

# [Hundreds of criminals waiting months before starting community service](#)

- [Home](#)
- [All News](#)
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Hundreds of criminals who were handed community payback orders last year didn't start the work for months afterwards, it has emerged.

Research by the Scottish Conservatives revealed that 338 offenders did not commence CPOs for more than four months after sentence was passed last year.

That's an increase of 22 per cent in the space of 12 months, with hundreds more waiting more than two months to get started.

The Freedom of Information response from the Scottish Government also showed some criminals have waited more than a year for their CPOs to begin, with at least one waiting 511 days in 2014-15.

Shadow justice secretary Liam Kerr attacked the delays, saying they made the court system look weak and damaged the rehabilitation prospects of those involved.

CPOs are likely to take on more importance as the SNP government seeks to impose a presumption against prison sentences of less than 12 months.

However, with so many delays in getting these underway, the Scottish Conservatives voiced concerns about the system not being ready to take on more demand.

In 2015/16, the most recent year for which figures are available, 412 criminals waited more than two months for their order to start, while 176 were delayed between three and four months.

**Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Liam Kerr said:**

"There's clearly a problem with the system when hundreds of criminals are waiting months for their community payback to begin.

"These unacceptable delays create two serious problems.

"Criminals already show up to court knowing they stand a good chance of getting off lightly, and having months between the sentence being handed down and CPOs beginning will do nothing to change that mindset.

“And these waits will do nothing to help rehabilitation.

“Many offenders whose sentence is a CPO have challenging and difficult lives. Significant delays such as this can break the connection in the mind between the crime and the punishment.

“It would be far better for these offenders to receive the punishment and get the CPO completed as soon as possible, allowing them to move on from their criminal life.

“The SNP wants to empty jails across the country, and that will mean more of these CPOs will be used.

“But as it stands, the system is already unable to cope, and ministers must explain how they intend to address that.”

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To see the full Freedom of Information response, visit:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/FoI-17-01881-CPO-Delays.docx>

As part of her Programme for Government, Nicola Sturgeon said she wanted to abolish sentences of less than 12 months:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2017/09/ruth-responds-to-snps-programme-for-government/>

More than 1000 prisoners receive no work or education activity towards their rehabilitation:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2017/08/blow-for-rehabilitation-as-fewer-inmates-involved-in-purposeful-activity/>