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INDEPENDENT MONITORS LAUNCH NEW HOTLINE FOR PRISONERS TO REPORT CONCERNS DURING PANDEMIC

Prisoners in 13 prisons across England will be able to raise concerns to independent monitors on a confidential hotline as part of a new pilot scheme, it was announced today.

Usually prisoners make complaints and requests – known as ‘applications’ - in writing or face to face to members of Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs), who are appointed by Ministers and visit prisons to check on the conditions and treatment of prisoners.

With visits curtailed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Boards wanted to find additional ways for prisoners to get in touch.

Members from IMBs at Wayland, Pentonville, Lewes, High Down, Berwyn, Woodhill, Eastwood Park, Bronzefield, Durham, Buckley Hall, Swinfen Hall, Onley and Elmley prison will run the service, which starts on Monday 27 April.

Ten thousand prisoners in these 13 pilot prisons will be able to call for free from a phone in their cell or a communal phone.

Lines will be open, with a voicemail service, from 7am-7pm seven days a week during the six-week trial period.

The prisoner’s concerns will be passed on to the relevant board, who will respond through the ‘email a prisoner’ service, or through the normal IMB routes or the IMB clerk.

Like calls to the Samaritans, these calls will be confidential, and not recorded by HMPPS.

With reduced IMB visits, as well as the freephone service, boards have put in place other ways to monitor conditions and treatment in prisons, including:

- dialling in to prison meetings and reviews of people held in segregation
- receiving daily updates from prisons including details of support for prisoners at risk of suicide or self-harm
- dealing by email with applications scanned in by the IMB clerk
- speaking to prisoner representatives who have been able to phone the IMB directly

Any major concerns will be reported to Ministers and the Prison Service by the National Chair of IMBs, Dame Anne Owers.

Dame Anne said:

“In normal times, every prison in England and Wales is visited regularly by IMB members who are the eyes and ears of the public. Prisoners can raise individual concerns or complaints with them.

“It’s vital that we maintain as much contact as possible with prisoners during the COVID crisis, especially when most are locked in their cells for around 23 hours a day and are extremely anxious about their health and that of their families.

“That is why we are piloting the new freephone line so that prisoners can still raise concerns with their IMB. We’re grateful to the Prison Service and the governors of the 13 prisons for supporting this initiative and its speedy implementation.

“If it is successful, we hope to roll it out nationally.”

She added:

“Boards are still working hard to gather information and feedback even where they are not able to visit, and we will be communicating their findings.”

At this stage the number, and details of how phone applications will be dealt with, will be publicised in the pilot prisons, rather than externally, to ensure that lines are kept open exclusively for prisoners. A similar service for immigration detainees (who can already email IMBs directly) is also being developed.

Notes to editors

1. Members of an IMB are from the local community, appointed by the Secretary of State for Justice under the Prison Act 1952. They are unpaid.
2. Each IMB has a duty to satisfy itself as to the humane and just treatment of those held in custody within its establishment and (for prisons and YOIs) the range and adequacy of the programmes preparing them for release; to inform promptly the Secretary of State, or any official to whom s/he has delegated authority as it judges appropriate, any concern it has; to report annually to the Secretary of State on how well the establishment has met the standards and requirements placed on it and what impact these have on those in its custody.
3. To enable the Board to carry out these duties effectively, its members have right of access to every prisoner or detainee, every part of the establishment and all its records (except for personal medical records).

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