

Chief Executive's blog – Parole Board Covid-19 recovery plan

In March 2020 it was clear that the spread of Covid-19 made face to face hearings impossible and the Board was forced to progress cases in other ways.

Whilst there have been some inevitable challenges, since then, the Board has demonstrated some flexibility and imagination to progress cases fairly and safely by progressing hearings remotely. The numbers are positive.

Since Covid hit:

- 7,603 Parole Board decisions have been made
- There have been 1,029 directions for release
- 1,594 hearings have taken place via video or telephone.
- Far from a backlog building; the number of cases waiting for a hearing date has reduced by 46%.

Whilst this is positive, it is clear that we are some way away from normality. The Board has therefore published its COVID 19 recovery Strategy.

The Board has set four objectives to guide its recovery and ensure we can achieve the following aims.

We will:

1. Keep people safe and well
2. Manage our resources effectively
3. Maintain flexibility
4. Keep things simple and consistent

Under our strategy we will:

- Continue to pay close regard to Government advice.
- Continue to work remotely until it is safe to make changes.
- Ensure vulnerable members or staff will not undertake face-to-face oral hearings or return to the office until it is safe for them to do so.
- Allow our people to continue to work remotely for extended periods, limiting the need for public transport.
- Continue to schedule remote hearings until prisons are open for a sustained period (either regionally or nationally).
- Communicate and consult as our plans flex and change.

The Board sees 3 phases to our recovery plan (we are currently emerging from Phase 1):

Phase 1 – Access: May – June 2020

- Presume remote working
- Only essential access to PB site

- No access to prisons
- Limit use of public transport

Phase 2 – Mixed Economy: July – November 2020

- Consider re-starting small number of face-to-face hearings for those cases where it is essential for fairness and safe socially distanced hearings can be undertaken
- Scale up video hearings and increase number of remote rooms
- Teams start to return to 10SC in small numbers
- Some member recruitment starts
- Some access to prisons may be possible
- Some face-to-face events if can be managed safely with social distancing

Phase 3 – New Normal: December 2020 onwards

- Greater use of remote hearings and remote working where appropriate
- Increase in levels of face-to-face hearings if safe
- Different pathways for different types of cases
- Enough remote video rooms to meet demand
- Office reopened and more staff able to work from the PB office safely again, or with social distancing in place

We will only return to routine face-to-face oral hearings when it is safe to do so and will continue listing hearings but be ready to convert them to remote on a rolling basis to manage any potential extensions to, or rolling or local lockdowns.

Alongside this, The Board will ensure that its ongoing paper assessment process (the Member Case Assessment “MCA” process) matches the interim policy for remote hearings and include an extra step at MCA to support decision making on the papers.

Whilst face-to-face hearings must happen for some prisoners, we have found that for the majority remote hearings are fair and effective and allow us to operate in a period of ongoing uncertainty where further lockdowns are predicted for years to come.

For those cases that do require a face-to-face hearing, we will agree a way with HMPPS for how face-to-face hearings can take place safely in prisons with social distancing measures remaining in place. Where face-to-face hearings remain the most appropriate way forward, resuming them will depend upon prison access and a full risk assessment.

Video hearings are being scaled up and will be used in the majority of cases where it is important for panels to see each other and those attending. Telephone hearings will continue to be used when the facts of the case allow, making for speedier reviews, with much shorter time frames than an oral hearing. Telephone hearings will be used for determinate recall cases and to ensure adjourned cases progress appropriately.

The Parole Board now has eight virtual video meeting rooms which are allowing us to hold hundreds of video hearings each month. This number is set to

double in the next few weeks and we plan to increase this in the coming weeks to up to 25 advanced video rooms that will allow side conversations and recording in the future.

Despite the significant challenges, prisoners, Prisoners' legal representatives and other participants (including victims) have been supportive and shown considerable patience and forbearance amidst the disruption caused by COVID 19. We are very grateful for their support and will continue to work with them to ensure cases are concluded fairly and safely in the future.