

UNLOCK's Response to a Parole Leaflet for Prisoners

Parole Board Stakeholder Engagement



Aim

This document is intended as an informal response to the Parole Board on a draft leaflet intended for prisoners to communicate the process of parole.

Response

Firstly, I am pleased that you have taken on board some of the comments that we, and others, have previously made around improving the information that is provided to prisoners about the parole process. I think it is important to start from the position that prisoners themselves (rather than those who represent them, work with them, or work for them) are recognised as a main stakeholder, and that this principle applies throughout the Parole Boards development in terms of stakeholder engagement. In this regard, I think it would be worthwhile, before finalising any guidance targeted at prisoners, that prisoners themselves are given the opportunity to comment so as to ensure that any publication properly achieves the aim it set out to achieve. This could be done by taking a sample of prisons, reflecting the different categories of establishment and the different types of people held, and looking to gain the views of serving prisoners.

Secondly, I think that a short guide along the lines of what is attached is one important way of going about communicating how the Parole Board works. Given the PRT research that you make reference to, it is sensible to have a short leaflet which can be easily read and understood. I agree with the overall purpose of the leaflet, and having had a quick look at the draft guide it seems to achieve its purpose in this regard.

However, the research that you reference as indentifying half of all prisoners as being at or below the level expected of an 11 year-old in reading can also be read as showing how half of prisoners are above this level. I think it is therefore important to address this group of people as well when looking to engage with prisoners about the Parole Process. This is further substantiated by the queries that UNLOCK receive, where there appears to be a general appetite for more information. Although by nature of making contact this is highlighting a sub-set of a larger group, I think it still illustrates a rather indicative point.

Further to this, although the leaflet looks to point prisoners in the right direction in seeking professional help, I suspect that there is much more information and advice in the form of guidance that could be made available to prisoners, provided by the Parole Board, without having to have recourse to legal advice. The information that is currently available on your website is evidence of this.

In the age of decreasing legal aid budgets, I would like to think that organisations such as the Parole Board are able to look at the issue of information in a much more holistic way and realise that, if more detailed information was available for those who had a direct interest and an ability to make practical use of such information, it would be an effective use of resources, rather than funding through the taxpayer the provision of professional legal support. Furthermore, as a charity, we are always keen to strive towards empowering individuals wherever possible to take control of their own affairs, rather than rely on the support of others.

As you rightly point out, detailed guidance for legal representatives and other practitioners representing prisoners is already provided on your website – are there any practical reasons as to why serving prisoners are not able to have access to this type of information, other than for the fact that most prisoners do not have access to the internet? Would it be possible to take this level of detailed information and translate it into hard-copy versions, which could be disseminated by the Parole Board proactively, as well as reactively request?

In terms of the areas that would be covered in a more detailed guidance document, I have consulted with a volunteer of ours who is a serving prisoner to gain his thoughts as to the areas that may be useful. He identified the following areas:

1. More information (similar to what is currently available on website), including sections on:
 - Parole information for determinate sentence prisoners
 - What sentence have I got?
 - How do I apply to the Parole Board?
 - My dossier
 - The Parole Board decision
 - A guide to life and IPP licence
 - Information about your sentence, tariff and applying for life and IPP licence
 - Information about how the Parole Board makes its decisions
 - A guide for juveniles
 - Parole for children and young people
 - Recall to prison
 - Other sources of help (other than legal advisors)
 - Glossary of terms
2. The Parole Board Rules 2004 and other information in the Policy and Guidance section of the Parole Board website (such as Secretary of State decisions, influential cases, the Oral hearing prioritisation framework, criteria for refusing an oral hearing and intensive case management) should be made available to serving prisoners (without the need for recourse to legal advice), e.g. through the Prison Library.
3. There should be a presumption that as much information as possible about how the Parole Board make its decisions is made available to prisoners when preparing their case, including detailed information on its decision making process and the role of aggravating and mitigating factors that would influence the decision. This would enable prisoners to be given

the best opportunity to put their case forward. This would be subject to the exception where there is a strong case for not disclosing certain elements of the decision making process.

4. Once granted Parole, lifers still have to wait until a date has been set for release, which can take months. Information needs to be available which explains why there is such a delay and what processes there are for dealing with this situation, i.e. how can a prisoner expect his or her case to be dealt with, as there is a common assumption that once lifers are granted Parole, they are entitled to be released immediately.
5. Information is needed on the influence of reports made by outside Probation officers in terms of how they weigh against those of internal Probation officers, given the likelihood that an internal Probation officer would have the best insight as to the individual's development and conduct.
6. Detailed information on the timelines of a case being prepared for the Parole Board and their decisions needs to be available, which accounts for the compiling the reports and the impact that further reports can have on affecting a decision being made.

In terms of distribution, I would suspect that looking to make copies available to prison libraries, as well as organisations that work both directly and indirectly with serving prisoners, would be a positive and effective form of dissemination. I also think it would be worthwhile looking to draw attention to their existence through mediums such as *Inside Time* and *Converse*.

I would also recommend that, alongside keeping both types of leaflet kept up to date, further additions to the more detailed guidance are made by way of 'supplementary guidance' to ensure that changes which are made which affect prisoners (such as policy changes) are effectively communicated.

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