



Ministry
of Justice



HM Prison &
Probation Service

COVID-19: The National Research Committee's Medium-Term Plan

Updated 8 February 2022

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1. Introduction

In response to the threat of COVID-19, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) took decisive action to protect staff and people accommodated in prisons¹ or on supervision in the community. This involved making significant alterations to ways of working through Exceptional Delivery Models (EDMs) and management plans, and implementing restrictions to limit the movement of people.

Based on these restrictions, the NRC introduced a moratorium on primary research in HMPPS.² The moratorium aimed to ensure safety and reduce unnecessary burden on the prison and probation estate. This guidance outlines the process for reintroducing primary research while COVID-19 remains a factor.

This document is intended to be read alongside the **National Framework for Prison Regimes and Services**.³ This document sets out the conditional approach to the easing of restrictions and what this means in practice. At all times the priority is to accommodate government and public health advice to ensure a safe environment.

As of February 2022, the Probation Service is no longer following the **Probation Roadmap to Recovery**. The NRC will therefore review primary research to be undertaken within the Probation Service where a Risk Assessment form has been submitted and approved (see Section 3 for further information).

2. NRC Process

The NRC has closely aligned the lifting of its moratorium for primary research with the stages of recovery for prisons. Table 1 in [Annex A](#) sets out the NRC criteria for reviewing research against the Prison Framework.

The National Framework for Prisons sets out 5 stages of recovery from (5) Complete Lockdown, (4) Lockdown, (3) Restrict, (2) Reduce, and (1) Prepare.

Progress is likely to be incremental, and the transition from one stage to another will take some time. Prisons will move up or down the stages in response to national or regional Covid-19 restrictions / tiers as well as localised outbreaks or spikes of infections in the prison. A mixture of national, regional and local government structures will be in place to tightly monitor progress and advise on the appropriate stage. Accordingly, the NRC will adopt an equally responsive approach and will monitor stages, as well as national restrictions, local tiering and outbreaks of infection in prisons. All these factors will form an essential part of decision making around primary research.

¹ This plan applies to Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) as well as adult prisons.

² Only applications involving secondary data analysis that did not pose a risk of potential harm to individuals and impact negatively on resources were considered. Applications that were considered high priority or urgent have been reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the NRC since the moratorium on primary research was introduced in March 2020.

³ The National Framework can be found at the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-national-framework-for-prison-regimes-and-services>

However, as per our standard guidance⁴, **the final decision to grant access to researchers will lie entirely with governors or directors at individual prison establishments and regional probation directors.**

Lifting of Restrictions

Lifting of restrictions on primary research with prisoners or prison staff will be staggered for different groups:

- 2.1. **For internal (HMPPS, MoJ) applicants** the NRC will reopen for primary research conducted through remote methods at prison stage 3.
- 2.2. **Frontline prison staff** may conduct contact (face-to-face) research at prison stage 3 if undertaken as part of business as usual or routine duties in line with establishment protocols, where there is no additional risk to safety. This may include cross-site working where that is a part of ongoing business as usual in the Prison Group and local COVID-19 mitigation plans are followed (e.g. Lateral Flow Testing on access).
- 2.3. **For external applicants**, the NRC will reopen for primary research at prison stage 2. However, if research only involves staff, applications will be considered where prison sites are still at stage 3. All external applicants will be required to complete the **NRC COVID-19 Screening Form** which will be assessed by the central NRC team and/or HMPPS research leads to determine whether the research is feasible under local conditions. Additionally, precedence should be given to non-contact (remote) data collection methods.

In addition to the stage of the prison, other factors such as outbreaks of Covid-19 in an establishment, local tiering and national restrictions will all be considered when making a final decision. In response to local conditions, prisons may implement different or restricted operational practice but stay within the same stage and this will also be taken into consideration when reviewing applications. Applications to conduct research will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the relevant research lead. Access will only be provided if it fits the local and establishment COVID-19 response protocols.

Research During Periods of Greater Restrictions

During periods of greater restrictions in prisons, only research deemed as high priority or urgent will be considered (See table 1 in [Annex A](#) for details of where this applies). Support must be provided in writing at HMPPS/MoJ Executive Director or Prison Group Director level for the research to be considered.

Such research is likely to be linked to COVID-related issues and will have the potential to inform current or future operational practice. Proposed research must not duplicate any planned research or existing body of evidence, and data collection must be time bound (it is only possible to collect data at that time, and no other, to inform the study). The NRC will

⁴ See standard NRC process set out at the following link:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/her-majestys-prison-and-probation-service/about/research>

assess whether the topic is high priority and urgent on a case-by-case basis, reviewing national, departmental and local priorities, in consultation with senior MoJ or HMPPS business consultees and with HMPPS research leads.

3. New Applications for Primary Research

Our process for new primary research applications will involve the following:

- 3.1. **External** applicants planning to conduct research with prisoners or prison staff must fill in the **NRC COVID-19 Screening Form**⁵ to establish whether the proposed research is practical given the stage of lockdown in the prison. Screening forms should be sent to the NRC mailbox.⁶ For prison-based research, researchers may wish to contact the HMPPS research lead (see [Annex B](#)) for the site in which their research is taking place for advice on the local context. If the proposal is accepted, applicants will be allowed to submit a full application. Internal applicants can use the screening form if they are unsure of whether their full application can be submitted. We will aim to turn around screening forms within two weeks.
- 3.2. **All applicants** will be required to submit a full application⁷ form and complete the **NRC COVID-19 Risk Assessment Form**⁸, outlining how their research design has considered the response to COVID-19. These should be submitted to the NRC mailbox.
- 3.3. All prison-based applications will be assessed based on the regime stages (table 1 [Annex A](#)) of the establishments included in the research project, as well as other factors such as outbreaks of COVID-19 in an establishment, local tiering and national restrictions. Where multiple sites are included, researchers should justify why this is necessary. If there is more than one site, the application will be assessed according to the stage of the site with the most stringent lockdown at the time of review.
- 3.4. Once the research has commenced, if there are changes to the prison stage, and the research being undertaken no longer fits the NRC guidelines, researchers will be expected to **cease research**. Researchers should contact the relevant HMPPS research leads or the NRC mailbox to confirm this cessation or for advice if there is ambiguity. To recommence research, an amendment and updated **NRC COVID-19 Risk Assessment Form** should be submitted to the NRC mailbox outlining the changes to the regime, and any proposed changes to the methodology or timescales.
- 3.5. **Researchers hold responsibility to follow NRC guidance and act appropriately to changes in the regime.**

⁵ Available on our website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/her-majestys-prison-and-probation-service/about/research>

⁶ The NRC mailbox address is: National.Research@justice.gov.uk

⁷ If the research requires Health Research Authority approval, applications should be submitted via IRAS at the following link: <https://www.myresearchproject.org.uk/>

⁸ Available on our website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/her-majestys-prison-and-probation-service/about/research>

4. Data Collection Methods

Methods requiring **no** face-to-face contact should be the default until full recovery. Applicants are required to fill in the **NRC COVID-19 Risk Assessment Form** outlining how their research design has considered the response to COVID-19. There are a range of remote methods that can be utilised. For example, video calls and telephone interviews may be possible, as well as letter writing, postal or online surveys. Applications should fully consider:

- 4.1. Safety or hygiene issues, such as circulating or collecting paper copies of research documentation (e.g. consent forms, information sheets, questionnaires etc.), and how these issues will be mitigated.
- 4.2. The availability of technology within prisons or for participants within the community.
- 4.3. The likelihood of access to technology, especially in prisons where priority may be given to the use of technology to aid communication and contact in the absence of social visits, court hearings or rehabilitation.
- 4.4. The demand placed on prisons or probation regions to facilitate these methods.
- 4.5. The appropriateness of these methods to cover sensitive topics or collect information from vulnerable participants, the potential distress caused by lockdown measures (e.g. isolation or restrictions on social visits) and how additional support will be made available to participants (including how assistance will be provided to ensure comprehension where necessary).
- 4.6. Any specific data protection issues relating to the handling, storing or transfer of data.

There may be circumstances where face-to-face contact is deemed essential, for example, where data is collected by a practitioner during the delivery of a programme or intervention. In such cases, researchers must adhere to any measures to maintain public health and social distancing as advocated by the establishment they are in or their employer.

Researchers should fully consider the resource burden of their chosen method and minimise this as far as possible, including any facilitation required by staff. Methods that are too resource-intensive will not be permitted.

5. Ongoing Research and Pending Applications

Research paused due to COVID-19:

- 5.1. Researchers wishing to recommence projects that have been paused due to the moratorium should submit an amendment to the NRC mailbox, explaining the changes that will be made to ensure fieldwork is safe, feasible and methodologically appropriate. The **NRC COVID-19 Risk Assessment Form** should also be completed and provided as part of the amendment. If there is a change to the topic of study or research

questions a new application will need to be submitted to the NRC (see guidance in [Section 3](#)). Amendments should outline any risks and how these will be mitigated, the resources required to facilitate the research, and how remote data collection methods will be utilised. Where a change of site is requested, a strong rationale will be required to avoid over-burdening sites.

5.2. Amendments will be assessed against table 1 (see [Annex A](#)). Applicants should only look to progress their research where the site has eased restrictions, and the guidance in table 1 can be followed.

Pending applications:

5.3. Researchers with pending applications should revise and resubmit their applications to the NRC mailbox in light of the guidance set out in this document. The **NRC COVID-19 Risk Assessment Form** should also be provided.

Next steps

The processes and criteria outlined in this document will be kept under review and amended if required. This document was last reviewed February 2022.

Annex A

Table 1: NRC criteria for review of primary research at each stage of Prison Framework

Stage	Topic	Method	Other Considerations	
5	<p>Complete Lockdown</p> <p>Regime focused purely on preservation of life.</p> <p>Minimise time out of cell and social contact – no time in the open air, all meals served at cell door, support from other establishments or external suppliers for essential services like laundry.</p> <p>No transfers in or out of the establishment.</p>			
4	<p>Lockdown</p> <p>Minimum required regime in place to ensure safety and decency, as set out in the Exceptional Regime Management Plan (EDM) of 24th March.</p> <p>Receptions from courts for some prisons, but routine inter-prison transfers (IPTs) stopped and controlled IPTs agreed via Gold Command structures.</p>	<p>Research will not be considered unless the following criteria are met.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is urgent or high priority for the research to be carried out at this time: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - usually COVID-related - requires MoJ/HMPPS Executive Director or Prison Group Director support and sign-off 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-contact (remote) data collection methods should be used by default (e.g. postal surveys, telephone interviews, online surveys) with no or minimal burden on staff. • Where contact is essential, PPE should be used and social distancing observed in accordance with government guidelines and the requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Particular attention will be given to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - health and safety of research participants, staff and researchers - ease of access to intended sites or participants (physically or remotely) - ability of researchers to effectively deliver the project in a timely fashion

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - does not duplicate research (planned or current) - There would be negative consequences for MoJ or HMPPS if the research did not go ahead. 	<p>of the establishment and/or researcher's employer.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research should be risk assessed to ensure impact on participant, staff and researcher safety, is minimised as far as possible. • Researchers should fully consider the resource burden of their chosen method and minimise this as far as possible – including any facilitation required by staff. Methods that are too resource-intensive will not be permitted. • Ethics will be evaluated in light of the regime at the site in question (e.g. the use of in-cell telephones for research purposes, when their intended use is to allow prisoners to keep in touch with family and friends, or for rehabilitation). 	
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3	<p>Restrict Compartmentalisation⁹ remains in place. Testing and monitoring ongoing. Social distancing applied and PPE in use.</p> <p>Inter-prison transfers where Reverse Cohorting Units (RCUs) in place and procedures are agreed by Prison Gold command.</p> <p>Highest priority areas of regime (e.g. visits) can start to be reinstated with appropriate restrictions, including restrictions in the community on travel to prisons.</p> <p>Implementation of stage 3 elements of the relevant Exceptional Delivery Models, tailored to local circumstances such as physical layout and design of the establishment. Full detail set out in EDMs, but noteworthy points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reintroduce social visits, but with limited capacity and other restrictions and adaptations. 	<p>Research will not be considered unless the following criteria are met.</p> <p>For external research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is urgent or high priority for the research to be carried out at this time: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - usually COVID-related - requires MoJ/HMPPS Executive Director or Prison Group Director support and sign-off - does not duplicate research (planned or current) • There would be negative consequences for MoJ or HMPPS if the research did not go ahead. • Where research only involves staff and uses non-contact methods, research that is not urgent or high priority will be considered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-contact (remote) data collection methods should be used by default (e.g. postal surveys, telephone interviews, online surveys) with no or minimal burden on staff. • Frontline prison staff can use contact (face-to-face) methods if undertaken as part of business as usual duties in line with establishment protocols, where there is no additional risk to safety. This may include cross-site working where that is a part of ongoing business as usual in the Prison Group and local COVID-19 mitigation plans are followed (e.g. Lateral Flow Testing on access). • Where contact is essential or necessary, a strong case must be made outlining why the research cannot be remote and why it must take place now. PPE should be used and social distancing observed in accordance with government guidelines and the requirements of the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Particular attention will be given to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - health and safety of research participants, staff and researchers - ease of access to intended sites and participants (physically or remotely) - ability of researchers to effectively deliver the project in a timely fashion - whether research would be undertaken as part of routine prison staff duties • If volume of applications exceeds available resource for NRC review, internal MoJ or HMPPS staff applications will be prioritised, then applications from (or on behalf of) other government departments, followed by external applications. • The movement of people for research purposes must not jeopardise prison compartmentalisation policy.
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⁹ Compartmentalisation includes: restricting inter-prison transfers; accommodating known or probable COVID-19 cases in Protective Isolation Units; protecting the most vulnerable in Shielding Units; and accommodating those arriving in prison in Reverse Cohorting Units for a defined period before they enter the general population.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reintroduce classroom based education in Youth Custody Service, but with restrictions and adaptations. • Reintroduce Offender Management work and Offending Behaviour Programmes, but with restrictions and adaptations. 	<p>For internal research conducted by, or commissioned by MoJ or HMPPS staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research that is not urgent or high priority is now permitted if using non-contact (remote) methods. 	<p>establishment and/or the researcher's employer.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research should be risk assessed to ensure impact on participant, staff and researcher safety is minimised as far as possible. • Researchers should fully consider the resource burden of their chosen method and minimise this as far as possible – including any facilitation required by staff. Methods that are too resource-intensive will not be permitted. • Ethics will be evaluated in light of the regime at the site in question (e.g. the use of in-cell telephones for research purposes, when their intended use is to allow prisoners to keep in touch with family and friends, or for rehabilitation). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition, national restrictions, local tiering and outbreaks in prisons will be considered when making a final decision.
2	<p>Reduce</p> <p>Compartmentalisation remains in place. Testing and monitoring ongoing. Minimal social distancing required, in line with community guidelines.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research that is not urgent or high priority is permitted. • High priority and urgent research will be prioritised when reviewing applications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-contact (remote) data collection methods. (e.g. postal surveys, telephone interviews, online surveys) should be 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the volume of applications exceeds available resource for NRC review, internal MoJ or HMPPS staff applications will be prioritised, then applications from (or on

	<p>Inter Prison Transfers where RCUs in place at receiving prisons.</p> <p>Implementation of Stage 2 elements of relevant and further Exceptional Delivery Models. Full detail set out in EDMs, but noteworthy points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reintroduction of classroom based education in the adult estate; greater workshops activity in operation; indoor PE; all with restrictions and adaptations to reduce capacity as necessary. • Less restrictive adaptations and greater capacity across all services, such as visits. • Reintroduce communal worship with restrictions and adaptations. 		<p>prioritised with no or minimal burden on staff.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where contact methods are deemed necessary, full justification should be given. Social distancing observed in line with government and establishment or community guidelines and/or the researcher's employer. • Research should be risk assessed to ensure impact on participant, staff and researcher safety is minimised as far as possible. • Researchers should fully consider the resource burden of their chosen method – including any facilitation required by staff. • Ethics will be evaluated in light of the regime at the site in question (e.g. the use of in-cell telephones for research purposes, when their intended use is to allow prisoners to keep in touch with family and friends, or for rehabilitation). 	<p>behalf of) other government departments, followed by external applications.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situation under constant review by the NRC and HMPPS. Researchers will be required to monitor the stage of the prison and cease research if it moves to a more restricted stage. • In addition, national restrictions, local tiering and outbreaks in prisons will be considered when making a final decision.
1	Prepare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research that is not urgent or high priority is permitted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact and non-contact data collection methods can be used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If volume of applications exceeds available resource for

<p>Compartmentalisation no longer required, but ongoing screening, testing and monitoring continues to rapidly detect any new infections in the future.</p> <p>Routine Inter Prison Transfers allowed.</p> <p>Regimes operating without requirements for social distancing or PPE use.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where contact methods are used, researchers will need to follow the hygiene and contact requirements of the establishment. 	<p>NRC review, internal MoJ or HMPPS staff applications will be prioritised, then applications from (or on behalf of) other government departments, followed by external applications.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situation under constant review by the NRC and HMPPS and researchers may be required to cease research at short notice. • In addition, national restrictions, local tiering and outbreaks in prisons will be considered when making a final decision.
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Annex B

HMPPS Research Lead Contact Details

These contact details are for HMPPS **prison** research leads and should be used for the following:

- To seek advice on the local context prior to submitting a screening form or full application
- To confirm the cessation of primary research if there are changes to the prison regime and the research being undertaken no longer fits the NRC guidelines

Prison	Contact
Kent, Surrey & Sussex Coldingley, Elmley, Ford, Lewes, Rochester, Standford Hill	Martha Chinembiri: Martha.Chinembiri@justice.gov.uk Copy in: Kent&SussexRegionalForensicPsychologyService@hmps.gsi.gov.uk
East of England Bedford, Bure, Chelmsford, Highpoint, Hollesley Bay, Littlehey, The Mount, Norwich, Warren Hill, Wayland	Karen Johnson: Karen.Johnson4@justice.gov.uk Copy in: EofEPsychologicalServices@hmps.gsi.gov.uk
Midlands Brinsford, Featherstone, Hewell, Leicester, Lincoln, North Sea Camp, Nottingham, Onley, Ranby, Stafford, Stocken, Stoke Heath, Sudbury, Swinfen Hall, Whatton, Birmingham, Oakwood	Rachael Wheatley: Rachael.Wheatley@justice.gov.uk Copy in: Leah.Davies@justice.gov.uk.cjism.net

<p>North West</p> <p>Buckley Hall, Havering, Hindley, Kirkham, Lancaster Farms, Liverpool, Preston, Risley, Thorn Cross, Wymott</p>	<p>Catharine Booth: Catharine.Booth@justice.gov.uk</p>
<p>South West</p> <p>Bristol, Channings Wood, Dartmoor, Exeter, Guys Marsh, Leyhill, Portland, The Verne</p>	<p>South West Psychological Services: SouthWestPsychologicalServices@justice.gov.uk</p>
<p>London</p> <p>Brixton, High Down, Isis, Pentonville, Wandsworth, Wormwood Scrubs</p>	<p>Julie Aspin: Julie.Aspin@justice.gov.uk</p> <p>Copy in: LTVPS@NOMS.GSI.GOV.UK</p>
<p>Long-Term and High Security (LTHSE)</p> <p>Aylesbury, Belmarsh, Frankland, Full Sutton, Garth, Gartree, Isle of Wight, Long Lartin, Manchester, Swaleside, Wakefield, Whitemoor, Woodhill</p>	<p>Jenny Tew: Jenny.Tew@justice.gov.uk</p> <p>Copy in: PsychologicalServices.LongLartin@justice.gov.uk</p>
<p>North East and Yorkshire</p> <p>Deerbolt, Durham, Hatfield, Holme House, Hull, Humber, Kirklevington Grange, Leeds, Lindholme, Moorland, Wealstun</p>	<p>Jonathan Holmes: Johnathan.Holmes@justice.gov.uk</p> <p>Copy in: NE&YPS@hmps.gsi.gov.uk</p>

<p>South Central</p> <p>Bullington, Erlestoke, Spring Hill, Winchester</p>	<p>Annie Taylor: Annie.Taylor1@justice.gov.uk</p>
<p>South Central</p> <p>Grendon</p>	<p>Richard Shuker Richard.Shuker@justice.gov.uk</p>
<p>Foreign National Prisoners and Immigration Removal Centres</p> <p>Huntercombe, Maidstone, Morton Hall</p>	<p>Martin Fisher Martin.Fisher1@justice.gov.uk</p>
<p>Youth Custody Service</p> <p>Cookham Wood, Feltham (A) & (B) Werrington, Wetherby</p>	<p>Alisa Purton Alisa.Purton@justice.gov.uk</p> <p>Lauren Aspey Lauren.Aspey@justice.gov.uk</p>
<p>Wales</p> <p>Berwyn, Cardiff, Prescoed, Swansea, Usk, Parc</p>	<p>Mark Crane Mark.Crane@justice.gov.uk</p>

<p>Women</p> <p>Askham Grange, Bronzefield, Downview, Drake Hall, East Sutton Park, Eastwood Park, Foston Hall, Low Newton, New Hall, Peterborough (Women), Send, Styal</p>	<p>Oliver Field Oliver.Field@justice.gov.uk</p>
<p>Other Privately Managed Prisons</p> <p>Altcourse, Ashfield, Thameside, Doncaster, Dovegate, Forest Bank, Lowdham Grange, Northumberland, Rye Hill</p>	<p>National Research mailbox: National.Research@justice.gov.uk</p>

