

No.10 Deep Dive Paper

COVID-19 Contingency Planning: Prisons and Probation



Ministry
of Justice

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YOUTH CUSTODY

1. What are the risks posed to Youth Custody by COVID-19?

The YCS's risks have a different weighting to the adult estate. Regarding the 5 key risks identified, 3 of these risks are felt to be significantly reduced for the YCS, and 1 risk slightly reduced.

Firstly, by definition, the cohort of children are all 18 or under and therefore in a group that is less vulnerable to the virus. That doesn't mean that they are exempt from the virus, and indeed two cases have already been confirmed in YCS establishments. However we do not anticipate the significant number of deaths that we anticipate in the adult estate.

Epidemiological information on COVID-19 to date shows that the majority of children, those without additional health vulnerabilities, will experience a mild version of COVID-19 infection and will then recover. There is strong partnership working in the children and young people secure estate with NHSE&I as our co commissioner for health services, and we are working together to produce joint communications and guidance that is specific for the children and young people secure estate. NHSE&I have collected data on those children and young people who have additional health vulnerabilities (based on whether they are eligible for the flu vaccine) and sites have been asked to identify any children with extreme health vulnerability who might require shielding.

Similarly, we do not anticipate the necessity to care for significant numbers of severely unwell children / prisoners. We do have a very small number of children in our care who have been identified as in an 'at risk' group due to a pre-existing medical condition. We anticipate at this stage, that we should be able to care for the overwhelming majority of young people who may become infected with the virus within our existing estate.

We are caring for vulnerable children with complex needs. Social interaction and stimulation is vital during this period, but will be done at a physical distance. Education providers are being asked to work to be as creative as possible during this period in providing stimulating activities for children whilst implementing some physical distance. This applies equally to any parallel health interventions that would usually be carried out in groups.

Maintaining adequate social interaction and stimulation is critical for children in custody as it in the community and our providers both continue to be on site and delivering these services but will need to comply with physical distancing and therefore lessen risk.

The YCS population, while not at high risk of contagion is nevertheless is an emotionally immature, complex group of children with other vulnerabilities. The impact of prolonged social isolation in a restricted regime is likely to exacerbate pre-existing trauma and behavioural problems. Although we have the theoretical capacity to manage the cohort throughout this pandemic, it remains to be seen what the reaction of young people will be to prolonged periods of severely reduced regimes. There remains a considerable risk of self-harm and violence from this cohort if these restrictions become prolonged, as we anticipate.

2. Capacity in the Youth Custody estate