

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER



Minister's Office Block B,  
Castle Buildings  
Stormont Estate  
Ballymiscaw  
Belfast  
BT4 3SG  
Tel: 028 9076 5725  
[DOJ.MinistersOffice@justice-ni.x.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:DOJ.MinistersOffice@justice-ni.x.gsi.gov.uk)

SACC  
c/o Edinburgh Peace and Justice Centre  
City of Edinburgh Methodist Church  
25 Nicolson Square  
Edinburgh, EH8 9BX  
United Kingdom

Our ref: CORR-1763-2020  
30 September 2020

Dear Mr Haley,

Thank you for your letter. I am of course aware of the individual case you have raised in your correspondence; however, it would not be appropriate for me to comment upon the personal circumstances of someone in our care.

I do hope that I can nevertheless address some of the general concerns you have raised.

NIPS are diligently and actively managing the operational response to Coronavirus (Covid-19) in the community. The assessment and management of the risks posed by the virus within the context of the overall prison estate seeks to protect and promote the health and safety of prisoners, NIPS staff and the wider public.

The approach to the possible isolation of prisoners entering or returning to the prison are a direct response to the risks posed by Covid-19. NIPS have introduced specific isolation areas in each prison establishment with safeguards in place, including in

respect of staff and prisoners using personal protective equipment, specific cleaning routines and a regime designed and managed to avoid risks of infection. It is not possible to introduce equivalent safeguards in a normal residential location.

Decisions regarding isolation in some cases, including return from hospital appointments/visits, are a matter of discretion for each Governor, who considers all relevant aspects and makes a decision based on risk.

Prisoners attending hospital engage in direct face to face close contact and physical examinations of a type that invariably increases the potential for cross-infection. Therefore, a prisoner attending a hospital currently experiencing high volumes of serious Covid-19 infections, resulting in significant ill health and death, who has engaged in those examinations, interactions and close contact with numerous multi-disciplinary staff, represents a significant risk on return to the prison population.

Each time a prisoner leaves to attend hospital, the same approach to risk assessment is taken. The risks posed to the prisoner and staff on return are considered carefully by the decision making Governor, thereby ensuring, as far as possible, that the most current available expert health advice regarding Covid-19 management is followed.

On this basis it is not automatically the case that any prisoner who attends outside hospital will be returned to isolation. Decisions in this respect are made at that time, taking into account relevant factors and risk. Any decision made will be entirely predicated on the risk posed and how that risk should be managed.

Staff who escort prisoners outside an establishment wear PPE and, therefore, based on current PHA advice, do not have to isolate for 14 days on return. Unlike these staff, it was and is not possible for prisoners attending hospital to wear such equipment at all times when accessing certain types of medical care and treatment, including, for example, an MRI scanner. It is also not necessary for escorting staff to have the same level of direct and up close contact with healthcare professionals or equipment.

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER

All NIPS staff adhere to the best practice and current health advice, regarding PPE use and hygiene while at work, and are encouraged to do the same when not at work. They are not exposed to the same level of potential infection at hospitals as prisoners, for the reasons outlined above.

Since March 2020 over 1,300 men have come through the Isolation unit at Maghaberry before progressing into the main prison population. During the 14 days when a person is in an isolation unit they have access to their clothes, legal representation, showers, and can maintain family contact. If an individual raises a concern about their cell accommodation with staff, action will be taken to address any issues. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (SEHSCT) are tasked with healthcare provision and management within prisons in Northern Ireland. SEHSCT staff support individuals in isolation on an ongoing basis, and will see individuals with specific health concerns on a daily basis.

I have been very impressed by the work to keep our prisons safe for staff and those in our care throughout this time. That is illustrated by the fact that only eleven members of staff and one prisoner who was in our care has tested positive during this period.

I hope you will find this response helpful.

Yours sincerely



**NAOMI LONG MLA**  
**Minister of Justice**