



**Notes from the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3) Special Interest Group on
Covid-19
Wednesday 17th March 2021, via video call**

Attendees:

Anne Fox, Clinks (chair)
Will Downs, Clinks (notes)
Khatuna Tsintsadze, Zahid Mubarak Trust
Tracy Wild, Langley House Trust
Emma Wells, Community Chaplaincy Association
Martin Blakebrough, Kaleidoscope
Nathan Dick, Revolving Doors Agency (co-opted)
Melissa Berry, Include (co-opted)
Raheel Mohammed, Maslaha (co-opted)
Abubaker Adam, Muslim Charities Forum (co-opted)
Sofia Buncy, Muslim Women in Prison Programme (co-opted)
Amal Ali, Criminal Justice Alliance (co-opted)
Ahtsham Ali, HMPPS
Richard Carling, HMPPS

Welcome and introductions

- Anne welcomed attendees to the group and invited a full round of introductions. She gave an overview of the role of the RR3 and the RR3 special interest group on Covid-19.
- This was a one-off meeting convened to discuss HMPPS preparations for Ramadan in prison, and the opportunity for voluntary sector organisations to support people in prison to observe the holy month. Additional individuals were co-opted to the meeting for their specific expertise in this area.

HMPPS update on preparations for Ramadan

- The bulk of the work in preparing for Ramadan is delivered by the Muslim chaplains present in each prison. Chaplains have many years' experience of delivering services to people in prison during Ramadan. There is a challenge in the few prisons where there is not a Muslim chaplain present. A few imams are also isolating or shielding due to Covid-19 and doing what they can remotely.
- Since Covid-19, central HMPPS has sent a weekly update to all Muslim chaplains in addition to the main bulletin. The bulletin includes a Friday message and reflective activities which can be printed out and handed door to door to Muslim prisoners. This will continue during Ramadan.

- National Prison Radio will broadcast a 25-minute reflection each week delivered by a different imam, which also includes a song, a prayer and Qur'an recitation. Ten HMPPS imams are also working to develop a number of short clips that will be broadcast a number of times a day during Ramadan by National Prison Radio. Also, a series of weekly programmes with Islamic scholars has been selected from YouTube to be broadcast to people in prison through Way Out TV.
- A 30-page booklet is being created, with activities and reflection for each day of Ramadan, and will be made available to all Muslim people in prison via the chaplain. This will be in addition to a similar booklet created last year.
- There will be different protocols for delivering food in each prison, based on discussions between imams and catering staff. The time for fast opening is likely to be around 8 – 8.30pm. Some food may be delivered fresh at a later time, but it is likely that for most people, their evening meal will be delivered in an insulated container at the same time as the rest of the prisoners are given theirs. People will also be provided with a breakfast and lunch combined for the early morning meal.
- Prisons remain at stage 4 of the [National Framework for Prison Regimes and Services](#). Group worship and Friday prayers are not possible under stage 4. It is hoped that some group worship may be possible as individual prisons move into stage 3, though there will be variation across the estate, depending on both the status of the prison, the risk assessments, and the approaches taken by governors.
- There is some additional guidance being produced by HMPPS gold command with regards to faith services. Anne Fox reminded officials that the RR3 had agreed with HMPPS to feed into the development of new and revised guidance and Exceptional Delivery Models (EDMs) when time allowed. Richard Carling said he would follow up on this. [Richard was able to confirm subsequently that someone from HMPPS headquarters would be getting in touch.]
- There was a discussion in December as to what worked well last Ramadan and what could be improved. Given the conditions at the time, it was felt that the response had been very good. Three or four committees of imams worked almost around the clock on different projects trying to get support to Muslim people in prison during that time.
- In prisons where in-cell telephony was available this was much easier. Imams could talk to any prisoner from the chaplaincy office directly into their cells. Infrastructure and technology challenges remain and limit the amount of contact services and chaplains are able to have with people in prison. However, chaplains continued to have regular face to face contact with prisoners throughout the pandemic.
- Faith literature and artefacts come into prisons as donations mainly. There is need in many prisons for Islamic literature in the main, prayer mats, perfume bottles etc. If these could be facilitated, that would be of great help.

Group discussion

Practical issues over access to items and services

- An attendee asked whether there was any national prohibition of certain items being brought into prison due to a Covid-19 risk. HMPPS said the usual restrictions on the supply of items into prisons are in place. Some prisons will allow things like dates and others won't. Books were still entering the prison and prisoners can order items from catalogues. Chaplaincy volunteers have stopped coming in however which does impact capacity.
- An attendee said that people repeatedly raise frustrations with delays to delivery of orders made through the canteen and catalogues. They urged HMPPS to ensure some central coordination to avoid delays of items ordered during Ramadan.
- An attendee said that the prison population in certain prisons, including in London, have particularly large Muslim prison populations. They asked how support will be ramped up in those prisons. HMPPS acknowledged the increase in Muslim people in prison, and that at one prison 48% of prisoners are Muslim [after the meeting - Ahtsham clarified that this figure was a percentage of those expressing a faith – in actual it was 42% of the total prison population]. HMPPS confirmed that staffing ratios aim to mirror the prison faith breakdown in terms of chaplaincy team and so in some prisons you do have 3 or 4 imams working to meet the needs of the population. However, in some prisons there are practical challenges, particularly with recruitment of imams.

Health and vaccination information

- An attendee said that there is concern amongst some Muslim people in prison in relation to taking the vaccine during Ramadan, due to side effects and whether doing so is considered breaking fast. HMPPS has distributed resources and communications regarding vaccinations, with some resources specifically focussed on the Muslim community. Messages have been broadcast via National Prison Radio addressing potential hesitancy among some Muslims towards the vaccine.
- HMPPS said that a few imams have taken a different view as to whether taking the vaccine during the daytime constitutes breaking the fast. Similarly, there have been different views on whether prisoners on methadone are exempt from fasting. People from different denominations and backgrounds will take a different view too which must be respected.
- Attendees said they have for many years worked to develop health guidance that is agreed across different denominations. Often, individual people in prison won't adhere strictly to a particular denomination and will seek guidance from their local imam. There was some concern therefore that despite resources being shared with each prison, how those messages were communicated to people in prison rests heavily on the perspectives of individual imams. HMPPS said it cannot centrally control what Islamic juristic opinions the imams follow, but they can control the information that was delivered to prisons – ensuring it covered the broad juristic views but that faith related guidance had been circulated and more was to follow.

- An attendee said that certain methadone substitutes are available that could be used during Ramadan, such as Buvidal which can be taken monthly. Conversations can also be facilitated between imams and Muslim doctors to enable people to understand methadone is a medication. Kaleidoscope for example had benefitted from talking to some of the mosques in their areas of operation.

Family contact

- An attendee asked how HMPPS planned to ensure people in prison felt connected to their families and wider community over Ramadan if social contact was not possible. They suggested that HMPPS could facilitate more messages coming into prisons from family members or prominent members of the community.
- An attendee said that the video call system that has been further expanded during Covid-19 could be put to use during Ramadan to support Muslim people in prison to have contact with family particularly on the day of Eid.
- An attendee stressed the importance of providing information to families to explain what is being provided in prison. Families would understand that there will be inconsistency and local variation, but a clear update on what HMPPS hope will be available in each prison will be useful.
- Ahtsham Ali said he would follow up on these three points.

Racism and perceptions of preferential treatment

- It was noted that there were risks that some people in prison perceive one group being favoured for access to particular services or items over others and that this needed to be managed. For example, when lockdown was previously eased last year, imams were eager to restart classes and worked through logistics etc., but in some cases were not able to deliver due to concerns that Muslim people were having preferential treatment. An attendee said that in some prisons the imam's role is not seen as an essential role on the wing and other prison staff do not understand their role and its importance.
- An attendee pointed to research conducted by Revolving Doors Agency and Zahid Mubarak Trust focussed on Muslim men in the criminal justice system, which highlighted clearly the racism and discrimination faced by Muslim people in prison including from staff. [Maslaha published a report last year that showed how basic human rights were being denied to Muslim people in prison because of their religion](#). Some staff in the criminal justice system see observing Islam as a road to extremism. Good work by imams can be undermined by prison officers not facilitating or prioritising access.
- HMPPS said chaplaincies were multi-faith and were involved in conversations with staff in prison including faith awareness programmes. Conversations were being held at a senior level at HMPPS too, with direction and commitment from the CEO. Ahtsham Ali suggested this group could engage directly with the HMPPS Head of Diversity and Inclusion. An attendee encouraged HMPPS Chaplaincy and Faith Services to have conversations with

governors making it clear that discrimination and perceptions of preferential treatment must be tackled head on.

Voluntary sector support to HMPPS

- HMPPS said the involvement of voluntary sector during Ramadan is largely down to local imams, many of whom are very good at engaging with charities, including to ensure provisions of prayer mats, literature and dates etc were readily available during this period.
- HMPPS said it would welcome suggestions from voluntary organisations on how they can diversify their imams and chaplaincy volunteers. There was an underrepresentation of applications for example from imams of Somali and Sudanese backgrounds.
- An attendee said that they have for many years worked with HMPPS to support people in prison at this time, including helping to provide literature and uplifting messages. The Muslim Women in Prison project has been providing packs to women for nine years and will do so again this year to at least six women prisons.
- Maslaha has recently delivered training to a number of voluntary organisation staff and volunteers to help them respond to specific questions people may raise during Ramadan.
- An attendee said that Muslim charities generate a lot of income during Ramadan and there was a real opportunity for more of this funding to be provided to causes supporting people in the criminal justice system, especially in the context of a further projected increased of Muslim people in the criminal justice system. An attendee said that the wider Muslim charity sector can respond quickly to demands and gaps. For example, if a large quantity of literature, or prayer mats were needed that could easily be facilitated. They invited both HMPPS and charities working in the criminal justice system to work with the wider Muslim charity sector to address common concerns.