Dear Governors and Directors,

As you are aware, HMIP are re-commencing full prison inspections in May 2021. The first inspection has been announced and will commence at HMP Send on Monday 17 May. We recognise this announcement will present as challenging for Governors within the context of our current response to COVID and recovery. I wanted to share information my team have collated from recent meetings with HMIP to provide insight and advice in anticipation of upcoming visits.

HMIP will revert to their pre-COVID inspection model, expectations and scoring metrics for inspections of the male estate. Expectations relating to the women’s estate have already been refreshed and re-published. A new leadership dimension has been added which will apply to all sites. As part of this Inspectors will look to Governors to demonstrate their local grip of COVID recovery, backlog management and post-recovery regime planning aligned to the HMPPS future regime vision. We have issued a short guide on Local Recovery Planning to assist with this.

The Chief Inspector confirmed last week that HMIP are reverting to pre-pandemic scoring because this is the best way to safeguard the integrity of previous inspections and to provide a point of comparison. We recognise that assessments based on pre-COVID scoring means that establishments could see reduced scores as outcomes for prisoners are worse at the point of inspection as we emerge from regime restrictions. Indeed, we all accept that COVID has impacted on the lives of those in our care, as it has in the community on all of us. HMPPS has committed to consider the weightings of scores resulting from Inspections during the COVID response and recovery period as a result of this disproportionate context and understanding that these outcome scores will stay with a prison for a number of years.

HMIP have also confirmed their keenness to hear the local impacts of COVID and will reflect these impacts when writing the narrative that gives context to the scores. HMIP have suggested that it would be beneficial for Governors to go into detail on the local COVID impact during introductions, to share data on staff and prisoner cases, backlogs and other impacts and provide an honest and candid assessment of the enduring impact. These should include the physical and mental consequences for prisoners and staff.

Following an articulation of local COVID impact, HMIP are keen for Governors to take them through local recovery plans in detail. HMIP have suggested that their judgement on managerial grip as part of the new leadership domain will draw heavily upon a local grip of COVID recovery. HMIP have indicated that they are keen for assurance that establishments are taking a proactive approach and to describe their plans and limitations upon them that they cannot control. Governors could be asked to show they are responding proactively to each point where restrictions ease in the community and describe how the experience for prisoners at each opportunity will be improved, notably informed by feedback from prisoners themselves.

Beyond recovery and backlog management, HMIP are keen to hear establishment plans for longer term regime enhancement. We have shared the HMPPS Time Well Spent vision for future prison regimes with HMIP and this has been well received. HMIP have indicated that they are keen to see how Governors intend to imbed learning from COVID and for Governors to demonstrate their local vision even as a series of high-level ideas. Whilst supportive of the HMPPS vision, HMIP are concerned about potential trade-offs such as increased time in cell in some sectors. Inspectorate colleagues have demonstrated their keenness to hear what Governors feel the trade offs and risks could be locally and to share early thoughts on how these can be managed and mitigated.

In terms of reviewing pre-COVID recommendations, HMIP colleagues have indicated that they are finalising their approach but have informally indicated these recommendations are likely to be given less focus given the exceptional regimes that prisons have been operating since March 2020. Independent Reviews of Progress (IRPs) and follow up visits will not recommence at this point though may do within the financial year. HMIP have also indicated that they will monitor changes in community prevalence rates and may return to Scrutiny Visits (SV) and Short Scrutiny Visits (SSV) should we reach a point where full inspections cannot continue.

It is widely understood that some reports and their scores for some establishments may not be as favourable as before COVID due to the impact of restrictions on outcomes for prisoners. Any reduced scores may impact on staff and prisoner wellbeing, particularly if there is negative media coverage, which is an increased risk as inspections first recommence. HMPPS Communications are considering this eventuality but I do not underestimate the impact on staff and prisoners that a negative report could have after so much effort and energy has been expended keeping people safe during the unprecedented period. I know as a Governor the personal impact that criticism of your prison can have and the impact this will doubly have at a time when our resilience has been tested.

We all want to continue to support you through this process and to ensure a clear picture of the challenging environment that you have worked through is reflected in any assessment made. We will therefore engage with Governors who host the first round of inspections and with their agreement, will share a further briefing of any learning points from their recent inspection experiences.

I am extremely grateful to colleagues for their continued efforts to maintain the best possible regime during this period and wish every Governor well in their upcoming inspection. If my team can be of any assistance, providing any information or supporting in any way, please contact Chris Gunderson (chris.gunderson@justice.gov.uk).

Kind Regards,

Ed Cornmell