

**Prisons &
Probation**

Ombudsman
Independent Investigations

Independent investigation into the death of Mr Keith White, a prisoner at HMP Altcourse, on 25 October 2020

A report by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman

Our Vision

To carry out independent investigations to make custody and community supervision safer and fairer.

Our Values

We are:

Impartial: *we do not take sides*

Respectful: *we are considerate and courteous*

Inclusive: *we value diversity*

Dedicated: *we are determined and focused*

Fair: *we are honest and act with integrity*



© Crown copyright 2022

This report is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Summary

1. The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman aims to make a significant contribution to safer, fairer custody and community supervision. One of the most important ways in which we work towards that aim is by carrying out **independent** investigations into deaths, due to any cause, of prisoners, young people in detention, residents of approved premises and detainees in immigration centres.
2. We carry out investigations to understand what happened and identify how the organisations whose actions we oversee can improve their work in the future.
3. Mr Keith White died in hospital on 25 October 2020, while a prisoner at HMP Altcourse. He was 61 years old. The cause of his death was coronavirus pneumonia and heart disease. I offer my condolences to Mr White's family and friends.
4. The clinical reviewer concluded that the clinical care Mr White received at Altcourse was equivalent to that he could have expected to receive in the community. She made one recommendation, relating to the management of diabetes, that the Head of Healthcare will need to consider.
5. We found no non-clinical issues of concern.

The Investigation Process

6. NHS England commissioned an independent clinical reviewer to review Mr White's clinical care at HMP Altcourse.
7. The PPO's investigator investigated non-clinical issues, including aspects of the prison's response to COVID-19 and shielding prisoners; Mr White's location; the security arrangements for his admission to hospital; liaison with his family; and whether early release was considered.
8. The investigator and clinical reviewer interviewed six staff on 8 and 22 December 2020. The interviews were conducted by telephone due to the restrictions in place during the COVID-19 pandemic and summaries are attached as annexes.
9. The PPO family liaison officer wrote to Mr White's next of kin, his brother, to explain the investigation. Mr White's brother raised the following concerns:
 - Whether prison staff had increased Mr White's risk by going into his cell without wearing PPE?
 - Had Mr White become unwell due to moving to an unclean cell?
 - Mr White had said that in the week leading to his positive test for COVID-19, he had not eaten for five days and repeated requests for medical attention had been ignored.
10. Mr White's brother received a copy of the initial report. He made no comments.
11. We shared the initial report with HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). They found no factual inaccuracies.

Previous deaths at HMP Altcourse

12. Mr White was the 13th prisoner at Altcourse to die, since October 2018. Ten of the previous deaths were due to natural causes, including three which were COVID-19 related; one was self-inflicted and the cause of death was unexplained in another. There have since been seven further deaths from natural causes, one was apparently COVID-19 related. There are no similarities between our findings in the investigation into Mr White's death and those in previous investigations.

COVID-19 (coronavirus)

13. COVID-19 is an infectious disease that affects the lungs and airways. It is mainly spread through droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes, speaks or breathes heavily. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a worldwide pandemic.
14. COVID-19 can make anyone seriously ill, but some people are at higher risk of severe illness and developing complications from the infection. People at high risk (clinically extremely vulnerable) include those who have had an organ transplant; have severe lung or kidney disease; or are having certain types of cancer or other treatment which significantly increases the risk of infection.

Examples of those at moderate risk (clinically vulnerable) are people over 70; people under 70 with an underlying health condition, such as diabetes, or chronic respiratory, heart, liver or kidney disease; those with a weakened immune system; or who are very overweight. (These lists are not exhaustive.)

15. In response to the initial pandemic outbreak, HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) introduced several measures to try and contain the outbreak - to be implemented at local level, depending on the needs of individual prisons. (An outbreak is defined as two or more prisoners, or staff, who are clinically suspected, or have tested positive for COVID-19 within 14 days.) A key strategy is 'compartmentalisation' to cohort and protect prisoners at high and moderate risk; isolate those who are symptomatic; and separate newly-received prisoners from the main population. Other measures include social distancing and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE).
16. We note that in his report on short scrutiny visits to local prisons issued in April 2020, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons identified positive practice at Altcourse, including the development of bespoke patient logs which had improved oversight of COVID-19 monitoring.

Key Events

17. Mr Keith White was remanded to a medium secure psychiatric unit in April 2018. He transferred to HMP Altcourse on 23 October 2018. Mr White was convicted of attempted murder on 22 January 2019 and sentenced to 12 years and 9 months imprisonment.
18. Mr White had been diagnosed with several heart-related conditions, including heart disease and heart failure. He also had high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis, low vitamin D and mental health problems. Due to reduced mobility, he used a walking aid and wheelchair for long distances. Mr White lived in the prison's healthcare unit until April 2019, when he moved to an adapted cell for disabled prisoners on a residential unit.
19. On 19 March 2020, Mr White began to self-isolate in his cell, by choice, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On 7 April 2020, healthcare staff formally recognised him as at high risk of complications if he contracted COVID-19 and issued a letter with advice on shielding. While shielding, Mr White continued to have frequent key worker meetings to check his wellbeing and he socialised with the cohort of other shielding prisoners on his unit.
20. Mr White moved out of the adapted cell in October, as it was needed for a prisoner with more complex needs. Mr White was concerned that the move would affect his physical and mental health, so the safer custody manager arranged for support from healthcare staff and harm minimisation officers.
21. On 15 October, Mr White was seen by a prison GP, as he felt generally unwell, with nausea, poor appetite and a cough that had started three days before. A swab was taken to test for COVID-19 and he was instructed to self-isolate. The result was confirmed as positive on 16 October. The same day, Mr White's partner telephoned the prison several times with concerns about his wellbeing and that he was not eating. Wing staff and a nurse spoke to Mr White and healthcare staff began to take clinical observations every four hours.
22. At a late morning check on 18 October, Mr White's clinical observations were abnormal and had deteriorated since the previous check at 5.09am. Staff requested an emergency ambulance and paramedics took Mr White to Aintree University Hospital, escorted by two prison officers. No restraints were used.
23. Prison healthcare staff kept in touch with the hospital. They were initially told that Mr White was being treated with continuous oxygen, intravenous antibiotics and high dose steroids. However, Mr White then refused consent to share his medical information, as he blamed the prison for contracting COVID-19 and the hospital complied with his wishes. He told the prison to get information from the escort officers.
24. On 19 October, the prison assigned a family liaison officer to support Mr White and his family. He informed Mr White's brother that he had been admitted to hospital and provided updates, as well as the ward telephone number, for direct contact.

25. Mr White died in hospital on 25 October. The family liaison officer informed Mr White's brother immediately and provided support over the following weeks.
26. The prison's security manager and duty director debriefed the escort officers and offered support. Notices were issued to prisoners and staff, informing them of Mr White's death and reminding them of the support available.
27. In line with national policy, the prison contributed to the costs of Mr White's funeral, which was held on 22 December.

Post-mortem report

28. The post-mortem report indicated that Mr White's death was due to coronavirus pneumonia. Underlying heart disease had contributed to his death.
29. The pathologist commented that Mr White's poor cardiac/circulatory function had placed him at risk of catching COVID-19 and increased medical problems as a result of it.

Findings

Clinical Findings

30. The clinical reviewer concluded that Mr White's clinical care was of a good standard and equivalent to that he could have expected to receive in the community. However, she identified a weakness in the management of Mr White's diet in relation to his diabetes and made a recommendation which the Head of Healthcare will need to consider.

Management of Mr White's risk of infection from COVID-19

31. Mr White began shielding at an early stage of the pandemic and continued once he was formally advised of his vulnerability. Although he was on a designated shielding unit, not all the prisoners were shielding, so there was a split regime and those shielding formed a separate cohort to others. Healthcare staff who dealt with Mr White wore full PPE - gloves, masks and aprons.
32. Due to an outbreak of COVID-19, prisons in the Merseyside region, including Altcourse, were placed on a very restricted regime. On 6 October 2020, the Director issued a notice to staff to remind everyone of the key requirements and principles to be followed. Further guidance was issued over the following weeks about issues such as the mandatory use of face masks in certain circumstances (e.g. contact with isolating prisoners); social distancing; and testing staff.
33. Mr White's family was concerned about the cleanliness of cells and aspects of Mr White's care in the days leading to him testing positive. Mr White's records indicate that he had been given food, but had lost his appetite and that he had not raised any health issues with wing staff during that period.
34. The prison had a cleaning protocol for the cells of suspected and confirmed COVID-19 positive prisoners, but not for standard cell moves. Industrial cleaning was carried out for cells in a poor state of cleanliness or contaminated by body fluids. The cell to which Mr White moved would therefore have been subject to the normal processes in which either the prisoner and/or unit orderlies would clean the cell.
35. As Mr White had not left Altcourse for a lengthy period, he almost certainly contracted COVID-19 in the prison. The track and trace system did not link him to any other prisoners, or to other outbreaks. It was thought that the infection might have spread from staff on the unit who had tested positive.
36. We are satisfied that Altcourse adhered to national policies and put in place the required infection prevention and control measures. When Mr White reported being unwell, he was examined and tested on the same day. Due to close monitoring, healthcare staff quickly noticed that his condition had deteriorated and immediately sent him to hospital.

Sue McAllister CB
Prisons and Probation Ombudsman

October 2021

**Prisons &
Probation**

Ombudsman
Independent Investigations