

Keeping Safe

'Keep talking, stay safe'



Juliet Lyon CBE

For people in custody during the pandemic, this is prison within a prison. A time of increased isolation and dependence, made better for some people by good communication, sound relationships with staff, routines and small acts of kindness. Blighted for others by bereavement, bleak conditions, uncertainty, fear, raised expectations and dashed hopes.

The Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP) has just published a report into the experiences of those detained in prisons during the Covid-19 crisis. Our focus is on active steps to protect life. Drawing on National Prison Radio messages from over 200 people across 55 prisons, almost half the prison estate, the IAP presents voices, too often unheard, and views, too often unsought, of men and women in prison in unprecedented times. What is helping you to keep safe? What is making a bad situation worse?

The title of our briefing - "Keep talking, stay safe" - is taken from one of your messages and sums up the importance of clear, accurate and honest communication at a time of fear, risk and uncertainty.

'Everyone's frustrated. We're behind these doors, we don't know what's going on. We've stopped having updates now. I used to get updates every 2 days or so explaining what's going to happen. We're just frustrated because we don't know anything.'

Confusion was increased by high profile Government announcements which led people to believe that thousands of prisoners would be released early. On 4th April the End of Custody Temporary Release (ECTR) was introduced to create the headroom needed in overcrowded establishments to follow medical scientific advice. This would mean that new arrivals could be put in quarantine, people with the virus could be isolated and those most vulnerable could be safely shielded. Two months later, of the 4,000 people who were first thought to be eligible, just 79 had been released. This complex, risk-averse scheme is hard to understand, difficult to explain and close to impossible to deliver, even for a disciplined service like the prison service:

'...no sign of early release, no staff have any clue if it's even true but it's on the news. Prisoners feel like they're sentenced to [a] death sentence if it spreads and it's on several wings.'

Many of your messages show appreciation for staff. Thankfully, there have been few Coronavirus deaths. The IAP urges the prison service to maintain safer custody and build on the keyworker scheme to ensure you continue to have trusted people you can turn to:

'It's mad. It's mad what's going on in the world. They've got families, they're so compassionate to us.'

'Massive respect for all of them ... It takes a strong type of person to do what they're doing.'

During these unprecedented times, and when independent monitoring is reduced, it's more important than ever to hear about and learn from your experiences. Prisoners are keenly aware of risks of spreading the virus through an absence of PPE and difficulties in complying with social distancing. You must be adequately protected:

'People are in isolation but the same staff rotate round the whole prison touching everyone's handles, buzzers, paperwork, door - fast way to kill all the prisoners.'

'Things are bad in here, we have no toilet roll, no hand sanitiser, we've been locked down 23 hours. They've given us frozen food, frozen sandwiches been in the freezer for months.'

Severely restricted regimes are having a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing. Ministers must take this into account as attention turns to the next phase of the virus:

'I'm sure there is a lot of prisoners suffering from severe anxiety, isolating in their cells not knowing when they're going to be unlocked.'

Some vulnerable people spoke highly of the support and help they were getting:

'But for these people on D wing the staff are like - they know my heads fallen off so many times. I've tried to kill myself. I've tried to do so many crazy things to myself and I just appreciate the way the staff just keep picking me up. Just keep bringing me back and keeping me focused.'

And for some people there was a strong sense of all being in this together:

'We need to stand shoulder to shoulder and show this virus that it's not welcome in our world.'

Others felt very differently:

The governor says that we're working as a community, that's not right at all. We're not getting listened to at all. When we try to raise our opinions, the staff aren't listening, they just avoid us or tell us to shut up. When people are needing to see the nurse we're not getting seen to. There's a lot of people in here struggling with their mental health.'

Stemming from our review, the IAP set out recommendations on clear, honest communication and consultation; staff support and supervision; cleanliness and decency; mental health, wellbeing and care for the most vulnerable; increased family contact and bereavement counselling. These are being taken on board by Ministers and officials and we will monitor implementation. As plans are made for a slow and painstaking recovery from extreme imprisonment and isolation, your voices and views are being heard.

Juliet Lyon is Chair of the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP)

FreePost IAP is back and up and running. Write in with confidential access to FreePost IAP - that's all you need to put on the envelope, nothing else. Write and tell us how best to keep people in prison safe. We will reply. We look forward to hearing from you!

Advertorial

Being parents first

Support to cope with relationships



relate the relationship people

Here's what one parent, Phil Martin (former prisoner and campaigner for the development of rehabilitative cultures) had to say...

Anxiety, separation and short, rushed moments of communication can make it challenging to be a good partner or effective parent from inside prison. Going to prison does not make someone a bad parent but coping with being away from your children and partner can be hard. During time in prison, relationships will often change.

Evidence shows that conflict between parents which is frequent, intense and poorly resolved, affects their children's health and life outcomes. This includes "silent treatment", lack of respect and aggression towards each other.¹

But what if there was a service that was free and which existed solely to help you navigate this minefield? A team that cared and provided guidance for you, your partner and your children about what to expect before, during and after imprisonment and which guided you through it.

Leading relationships charity 'Relate' is pleased to be offering a programme to support you. The programme is called 'Being Parents First'.

"One of the hardest things I found was trying to maintain a meaningful relationship with my wife and children when all we had were rushed telephone calls and short, pressurised visits.

"I remember the gut-wrenching feeling of the credit ticking down on the phone and not having enough left to resolve yet another disagreement, or only having enough time to say goodnight to two children but not the third because 'bang-up' was called.

"The strain on families is unbearable at times. I saw many friends whose relationships broke down and others who became estranged from their children or they grew apart.

"If we had Being Parents First to turn to then, it would have brought a caring, experienced and objective voice to the situation and helped us to find our way out of the maze of turmoil and blame that we were so hopelessly lost in."

One of the Being Parents First counsellors, Chris, talks about the programme: "We've found

that parents are coming to us because they find every conversation becomes an argument or that they are unable to talk to each other anymore because they are so resentful of the situation they find themselves in. Many parents we support feel the benefit of having time to talk together to understand each other and explore how they can argue better and communicate differently to help their children feel happier. We're working with parents who haven't lived together and don't want to, and that's ok, but they have had a chance to talk about how to be parents together and sort out practical issues about contact. It's a safe place for two people to have the conversations away from their children, to understand how their arguing has affected their children and what they can do differently."

"One family has finally engaged with their teenager who had refused to talk to either parent since the dad came home from prison. They learnt to listen to him and vent their anger towards each other in front of him. It's amazing to see how giving these families time to talk makes such a difference."

What happens on the programme and how do I apply?

Couples and ex partners accepted onto the programme will have a trained Relate counsellor to support both parents over a 6-8 week period. The counsellor will explore any causes of conflict, how this impacts on the children and will help you look at different ways to improve communication and how you sort out arguments. During the pandemic we are running sessions by phone or video calls where possible. We can also have contact with you by email.

¹ What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children? Prof Gordon Harold et al 2016

BEING PARENTS FIRST

If you or your child's other parent is due for release within the next few months, or you have been released in the last year, then we would like to hear from you. However bad things seem, talking can help.

Call us in confidence on **0300 003 0270**

Write to us at **Being Parents First, RELATE, 58 Preston Rd, Brighton BN1 4QF.**

Email beingparentsfirst@relate.co.uk

Visit www.relate.org.uk/beingparentsfirst

We will do all we can to help you have what we all want - better relationships with our loved ones.