

Prisons and probation

Fears over coronavirus risk in prisons as first UK inmate case confirmed

Manchester prison inmate taken to hospital while charity sues over immigration detention

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A public health expert has warned that prisons and detention centres provide ideal incubation conditions for the rapid spread of Covid-19, as the first case of the virus in a UK inmate was confirmed.

Countries such as Spain and [Iran](#) have ordered the release of many prisoners due to the risk of virus transmission among detainees and jail staff.

The UK government issued [guidance](#) stating that if there was a significant outbreak of Covid-19, “cohorting” should be used to put all those infected together behind locked doors in prisons, detention centres, young offender institutions and secure units.

A report by Prof Richard Coker, of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, warns of the substantial risk of the virus spreading at a particularly fast rate in locked establishments such as prisons and detention centres, in a process he refers to as “cluster amplification”.

On Wednesday the first case of Covid-19 in a UK prisoner was confirmed at Strangeways prison in [Manchester](#).

The inmate was taken to hospital and there are no further confirmed cases of

Covid-19 at the prison, although the Ministry of Justice said 13 prisoners had been put into isolation as a precaution.

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A prison service source said the course of action taken suggested the inmate had an underlying health condition.

Visits are going ahead at Strangeways, formally known as HMP Manchester, which has an operational capacity of 1,238 inmates. A prison service spokesperson said: “Our priority is to maintain a normal regime for as long as possible, including visits.” But some have questioned whether current practices can continue, with the charity Appeal calling for a proportion of low-risk offenders to be released.

It is understood prison officers and other staff who had contact with the inmate are now self-isolating. There is also some isolation in place on the wing where the man was living, however it is not clear if fellow prisoners on that wing have been locked down or moved to other cells.

A prison service source said it was no surprise there had been a confirmed case on the prison estate and that more were expected in the coming weeks and months.

Current guidance advises that restrictions to prisoner movements may apply in prisons where the disease is detected. As yet there are no overarching plans to stop the movement of inmates between prisons in the UK.

In 2018 a report by MPs concluded 15% of the prison population had respiratory conditions, and last year inspectors found 10 out of 35 men’s prisons failed to meet the minimum standards of infection control compliance and cleanliness.

One woman whose son is in prison told the Guardian he had told her some inmates were refusing to report symptoms “because they don’t want to be locked in all that time”.

She said: “When I asked my son if he was managing to self-isolate, he said he couldn’t because if they want to have a hot drink they have to go with a jug to communal hot water area, so he’s having to mix with other people. There’s no avoiding it. He has to have antibiotics on a daily basis and I’m really scared he’s going to get it.”

Coker’s report was commissioned by Duncan Lewis Solicitors, who have embarked on what is thought to be the first legal action against the government relating to Covid-19. The law firm has called on the Home Office to release many detainees from immigration detention centres because of the high risk of contracting Covid-19 if they remain locked up. The suspension of flights means few are likely to be removed from the UK imminently.

A legal challenge lodged on Monday argues that the Home Office has failed to protect immigration detainees from Covid-19 and failed to identify which

detainees are at particular risk of serious harm or death if they do contract the virus due to their age or underlying health conditions.

It calls for the release of all those who are particularly vulnerable and for all detainees to be tested for Covid-19, along with the suspension of all new detentions. The action warns even a short delay could have “catastrophic consequences”.

The legal action expresses concern about the large numbers involved. Last year 24,443 people were detained, and at any one time 1,500-2,000 are detained. Many of those locked up have arrived from high-risk countries such as Iran, China and Italy. Some are forced to share rooms, and a “lock-in” regime prevents many from leaving their cells during the night.

The charity [Detention Action](#) and a vulnerable detainee are bringing the legal action.

Coker believes there is a risk of a serious outbreak behind locked doors, with a figure of 60% of people getting infected “plausible and credible”. He likened the conditions for incubation to those on a cruise ship.

He said action to express these issues was needed “extremely urgently”. His report states: “If detention is unnecessary, it should be relaxed.”

Bella Sankey, the director of Detention Action, said: “The situation across the UK’s immigration detention estate is dire - a large at-risk population, no information on Covid and a lack of soap and basic cleaning materials. Without immediate action to release those detained, the government faces a human catastrophe of its own making.”

Toufique Hossain, of Duncan Lewis Solicitors, said: “The government is sitting on its hands, keeping detainees locked up during this pandemic, contrary to its earnest public health instruction and exposing detainees to a severe risk of infection. The time for swift action is overdue.”

The Home Office has been approached for comment.

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