



Ministry
of Justice

Alex Chalk MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State for Justice

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Dear Juliet,

PRISONS AND COVID-19 INCURSION RISK

At our meeting on 27th May to discuss the upcoming Ministerial Board on Deaths in Custody you referenced a recent Reuters special report on the impact of Covid-19 in the Isle of Sheppey. I wish to offer some further clarity on the risk of transmission into prisons as touched upon in the article.

During the pandemic we have had to challenge a number of speculative reports suggesting that prisons have driven outbreaks of Covid-19 in the wider community, and I am sure you will agree it is important prisons are not stigmatised unfairly. It has been our experience that high prevalence rates in the community are in fact the most predictive factor in prison outbreaks.

I was therefore pleased to see Dr Barrett's conclusions, as reported by Reuters, that "it is now clear that the prison wasn't infecting the wider community; the community was infecting the prison". My sympathies are with all those who suffered from Covid-19 in Sheppey, but it is important to emphasise that this was a widespread outbreak affecting the whole local community, rather than something specific to the prisons.

The recently published SAGE paper *Covid-19 Transmission in Prison Settings* identifies that "prisons may in future act as a potential reservoir and amplifier of infection", but it is clear that this is something that *could* happen "in the absence of immunity or continued control measures", rather than something that has happened to date.

As the SAGE paper finds, the measures we have introduced thus far have saved lives and prevented much larger-scale transmission of Covid-19. We are, however, alert to the additional risks posed by variants of concern, which evidence indicates are more transmissible than previous strains. We are continuing to support the NHS in deploying the vaccine in custody in line with the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation recommendations, to build the degree of immunity that would allow us to continue to relax our infection prevention measures.

I would be happy to discuss this with you further, and look forward to the full meeting of the Board.

Yours sincerely

ALEX CHALK MP