



**The Professional Trades Union for Prison,
Correctional & Secure Psychiatric Workers**

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Dear Colleagues

GENERAL SECRETARY UPDATE NO:3 - COVID-19

As we enter week 3 of the lockdown not just in our Communities but in our Prisons and other institutions the saddest part so far is losing two colleagues to this dreadful virus. At HMP Pentonville where I once worked sadly Bovil Peter and Patrick Beckford both Operational Support Grades have died as a result of COVID-19 related illnesses and I extend my deepest sympathy to their families, friends and colleagues. I also know that there are many more colleagues who are hospitalised or recuperating at home due to this virus and I wish every single person a speedy recovery and back to full health. Condolences also to the families of those Prisoners in our care who have also passed away.

I have previously stated there is no blueprint or manual that can be dusted down in relation to COVID-19 that is why it is so important to work with our respective Employers and Government Officials in order to have the necessary input on a regular basis on Health and Safety issues and related matters to keep our members and those in our care as safe as we possibly can.

On Saturday 4th April 2020, the National Chairman and myself engaged with the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice Mr Robert Buckland QC on a SKYPE meeting about early release. Prisoners who pose a low risk of harm to the public and are within two months of their release date will now be considered for temporary release. The Secretary of State discussed these issues with us and took our advice into account and hopefully will continue to do so. This is a sensible decision and one which was inevitable to free up needed space in our Prisons to protect the health and well-being of our members and indeed those in our care. The main aim of the POA is exactly that which will protect our members. I do not want to see any slide back on these proposals because it is essential to free up space. That might be the difference between life and death. I do not want to sound alarmist but the decision by the Secretary of State for Justice was one that we wholeheartedly support for the right reason. If anything, it might not go far enough and that is why I have asked him to keep it under review in case he needs to go further in the coming days and weeks. My personal view is he may well have to instruct further measures to free up spaces in Prisons. I also applaud and support

the difficult decisions that have taken place in Northern Ireland and Scotland by Employers and Scottish Government and the Assembly in Northern Ireland in respect of early release.

Testing for COVID-19 and the appropriate PPE is vital in our enclosed environment. I recognise there are pressures elsewhere on PPE and testing, such as our brilliant NHS and other Keyworkers who are too numerous to mention. But it is a critical environment in Prisons and to his credit Mr Robert Buckland QC recognises our concerns and is actioning those concerns behind the scenes.

We will all be entering a crucial period where the Scientists and Public Health England along with their colleagues in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland recognise there could be a peak in cases. That is why it is essential that in all areas where our members work that the Temporary arrangements that are in place are adhered to. All too often I have heard that some establishments are pushing the boundaries to see what they can do to escalate regimes. Let me put it very bluntly by doing so Managers are risking lives and the POA NEC will intervene at the highest level where there is concrete evidence of risk-taking with safety and potentially spreading the virus just because it may be seen as popular to get groups of prisoners out for activities. If it is happening it needs to be stopped and indeed, we have stopped it in the isolated cases where we have been informed by raising it at the highest level. There is nothing to be gained by taking unnecessary risks apart from potentially spreading this virus and playing Russian roulette with the lives of our members and those in our care. The impact of COVID-19 isn't a game it is deadly serious as we are finding out. Behind every statistic that we hear on the news every day there is a victim and tragic consequences for every family affected. No one is immune from this that is why our respective Employers and Government along with the experts have put social distancing and other safeguards in place. It may well be with the passage of time when things improve then regimes will be reviewed and with POA input as the recognised Trade Union. By working together and following the rules hopefully we can minimise the impact of this virus, but it will be enhanced if individuals take risks. We continue to work in partnership with Government and are having dialogue on a daily basis with Employers to ensure safety.

I thank all POA members for their dedication, bravery and professionalism at this difficult time. I thank Local Officials, NEC and Full Time Officers for their round the clock work and also to my support staff who continue to churn the work out for the NEC to keep the POA moving forward on your behalf with the day to day administration.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steve Gillan', with a small flourish at the end.

STEVE GILLAN
General Secretary