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Minister's Reference: DJE-MO-01901-2020

Dear Ms Bakker

Thank you for your email to the Minister for Justice and Equality, Charlie Flanagan TD in relation to the response of the Irish Prison Service during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Minister has asked me to respond to you on his behalf.

Covid-19 does of course provides unique challenges to congregated settings, including our prisons. An outbreak of Covid-19 in a prison setting would present difficulties for prison management in terms of controlling the spread of the virus amongst staff and prisoners, and the provision of appropriate medical treatment to affected persons and the maintenance of staffing levels.

In relation to your specific queries about education and isolation, you will appreciate that certain activities such as work and training have been curtailed in order to reduce risk of cross-contamination. This is in order to reduce cross-prison movement and interaction.

With regard to prison education, as noted in your correspondence, it has unfortunately been necessary for prison schools to close. However, I understand that the Irish Prison Service has built upon contingency plans to ensure, to the greatest extent possible, business continuity and the maintenance of services such as education, psychology, chaplaincy, in-reach mental health services and more, in line with public health guidance.

While these important measures are in place to safeguard the physical wellbeing of staff, prisoners and their families, I understand that the Irish Prison Service is at the same time taking steps to maintain good communication with prisoners and staff; and to allow prisoners to maintain human contact during these difficult times.

Tailored regular communications with regular Covid-19 information leaflets for prisoners (developed by the prison Red Cross Prisoner Volunteers) and Covid-19 information newsletters for staff are being published and distributed to raise awareness of the particular risks the virus poses in a prison environment and to provide accessible updates on the necessary actions being taken.

In addition, an electronic video visit system has been introduced, to allow prisoners to maintain contact with their families.

In more general terms I think it is fair to say that our Prison Service has made great efforts to prepare as well as possible for the difficult situation we all find ourselves in.

At an early stage, the Director General of the Irish Prison Service established an Emergency Response Planning Team ("ERPT") consisting of senior staff with skills and experience in areas including operational; healthcare; and infection control. The ERPT was tasked with identifying and issuing instruction for any necessary actions with the aim of:

- Blocking the spread of Covid-19 into a prison setting;
- Early detection of any possible case of Covid-19 in a prisoner or staff member; and
- Prevention of the spread of Covid-19, should a case be confirmed.

A huge amount of work has been carried out by the Irish Prison Service in this regard, informed and guided by the advice received from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), and consistent with the prison specific guidance for the management of Covid-19 issued by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 15 March 2020.

Some of the measures taken to date are as follows:

- Granting of temporary release to low-risk prisoners, following a case-by-case assessment, to reduce overcrowding and allow for an effective infection control regime, including physical distancing, to the greatest extent possible.
- Restrictions on access to prisons, in particular suspension of family visits with effect from 28 March.
- Introduction of a basic health check, including taking of temperatures, for all persons entering prisons from 29 March.
- Quarantining for up to 14 days of all prisoners newly committed to prison, in order to reduce the risk that a new committal who might be incubating the virus could spread Covid-19 to the general prison population.
- A specific unit in one prison has been opened to allow for the isolation of any confirmed case.
- All prisoners aged 70 years or more or those that are deemed medically vulnerable are being “cocooned”, so as to minimise all interactions with other prisoners or staff and to ensure their health and safety. This approach is in line with Government advice to members of the public.
- A proactive approach to ensure early detection of any possible cases.

Due to the contingency measures introduced, the ongoing dedicated work by the staff of the Irish Prison Service and also with the cooperation and understanding of the prisoners themselves, I understand that, as of 22 April 2020, there has been no confirmed prisoner case of Covid-19 within the Irish prison system. We hope that will continue the case.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact the Minister on this very important issue and I hope the information above has been of assistance and reassurance.

Yours sincerely,

Conor Cleary

Private Secretary to the

Minister for Justice and Equality