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| Guide on cohorting and social distancing during Reception proceduresVersion 2 July 2020vVBB |
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**Purpose**:

HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS) resumed cases in selected courts on 18 May 2020 as a precursor to a wider re-instatement of courts nationally. Prisoner movements are expected to significantly increase in the near future and it is vital that Reception operates safely and effectively, carefully balancing COVID controls with the need for efficient, safe and secure reception processes. The purpose of this document is to outline how cohorting and social distancing can operate in Reception during COVID-19 restrictions.

The Reception policy (PSI 2015-07) and associated requirements have not changed. Prisoners must still be received into lawful custody and processed efficiently being treated with decency and sensitivity at all times. Establishments must take into account the risk posed by COVID-19 and the risk prisoners may pose to themselves or others. The purpose of this document is to recommend how social distancing and cohorting should operate alongside existing policy requirements during the COVID-19 restrictions. This is not a change to national policy, it’s guidance on how to work differently in Reception during COVID-19 to protect both staff and prisoners.

1. **Social distancing:**

Social distancing means minimising face-to-face contact, creating distance of at least two metres between individuals and establishing physical barriers between individuals where contact is required. However there are occasions where two metre social distancing is not possible due to the physical fabric in Reception or Visits. Where two metre social distancing is not possible in Visits or Reception, establishments may reduce the distancing to a minimum of 1 metre plus provided they have mitigating measures in place to offset the reduced social distancing (please see cohorting section). Vehicles must be decanted as soon as possible after arrival. Prisoners cannot be held on vehicles instead of holding rooms as a means of achieving social distancing. **Social distancing must therefore operate from the point a prisoner leaves a vehicle and operate as part of every Reception procedure to the point a prisoner is located onto a residential unit.**

Establishments must review their Safe Systems of Work and Risk Assessments applying to Reception. These must risk asses every Reception process and the areas in which they operate. This should include the assessment of holding rooms, to establish the safest way of moving prisoners through Reception and minimising waiting times on vehicles. Avoiding contact and maintaining effective hand hygiene are the priority but wherever tasks cannot achieve the 2 metre separation, the relevant Safe Operating Procedure (SOP) must be followed. An example of a workplace risk assessment is attached as Annex A.

HMPPS Directorate of Security, Order & Counter-Terrorism (SOCT) has issued guidance on searching effectively whilst adhering to social distancing requirements and this guidance must be adhered to in Reception (Annex B). Health & Safety colleagues have also developed a SOP that includes the deployment of PPE and this must also be followed (Annex C). Public Health England (PHE) has separately provided guidance on achieving effective social distancing which suggests several controls/measures for maintaining social distancing in a prison environment. Based on this PHE guidance we strongly recommend establishments introduce the following measures to promote social distancing in Reception:

**‘Channel markings’ showing routes to walk**. These can be useful where people have to pass in opposite directions. A “track” or corridor can be marked using paint, tape, floor stickers, signage or furniture. Additional arrow markings should be created to show the direction of travel and a one-way system should be put in place wherever possible.

**Floor markings to enable safe queuing.** Wherever establishments require prisoners to queue, floor markings should be placed at two metre intervals to indicate where each prisoner should stand. Similar markings should be placed two metres from each staff station at every reception process.

**Holding room markings**. We appreciate achieving social distancing in holding rooms is extremely difficult however prominent signage should be placed in every holding room and seating positions two metres apart should be marked wherever possible.

**Barriers and screens.** Where contact is required, such as during an interview or healthcare screen, staff should ensure that there is a two metre gap between themselves and prisoners where possible. Sites are strongly advised to erect a permanent or temporary screen around the Reception desk, property desk and other locations where contact takes place wherever possible.

**Minimising movement.** All entrances to Reception should have clear signage prohibiting staff from walking through, a staff notice should be issued to this effect. Establishments should consider whether prisoner orderlies and peer supporters continue to work in Reception during this period. We suggest that establishments assess whether their presence creates a risk of infection, and only remove peer supporters where the risk is considered too high.

**Prominent signage**. It is advisable that prisons display prominent signage on social distancing throughout Reception. Staff should also be briefed to communicate social distancing requirements to prisoners throughout the process.

**Removing unnecessary items**. PHE guidance states that there is a potential for the virus to remain present on wall coverings, books and hard surfaces for up to 72 hours. It is recommended that establishments remove excess paperwork, wall coverings and items stored openly in reception, leaving only signs and messages that contain critical messages.

**Miscellaneous controls.** Designated staff should be appointed to tasks wherever possible and movement between work spaces should be minimised. Where the movement between work spaces does take place relevant items, e.g. keyboards should be cleaned between each use. Processes should be concentrated in a small “operating area” wherever possible to minimise the size of area to be cleaned between each prisoner. A route from reception to the first night centre/reverse cohorting unit should be pre-determined and followed consistently.

Orderlies should be retained in Reception wherever possible but establishments must risk assess this and satisfy themselves that the movement of orderlies does not introduce a further transmission risk. Orderlies should be briefed to clean door handles, surfaces and hand contact areas in between each prisoner accessing them, using the correct cleaning products and processes. Where orderlies are not retained, establishments must make alternative local arrangements to ensure sufficient cleaning takes place regularly and consistently. Peer supporters should be briefed on the measures and promote social distancing. Staff should encourage prisoners to wash hands and do so themselves in between processing each prisoner. HMPPS cleaning and infection control guidance outlines these requirements in more depth.

Establishments should review how food is dispensed and eliminate elements of risk associated with is activity in Reception. The SOP attached in Annex C covers this activity and must be followed in every Reception area. Prisoners should be provided with the HMPPS induction guidance explaining COVID-19 key terms and regime implications as well as information on maintaining cell cleanliness. Prisoners must be told what the recognised symptoms are and briefed that they must report them if they or prisoners around them show signs of the virus. This should include the recently added anosmia- the loss of or a change in the normal sense of taste or smell. Prisoners should be given a pen that they keep for the duration of the process to avoid cross-contamination.

1. **Cohorting in Reception**

Government guidance issued on 11 May 2020 says that “where social distancing guidelines cannot be followed in full in relation to a particular activity, [and where the activity is considered essential] all possible mitigating actions must be taken to reduce the risk of transmission”. From 4th of July this has been updated further. Where two metre social distancing is not achievable in Reception, social distancing at “one metre plus” can be adopted as long as there is a mitigation in place. Where prisons reduce social distancing to one metre plus in Reception, they must have cohorting in place from the moment prisoners enter reception as one of their mitigations. In line with the HMPPS Cohorting Guidance, all establishments are already required to cohort their prisoners into “households” and “regime groups” however to adopt one metre plus social distancing prisons must cohort earlier, in Reception rather than on arrival into the Reverse Cohorting Unit (RCU). Cohorting consists of households, cohorts and regime groups:

* **Households** are groups of prisoners sharing cells or dormitories meaning they cannot socially distance from each other, as is the case within households in the community.
* **Regime groups** are collections of prisoner households that have their exercise and domestics periods together each day but will have no contact with prisoners outside their group to minimise the risk of transmission.
* **Cohorts** are collections of regime groups that are kept separated from others – the shielding cohort are prisoners who are particularly vulnerable to infection and must be protected, the reverse cohort is the new reception prisoners who must spend 14 days separated to prove they are not symptomatic, the isolation cohort are those with the virus who must be separated from all others beyond their household.

**Prisoner reception is to be the start of cohorting and prisoners must be allocated to regime groups in reception, including separation of those expected to shield**. This means that whilst we must maintain two metre social distancing wherever possible, we are treating prisoners who are received at the same time as regime groups and therefore accepting that some closer contact may be unavoidable during the reception process. This means prisoners can be located in a holding room together provided they are then treated as being part of the same regime group. Prisoners required to shield and/or those returning to reception having left the prison that morning cannot form part of the same regime group as newly received prisoners and must be kept separated.

Prisoners who are not part of the same cohort or even regime group **should not mix**. Prisoners from different cohorts should be separated as soon as possible, especially those who are classed as shielding. Any prisoner who is shielding or may be eligible for shielding cannot mix with others unless they too are shielding or eligible to do so. Prisoners returning from court who have been out on a single day appearance can be fast tracked through Reception and return to their units, however in line with Cohorting Guidance, all prisoners out at court on multiple, consecutive days need to reverse cohort during and after their trial. All prisoners requiring reverse cohorting who have been received together can form part of a regime group for the duration of their 14 days in RCU, this means they can be co-located in Reception if social distancing cannot be achieved.

Though we recognise the operational pressures that each party is under, it is important that colleagues from Prisoner Escort & Custody Services (PECS), escort contractors and prisons work together and discuss the requirements placed upon establishments under this guidance. Escort contractors have an important role to play in helping facilitate COVID controls in prisons by trying to minimise numbers that arrive during “peak periods” in Reception. Similarly, establishments have a responsibility to minimise prisoner waiting times on vehicles by moving them through Reception in a timely fashion.

ANNEX A



Annex B

  
  
Annex C

