**Wellbeing checks during COVID-19**

It is vital at this time that we make sure that prisoners are safe. While regimes are temporarily restricted due to the current situation, checking regularly on the wellbeing of prisoners is essential. There is a need for greater awareness by staff, to identify those prisoners who might not be coping so well or who may be at an increased risk of self-harm, as well as to monitor those who are in isolation due to symptoms of Coronavirus or are being shielded.

Staff should be briefed to use all the interactions that are possible in this period of regime restrictions and physical distancing to check on well-being, taking any opportunity to communicate hope and encourage self-care, as well as to identify any change in appearance or behaviour that gives rise to concerns about raised risk of self-harm or suicide.

We know from studies of people in the community who have been isolated during pandemics that it is common to feel frustrated, anxious, fearful, depressed and angry. These feelings can worsen as time goes on; normal daily routines are restricted; they do not understand what is going on, why things have changed and for how long the changes will be in place. Being in isolation in prison can exacerbate these feelings, particularly for certain groups of people, so it is important for staff to recognise this.

What is a wellbeing check?

A wellbeing check is more than a routine check (often referred to as a welfare check) which takes place every day and confirms that a prisoner is safe and well. Many establishments are already undertaking welfare checks which often take place at unlock and roll check and will involve staff physically checking the presence of the occupants in every cell, ensuring that they receive a positive response from each prisoner. Additionally, some prisons have put processes in place to ensure that daily checks are undertaken and recorded for isolated and shielded prisoners.

Who are wellbeing checks for?

It is recommended that a wellbeing check is undertaken for all prisoners, and that where this is not possible that they are prioritised for particular groups of prisoners.

The exceptional delivery model for key work requires that if it is not possible to undertake key work, then at the very minimum, a wellbeing check must be carried out daily for prisoners in the priority groups (these include prisoners identified as being at risk of self-harm or suicide, prisoners assessed as high in terms of risk of serious harm, extremist prisoners and prisoners who are clinically extremely vulnerable and advised by government COVID-19 guidance to shield). Subject to resourcing and the requirements of social distancing, governors may want to include other groups amongst those prioritised, based on their knowledge of their population and with the agreement of their PGD.

How often should these take place?

As set out above, where key work is not being delivered, a wellbeing check must be carried out for prisoners in the priority groups daily

For all other prisoners there is no requirement as to how often a wellbeing check has to take place but depending on the availability of staff it is recommended that where possible they take place on a weekly basis.

When can these take place?

These checks can take place at the cell door for those who are isolating, ensuring that social distancing requirements are met and PPE is used where necessary.

Alternatively these interactions could happen when prisoners are unlocked and have access to the regime, provided that this does not negatively impact on an individual’s access to showers, phone calls etc.

What should a wellbeing check include?

A wellbeing check provides staff with an opportunity to:

* Allow the individual to raise any pressing problems in terms of their health and/or wellbeing;
* Check that the individual has contact with family / friends where possible;
* Ensure that the individual has activities to occupy them during time in cell, books, distraction materials etc; and
* Provide information about the COVID-19 situation, checking that it is understood.

This is a guide and not a checklist, and it is important that staff aim to interact in an informal way and keep the tone light. The point is to use the opportunity to build a relationship, letting the conversation take a natural course, rather than to give the impression that this is a formal process that has to be worked through.

Identifying any potential wellbeing concerns

The following points should be considered:

**Sleeping:** Irregular sleeping patterns or too little/too much sleep can have a big impact on the emotional wellbeing of an individual.

**Stress:** Research has shown that being lonely also causes a lot of stress, which can be a particular issue for new receptions and some individuals who struggle to integrate with their peers.

**Self-esteem:** Feeling lonely can have a big impact on confidence and self-esteem, which can only make it harder to open up and make new connections. Having regular interactions with prisoners can help support them to maintain self-esteem.

**Eating:** What an individual eats can affect mood. Monitoring this can identify those who are struggling and improved intake through encouragement may help the individual feel better. Some establishments are providing additional food packs so that prisoners have food available to them, particularly in the evening.

**Exercise:** Talk about whether the individual is taking the opportunity to get fresh air and go out on the exercise yard when this is available. If they are not doing so explain how beneficial this is to their wellbeing and physical health and explore any barriers, e.g. they may be under threat or have concerns about being in a group.

**Mental health:** Accessing the correct treatment, support and services whilst in prison are ongoing issues for many individuals, particularly those with existing mental health issues, and staff may be able to assist and encourage prisoners to resolve these.

**Isolated Individuals (not due to Covid-19)**: individuals who choose not to take the opportunity to come out of their cells during unlock times, particularly those who were isolating before the regime restrictions, should be supported and encouraged to mix with their peers.

**Referrals to colleagues:** despite restricted regimes support via Chaplaincy, Healthcare (including Mental Health services) etc. should still be available to all prisoners, although the way it is delivered might be different depending on the resources within each establishment and the impact of the current pandemic.

**Key workers** – Key worker contact is important as engaging with residents regularly will allow any changes in behaviour to be noticed at an early stage and the appropriate support to be provided. *However, it should not be solely the responsibility of a key worker to check or report on concerns regards the wellbeing of an individual.*

How should wellbeing checks be recorded?

There should be a local record that all prisoners have been checked in with. Wherever possible, the details of the wellbeing check should be recorded on NOMIS. Where there are specific concerns about individuals, this should as always be recorded on NOMIS, and, if the prisoner is on an open ACCT, an entry in the ACCT document should be made.

It is always good practice to record interactions to inform others of what has occurred. It is accepted that with additional pressures there may not be sufficient time for this to be done on NOMIS in all cases, but a comment made in a landing or wing record should be the minimum – this is quicker to do, and will help colleagues to understand what has happened.

Good practice

A number of establishments have put in place regular wellbeing checks, some of the details of which are shared here:

* Having a list of briefing points for staff to use which is updated weekly.
* Allocation of specific staff to undertake wellbeing checks.
* Providing a briefing for staff on how to conduct the checks.
* Development of an assurance process for the checks.