

Howard League for Penal Reform

10 March 2020

Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC MP
Secretary of State and Lord Chancellor
Ministry of Justice
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Dear Robert Buckland

As business are taking action because of the infectious and potentially lethal nature of the coronavirus, I am surprised that there appears to have been no statement from the Ministry of Justice as to the precautions being taken.

I am concerned that prisons are unhygienic sites that could be a centre for spreading the virus into the community. Infectious diseases flourish in conditions of overcrowding, poor ventilation, filth & a population with compromised health. It would take only one prisoner with the virus to infect many hundreds of people.

Over two centuries ago, John Howard was so concerned at how such gaols were spreading typhoid and cholera back into the community that he fought to get healthcare and hygiene improved, succeeding in getting legislation onto the statute book. It took several more generations to eradicate the diseases but meanwhile many people had died.

The same principles apply today. Hygiene and cleanliness are essential to protect staff, prisoners and visitors and, of course, to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Should anyone enter a prison already infected with coronavirus it would spread and multiply like wildfire inside the establishment and in the community.

Many prisons are filthy and disgustingly unhygienic. Staff, visitors and inmates are not able to wash and soap is frequently impossible to obtain. Lavatories and sinks in cells are ingrained with years of human waste. You will know that in 2018 the Howard League surveyed access to showers and found that in the most troubled jails, the big city jails which have thousands of men going in and out every month, less than half of prisoners said that they were able to shower daily. In one London prison, the proportion of men who said that they could shower daily was just one in six. There are rarely facilities for staff or visitors to hand-wash on entry or exit, which is contrary to current government advice.

I am interested to hear what steps are being taken to protect people in prison and thereby the community.

Yours sincerely
Frances Crook
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