



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Justice Committee

Humza Yousaf
Cabinet Secretary for Justice
Scottish Government

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By e-mail

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Dear Humza,

COVID-19 and the Scottish Prisons Service

As you know, the Justice Committee is very supportive of the Scottish Government's efforts to keep people safe in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 emergency. We also commend the work of all the bodies within the justice remit during this difficult time.

As stated in my letter of 25 March, the Justice Committee will try to keep correspondence with you and other bodies to a minimum. However, the Committee has been approached by 3 separate officers from within the Scottish Prison Service, from 3 different establishments, expressing concerns about Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). I set out an anonymised and paraphrased version of their emails in the Annex.

When time allows, I should be grateful if you would provide the Committee with a response. I am copying this letter to Teresa Medhurst, Interim Chief Executive at the Scottish Prisons Service.

Best wishes,

Margaret

Margaret Mitchell MSP
Convener, Justice Committee

ANNEX

Case 1

Person A works in one of the prisons and reports that they have no PPE. They express concerns about having to be in close contact with prisoners who can be violent on a daily basis. They have no choice but to intervene. They are worried they will contract the virus due to this close contact in the absence of PPE. They urge the Committee to intervene to help.

Case 2

Person B works in a different prison and has concerns about the health and safety of prison officers in Scotland. They report having to work in circumstances where Person B and 2 other officers are responsible for looking after over 70 prisoners, with no PPE (only gloves). They report that prisoners are not social distancing, especially in common spaces such as exercise yards which can see in excess of 100 prisoners sharing vapes, shaking hands and standing in crowds.

They report that SPS has said that to allow staff to protect themselves, they do not have to search prisoners, which they feel is very dangerous as their job is extremely volatile at the best of times. They worry also about restraining prisoners in the absence of PPE.

Person B says they have parents who are in the high risk category. They report that two of the prisoners they supervise were removed from the prison after showing symptoms of COVID-19. They report that they have been in close contact with both of these the prisoners. They are worried about self-isolating as this could leave the prison short of staff, potentially meaning the army will need to be brought in.

They question why prison staff are not classed as key workers. They think this lack of recognition is having an impact on morale. They wish to be categorised as emergency workers.

Case 3

Person C works at another different prison. They have said they appreciate how under pressure everyone is but they raise what they consider to be legitimate concerns about safety whilst working. They say they have a right to social distancing measures but this is not currently being implemented.

In their establishment, they report that staff have been instructed to take six or more prisoners for exercise, showers or to use the phones. They say that social distancing is not being observed at those times. They say they have needed to intervene in some circumstances which have brought them into close contact with prisoners. They say they have waited weeks for hand sanitiser which has now arrived, but with no way to distribute it across the prison.

Person C also reports that they live with a partner who is in a high risk group. They are worried that they are working in an environment where government guidelines aren't being followed. They are worried about the risk to their partner. They also report that a member of staff in their establishment has tested positive for the virus and they are worried that this will now spread. They call on the Committee to help keep officers at the SPS safe.