and collaborative working in response to this pandemic. This has been an incredibly challenging time for everyone working across the estate who have had to rapidly adapt to new ways of working to keep themselves and those in their care safe. We must not forget those who live in our prisons who are complying well with the restricted regime in place.

The prison service remains committed to continuing to engaging with families and partner agencies to ensure they are kept informed of the situation as it develops. I would be happy to provide any further updates to Members.

HUMZA YOUSAF

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Convener Covid-19 Committee
Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport
Minister for Public Health and Sport
Minister for Drugs Policy

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