



Ministry
of Justice



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Department
of Health &
Social Care

Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody

*Chair: Juliet Lyon CBE
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Rt. Hon Harriet Harman QC MP
Chair, Joint Committee on Human Rights

2 June 2020

Dear Harriet,

In the face of the unprecedented challenges posed by Covid-19, the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP) has focused on providing clear advice on how Ministers can meet their human rights obligations and protect the lives of people detained in all forms of state custody.

One of the IAP's guiding principles is to include the voice of those in custody and their families in our recommendations and advice. The IAP has just published a rapid review of the experiences of people detained in the nation's prisons under Covid-19. The review, available at <https://www.iapondeathsincustody.org/covid-19>, draws on messages from over 200 prisoners across 55 prisons to shed light on a period of heightened isolation and uncertainty, mitigated for some by positive staff relations, good communication and small acts of kindness but blighted for others by bereavement, bleak conditions and dashed expectations.

The title of our briefing – “*Keep talking, stay safe*” – is taken from one of the messages received and encapsulates the importance of providing clear, accurate and honest communication at a time of fear, risk and ambiguity. Other messages highlight the need to meet, at an absolute minimum, the basic needs of people in prison, including by providing opportunities for exercise and time in the fresh air, nutritious food and clean clothes.

Risks remain – from the spread of the virus to an upsurge in prison numbers as courts resume; from growing instability to a rise in suicide and self-harm. It is vital to preserve and expand the headroom in terms of physical space and staff time that has been secured and could, so easily, be lost again. The messages from prisoners remind us too of the privations of loss of liberty and damage done by extremes of lockdown which cannot, and should not, be sustained over time.

The review has relevance for all places of detention in this period. We have written to Ministers and senior leaders within the prison service and urged them to consider taking forward ten specific recommendations, which cover prisoner engagement, independent scrutiny, mental health, care of the most vulnerable, and family contact. In the coming weeks, we hope to discuss its implications at a meeting of the Ministerial Board on Deaths in Custody.

I hope that you will find this unique review interesting and useful, and will be able to share it with your Committee members. I would also very much appreciate a meeting with you to discuss its conclusions and recommendations, and to explore further how we can work together productively as places of state custody begin the difficult path to recovery.

As ever,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Juliet', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Juliet Lyon CBE, Chair, Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody