



*Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody*

*Chair: Juliet Lyon CBE  
Head of Secretariat: Piers Barber*

*102 Petty France  
7<sup>th</sup> floor,  
London  
SW1H 9AJ*

[www.iapondeathsincustody.org](http://www.iapondeathsincustody.org)

Wednesday 10 March 2021

**The Rt. Hon Matt Hancock MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care**

Dear Secretary of State,

**IAPDC advice: COVID-19 vaccinations for closed institutions**

On 26 February you announced your government's decision to continue with the mass vaccination programme on an age-related basis, for reasons of speed and simplicity, as the best way to save lives. The Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAPDC), which I chair, understands that this was based on scientific analysis and advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). We understand too, and welcome, that you plan to keep this decision under review.

I write to ask you to consider, as a matter of urgency, vaccinating everyone, staff and all those detained, in closed institutions. This comes in the light of new data and information held by your department and the Ministry of Justice on:

- spread of the virus amongst, and rapid rise in deaths of, people in prison;
- major community outbreaks in prison localities, together with growing evidence of the success of vaccination in preventing transmission;
- and recent reports by, amongst others, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMCIP) which attest to serious harm being done by severely restricted regimes and prolonged isolation.

February 2021 proved the worst month for COVID-19 deaths in custody since the onset of the pandemic, with 35 deaths recorded according to Ministry of Justice data. Reports suggest that on 22 February the prison population rate of infection was 1.1% - ten times higher than the community rate of 0.11%. There are COVID-19 outbreaks of varying scale in 90 prisons (approximately three quarters of the prison estate).

Reports have indicated that of the ten worst affected areas in England, nine coincide with major prison outbreaks – these include HMPs Birmingham, Manchester and Stocken in Rutland. In the week ending February 21, the area of England with the highest coronavirus infection rate was Wetherby East & Thorp Arch in Leeds, home to both HMP Wealstun and HMYOI Wetherby. The area's rate was 1,181 cases per 100,000 people, the highest in the country. We understand that the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) is preparing public health advice on prisons and transmission.<sup>1</sup>

The sole objective of the IAPDC is to prevent all deaths, natural and self-inflicted in custody. Concerns arise from reports on the health and state of people in prison, including those produced by HMCIP (February 2021) and our report with the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) published in October 2020.<sup>2</sup> It is still too early to assess the full impact of severe restrictions introduced, and maintained by a significantly depleted workforce, to save lives during the pandemic. It is clear from reports however that mental health is being impaired, and suicidal ideation increased, by extreme isolation and that physical health is being harmed by lack of exercise, missed appointments and late diagnoses.

Health-led action in mitigation should include physical and mental health checks including those for long COVID. Mental healthcare, diminished during the pandemic, should be re-established and supplemented by a programme of additional mental health and bereavement support for people emerging from extreme isolation, lockdown and restrictive measures. Routine lateral flow tests should be introduced for all prisoners attending courts and for anyone approaching release/discharge – currently this is practice in a few pilot sites only.

We draw your attention to approaches taken elsewhere. The Department of Health in Ireland plans to vaccinate the country's 3,800 prisoners as part of 'group nine' of its vaccine allocation strategy applying "*to those aged 18-64 years who are living or working in crowded accommodation where self-isolation and social distancing is difficult to maintain*".<sup>3</sup>

Finally, vaccinating everyone, staff and prisoners, at once could increase confidence and take-up by hard to reach groups, over-represented in the prison population.<sup>4</sup> In a recent consultation with 805 prisoners on their likelihood of accepting the vaccine, Nuffield Trust researchers concluded that authorities should "*consider whole prison community roll out, including staff, to alleviate suspicion and increase chances of recovering the regime*".

---

<sup>1</sup> Minutes of the Eightieth SAGE meeting on COVID-19, 11 February 2021, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/963390/S1115\\_SAGE\\_80\\_Minutes.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/963390/S1115_SAGE_80_Minutes.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 'What happens to prisoners in a pandemic?: A thematic review', February 2021, <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/02/What-happens-to-prisoners-in-a-pandemic.pdf>; Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody and the Royal College of Nursing, 'Natural deaths in prison custody: Putting things right', September 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c5ae65ed86cc93b6c1e19a3/t/5f736f57ef92df5643a3a461/1601400665948/200929+IAP-RCN+-+prevention+of+natural+deaths+in+custody+-+final+for+publication.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> 'Prisoners to be vaccinated as one cohort in group 9 of rollout', *The Irish Times*, Wednesday 9 March, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/prisoners-to-be-vaccinated-as-one-cohort-in-group-9-of-rollout-1.4504716>.

<sup>4</sup> Empowering People: Inspiring Change, 'The COVID-19 Vaccine: A Summary of Patient Views', [https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://epicconsultants.co.uk/onewebmedia/COVID-19%2520Vaccine\\_%2520Patient%2520Summary.%2520FP.pdf&r=3](https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://epicconsultants.co.uk/onewebmedia/COVID-19%2520Vaccine_%2520Patient%2520Summary.%2520FP.pdf&r=3).

To meet your obligation to protect lives, the IAPDC strongly advises taking a whole institution approach to vaccination in closed settings. This would be a discrete exercise within the overall programme of mass vaccination delivered speedily and simply. It would be comparative to, but on a smaller scale than, vital steps taken earlier in care homes to keep frontline staff and residents safe with maximal public health impact.

As ever,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Juliet Lyon', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Juliet Lyon CBE**  
**Chair, Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody**  
e: [juliet.lyon@justice.gov.uk](mailto:juliet.lyon@justice.gov.uk)

cc.

**The Rt. Hon Robert Buckland QC MP, Lord Chancellor, Ministry of Justice**  
**Minister of State Kit Malthouse MP, Home Office and Ministry of Justice**  
**Minister of State Nadine Dorries MP, Department of Health and Social Care**  
**Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Alex Chalk MP, Ministry of Justice**  
**Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Nadhim Zahawi MP, Department of Health and Social Care**  
**Sir Bob Neill MP, Chair, Justice Select Committee**  
**Jeremy Hunt MP, Chair, Health Select Committee**