



Ministry
of Justice



HM Prison &
Probation Service

Her Majesty's Prison & Probation Service

Public Protection Group

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19 March 2020

Dear colleague

MHCS Update: Covid-19

We first wrote to you towards the end of January to introduce ourselves as the newly appointed Head of Mental Health Casework Section. We were looking forward to a further update on performance at the end of quarter four. However, we wanted to send this interim stakeholder communication to set out our response in relation to covid-19.

For all of us the picture is ever changing and we are all working in unprecedented times, indeed this update may well soon be out of date. Though we recognise the increasing number of general enquires so would like to update you on our position as of today (19 March 2020).

MHCS are actively contingency planning and putting these plans into action as and when required, as you will each no doubt be doing in your own settings. First and foremost our approach is to follow the advice issued by Public Health England, upon which much of our own corporate advice is based. This week this advice has led to a change in our working practices, as of Tuesday all MHCS staff have been asked to work from home (with no end date set at this point). Working from home is not unusual for MHCS, we regularly do so. However to do so day-by-day and for an extended period is new territory. MHCS staff are enabled to work from home; our case management system can be accessed remotely and so as yet there are no changes to our ability to perform our statutory functions with regard to casework and we continue to maintain our out-of-hours service.

We are receiving increasing numbers of queries from stakeholders asking about guidance and changes to our processes and practices. At this point in time, MHCS policies and procedures remain the same.

Discharging our statutory functions and the resultant casework will continue to be our priority during this time. Our ability to deliver casework across all areas of work is as yet uncompromised, however,

should staffing levels decrease as a result of covid-19 we will need to proactively adjust our resources to deliver key priorities. Should this arise we will direct resources toward:

- Recalls
- Prison Transfers
- Upward Transfers
- Tribunal Statements
- Level and downward transfers and repatriations

In the event that our resources become stretched we will try to maintain our output in regard to leave decisions and discharges, however there may be some delays. Conditional Discharge Reports (CDRs) and applications for Changes of discharge Conditions (unless considered to be particularly important in terms of managing risk) fall at the bottom of the priority list. For those of you completing those I would ask you to bear this in mind and if in any doubt, please do email us about any change in circumstances for a patient that we need to be aware of immediately, such as a possible recall, consideration of voluntary admission and/or civil section. Similarly, please do contact us to discuss any concerns you may have about fulfilling your obligation to complete CDRs in the current climate.

The Secretary of State for Justice does not have statutory responsibility for the medical care or treatment of patients. We will continue to look to clinicians and social supervisors to make decisions in relation to care and treatment of a patients mental disorder (as they would normally) in the interests of their patients and public protection during these unprecedented times. MHCS staff will continue to discharge the functions on behalf of the Secretary of State for Justice to fulfil our statutory responsibilities, namely to recall patients from the community and to vary or remove conditions of discharge.

If you have concerns regarding a change in a discharged patient's mental disorder please continue to engage in discussions around recall as appropriate. Please continue to contact MHCS using normal channels for case-by-case queries.

General queries in relation to coronavirus or to report cases of covid-19 in a secure hospital or community setting please contact MHCSqacs@justice.gov.uk

Yours sincerely

Two handwritten signatures in black ink. The first signature is on the left and the second is on the right, both appearing to be cursive and somewhat stylized.

Helen Souter and Kathryn Nichol
Head of Mental Health Casework Section, Public Protection Group, HMPPS
Copy: Gordon Davison, Head of Public Protection Group