



8 April 2020: A statement from HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Peter Clarke

HM Inspectorate of Prisons is developing a new approach to visiting prisons and other places of detention to meet its duty to report publicly on treatment and conditions during the Covid-19 crisis.

Peter Clarke, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, announced on 17 March a suspension of full inspection visits until the end of May 2020. This reflected government public health guidance about social distancing and the recognition that it would be wrong to burden prison staff with the rigours of full inspections as they deal with the crisis.

However, the Chief Inspector continues to have a statutory duty to report on treatment and conditions for those detained. This is perhaps even more important as prisons deal with unprecedented challenges.

HMI Prisons has worked intensively to create an adapted approach for this period, involving short scrutiny visits – of one-day duration, involving two or three inspectors – to prisons and other establishments.

Prisons and other establishments to be visited will be selected based on information from a range of sources and will be clustered according to themes – such as local prisons, or young offender institutions. A summary of findings from the groups of visits will be published around two weeks after the visits.

The new model is still being developed but it is envisaged that groups of three visits a week will begin in late April.

HMI Prisons' inspections would normally assess prisons and other establishments against a wide range of detailed standards called Expectations. The Covid-19 model of short scrutiny visits will be significantly different in approach, identifying both thematic problems and good practice specific to providing safe and decent conditions in this period, taking into account the need for prisons to implement social distancing measures.

Inspectors will focus on issues which are essential to the safety, care and basic rights of those detained in the current circumstances. These include: healthcare, nutrition and hygiene; contact with families, friends and the outside world; legal rights; use of time and the need for meaningful human contact; support for those at risk of self-harm and suicide; and support and risk management for those being released.

HMI Prisons has worked collaboratively with HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and the Ministry of Justice on the detail of the Covid-19 model. HMI Prisons will inform HMPPS – and the Home Office, in relation to immigration removal centres – of proposed visits in advance, to minimise disruption to and distraction from essential work at this challenging time.

HMI Prisons has developed detailed health and safety guidance for inspectors to mitigate as far as possible risks to themselves, detainees and prison staff.

Peter Clarke said:

“This is a uniquely challenging time for prisons and other places of detention and our usual approach to conducting inspections is not appropriate. Equally, though, there is a clear need for some form of independent scrutiny of the experience of prisoners and others in this period.

“It is important to be able to reassure the public that any restrictions or changes to ordinary regimes in prisons are proportionate and preserve basic rights. We have worked closely with HMPPS and the Ministry of Justice in developing these temporary arrangements for meeting our legal duties.”