**Gold Brief – Social Visits: Testing for Physical Contact and Refreshments**

**Purpose**

Ministers have given approval for the rollout of visitor testing to support safer physical contact at social visits across the estate. Therefore, subject to local risk assessments and the availability of resources, establishments can introduce a testing programme that, where negative visitor tests are evident, will allow for some physical contact between prisoners and their visitors.

Approval has also been given for the resumption of refreshment services at sites that have implemented testing for social visits and who have also progressed to stage 2 of the National Framework for Recovery. Guidance is currently undergoing consultation, and therefore whilst this has been nationally approved this cannot commence until guidance is consulted and published. This will be published as soon as possible.

**Testing for physical contact**

We know that social visits support prisoners to maintain healthy relationships with their families and significant others which is often a protective factor in reducing reoffending. However, existing Covid control measures have had a negative impact on the quality of the visit experience and the effective maintaining of these ties face to face.

We must demonstrate to prisoners, families and significant others, as well as wider stakeholders, that we are moving towards the return of a more meaningful social visits experience. This will also enhance perceived legitimacy by giving greater parity with the position in the community.

On 27 May we introduced physical contact for under 11s and undertook to explore further opportunities to improve the visits experience by piloting the use of testing to facilitate safer physical contact for older children and adults.

Initial pilots, in which testing was offered prior to social visits but physical contact was not allowed, found low uptake as there was no perceived benefit for prisoner or visitors to agree to take a test.

In the more recent pilots, where physical contact was allowed between a prisoner and their visitors (subject to a voluntary test providing a negative Covid result), the overall uptake among prisoners and visitors was 82% and 93% respectively.

Public Health England (PHE) and Public Health Wales (PHW) have advised on and given support for these proposals. Testing of visitors prior to physical contact will help mitigate the risk of incursion into prisons. In light of recent changes to restrictions in Wales, Welsh Gov have confirmed today that although hugging is still not advisable and should not be encouraged, there is nothing preventing visitors hugging prisoners on arrival under Welsh regulations from 17th July onwards.

Implementation

We now have agreement to roll-out testing to support the safer reintroduction of physical contact, subject to local risk assessments. Visitors should be encouraged to access community testing where this is available to limit the resource implications for prisons. We are awaiting formal confirmation from Welsh Government that they are happy for visitors to access community asymptomatic testing for this purpose, but do not anticipate any difficulties**.**

Where possible, prisoners should be offered testing the day of or day before a social visit as best practice. If staffing levels cannot support prisoner testing prior to visits, physical contact can still go ahead, providing the visitor has evidenced a negative test. We are working with DHSC to enable prisoners to self-test in-cell to support prisoner testing which will reduce the staff resource required.

Operational Guidance on setting up testing programmes is available here: (<https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/ersd-guidance/2020/04/28/staff-testing-in-england/>

It will be necessary for prison officers to continue to enforce the use of face coverings and enforce social distancing if visitors have declined a test. This may cause disruption to social visits, however testing pilot prisons have not reported any major issues of conflict.

Considerations for implementation

It is likely that prisoners and visitors will question requirements for testing, face coverings and social distancing measures at social visits after 19th July, once the majority of community restrictions are lifted in England. A note was issued from Phil Copple on 6th July to Governors explaining the need for ongoing controls in prisons as high-risk environments. The note included materials for communicating with prisoners and families which included reference to us trying to enhance social visits – these can be found here <https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/ersd-guidance/2020/10/23/gold-briefings/>

The rollout of these changes will be informed by local risk. Whilst we encourage this being rolled out as soon as possible high prevalence or an outbreak may be a barrier to this straightaway and recognise that there may be occasions where we will need to suspend visits or physical contact at visits in response to a local outbreak risks. We recognise that this could lead to frustration among prisoners and visitors so communications with prisoners and families must be clear that suspension remains a possibility.

**Communications materials**

Additional communications products to support the roll-out of testing for physical contact can be found by following the following link: <https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/ersd-guidance/2020/07/15/visits-supporting-material/>. Materials available include posters, leaflets, core lines and notices for staff and prisoners.

Bespoke products for the YCS will be sent directly to those governors and Welsh translations will follow early next week.

Please note that an update will be made to gov.uk about contact during visits and national social media issued from Monday 19 July. This will make it clear that prisons will be rolling this out at their own pace. The HMPPS communications team will work with the testing team to make sure gov.uk is updated with the prisons running this once they go live.

These products will be added to the resource section of the intranet and we will also send out printed copies in the coming weeks.

Please contact HMPPSCOVID19RegimeRecoveryTesting@justice.gov.uk with any queries related to test to contact, and COVID19.RegimesOpsGuidance1@justice.gov.uk with any other queries.

Kind Regards,

**Covid-19 Gold Command**

**16 July 2021**