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Dear Juliet

Thank you for your letter of 23 March introducing the work of the Independent Advisory Panel and re-stating your support to protect the lives of those in immigration detention. The challenges facing us in the fight against COVID-19 are unparalleled and this Government is taking all necessary steps to keep people in detention safe and to preserve life.

You raise a number of very important points such as protecting the vulnerable, ensuring effective systems of communication and support are in place for those who are detained and questioning the aim of using or maintaining immigration detention during this period.

The Home Office is, as always, mindful of our legal obligations in respect of immigration detention, ensuring that there is a realistic prospect of removal in a reasonable timescale. Decisions to detain are made on a case-by-case basis and kept under constant review, but our priority is to maintain the lawful detention of the most high-harm individuals, including foreign national offenders (FNO). Around 730 people are currently detained under immigration powers, with around 700 foreign national offenders split largely evenly across immigration removal centres and prisons (this is based on local management information and subject to daily change).

As you will be aware, the High Court ruled that the Home Office are taking sensible, precautionary measures in relation to coronavirus and immigration detention. This is in line with the Public Health England (PHE) guidance and these measures are in place to protect staff and detainees during these unprecedented times. We consider the outcome to be a strong endorsement of the steps we have taken so far and which we will continue to take.

Everyone in detention has been reviewed to see if they are at a heightened risk from coronavirus in detention, with new interim guidance issued in March setting out the action that case workers should take in response to COVID-19. This reflects PHE guidance issued on 16 March 2020. Caseworkers are additionally reviewing detainees in accordance with the detention guidance and known country situations.

However, there is no global embargo on removals, and we remain committed to removing foreign national offenders wherever possible.

We take the welfare of the detainees in our care very seriously. In line with Public Health England guidance, measures such as shielding are considered on a case by case basis to minimise the risk of COVID-19 spreading to vulnerable groups in the immigration detention estate. Further measures including single occupancy rooms and the cessation of social visits have been introduced in line with the Government direction on social distancing. In

light of this, detainees have been provided with additional mobile phone credit to ensure they are able to contact friends and families while social visits have been stopped.

Detainees arriving at an Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) are medically assessed by a nurse within two hours of their arrival and offered an appointment with a doctor within 24 hours. Detainees also have access to medical assistance whilst they are in an IRC. Healthcare professionals continue to bring to our attention those individuals who they consider to be at risk of suicide or self-harm and are offering support to detainees who are otherwise in need of mental health coping strategies during this time.

I can assure you that handwashing facilities are available in all centres and we are working closely with suppliers to ensure we have a continuous supply of soap and cleaning materials. In addition, each IRC has prominently displayed posters and is making leaflets available to alert detainees to the recommendations regarding handwashing and social distancing. This safety messaging is also being reinforced to detainees as part of the IRC induction programme for new detainees. Furthermore, suppliers have been deploying coping initiatives, as advocated in your letter to co-sponsors dated 30 March, which we shared across our estate. This includes the wide use of distraction packs, provision of security adapted ipads and kindles to those in isolation offering access only to pre-loaded games, newspapers and books, weekly multi-media reminders to detainees to reinforce hygiene and safety precautions and, establishing other activities (while observing social distancing) such as outdoor bingo and a gardening club using plants donated from a local garden centre.

Detainees are also able to speak to staff directly for advice on the measures in place. To supplement the existing support, we will share details of the IAP's COVID-19 information hub with our IRC suppliers so that this resource can be accessed by all those who are detained or who are working in our centres.

I am confident that the collective measures that have been implemented in our estate have contributed to ensuring an absolute minimum in the number of cases of COVID-19 infections in detention. There are currently no cases of COVID-19 in detainees within the immigration detention estate. As of 28 April there have been two confirmed cases of COVID-19 in detainees. A third individual was identified but after his release from detention had been agreed. Whilst in the IRC the individual was in isolation. He was released as there was no immediate prospect of removal. No other detainees have tested positive for COVID-19. These collective measures have also assisted in ensuring that the detention estate has not suffered any deaths in detention, COVID-19 related or otherwise.

During this period of uncertainty, business as usual in all organisations has been impacted due to the need to minimise unnecessary travel, avoid contact with others and to self-isolate. Nonetheless, a reduced number of Home Office staff continue to be present at all immigration removal centres to provide assurance and oversight. We are also working closely with the Independent Monitoring Boards and HM Inspectorate of Prisons to support their processes for scrutiny of immigration detention during the COVID-19 epidemic.

I hope this reassures you that we are doing all we can to provide detainees with a safe and secure environment.



Chris Philp MP
Minister for Immigration Compliance and the Courts

