**Letter to Families**

Yesterday evening (5 July 2021), the Prime Minister updated the country on what is being done in England so that restrictions in the community can stop on July 19th.

The changes announced are for England only and we expect the First Minister of Wales to give an update on the 15 July.

The Prime Minister also said that the pandemic was not over because we are seeing cases rise in the community. He said that we will see more cases in the community and more deaths as things start to open up again. He also said we need to be prepared to reintroduce some measures in the winter.

I wanted to write and tell you what this means for us. We are starting to see rises in cases in our prisons each day which is why we must continue to ease our own restrictions carefully and safely. This means we won’t be lifting all our restrictions in our prisons in England on July 19th.

Public Health experts have told us that prisons are more likely to suffer from longer outbreaks of infection because they are closed environments, with everyone living and working closely together. I know this is a message I have shared with you many times but I wanted to stress that our decisions are taken based on the health advice.

Keeping everyone in our prisons safe from this virus has always been, and continues to be, our number one priority and we must not do anything now that could threaten the progress we have made so far.

However, I do want to reassure you that we will be progressing with our regimes, even though we must do it at a slower pace than the community. There are already 13 prisons which are now running regimes with far less COVID restrictions and I know there are many more getting ready to move to that next stage.

I also understand the importance of having physical contact with the person you are visiting during visits. We recently completed a pilot across a selection of prisons that allowed for physical contact during visits following a negative COVID test result taken on the day. We are currently looking at these results and I will update you soon on how we will use these results to improve visits in all prisons.

Health experts have said that a successful vaccine rollout is key to beating COVID-19 and reducing the risk of returning to a more restricted regime in the future. We have already given a first dose of the vaccine to 42,500 people in prison and 21,000 are now fully vaccinated. We would very much welcome your support in encouraging your loved one to accept the vaccine when they are offered it. If they aren’t sure about having it, they can speak to their key worker, someone in healthcare or perhaps a peer mentor or religious leader who will be able to listen to their concerns and answer any questions they may have.

How we live with COVID in the longer term will be a new experience for all of us. We must continue to protect ourselves and each other by making sure we keep following the public health measures when visiting the prison such as maintaining social distancing and wearing a face covering.

Thank you for your support.