



“Ameliorating the impact of cocooning on people in custody Report”

Response by the Irish Prison Service – July 2020

1. Background

Covid-19 poses unique challenges for our prisons, our prisoners and our staff due to the sheer volume of people who pass through our prison gates on a normal day. The Irish Prison Service has worked very closely with the Department of Justice and Equality, and with the Health Services to ensure that were prepared for the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Back in January the Irish Prison Service began our preparations for responding to what was to become a global crisis. The Service, through our experts in infection control and disease prevention, was aware of international prison experience where there were explosive outbreaks, prison health services overwhelmed and unfortunately fatalities among staff and prisoners.

The Irish Prison Service established an Emergency Response Planning Team to oversee our response at local and national level and to ensure that the actions taken were consistent with public health advice and actions taken in the community. The Irish Prison Service introduced over 80 actions to ensure the safety of all those who live, work or visit our prisons.

The key aims of our response has been:

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

2. Cocooning in the Irish Prison Service

Following the Government advice that all persons over 70 years of age, and all those who are considered medically vulnerable, should stay at home and reduce face-to-face interaction with other people or “cocoon” as it is known, the Irish Prison took steps in April 2020 to identify people in custody who would meet this criteria.

These cocooning prisoners were removed from free association, but could associate with one another in dedicated areas. Any prisoner who was cocooning continued to have access to a wide range of services and facilities within the prison. These facilities included psychological support, phone calls, television, tuck shop and chaplaincy services. In particular efforts were also been made to ensure that these prisoners could communicate with their families, through increased provision of telephone services and video visits.

As a result an average of about 120 prisoners were required to “cocoon” on a daily basis.

The practice of cocooning has now ceased in prisons, in line with the general easing of relevant public health restrictions in the community. However prisoners formerly cocooning were offered the option of a restricted regime at their own request.

3. Engaging with Inspector of Prisons in monitoring the impact of cocooning in prisons.

The Irish Prison Service was happy to facilitate this important project as the Service is acutely aware of the potential impact that the restriction of a regime can have on the prison population. The Service Welcomes the Report published today by Maynooth University and the Inspector of Prisons and also recognises the contribution and assistance of our own Red Cross Volunteers and those prisoners who were willing to participate and provide meaningful feedback.

The Service is very aware of the need to respect the human rights and dignity of detainees and to protect their health. Covid-19 presented an extraordinary challenge to all sectors and the prison service was no exception.

The Service recognises that cocooning was a challenge for individuals and this applied to those who live in the community or a prison setting. It was encouraging that prisoners understood the rationale for these provisions and the need to keep vulnerable prisoners protected.

At all times, the Irish Prison Service was anxious to provide prisoners with information via newsletters, leaflets, posters, Red Cross volunteers and by our staff. The Irish Prison Service introduced 2 prisoner newsletters to ensure that all prisoners were provided with the latest news and developments with regard to Covid-19 and the potential impact on them.

A bespoke newsletter was provided for prisoners who were being restricted or confined to their cell with practical information and advice on coping mechanisms.

The Service recognised the need for social contact within the prison itself and also with friends and family and supported prisoners through increasing the numbers of phone calls and allowing for the use of video calls.

The Irish Prison Service was aware at all times of the impact that the curtailment of routine services had on all prisoners in custody. In this regard, the Irish Prison Service has been planning for and has entered an unwinding phase of Covid-19 restrictions in line with the action also being taken in the community. Senior management in the Service meets every Friday morning to review the measures in place with a view to modifying or removing (or retaining if necessary) the actions that are in place.

In this regard the Service has begun lifting some of the restrictions with a view to a return to normal regimes across the service and increasing the out of cell time for all prisoners. In this regard a number of key actions have been taken including inter alia:

- Cessation of cocooning for over 70ies and medically vulnerable prisoners
- Cessation of the use of “kraft boxes” and the return of plates
- Return of physical visits from 20th July 2020 on a restricted basis
- Return of access to non-essential medical appointments on a case by case basis

In addition, a large number of actions are being modified on a phased basis to reduce the impact that they are having on the prison regime with a view to being lifted as soon as it is deemed safe to do so. This includes the recommencement of certain services from the 20th July including library Services with a view to the full return of prisoner services in time. This also includes extensive planning for the return of the education service and prison schools in September.

4. Conclusion

The Director General of the Irish Prison Service welcomes and appreciates the value and importance of research such as this Report and extends sincere thanks to the Inspector of Prisons and to Maynooth University - Department of Law and to all those who assisted in the collection of the material.

Throughout this crisis the Irish Prison Service has recognised the importance of communication with prisoners and has made every effort to enhance our communications systems and the provision of information.

It is essential that this enhanced communication system includes listening to the feedback and concerns of our prisoner population. The Service recognises that it is important that the voices of prisoners are listened to, so that we can respond to the needs of the prison population and continue to provide safe and secure custody and rehabilitation in line with best practice.

Irish Prison Service

29nd July 2020.