

Nadhim Zahawi MP,
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
(Minister for COVID Vaccine Deployment)

cc. Professor Andrew Pollard and Professor Lim Wei Shen
Joint Committee of Vaccination and Immunisation

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21st January 2021

Dear Nadhim Zahawi MP,

I am writing to you to ask that people in prison and those who work with them, including voluntary sector staff and volunteers, are given priority vaccination against Covid-19.

Clinks is the infrastructure organisation supporting voluntary organisations in the criminal justice system in England and Wales. Our aim is to ensure that organisations and the people they support are informed and engaged in order to transform lives and communities. In partnership with Nacro, we are a member of the Department of Health's VCSE Health and Wellbeing Alliance, to raise awareness of the health needs and inequalities experienced by people in the criminal justice system and the vital role the voluntary sector plays in addressing them.

Covid-19 has had an acute impact on people in prison and those who work with them, both in terms of their risk of infection and the measures which have been put in place to reduce this risk.

People in prison are particularly vulnerable to severe illness or death from Covid-19. They experience poorer health outcomes than the general population with 15% having experience of respiratory conditions compared to 8% of adults in the general population, with tuberculosis prevalence for people in prison being five times higher than the general population. Additionally, older people make up nearly 1 in 5 of the prison population and people in prison often present health needs up to 10 years earlier than the general population.

Since the start of the pandemic, 3,460 prisoners or children tested positive for Covid-19 across 110 establishments, almost all of whom were adults. As of December 2020, 71 people in prison have died having tested positive for Covid-19, or where there was a clinical assessment that the virus was a contributory factor in their deaths.

These figures are, as with all Covid-19 deaths, extremely tragic, but thankfully much lower than some predicted at the beginning of the pandemic in March based on prevalence of Covid-19 in prisons across the world. But achieving this has not been without cost. HM Prison and Probation Service have only been able to minimise levels of infection through implementing severely restricted regimes – far stricter than anything experienced by the general population. This has included prolonged periods where prisoners have been confined to their cells for 23 hours a day, sometimes unable to access basic sanitation and hygiene facilities such as showers and toilets, and visits, educational activities, rehabilitation programmes and purposeful activity have been cancelled.

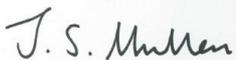
Unsurprisingly, voluntary sector organisations are now reporting deteriorating mental health of people in prison and HM Inspectorate of Prisons reports have noted disturbing rises in cases of self-harm in prisons. However due to the ongoing restrictions prisoners are also unable to access mental health services.

With the new, more transmissible variant of the virus, cases in prisons have surged by over 70% since the start of December. Even with a return to these severe regime restrictions, which will further exacerbate the negative impacts outlined above, cases of Covid-19 may not be able to be contained within the prison estate to the extent that it was previously.

The new strain and resulting increase in cases in the community has also put the prison system under further pressure due to prison staff having to isolate or take time off work due to Covid-19 infection. Voluntary sector staff who were working in prisons are now largely unable to enter establishments resulting in a loss of access to essential health and wellbeing, rehabilitation and education services.

It is therefore vital that prisoners and the whole prison community – including people who work in prisons across the statutory and voluntary sectors – are prioritised for the vaccine to allow for the restoration a prison regime that is safe and rehabilitative. Clear and accessible information about the timescale for vaccination of the prison community is also required to address the uncertainty faced by prisoners and enable voluntary sector organisations to better plan for when they might be able to resume delivery of vital services.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'J. S. Mullen'.

Jessica Mullen,
Director of Influence and Communication
Clinks