



HM Prison & Probation Service

Director General Prisons
HM Prison and Probation Service
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Mr Scott Matthewson
HM Assistant Coroner for Kent and Medway
Cantium House
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30 December 2021

Dear Mr Matthewson,

Thank you for your Regulation 28 report of 4 November 2021 addressed to Victoria Atkins, Minister of State for Prisons and Probation, following the inquest into the death of Christian Hinkley on the 29 July 2019. I am responding as Director General of Prisons.

I know that you will share a copy of this response with Mr Hinkley's family, and I would first like to express my condolences for their loss. Every death in custody is a tragedy and the safety of those in our care is my absolute priority.

You expressed concern following evidence heard at the inquest about the current system of fire detection in Her Majesty's Prisons and the length of time that it will take for in-cell fire detectors to be installed to all prisons nationally. You also asked whether in-cell fire detectors could be added to a small number of cells for prisoners that pose a higher risk of self-harm, barricading and fire setting, as an interim measure. I am grateful to you for bringing your concerns to my attention.

Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) is committed to fire safety and ensuring that all prison accommodation complies with modern fire safety standards, this is currently being improved through an ambitious national fire safety improvement programme. In 2015/16 HMPPS committed to the Crown Premises Fire Safety Inspectorate that at least 15% of the annual capital maintenance budget would be allocated to fire safety improvement works across the prison estate. We have honoured this commitment each year since and in 2021 the Government agreed to invest £315m into the prison estate in order to tackle the most pressing maintenance issues, including that of the introduction of in-cell fire detection systems.

The rollout of the automatic fire safety systems nationally relies on a sustained level of investment and on the availability of resources to ensure that there is minimal disruption to the prison regimes. Fire safety systems are costly and complex to install and there can be delays in these works due to important measures to maintain the safety of staff and prison residents and also to maintain the overall security of the prison. It can therefore take a number of years to install the full system at a single establishment. Given the number of prisons nationally that require this work and the challenges in doing this, the overall

programme is forecast to be delivered and completed within the next five to seven years. Having reviewed the strategy, and due to the complexity involved it is not possible to do this any sooner than this timeframe.

There are currently fire safety improvement programmes underway at 35 sites across the prison estate. The work begins with a full assessment of each establishment, many of which require the installation of a full and updated fire detection system before the in-cell detectors can be installed. The start date for the fire safety assessment to commence at HMP Swaleside, which will include the installation of the in-cell detectors, is currently scheduled to be in December 2022.

While it has been reviewed whether in-cell fire detectors could be added to a small number of cells for prisoners that pose a higher risk of self-harm, barricading and fire setting, as an interim measure, this is unfortunately not feasible. Given that a complete new fire system will be required in many prisons across the estate before the in-cell detectors can be installed, the workmanship and equipment required to install even a small number of cells for each prison would be significant. The work would then have to resume at a later date to complete the remaining cells and this would be costly and would delay the completion of the overall fire safety improvement programme.

For the prisons where the in-cell fire detection systems are not yet installed, there are a number of interim safety measures in place to reduce the risks of cell fires. In April 2021, annual risk based inspection programmes were introduced which are conducted by the HMPPS National Fire Safety Team who review fire safety measures in each prison. This includes reviewing the provision of fire safety equipment, staff training and compliance and the Arson Reduction Strategy of each prison to identify any fire safety risks and any protective measures that may be required to address those risks.

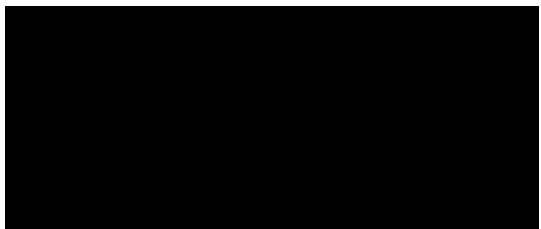
Stand-alone portable fire detection devices are currently installed for all cells that do not have the automatic fire detection systems, including at HMP Swaleside. These provide an interim fire detection solution, in accordance with the fire safety regulation requirements. All prisons across the estate have also been provided with an increased number of water mist firefighting equipment and portable smoke ventilation fans to assist smoke disbursement during fire incidents. Access to fire ignition sources will remain prohibited with electrical items removed from possession when found to have been tampered with.

All operational staff receive cell fire response training when they join the service which provides staff with the skills and knowledge of the actions to take in fire prevention and the actions to take when a fire is detected including a theory test and three practical scenarios. Annual refresher training is also delivered, and the national fire team audit the training at each prison when conducting the annual risk based inspection programmes to ensure the training has taken place in accordance with the required syllabus.

The prison officer Cell Fire Response training was also revised in December 2021 to include a narrative and a practical scenario for where the cells inundation port is seized or obstructed with the observation panel used as the secondary inundation point. The use of the observation panel aperture provides prison officers with an effective alternative route to inundate the cell with water mist.

Thank you again for bringing your concerns to my attention. I trust that this response provides assurance that action is being taken to address the matters that you have raised.

Yours sincerely,



Director General of Prisons