

## **26th Council of Europe Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services**

“Gaining an edge over the pandemic”

20-21 September 2021 – Vidamar Resort Hotel, Madeira

Elements for keynote speech by Alan Mitchell, President of  
CPT

### **Intro:**

This feels normal – meeting together to exchange views,  
learn from each other and discuss how best to meet the  
challenges we all face.

And yet ... clear that Covid-19 is not just disappearing and  
that we all have to learn to live with it.

### **CPT and Covid-19**

- Statement (20 March 2020) + follow-up Statement (9 July 2020)
- March Statement- alternatives to custody and decreasing overcrowding + fundamental rights (healthcare, medical care, soap and water, outdoor exercise, contact with lawyers and families)
- July statement- suspension execution of sentences, conditional/temporary release, electronic monitoring. Increase in telephone calls and in cell telephony, medical screening, HUMAN RIGHTS FIRST, temporary restrictions, independent monitoring – CPT programme resumed July 2020.

- **Impact on prisoners** – US Michigan 8/100 population affected c.f. 76/100 prisoners = x 9.2 greater risk
- Quarantining (solitary confinement or locked in cell with others for prolonged time) Example from Scotland
- Very limited regime, inc work and gymn
- Very limited family contact (example of reluctance to connect prison-family home)
- Reduced access to lawyers and to court process-frustration
- Access to healthcare services
- Reduced or stopped independent monitoring
- Access to vaccination for prisoners and staff and controversy over prioritisation
- **Impact on Families**
- **Impact on Staff** (the importance of staff for the operation of a prison and that staff of all grades are key interlocutors for CPT) – shielding, illness, restrictions, (Turkey organised itself whereby prison staff lived for 7-10 days in the prisons sleeping in unused classrooms with 7-10 days at home free and 7-10 days quarantining at home before being tested)

and returning to live in prison), mental exhaustion. Low staff numbers associated with staff going off sick at short notice/having to self-isolate for 10/7

- Protests and violence (Italy) c.f reports of staff and prisoners feeling safer when prisoners locked in cells 23-24/7
- Effective measures to keep Covid-19 at bay.

Interesting to note that the **design of prisons- European v US prisons-** also played a role in whether the virus could be better contained in a prison – for example, more modern prison establishments which were modular based containing association rooms, classrooms, a dining room and outdoor exercise yard were better placed to keep prisoners from catching the virus than in older panoptican prisons where the wings abut one another, and all facilities are common. These prisons were also more susceptible to the virus being spread by prison staff.

18 months later - **prisoners**

- impact of restricted regime – no activities/ locked up in cells
- Contacts with outside world
- Regime progression? Uncertainty of future

18 months later – **prison staff**

- Life is calmer when prisons are locked down so challenge for staff as prisons open up again and become noisy and

bustling places again with lots of movements and increased possibilities for violence between prisoners and against staff. But also more rewarding as staff can engage with prisoners to assist them through their sentences and help prepare them for their return to the community. How to manage this transition?

### Reference to **mental health and well-being of prisoners and staff**

- CPT experience/findings – break down for different categories of prisoner (older prisoners; those with immune deficiency; prisoners suffering from mental disorder)
- Prevalence for acts of self-harm and attempted suicide increased?
- Importance of draft recommendation drawn up by WG of PCCP on which we will have an opportunity to discuss in the workshops
- Staff support mechanisms as transition back to opened-up prisons
- Recognition by staff of vulnerabilities of prisoners and of staff colleagues

### **Vaccination remains key**

**Gaining and edge-** what might we want to continue to do differently: reduce overcrowding, create safe environment for staff and prisoners as unlock progresses, think about what

has worked well or less well. Use our experiences to plan for the future.

Independent monitoring both local, national and international = an opportunity not a threat.