



## **Voices of Prisoners**

Experiences shared with Let's Be Heard

A Case Study

# Executive Summary

## What is Let's Be Heard?

Let's Be Heard is the Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry's public participation project.

The independent public Inquiry is investigating the devolved strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2022. It will establish the facts, identify lessons that need to be learned and make recommendations to Scottish Ministers, so we are better prepared in future.

Let's Be Heard has been established to give people living in Scotland, or affected by decisions made in Scotland during that period, the opportunity to share their experiences, and the lessons they believe should be learned from them.

Participating in Let's Be Heard is the main way in which people can engage with the Inquiry to help inform its investigations, reporting and recommendations. It would not have been possible for the Inquiry to hear as many experiences of the pandemic from the people of Scotland without Let's Be Heard, and the Inquiry is grateful to those who have shared their experiences.

## Purpose of this case study

This case study shares Let's Be Heard's thematic findings from the responses of 74 prisoners in Scotland. It includes their experiences of the pandemic in Scotland during the period the Inquiry is investigating, the impacts of the Scottish Government's rules and restrictions, and the lessons prisoners think should be learned from their experiences. This case study was conducted to

ensure that the experiences of prisoners, who are not providing oral evidence to the Inquiry, are captured and represented.

## Main observations

- **Mental health:** We heard from responses that the mental health of prisoners in Scotland was severely impacted during the pandemic. Respondents felt isolation and increased time locked in cells adversely impacted prisoners, with many feeling that restrictions compounded their custodial punishment and led to depression and anxiety. Some respondents reported increases in self-harm, feeling suicidal, and the use of illegal drugs during periods of lockdown. Changes in routines and responsibilities were also reported to have had profound impacts on the mental health of prisoners.
- **Limited opportunities:** Prisoners stated that stricter measures affected food quality and hygiene, disrupted daily routines, limited access to education and reduced opportunities for exercise. Cancellation of activities meant that prisoners could not participate in the developmental activities needed for them to progress to lower security facilities. A small number of respondents also reported that delays in court proceedings led to increased time on remand and caused additional stress.
- **Prisoner/staff relations:** Respondents reported that during the pandemic there was an erosion of relationships between prisoners and staff. They said that poor communication between prison authorities and

prisoners led to frustration and anxiety. Respondents believed that prison officers were the source of infections in the prisons, with many reporting that staff did not follow Scottish Government guidelines. However, some prisoners praised staff and their efforts to support them, noting that prison officers were under pressure at home and at work.

- **Access to healthcare:** Respondents felt that they had additional barriers and delays in relation to accessing healthcare, compared to people outside prisons. This included access to tests, mental health support and vaccinations.
- **Visits:** Prisoners and their families reported feeling distressed by the halting of face-to-face visits but later welcomed the Scottish Prison Service's (SPS) rollout of mobile phones and the use of virtual visits.
- **Preparedness and communication:** Respondents felt that Scottish prisons were not adequately prepared for the COVID-19 outbreak. Those in custodial care reported poor communication, and some said that they were not given enough information about COVID-19 and the associated restrictions.

## Prisoner views on lessons to be learned

Prisoners gave their views to Let's Be Heard on the lessons they thought should be learned, including:

- **Pandemic planning:** Prisoners felt there should be clear and practical plans in place for each prison, including staff training, preparation of PPE and a plan in place for returning to pre-pandemic routines. This should include broader plans to avoid disruptions to justice processes and release dates.
- **Infection control:** Respondents wanted to see increased hygiene measures for prisoners and their environment, and greater availability of tests in the event of a future pandemic.
- **Mental health:** Respondents said there should be measures in place to prevent loneliness, isolation and poor mental health, such as increased social time with other prisoners, calls with friends and family and increased welfare checks.
- **Communication:** Prisoners also wanted clear and prison-specific information available on restrictions, guidance and vaccinations. Prisoners would like this to be available to SPS, its staff, and those in custodial care.