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**Special edition: Responding to
the coronavirus pandemic**

Editorial Comment

There is a risk in producing a special edition of *Prison Service Journal* focussing on the coronavirus pandemic when the events are still playing out and the story is not yet complete. What is recorded here is incomplete, tentative and contestable. It is a record of the thinking, actions and experiences of people living and working in prisons during the global pandemic. It is history in the process of being made.

The interviews and articles in this edition were written in late 2020. They largely focus on the first wave of the pandemic, which followed from the first recorded outbreak in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019, with the city being locked down in January 2020. The same pattern then followed in cities and countries around the world, with outbreaks and major public health measures being taken that curtailed everyday life in ways rarely seen in peace time.

Prisons are often hidden in the midst of such large scale global crises, yet they face significant risks with vulnerable people held in close proximity often with inadequate buildings and facilities. The experience of prisoners, prison staff and the families of prisoners often takes place out of sight. This special edition attempts to bring those experiences into view.

The first half of the edition focusses on prisons in England and Wales. It includes interviews with Dr. Eamonn O'Moore, a senior consultant responsible for the public health response in prison, and Sarah Coccia, who led some of the most operationally challenging prisons in the country. An article by a team from the Prison Reform Trust draws upon their research capturing the experiences of people living in prisons. In addition, Natalie Booth and Isla Masson illuminate the experiences of families of people being held in prison. Peter Clarke, the Chief Inspector of Prisons until the end of October 2020, describes the importance of independent scrutiny during the pandemic and the findings of prison inspections. The first part of the edition closes with an interview with Ian Merrill, the Chief Executive of Shannon Trust, a charity that supports reading and literacy across the prison estate. This interview describes how an important charity has had to adapt to meet the challenges of the pandemic, ensuring that they survive and continue to provide a vital service to people in prison.

The second half of this special edition looks internationally at a range of countries, drawing upon the expertise of practitioners and independent non-

governmental organisations. Alessio Scandurra, from the Italian prison reform organisation, Antigone, describes the immense challenges faced in Italian prisons. Italy was the first European country to experience a widescale outbreak and to take drastic public health measures. In prisons, the suspension of family visits sparked widespread rioting. Scandurra discusses the experience of Italian prisons, but also draws upon other prison systems in Europe. Tiberiu Firinel Ungureanu, the Director General of prisons in Romania describes how that country managed to avoid any widespread impact in the first wave, although ominously, his interview concludes at a point when a second, and apparently more severe, wave is starting to be felt across the country. Three members of the team at Prison Watch – Sierra Leone describe their work to support people in prison. This West African country has recently had to deal with other outbreaks of infectious diseases, including Ebola. They are managing the threat from coronavirus in a very different economic, health and penal context from the UK. In the South American country, Chile, the National Director of prisons, Christian Alveal is candid about the painful experience of leading a prison system that has been gripped by the pandemic and in which people have died and his efforts to reform the prison system have been thwarted. Despite the effectiveness of his leadership, Alveal offers a very human account of his experiences. In Mexico City, Hazael Ruiz Ortega the Head of the Mexico City Prison System, and Pedro Aguilar Cueto, the Director of a pre-release prison, both offer an account of how they have responded to the challenges of coronavirus. Although to some extent activities in the prisons have been curtailed, they have maintained significant work and education opportunities. They are also insightful in their understanding of the experience of those who live and work in the prisons and well as family members.

This special edition of *Prison Service Journal* does not offer a detached, theoretical analysis of events and does not seek to make a judgement on the effectiveness of what has been done, but instead it attempts to offer an inside account of prisons during the coronavirus pandemic. It prioritises the experience of those who live and work in prisons, and the families of people in prison. It is a glimpse into the lives of the people who have experienced imprisonment in the midst of a global pandemic.