

**LISTENER SCHEME DURING COVID 19**

This document provides an overview of how the Listener scheme can be operated in the current operational and prison regime context. The Listener scheme offers valuable assistance to those in custody and should continue to be used where appropriate cohorting and infection control measures can be put in place.

Currently, on the Operational Guidance platform accessible to all staff, we have published guidelines encouraging the continued deployment of Listeners and other peer workers. It is noted that those who are vulnerable, and for whom Government advice is that shielding is appropriate, should not be permitted to continue in the Listener role. The importance of ongoing formal support to Listeners, facilitated through phone calls with Samaritans volunteers that are confidential and free to Listeners themselves, is also emphasised.

Briefings from the Safety Team can be found here:

<https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/except/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Safety-Briefing-Supporting-the-Listener-scheme-v6.pdf>

<https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/except/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Peer-Support.pdf>

The link below provides further information on the safe running of the scheme in the current context, in particular in relation to the Cohorting Guidance. It requires establishments to designate three areas for the separation of particular cohorts:

1. Reverse Cohorting Unit (RCU) – for all prisoners entering or returning to the establishment to remain separated from the wider population for 14 days to ensure they are a-symptomatic.
2. Protective Isolation Unit (PIU) – for all symptomatic prisoners to reside for a minimum of 7 days but until they are a-symptomatic.
3. Shielding Unit (SU) – for all prisoners identified as vulnerable and extremely vulnerable to infection to remain separated for a minimum of 12 weeks but more likely for the duration of the outbreak.

<https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/except/2020/04/15/cohorting-and-population-management/>

***Listeners Scheme under the cohorting arrangements***

Prisons are encouraged to continue with the provision of the Listeners during this pandemic crisis but need to organise it in a way that does not contradict the existing national guidelines and corresponds with local capabilities and needs. It is important that prison safety teams are working closely with the local Samaritans branch, and that decisions about how to operate the scheme are made jointly. These decisions should be recorded in the local defensible decision log to ensure that there is a record of how the scheme is operating at any time and the reasons for this.

Where in-cell telephony is available it may be possible and appropriate for contact with Listeners to be made available by phone.  However, many prisoners will prefer face-to-face contact, so wherever possible this service should be maintained, and the phone service should become the default only where it is necessary for infection control purposes.

The following suggestions may provide support in the creation of the safe model of operating/

***Listeners***

- The training of new Listeners was suspended when visits from Samaritans volunteers became impossible. Samaritans have now adapted the training to be delivered remotely by phone/video link, and are starting to work with prisons to explore ways of delivering this. Please talk to your local Samaritans branch about options for remote training, thinking about the various IT that you may be able to use in the prison and the practicalities of how to facilitate it in terms of levels of supervision, social distancing etc. Guidance on resuming visits from Samaritans volunteers will follow in due course.

- In the meantime establishments should continue using their current pool of trained and security cleared Listeners. Ensuring that individuals who have been trained as Listeners in other prisons are identified on arrival and offered the opportunity to join the team (with the agreement of the local Samaritans branch) can help to maintain numbers.

- Where numbers are lower than usual, care should be taken to ensure that the remaining Listeners are not overloaded – this can be done by reducing the hours of availability of the service (and offering phones support from Samaritans at other times) and/or by restricting the service to priority cases (eg those on ACCT) and offering phone support from Samaritans to others.

- It is important that the process for accessing Samaritans support by phone is clear and understood by all prisoners and staff. In particular where in cell telephony is not available there should be a process for issuing, retrieving and cleaning the Samaritans phone at all times, including during patrol and night states.

- Establishments should facilitate ongoing support for Listeners from the local Samaritans branch, arranging regular phone calls to volunteers that are free for Listeners and confidential in the sense of not being overheard or monitored. Talk to the Samaritans branch about how best to arrange this, using conference facilities where available.

- Only prisoners who are not required to shield can continue to take on the usual Listener role, as this includes direct contact with other prisoners. You may be able to continue to engage shielding Listeners in the work in other ways, particularly where they have in cell telephony. Wherever possible also continue to include them in the support calls with Samaritans.

- Listeners should be made of aware of the importance of the hygiene and social distancing requirements. These should be reinforced regularly.

- Listeners should generally not be cross-deployed between cohorting groups, and where possible should serve the prisoners on their unit only.

***Provision for different cohorting groups****:*

*Symptomatic:*

Prisoners who are symptomatic and in isolation must not have contact with other prisoners to minimise the risk of transmission. In addition to staff checks on their wellbeing, they can be offered access to a Samaritans phone. This should be managed in accordance with the guidelines on the appropriate cleaning and handling of phones <https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/except/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Cleaning-Guidelines-v1.4-140520-COVID-19-Infection-Control.doc>

*Shielding:*

Shielding prisoners should be offered a Samaritans phone in the first instance as this carries less risk of transmission (assuming it has been cleaned in accordance with the guidelines). If it is deemed appropriate and social distancing can be effectively maintained, there can be an exception made for one shielding prisoner who is a Listener to offer the service to another, if they are both part of the same regime group.

*Reverse-cohort unit*

Prisoners who are new to custody and/or a particular prison are considered to be at heightened risk and support for them should be prioritised. They should be allowed access to the Listeners with the appropriate hygiene and social distancing measures in place.

In order to avoid cross-contamination, it is best to provide the service on the Reverse-Cohort Unit by having one or more Listeners living there. Such Listeners should be volunteers: they must not be required to live on the RCU. Rather, the cohorting strategy should be explained to the Listeners, and they should be given the option of doing so.

Where it is not possible to provide the service through Listeners resident on the RCU, another option for minimising cross-contamination is to promote phone access to Samaritans in the first instance, and to deploy Listeners only where absolutely necessary, e.g as part of an individual’s support plan under ACCT. If this second model is used, and Listeners do not reside on the RCU, it is vital that Listeners adopt the same decontamination process required of staff visiting the RCU – see cohorting guidance for details <https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/except/2020/04/15/cohorting-and-population-management/>

*Social distancing*

Listener contacts should be facilitated in rooms / places that allow for at least 2 meters distance between the individuals, whilst allowing a confidential conversation to take place. Ideally, this would be a ventilated room. Consider permitting contact outdoors, e.g on exercise yards, where feasible, as this is safer. If required, a physical barrier may be established between the individuals to further facilitate infection control. Where social distancing rules cannot be met, the service should not be offered and alternative sources of support (e.g by phone) should be used.

*Recognising the role of LIsteners*

- It is important to ensure that the vital role that Listeners play is recognised. Listeners are volunteers and it is not appropriate to offer financial rewards, but establishments should ensure that they are supported by staff and Governors and other senior managers are encouraged to make time to thank them for their efforts.