

**Report by the
Comptroller and Auditor General**

Parole

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Executive summary

1 The number of prisoners in England and Wales eligible to apply for early release from prison on parole has been rising in recent years – in 1998-99, nearly 7,000 prisoners were eligible to apply for parole compared with just over 5,000 in 1996-97. It is important that prisoners' applications for parole are considered in a proper and timely manner. Ensuring that this occurs requires close co-operation between the Prison Service, the Parole Board and other agencies involved in the parole process such as the Probation Service and the police.

2 Members of Parliament, prisons' Boards of Visitors and organisations representing prisoners have all criticised delays in processing parole applications. Such delays can result in successful applicants for parole remaining in custody longer than necessary, placing additional strain on available prison accommodation. It is also expensive - each week's delay in releasing a prisoner on parole costs in the region of £450.

3 The Prison Service is concerned about delays in the parole process and has taken a number of initiatives to address the problem and others are underway. Taking this work into account, our report focuses on parole performance and how the organisations involved in parole co-operate to enable paroled prisoners to be released on time; and how prisons' operations can be improved to support the parole process.

Releasing paroled prisoners on time

4 Determinate sentence prisoners are eligible for release on parole when they have completed half their sentence. The parole timetable begins 26 weeks before that halfway point and involves the parole clerk at the prison compiling a dossier of at least 14, and frequently 20 or more, reports and documents on the prisoner. These are required to assist the Parole Board in making a risk assessment to inform a decision on early release. The dossier should be with the Parole Board at least 10 weeks before the prisoner becomes eligible for release on parole (the parole eligibility date). This is to ensure that the Parole Board can reach its decision two weeks before the parole eligibility date, as required by the parole timetable. Two weeks are normally required to ensure that successful applicants for parole are released on time.

5 Until recently, data measuring performance against the parole timetable have been unreliable, and we had to use data for 1998-99 and later for the purpose of our examination. However, by comparing 1998-99 data with earlier performance data generated for specific reviews of parole, we established that performance has improved as a result of work undertaken by the Prison Service and the Parole Board in recent years. In 1998-99, around 50 per cent of completed dossiers were received by the Parole Board by the due date compared with about 40 per cent in 1996-97.

6 For the dossiers that were submitted late to the Parole Board, the delay to the 26-week timetable cannot always be made up. In 1998-99, the target for parole decisions (approvals and refusals) to be notified two weeks before the prisoner's parole eligibility date was met on average in 58 per cent of cases. Of 2,214 successful parole applications, 853 decisions (39 per cent) were not notified by the target of two weeks before the parole eligibility date. This is likely to have resulted in prisoners being released some time after their parole eligibility date. We estimated the cost to the Prison Service of delays in releasing United Kingdom nationals in 1998-99 at some £2 million.

7 In the first six months of 1999-2000, there were further improvements in performance in the submission of dossiers to the Parole Board and the notification of Parole Board decisions to allow release by the prisoner's parole eligibility date. For April to September 1999, an average of 67.5 per cent of all dossiers arrived at the Parole Board on time. From April 2000, while prisons will continue to aim to get all dossiers to the Parole Board by the due date, the Prison Service plans to measure prisons' performance against an indicator of 80 per cent of dossiers arriving by the due date. In the first six months of 1999-2000, the notification of parole decisions by the target date also improved and averaged 82 per cent.

8 Serious delays in processing a prisoner's application for parole can be caused by their transfer to another prison during the parole process. The receiving prison may have to wait for reports on the prisoner to arrive from the sending prison, and the interview between the prisoner and a Parole Board member may have to be delayed - transfers accounted for nearly half of cancelled interviews in the eight months ending June 1999. The Prison Service does not monitor the numbers of these transfers, or whether they are fully justified. Some Prison Governors have tried to address the problem by refusing to accept transfers of prisoners with a parole application in progress unless the relevant parole documents are sent at the same time, or they receive firm assurances that they will quickly follow.

9 Most parole clerks have some difficulty in obtaining parole reports from the police, the courts, and the Probation Service. The problems with police and court reports illustrate the need for criminal justice organisations to share appropriate information, for example on the nature of a prisoner's offences. Otherwise organisations at the end of the chain, like the Prison Service and the Parole Board, have to carry out their responsibilities without important information. The problems with obtaining Probation Service reports illustrate the need for improved collaboration between the Prison Service and the Probation Service on parole reviews, for example to ensure that the probation officer has sufficient, timely information on the prisoner's conduct in prison to complete a parole assessment.

10 Delays in releasing paroled foreign nationals subject to deportation can occur when the Immigration and Nationality Directorate is not ready or able to remove the prisoner to their own country. In 1998-99, only 27 per cent of deportees were paroled on time. Around 8 per cent spent an additional 100 days in custody. We estimate that these delays cost the Prison Service around £0.5 million.

Supporting the parole process

11 In 1998-99, the Parole Board rejected around 60 per cent of applications for parole. In 96 per cent of a sample of rejected applications examined by independent researchers commissioned by the Home Office, the reasons given for the decision included the prisoner's failure to address offending behaviour.

12 Prisoners' sentence plans are intended to help them tackle their offending behaviour and give them experience of work, training and education to help them prepare for release. We found no explicit links in these plans between the programme of action agreed with the prisoner and their possible early release on parole. Parole is an important part of the process of rehabilitating offenders, and we consider that parole needs to be much better integrated into the planning of the prisoner's whole sentence.

13 Many prisoners have a poor knowledge of the procedures and criteria for parole. Prisoners need to be given a clear idea of the criteria against which their applications will be assessed, and the sorts of issues and information which the Parole Board will take into account. To help meet this need, the Prison Service is working with the Prison Reform Trust to produce a booklet on parole for prisoners.

14 Since July 1998, the Prison Service has provided monthly reports to Prison Governors on the performance of their prisons in providing timely dossiers to the Parole Board on determinate sentence prisoners. Initially, there were concerns about the accuracy of the data because of under-use of the Inmate Information System which supports parole, but the Prison Service believes that the reports have been accurate since at least October 1998. However, our survey found that use of the system was still not comprehensive across the Prison Service.

15 The monthly reports have raised awareness in prisons about the need to improve performance in meeting the parole timetable and the causes of delays. We consider that there is a need for more aggregated information on the reasons for and extent of delays to help inform central plans for further improvements in handling parole applications. We found, for example, that no global information was readily available on the extent to which reports from the Probation Service were late, although since our examination changes have been made to provide this information.

16 The parole caseload varies widely between prisons – from nil to 280 applications in 1998. This can lead to inefficiency, particularly in prisons where, for example, a small parole workload effectively requires the parole clerk to relearn the parole process each time they deal with an application. Although we found that management support of parole has been improving, managers need to be more involved in the allocation of parole work and in ensuring that all the various people and organisations that need to contribute to the parole process play their part.

17 We found significant gaps in the training of parole clerks and their managers, which the Prison Service is taking action to address. Only a third of parole clerks had received training in parole procedures, and only 40 per cent of parole managers had received any relevant training. Less than a quarter of those expected to write reports on prisoners applying for parole have received training in writing reports for parole purposes.

Key recommendations

18 Our detailed recommendations are set out at the end of Parts 2 and 3 and in Appendix 1, referenced to the relevant parts of the report. Our key recommendations below reflect the main themes arising from this examination.

- Better monitoring information is needed which measures releases relative to prisoners' parole eligibility dates; allows the cost of releasing prisoners late to be calculated; aggregates the reasons for delays,

including the frequency and extent to which different parole reports are late; and identifies the numbers of, and reasons for, transfers that take place during the parole timetable. The Prison Service needs to support these improvements by reviewing and improving training in parole and by enabling parole clerks to make full and effective use of the computerised Inmate Information System.

- Co-operation across the criminal justice system needs to be improved. The police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts should make available all the reports needed to plan the prisoner's time in prison at the start of the sentence. And the Prison Service and the Probation Service need to act jointly to ensure that parole assessments are completed on time.
- The Prison Service and Probation Service are developing a Prison-Probation joint offender assessment system. The effectiveness of the current arrangements under which prison and probation staff provide separate parole assessments needs to be reviewed, taking account of the existing joint work.
- Prisoners' sentence plans should be properly integrated with preparation for prisoners' release, including parole. Prisoners who become eligible to apply for parole should be given a clear assessment of their performance against the targets in their sentence plans.
- There should be stronger accountability for performance within the Prison Service, including for the cost of parolees not being released on their parole eligibility date.

19 As part of our study, we undertook comparative analysis of the processes that apply to determinate sentence prisoners eligible for parole and the different processes that apply to life-sentenced prisoners (lifers), who have no entitlement to parole, but may be released on licence which remains in force for life. Though the processes are different, many of the problems of the two systems are the same, for example late reports. Similar means have been used to tackle the problems, and there were few further reciprocal lessons we could draw from our analysis for the management of parole. However, we concluded that factors partly responsible for recent improvements in performance on parole, such as improved information, reporting and use of targets, could also prove effective in relation to lifer reviews.

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The Prison Service has begun to take action on these lines, and should consider with the Parole Board how the successful elements of the parole process can be further applied to the process for lifer reviews.