

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Justice

RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS

Published at Monday 16 March 2020

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I would like to explain to Members the arrangements that are being made within the Department of Justice to continue to deliver essential public services in the face of the challenges presented by Covid-19, and in particular the steps being taken in the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and in the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Contingency planning

At the outset I would like to reassure members that the wider justice family is working together to mitigate any risks and ensure the continued delivery of justice in Northern Ireland; not least on important matters pertaining to public safety and personal liberty.

Significant work has been undertaken across the Department's business areas, agencies and NDPBs, and contingency plans are in place, which will enable us to have the resilience to continue operating in the event of increased staff absence.

We have identified the highest priority public services that need to be maintained and will, if necessary, make resources available to maintain those services.

Alongside that we are taking proportionate steps, in line with PHA guidance, to safeguard staff wellbeing and have offered advice to consider the need for face-to-face meetings, reduce non-essential visits and take account of social distancing guidance.

Officials from the Department will later this week update the Justice Committee in more detail on the work that has been done to understand the risks across the Justice System, the Department, its Agencies, and other bodies, to ensure our readiness for the impact of Coronavirus.

Specific Risks

In Justice terms, one of the most significant risks relates to the **Prison Service**.

- The Prison Service take the threat presented by COVID19 extremely seriously and have undertaken significant work in preparation for the challenges an outbreak would bring.
- The Director General has put in place specific contingency planning structures and established a dedicated team to oversee planning arrangements and to support Governors.
- Preparations have included the purchase of additional protective clothing for staff and the preparation of areas within each prison where prisoners suspected and/or diagnosed with the virus can be accommodated.
- Both the Prison Service and their partners in the South Eastern Trust have been following guidance issued by the Public Health Agency which has also been provided to staff and prisoners.

- Notwithstanding the disruption and challenges ahead, which have the potential to impact the prison regime, mitigations are being planned to support staff and ensure that keeping safe those in our care remains our primary focus.
- While there has not to date been a confirmed coronavirus case in any of our prisons, the latest position is that on Saturday 14th March six prisoners - four at Maghaberry and two at Hydebank Wood - were placed in specially located accommodation away from the general population. This was a precautionary move and in line with preparations to mitigate the impact of the virus.
- I want to commend all the staff who dealt with, and continue to support those people and the plans which had been developed over the past month worked as envisaged.

Looking at the **Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals' Service**:

- Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal's Service [NICTS] will continue to follow Public Health Agency (PHA) guidance and members of the public and others who engage with the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal's Service have been notified through various communications channels about the procedures to follow.
- NICTS has a graduated response which depending on the prevailing circumstances and available resources would entail working with the judiciary and partners to slow down lower priority business.
- Officials are working closely with the Lord Chief Justice on practical arrangements to reduce the need for attendance at court, including the adjournment of cases administratively; dispensing with the requirement of parties to attend save for certain specified circumstances and staggering business across the day to reduce footfall at any given time. Further detail on these arrangements will be published imminently by the Lord Chief Justice's Office.
- Areas considered to be critical would include cases impacting on liberty (bail / custody); individual and public safety (Non-Molestation Orders and Emergency Protection Orders) and other types of urgent business.
- Ongoing jury trials will be managed to a conclusion where possible. No new jury trials will be commenced.
- NICTS will also have the option to temporarily reduce the number of hearing rooms at a venue or relocate business to other court venues based on the level of available resource or support services or specific buildings being out of action at any time.

In conclusion:

This is a fast evolving picture and we will continue to follow PHA guidance. If that guidance changes, we will move quickly to adapt our approach accordingly.