

# Chief Executive's blog – January 2021

On 4th January 2021 the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Act 2020 was brought into law.

The Parole Board has welcomed the implementation of the Act which puts on a statutory footing guidance that was first issued by the Board in 2017. It is important for victim and public confidence to be clear that the Board will always consider failure to disclose information about victims.

The Board has immense sympathy for families that find themselves in this tragic situation and recognises the distress that a parole review of the offender is likely to cause. The Parole Board guidance which has been reissued and advises panel members to carefully consider any failure or refusal by an offender to disclose the whereabouts of a victim's remains when assessing suitability for release.

The Act will have an impact on our decisions, making it a legal duty for the Parole Board to take into account an offender's failure to disclose the location of their victim's remains when considering them for release. Having a statutory obligation is stronger than internal guidance which cannot be binding on members. If a panel fails to take the failure to disclose information into account, and set out their assessment of the reasons in their decision, the Secretary of State for Justice would have a strong case for seeking a reconsideration of the Board's decision.

Whilst the Act is not a bar on release, and does not, and could not legally amount to "no-body no parole" it does have real meaning. Practically, in my experience, any deliberate failure to disclose what has happened to a victim will almost always lead to a prisoner spending longer in prison. A prisoner who fails to disclose information, or assist the authorities, is at the very least showing a lack of victim empathy, and may also demonstrate an attempt to exert power over their victims. Such behaviour is unlikely to assist a prisoner in demonstrating a reduction in risk. It is also much harder for a prisoner to demonstrate change in behaviour, reform and a reduction in risk of harm if they have not admitted their offence or co-operated with authorities.

The 2020 Act represents a further step in improving the parole system's responsiveness to victims. Since 2018 I have welcomed the steps that have been taken to improve the transparency of the parole system and victims access to information. Whilst understandably, victims will voice disquiet and concern when a prisoner who has caused real harm is considered for parole, I am always impressed by the dignity they show. I am convinced that providing clearer and timely information to victims, including better explanation of the sentence itself, will reduce the concerns that they have. More than 4,000 summaries of our decisions have been issued.

The Board has also implemented a transparent reconsideration mechanism that has provided an important and speedy avenue to ensure decisions are rational

and fair, in the light of the evidence presented. I am convinced that with the right safeguards further increasing transparency would be a positive step.