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Teresa Medhurst
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Professor A Tomkins MSP
Convenor
Justice Committee

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Dear Professor Tomkins

COVID-19 OUTBREAKS IN HMPs ADDIEWELL, DUMFRIES AND KILMARNOCK

As you will be aware that there have been a number of new outbreaks of COVID 19 in the prison estate and I am writing to provide you with an update on the current situation.

Almost all of the current positive cases (both staff and those in custody) are confined to 3 establishments, HMP Kilmarnock, HMP Addiewell and HMP Dumfries. As of yesterday (17 February), there were 242 confirmed cases in HMP Kilmarnock, 97 confirmed cases in HMP Addiewell, and 23 in HMP Dumfries.

Multi-agency Incident Management Teams (IMT) are in operation in all three establishments to manage the local response to the outbreaks. The prison management teams in each of these establishments are working closely with local NHS boards and public health officials to ensure that every possible step is taken to protect the health and wellbeing of those living and working in those establishments.

The vast majority of these cases have come to light following Mobile Testing Units being deployed at these sites on the recommendation of the IMTs. The majority of the cases confirmed as positive are asymptomatic positive, meaning that the individuals concerned had not displayed or complained of any of the recognised COVID symptoms prior to the testing taking place.

These new cases have led to significant numbers of individuals in our care in these establishments being isolated as a precautionary measure. At present there are approximately 1293 individuals across the prison estate who are being asked to self-isolate, the majority as a precautionary measure.

Necessary restrictions are in place at these establishments in order to control the outbreaks, these restrictions unfortunately mean that the prison regime has been significantly affected. In line with our prisons Pandemic Plan, all non-essential inter prison movements have been suspended.

One impact of these events has been a reduction in the availability of virtual visits in the establishments affected. Whilst staff will do everything they can to give access to these visits, their availability will be dependent upon local risk assessment. Mobile phone and in-cell phone provision however remains to enable maintenance of family contact.

Local prison management teams are in regular communication with those in their care to advise of the impact of local restrictions. A corporate communication to all those in custody updating them on the current situation was issued on 16 February. This communication is also available on SPS website to give families and friends a better understanding of the situation. We have also been in contact with Families Outside, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons and other partners to advise and update on the actions taken. We remain committed to continuing to engage with families and partner agencies to ensure they are kept informed of the situation as it develops.

As you know, the prison service has robust and established procedures in place for responding to Covid-19 outbreaks across the prison estate and operational contingency plans covering staffing and the provision of healthcare services are in place.

Earlier this month, the First Minister announced that the Scottish Government were introducing an enhanced asymptomatic testing programme to break the chain of transmission. To begin this process, SPS will begin testing in two pilot sites. Testing will be voluntary but will be offered to staff regularly.

This remains an incredibly challenging time for everyone working across the prison estate; for prison officers, staff and health partners who are working in the complex setting of a prison environment. It is of great credit to those working on our prisons, that during the first wave of the pandemic, prisons across the estate had low infection rates. Applying the good practice and learning from the first wave of this pandemic will ensure that we, along with our partners, continue to take rapid and decisive action to limit the spread of the virus across the estate.

To finish, I would like to acknowledge the level of cooperation and understanding shown by those in our care which has been remarkable. Without that cooperation it would have been extremely difficult to manage this situation in the way that we have.

We will of course continue to keep you apprised of further developments that take place across the prison estate.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Teresa Medhurst". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the left of the name.

TERESA MEDHURST
Interim Chief Executive, SPS