

“All hands to the pump”

EuroPris spoke with Tim Gurrey, Ambassador for Prison Officers at Her Majesty’s Prison & Probation Service in the United Kingdom. After having worked as a custodial manager for 26 years, he was seconded to the position of Ambassador for Prison Officers five months ago. Because of Covid-19, he was called back to work in his prison.



I see this prison as a community. Some of us live here and some of us work here. It should be safe for all of us. That means that we all need to be aware of the importance of social distancing, both prisoners and staff.

Before Covid-19, we used to unlock everybody every day, to go to work and do other activities. Now, because of the social distancing, they can only come out in small groups and they get much less time. They can use the shower, clean their cells, call their families, and get some fresh air. And they just get 40 minutes a day to do all of that. At first, this was very difficult for the prisoners to accept. They were not aware of what was going on outside. I believe communication is key: prisoners need to know what is happening and why. I think we have communicated about the situation very well now and most prisoners understand we are just trying to keep everybody safe. Our community mirrors the situation outside.

Of course, everything can change on a daily basis now. I hope we will not get to a full lockdown in which we can only give meals and nothing else. I also hope there will not be a backlash when everything goes back to normal. We have had no incidents so far, but of course the risk is currently low because of the lockdown situation. There may be some resentment when this is all over. That is another reason to communicate as well as we can, to make clear that this is not something that we are doing to the prisoners. We have also tried to compensate the prisoners; they still get paid even when there is no work, and they get extra phone credit to stay in touch with their families. We try to make it as comfortable as possible and try to fight the boredom. One thing that seems to be appreciated is that we organize quizzes and give prizes to the winners.

Another key point is the staff morale. Without staff, a prison service is nowhere. With a good staff group, that gives 200%, you can take on everything. Of course, we have lost some staff members because they are considered to be at risk, or because they are in isolation because of exposure. But we also have staff volunteering to work overtime. It’s all hands to the pump. Some senior

managers have been returned to the frontline. Keeping up the staff morale is the only way we can secure the safety and security of everybody in custody and of the people who work here. It is important that the staff continue to feel supported. Personal protective equipment (PPE) is essential. We have sufficient PPE for the moment, but it is important to use it in the best way that we can to feel safe. And I think all prison staff should be given the opportunity to offload their anxiety and concerns. They should get an hour per month of professional supervision. I was already lobbying for that before this crisis, and now I am even more convinced that this is necessary and an important means to show our staff that we value and support them.