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SEGREGATION OF MEN WITH MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS IN PRISON

It was a pleasure to meet you on 5 February 2024. I would like to reiterate my gratitude to you and the many members of the Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs) for their vital, valuable work and commitment to making prisons safer. As we discussed during our meeting, I am writing to provide an update on the work this Government is undertaking, in the absence of the Mental Health Bill, to address the recurring issues raised by IMBs relating to mental health in prison, and the recently published IMB thematic monitoring report on the segregation of men with mental health needs.

Firstly, I would like to assure you that this Government remains firmly committed to introducing the Draft Mental Health Bill when parliamentary time allows. In the meantime, we are undertaking a range of work to improve access to mental health care and treatment for vulnerable offenders and defendants through close and ongoing collaboration with our partners.

Nobody should be in prison simply because of their poor mental health, and we are taking steps to divert people with severe mental health needs away from custody at the earliest opportunity. We are piloting a Regional Health and Justice Hub in the North East of England, delivered in partnership with NHS England and HMCTS. Through the Hub, we will seek to improve the way that courts, health services and prisons work together at a local level to better support defendants with severe mental illness, with the aim of smoothing their pathway into the right treatment, whether that is in hospital or in the community.

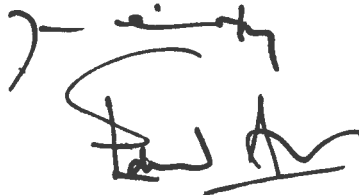
Additionally, we are working with NHS England and the Home Office to explore how we can strengthen NHS England's Liaison and Diversion services, which are in place across all police custody suites and courts, to support people with mental health needs to access the care and treatment they need from their first point of contact with the criminal justice system.

When in prison, people are entitled to the same standard and range of health and social care services as they would receive in the community, including integrated mental health services commissioned by NHS England. This includes access to a range of treatments and interventions within prison as set out in the national service specification for mental health care in prisons. We will continue to work closely with our health partners through the National Partnership Agreement on Health and Social Care in England to deliver safe, decent and effective care that improves health outcomes for people in our care. This of course includes people who require detention and treatment in hospital under the Mental Health Act (MHA).

Segregation is an absolute last resort for those deemed a risk to themselves or others. This government is determined to reduce unnecessary delays for vulnerable people who meet the threshold for detention under the MHA and require a transfer to hospital to access the specialist care and treatment they need. Following the Independent Review of the Mental Health Act, we are working with our health partners to explore how we can implement the recommendation to introduce a non-statutory independent role to improve oversight, and monitor delivery of the 28-day time limit set out in NHS England's good practice guidance.

More widely, we are taking steps to improve offender health and wellbeing, and better support those who are at risk of self-harm and suicide. We have renewed grant funding to the Samaritans, primarily for the delivery of the Listener Scheme - through which selected prisoners are trained to provide support to fellow prisoners in emotional distress - with total funding of just under £2 million between 2022 and 2025. We are also implementing a new safety training package for staff which includes modules on suicide and self-harm prevention and understanding risks, triggers and protective factors.

Finally, I would like to thank you for the IMB's continued interest and expertise across each of these issues and we look forward to continue to working together to ensure that vulnerable offenders and defendants receive the care they need, when they need it.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Edward Argar', written over a horizontal line.

RT HON EDWARD ARGAR MP