

## The Other Pandemic

**Pact CEO Andy Keen-Downs reflects on the experience of people of colour in prisons in England and Wales.**

The film clip from Minneapolis of police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on the neck of George Floyd for over 8 minutes as he begged for his life has triggered demonstrations in America and across the world including here in the UK. It has once again caused me to reflect on how our justice system treats people of colour. Watching the scenes of violent police officers on American streets, we are I hope all angry and distressed by the sight of the beating of unarmed protestors, including 75 year old Catholic peace activist Martin Gugino. Seeing such appalling scenes, knowing the history of white supremacism in the USA, and listening to the language of Donald Trump, we can perhaps be forgiven for thinking that at least things are not quite so bad over here?

But in one respect at least, things are worse.

Black people in the UK are four times more likely to be in prison than would be expected given their proportion of the total population compared to America. This was the finding of David Lammy MP who in 2017 led a review for the Ministry of Justice into the reasons why people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds make up a disproportionate number of the prison population in England and Wales. His conclusion is that overt and subtle forms of discrimination remain prevalent in our justice system. Quite simply, if you're Black, you're treated more harshly by the criminal justice system in the UK than if you're white. Black people tell me that they didn't need statistics to tell them this.

When my mother-in-law first came to London from Ireland after the war to become a nurse, she saw the signs in the guesthouse windows; 'No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish'. Today, such a sign would trigger a prosecution and we might think therefore that racism is dead in Britain. But when you work in prisons, you see the reality. Not only do we see a significant over-

representation of Black people, but we also see large over-representations of other groups, including Muslims and Catholics.

Pope Francis said last week, "We cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of human life."

Pact stands for the innate dignity of every person, created in the image of God. As prisoners and their families endure another week of necessary but painful lockdown in our prison system, and we hear the shouts of "I can't breathe" on the streets of America and Britain, echoing the painfully tragic final words of George Floyd, it's causing me to reflect on whether we are doing enough to challenge the sin of racism in all its forms in this country. Prisons are the end of the line, and the statistics on race and religion can't be denied. As Dostoyevsky wrote 'the degree of civilisation in a society is revealed by entering its prisons'. There is much to be done before we can congratulate ourselves on how civilised we are, or how very different we are from America. Pact has a role to play in this.



In our work, we are guided by our values, and by our vision of a society in which justice is understood as a process of restoration and healing, in which prisons are used sparingly and as places of learning and rehabilitation, and in which the innate dignity and worth of every human being is valued. And all of that is fine and good. But words are not enough. As Pope Francis says, we cannot turn a blind eye. We are called to stand in solidarity with all of those who tell us that they can't breathe - that they have been living through a different pandemic to Covid-19 for a long time now. The pandemic of racism. Whatever our background, or role, and however uncomfortable we may feel, we have to do more, and try harder, and do better. Pact stands in solidarity. Black Lives Matter.

## Celebrity support for Pact

Sir Michael Palin, who is 77 and self-isolating at home during the Covid-19 pandemic, is an English comedian, actor, writer and television presenter. He's also a great friend and ally to Pact.

Alongside starring in numerous films and television programmes from travel documentaries to serious dramas and of course 'Monty Python', he has recorded a video message to prisoners' families in which he tells them they are not forgotten and encourages them to make use of the Prisoners' Families Helpline provided by Pact.

In the video, Sir Michael explains why he is throwing his support behind Pact and the Helpline service. He says:

**“These are difficult times for us all, but especially for those in prison and their families outside. You may feel yourselves a bit forgotten, low on the list of those whose experiences of the coronavirus we hear about each day. In my work over the last few years I have realised how important is the link between families and prisoners. It's something we need to protect, not ignore.”**

It is an incredibly difficult time for prisoners and their loved ones, adding to the existing challenges of keeping in touch and maintaining strong family relationships while separated.

Joining Sir Michael is playwright and author Frank Cottrell-Boyce, a well-known Catholic who has thrown his support behind Pact's emergency Covid-19 appeal. Everyone making a donation online will receive a video message from Frank who speaks about the immense struggle that prisoners and their families are facing:

**“Pact is doing everything it can to support prisoners on lockdown and their worried families,” he explains. “Your support has meant so much to the staff and volunteers at Pact.”**



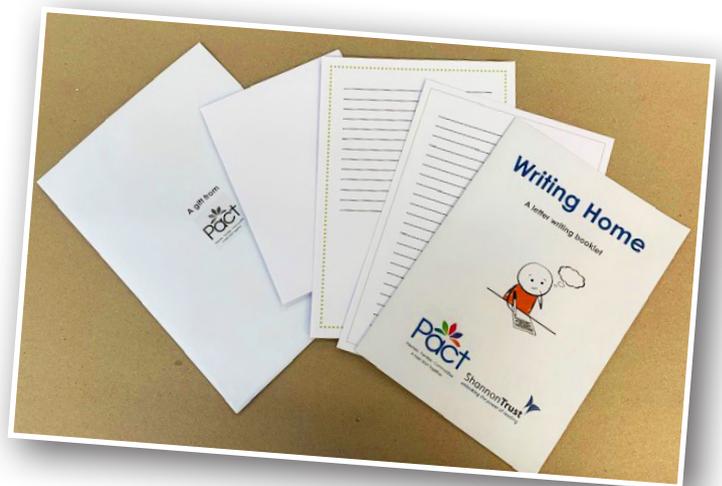
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## Writing Home

As part of our work to support prisoners to maintain strong relationships with their families, we were thrilled to partner with The Shannon Trust to develop our brand new 'Writing Home' packs: a simple but vital resource to help prisoners keep in touch with their loved ones during the COVID-19 outbreak.

At a time when other forms of communication (such as phone calls and visits) are restricted as part of efforts to control the spread of Coronavirus, it has never been more important for prisoners to be able to write to their loved ones. Our 'Writing Home' packs are therefore designed for people in prison who may lack confidence with writing, to support them to keep in touch with their families and children. Each 'Writing Home' pack contains a simple guide on how to write letters to adults and children, along with some writing paper and envelopes.

Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, we have been able to provide 20,000 'Writing Home' packs to more than 50 prisons across England and Wales as a gift from Pact.



## Adapting at Pact: Supporting our staff

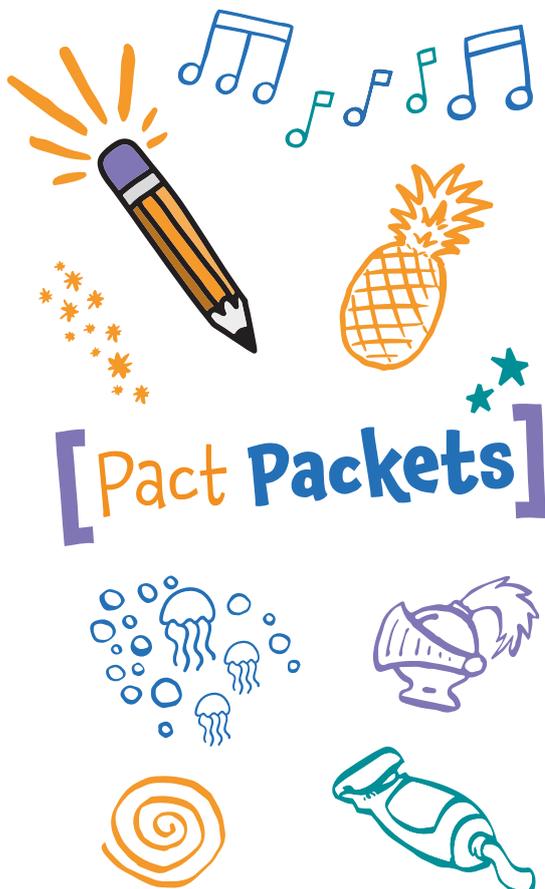
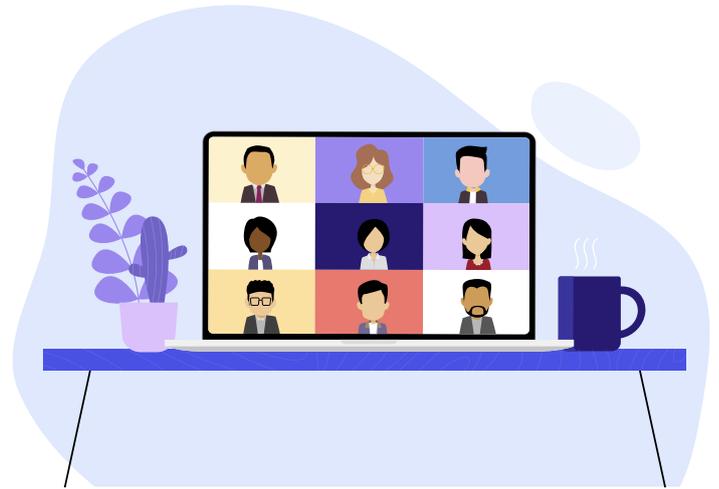
Joanne Mulcahy is Pact's Assistant Director of Services. She explains how Pact has been supporting staff working through the lockdown.

As restrictions started to be implemented in response to Covid-19, Pact assumed responsibility for staff safety as a primary concern. Those working face to face in prisons and the community were withdrawn from public-facing roles and we quickly implemented a remote working scheme so that we could continue to provide as good a service as possible from the relative safety of our own homes.

Whilst we do have some staff that routinely work from home, we were very conscious that for many, this switch to home working would not be easy. Some staff are juggling childcare responsibilities, some are living in shared accommodation, some were now quite isolated and for others, the possibility of home relationships becoming strained was a very real worry. We initially responded by putting our own guidance and links to other good resources and avenues of help for our staff. We also set up a staff support Zoom group so that people could drop into a video call to talk about how they were doing, difficulties they were having, or what they had watched on TV!

As well as regular all-staff keeping-in-touch emails, local managers responded by setting up WhatsApp groups and weekly video calls so that everyone could connect on an informal basis. A weekly Pact quiz for all staff on a Friday, gives a sense of fun and togetherness. Other proactive managers arranged virtual coffee breaks where their teams could have a coffee together and catch up on non-work related topics.

At Pact, we know that excellent services can only be provided by excellent people and we would like to say a huge thank you to all of our staff for their continued support and commitment, and their passion for continuing to support families through these difficult times.



### Pact Packets

We know that being separated from your loved ones can be difficult at the best of times, but the suspension of prison visits as part of measures to control the global pandemic has put even more pressure on families who are apart from each other because of imprisonment. That's why, in March, we were proud to launch 'Pact Packets', a brand new collection of resources to support children, families and prisoners throughout the Coronavirus crisis and beyond.

Each Pact Packet resource for families can be downloaded and printed at home and contains a selection of entertaining, age-appropriate activities to help pass the time. There are puzzles and brain-teasers, drawing and writing challenges, and two dedicated 21-day challenges for children and teenagers to complete. The first resources were thought up by some of our amazing staff and volunteers after we set a competition looking for the best ways to offer remote support to children. We have also been adding to the resources over the weeks and months of lockdown, and sharing best practice and ideas from other organisations.

As always, Pact are committed to supporting prisoners and their families. While prison visits are not open, you can find contact details for Pact's remote family support teams and the most up-to-date information we have in our digital visitors' guides:

[www.prisonadvice.org.uk/prison-visitors-guides](http://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/prison-visitors-guides).



## Could you be a Trustee of Pact?

Pact is a charity which is governed by a group of volunteers, known as our Board of Trustees.

We currently have one vacancy on our Board, and as a supporter, perhaps you might be interested? Some time ago now, our Trustees reviewed themselves and decided that we need to become more diverse. Trustees want to make sure that as a group, we reflect the broadest possible range of experiences and perspectives, and we want to better reflect the diverse communities we serve. So we are very keen to hear from people who share Pact's ethos and values, our sense of mission, and who have a few hours each month to support the good governance of the charity.

We are particularly interested to hear from people with a Black and minority ethnic heritage and from women. If you would like to find out more, email us at [info@prisonadvice.org.uk](mailto:info@prisonadvice.org.uk) for more information, and please put the following in the subject line 'Tell me about being a Trustee of Pact'.

## The difference YOU make

Supporter Relations Manager Lisa, shares the surprise that she's been dealing with for the past three months...

When our Spring Fresh Start arrived on your doorstep back in March, all the indications given to us was that charitable giving would be 'down' and that we, as a charity, should expect that we would need to cut our projects and reduce the level of help that we are able to give; that our donors would be keen to hang on to their money because of the uncertainty ahead. Well not Pact supporters, that's for sure! You so generously donated over £12,000 to Pact's core funding which has enabled us to keep our work going in all the ways you have read about in this issue of Fresh Start.

Of course it's ongoing, and now having launched our Covid-19 appeal we are again asking you to be generous. You will see the details in the letter that accompanies this newsletter; anything you can give will be so gratefully received. If you can, don't forget to GiftAid your donation: it adds an additional 25% to your gift and doesn't cost you anything.

## Support us through a donation

**Online:**  
[prisonadvice.org.uk/donate](https://prisonadvice.org.uk/donate)

**Post:**  
Cheques can be made payable to Pact. Please return your donation in the enclosed envelope, or send to:  
Pact, 29 Peckham Road, London, SE5 8UA

If you have other creative ideas of how to support us and help raise funds please get in touch.



**Pact is the national Catholic charity supporting prisoners, people with convictions and their families.** Our mission is to support prisoners and their families to make a fresh start and to minimise the harm that can be caused by imprisonment on people with convictions, families and communities.

Pact's journey began in 1898 – founded under the name of the Catholic Prisoners' Aid Society by a Catholic Prison Chaplain and a group of like-minded people who saw the importance and need for mercy and redemption. We have also operated as 'The Bourne Trust' for a number of years. Although our name has changed, our vision, mission and values remain the same, our belief in the innate dignity of every human being taken directly from Catholic Social Teaching, Scripture and the tradition of the Church.

## Contact Us:

**Website:** [www.prisonadvice.org.uk](http://www.prisonadvice.org.uk)

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[ParishAction@prisonadvice.org.uk](mailto:ParishAction@prisonadvice.org.uk)

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