

EuroPris Interview



EuroPris talks to Phil Copple on how COVID-19 affected the Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service

1. What is the current situation regarding Covid-19 in the prisons of England and Wales?

The situation in our prisons is improving in England and Wales, which reflects the improving situation in the wider community. The number of prison outbreaks of Covid-19 has decreased significantly over the last few weeks, as have staff absence rates and the number of open positive Covid cases among prisoners and staff. Where it is safe to do so, prisons have recently begun to ease some of the restrictions on what activity can take place, while maintaining underlying infection controls. The vaccine rollout is also progressing well, in line with the community rollout in the UK.

2. What were the biggest challenges you had to face since the crisis began in March?

The physical layout and fabric of prisons, which are generally quite densely populated spaces, has posed challenges for us when trying to implement distancing and self-isolation. We therefore sought to adapt the prison environment and create extra space, to enable social distancing and limit virus transfer, by installing temporary units in various prisons in England and Wales. There are currently over 800 extra spaces in use within these units.

Prisoners are also generally quite a vulnerable cohort in terms of their physical and mental health. The latter has certainly been extremely challenging for prisoners, who have been faced with regime restrictions for some months now, and haven't been able to see friends and family in person since last year. Every death we have experienced is a tragic loss, however, thanks to our successful and swiftly implemented contingency measures, we were able

to limit Covid-related deaths in prisons to far below the levels forecast by public health experts at the beginning of the pandemic. It has obviously also been key to maintain the safety of our prison staff, who have continued to work on the frontline since the start of the pandemic and without whom our prisons naturally cannot function effectively. Staffing levels have been particularly challenging during this period; we have needed staff to oversee social distancing and keep prisoners safe and secure, but we have also faced an acute staffing shortage, due to staff absent through illness or needing to isolate at home.

3. Which of the measures you introduced would you consider as the most important ones for keeping staff and prisoners safe?

The safety of our prison staff and of those in our care is always our top priority. In March of last year, we acted swiftly to implement a range of measures to ensure that their safety was protected and to limit the risk of virus incursion and outbreaks in our prisons. We have maintained elements of these responses since that time, easing controls in the summer before reinstating them during the second wave.

We implemented severe regime restrictions in order to reduce social contact in prisons, which has undoubtedly been detrimental to mental health and well-being as well as efforts to progress the rehabilitation of prisoners, but expert public health modelling indicates it was justified and has helped save many lives. We also took a range of measures to mitigate the risks to well-being, and help prisoners endure the conditions – such as additional money for phone calls, the introduction of video calls, issuing of supplementary food packs, and the waiving of television rental charges – in addition to prioritising care and welfare checks on prisoners by staff. Self-harm across the estate reduced during 2020, and the number and rate of self-inflicted deaths in 2020 were lower than in any of the previous 7 years, indicating considerable success in these measures.

Our ‘compartmentalisation’ strategy has been in place throughout the prison estate since the beginning of the pandemic, and allows us to effectively isolate the sick, shield the vulnerable and quarantine new arrivals. This has afforded us the most effective protection against the importation of the virus into prisons, minimised the risk to life and allowed staff to continue to deliver adapted prison regimes.

In addition, we have also sought to equip our staff with the necessary PPE to do their jobs effectively without putting themselves at risk of infection while doing so. All staff are provided with medical grade Fluid Resistant Surgical Masks, and there is additional PPE for people involved in higher-risk activities. This has been supplemented by ensuring adequate stocks of hygiene materials, and by encouraging and reminding prisoners and staff to adhere to social distancing regulations, and other infection controls.

4. Is there anything you are doing different now compared to the start of the crisis in March?

Testing technology wasn’t widely available either in the community or in prisons, when the pandemic first hit last year. We are now running routine staff testing throughout the prison estate in England and Wales, as well as testing for prisoners on arrival in custody and following transfer from other establishments. This has been hugely

beneficial in helping us to identify positive cases at the earliest opportunity, to break chains of transmission and prevent large-scale outbreaks in prisons. The development of Covid-19 vaccines has also been a hugely positive development. In January, we were able to start offering vaccines to eligible prison residents, based on their age and clinical vulnerability.

5. Do you expect that any of the changes made to the prison regime that were introduced in the past months will stay after the crisis?

Beyond the difficulties we have all faced over the past 12 months, Covid has reset the way we deliver our services. This means we have an opportunity for ambitious reform of the prison system, including where existing plans have been accelerated to support our response to the pandemic. Crucially, the pandemic has also provided an unforeseen and unique opportunity to learn, and we are absolutely intent on utilising and building on these lessons, and using them to inform our designs for future reforms, as we work towards recovery. The recovery period will not be about returning to life pre-pandemic, or indeed simply establishing a 'new normal'. Rather, it will be about continuing and laying the foundations for an expanded, ambitious programme of reform across the justice system which draws on the lessons learned during the pandemic, and builds back a better justice system in its wake. These lessons are based on a number of our most successful mitigations that we have implemented during the pandemic, for example the increased use of digital technology in prisons and video calling for prisoners and their families and friends. HMPPS has commissioned the Future Regime Design project within our three year Prison Reform Portfolio Programme to deliver systemic and estate wide reform of prison regime delivery.

6. If at all, is there anything positive that you take out of the crisis? Any positive learning for you as a Director General and/or for the Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service as a whole?

The past 12 months have been enormously challenging for our prison staff, prisoners and their families and friends. While I don't want to understate how difficult this period has been, it has also provided an opportunity for us to take a step back, reflect, and examine elements of our prisons in isolation as well as the system as a whole; as a result, we have learned numerous positive and useful lessons, for instance about the pace at which it is possible to implement change, and the role that technology can play.

The pandemic has also brought people together in positive ways. Many prisoners have been appreciative of staff efforts to keep things going, to keep coming into work despite the risks to themselves, and of the care and compassion shown in many instances. The worst of situations does tend to bring out the best in people in many respects. We have worked hard to maintain staff confidence and to engage our trade unions intensively in developing our responses – we have agreed several joint statements with our unions reflecting our solidarity in the face of the pandemic, and despite the challenges our employee relations have improved during this period.

7. How important was sharing of international experiences for you during the crisis? Any particular information or practice from other countries that was valuable for you during the crisis?

We always look to learn from the experiences of our counterparts overseas, and to share best practice. We created and published a National Framework early in the pandemic that sets out how we will take decisions about the level of necessary restrictions at different times, which drew on international examples about how other jurisdictions were tackling the same issues. As we rebuild and recover from Covid, we are striving to share and learn from the experiences of other nations – both positive and negative. This will also be important as we build our resilience to cope with potential, future pandemics.

8. Any other personal remarks that you would like to make?

The UK has been badly hit by the pandemic, with over 127,000 deaths to date. We have lost prisoners (over 140) and staff (33) to Covid-19, with the second wave causing the most tragedies. This has been a dreadful toll, but much less worse than we feared at the outset. Our number 1 priority was to save lives, and we have saved many, but reconciling yourself to the reality that it was not possible to save everyone has been difficult for everyone.

I would like to close by acknowledging what an outstanding job has been done by so many colleagues in this period. I sincerely hope that there is a redistribution of esteem towards key workers across all sectors as a result of this prolonged emergency, and that prison staff are recognised as the brave and dedicated public servants they are. I am grateful and proud of the way my colleagues have responded and kept going, carrying a huge burden and adapting to new and unforeseen ways of working, to ensure the safety and wellbeing of those in our care.