

Introduction

I am honoured and delighted to be speaking at this event to mark the 50th anniversary of the Parole Board.

I have been to several Parole Board hearings. These have shown me first hand, the care Parole Board members take when reaching often difficult decisions. I've been impressed by your professionalism and diligence - the fact that you are at pains to put all attendees at ease - and by your polite, but penetrating questioning of both offenders and professionals.

My role as Victims' Commissioner is to champion the interests of victims and witnesses, and highlight best practice in their treatment. To do this, I travel across the country, meeting and talking to victims and hearing their stories. This gives me a sense of what is happening on the ground.

And it won't surprise you to know that sometimes, what I hear on the ground is not quite the same as told by the centre!

In short, I am here to view the criminal justice system from the perspective of victims.

Although appointed by Ministers, I should also point out that I am independent of government. In practice, that means that I am free to tell it as I see it. And that's what I am doing today.

Parole Board

Over the past 15 years, the Parole Board has been on a journey in terms of its treatment of victims. Gone are the days when the only interaction victims had with the Parole Board was a phone call from their victim liaison officer to say their offender had been released.

Instead, you have recognised that the victim has a role to play in the parole process – should they chose to do so.

You have given them the opportunity to submit a Victim Personal Statement, telling panels of the impact the crime has had on their lives.

All too often, there is a perception that the impact of crime is transient and soon forgotten. If only it were so.

As you will all know from when you meet victims at panel hearings, many live the pain of bereavement or serious sexual or violent attack for years – sometime decades – after the crime took place. In some cases, the pain never goes away.

Ten years ago, you took went one step further and opened the doors of the hearing room to allow victims to read their statements in person.

At the time, there were those who predicted this would end in disaster.

You were told that victims would have unrealistic expectations.

That it was inevitable that the courts would rule it unlawful.

But ten years down the line, I think we can say that it has been a great success.

I am pleased to see that the number of victims attending hearings is steadily growing and the feedback I have from victims who attend panels is almost always positive. Through your professionalism and care, you proved that it was possible for victims to play a part in the parole process.

But that wasn't all.

Two years ago, your CEO took the rare but welcome step of sending all victims who attend hearings a personal and hand written letter thanking them for their contribution. This personal touch, recognising the victim's role in the process has been valued by victims for its thoughtful care.

More recently, you offered to pay for victims' expenses travelling to and from hearings. This has made hearings more accessible to more victims. It's another positive step in opening up the parole process to victims.

So, on behalf of thousands of victims who have had a positive experience of the parole process, very simply, I say a heartfelt thank you.

But please don't think that I have come here today simply to say thank you. For those of you who know me, it will come as no surprise to learn that "never satisfied" is my mantra.

I believe that there is always more that can be done to improve the victim journey. And I want to ask you to build on what you have achieved by going further.

Exiting the hearing room

I know from personal experience that sitting in front of a panel is a nerve wracking experience. But for increasing numbers of victims, being at the hearing is important. Parole hearings are all about the future – the risk presented by the offender if released and what plans are in place to manage that risk.

But I believe that the starting point in any hearing is that someone has lost their life. Or, they have been so horrifically attacked that their lives have been forever changed.

The victim's statement, particularly when read out in front of you, puts in context the enormity of the decision you are being asked to make.

And for the victim, once you have read your statement, you leave the hearing room with a sense that you have given your loved one a voice at the table.

It is hard to place into words just how cathartic this is.

I know the time pressures panels are always under, no doubt with Nick and Martin cracking the whip back in London! I am sure they like to get their money's worth from you!

But I want to ask you to consider carefully how you handle the exit of the victim from the hearing room. Hastily moving onto next business as soon as the statement is complete, can undermine all

the positive benefits to the victim derived from attending the hearing.

Nick and I have discussed this. I have asked that the Board reflects on how the victim's exit might be more sensitively handled.

Perhaps the panel chairman explaining the process and inviting the victim to ask questions they may have.

Just another 5-10 minutes may cause a slightly delay, but for the victim, it might just enhance their experience. Just as important, you might be able to answer a question that no one else has taken the time to deal with.

But this is not all.

Transparency

However well prepared a victim will be for the possibility of release, the reality of release will always be a shock. For the victim, this decision is a major and difficult milestone in their journey. There is a sense that the offender's punishment is over and they can move on with their life. Meanwhile, the victim may often be struggling with grief. For them, moving on might not be an option.

Many tell me of feeling scared and vulnerable simply knowing that the offender is on the streets.

I have victims writing to me to say that they're too frightened to leave their homes or they have changed their address.

I had one young mother tell me only recently that she no longer feels safe to take her five year old son bowling on Saturday afternoons.

Don't get me wrong. Most victims accept that the offender will be released one day. Yes, they are shocked and concerned. But in my experience, few victims complain about the decision per se.

What actually concerns them more is: not understanding how the decision was made, whether their Victim Personal Statement was been fully considered or if they might bump into the offender in the street. They want to know what supervision on licence will mean in practice.

Of course, in some cases the offender may be resettled at the other end of the country. But as the victim cannot be told this information, they will fear the worst and imagine he is living around the corner.

The victim is unlikely to know that the offender has been released into a hostel, with 24 hour staffing and a curfew. They may not know about licence conditions requiring the offender to report relationships, not work with children, be subject to drug tests.

In many victims' minds, the offender is simply free and able to do what he wants.

In the same way that we support prisoners in making the adjustment to the outside world, I believe we also have a duty to support victims into the next stage of their criminal justice journey.

For me, the best way we can do this is by being as open and transparent as possible.

I want us to look at how far we can go in explaining the conditions and the restrictions placed on the offender.

We need to do all we can to offer victims re-assurance and some peace of mind.

I am aware that the law prevents personal data from being shared. But I refuse to believe that there is nothing more we can tell a victim other than the offender is to be released on a date unspecified and to a part of the country unspecified.

Licence Conditions

And finally, we come to the thorny issue of requests for exclusion zones.

There will always be a tension between victims on the one hand, who often want large exclusion zones to allay their fears, and the Parole Board, on the other, that can only agree to conditions that are “reasonable and proportionate”.

I have met victims who have been dissatisfied with the final decision. A recurring theme is their frustration that they simply do not know why their requests have been amended or turned down. Their Victim Liaison Officers can often struggle to explain the decision on your behalf.

One such victim recently told me that all she knew about the Board's decision to reject her exclusion zone request was that it had something to do with the "Craven Judgment".

I genuinely believe that we can do better than this.

I make a plea that in future, when panels amend or reject a request for a licence condition submitted on behalf of a victim, the panel chair writes to the victim and sets out in clear terms the reasons why. At least this letter might help the victim to understand. It may also frame expectations when future requests are made.

Importantly, such a letter would mean that for the first time, the victim will hear directly from the decision maker, as opposed to their VLO acting as the messenger.

I believe that this direct contact will show the victim respect – and this is important.

Conclusion

My role as Victims' Commissioner is to champion the cause of victims and make sure that they get the support and recognition they deserve. Although there have been strides in the right direction, I am under no illusion how much further we need to go. I am determined to campaign to give victims the rights and support they deserve. In the words of Duke Ellington:

“My attitude is never to be satisfied, never enough, never”

Over the past 50 years, the Parole Board has been responsible for keeping the public safe and rehabilitating offenders. In recent years, it has shown huge commitment to engaging with victims, and allowing them to play a part in the parole process.

I look forward to continuing to work with you, to build on all that you have achieved by and giving victims the support they deserve at this painful stage in their criminal justice journey.

This engagement has been on a journey. I believe it is still on a journey.

I know that Parole Board members and its leadership team are genuinely committed to helping victims go through one of the most difficult parts of their criminal justice journey.

You have achieved a great deal, for which I am grateful, but there is still more we can do.

“Keep challenging yourself to –

Think better

Do better and;

Be better”.

By doing that victims will really see and feel that you will treat them with dignity and respect. Thank you