

Justice Committee

Prisoners (Control of Release) (Scotland) Bill

Supplementary written submission from Victim Support Scotland

Victim Support Scotland is the largest organisation in Scotland supporting people affected by crime. We provide practical help, emotional support and essential information to victims, witnesses and others affected by crime, both in the community and in every Sheriff and High Court in Scotland. The service is free, confidential and is provided by volunteers. VSS welcomes the opportunity to provide updated evidence to the Committee in light of the letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice of 3rd February¹ announcing proposed changes to the Bill.

Victim Support Scotland supports ending automatic early release of prisoners as we believe that this will lead to greater transparency and clarity in sentencing for both the general public and victims of crime. We welcome the Scottish Government's announcement that the Bill will be extended to cover all long-term prisoners, as this will allow a far greater number of prisoners, and victims, to benefit from these changes. Most importantly, this will take us a step closer to achieving a system in which sentences are straightforward and understandable to the victim and the wider community.

VSS also supports the guarantee of a period of post-release supervision for prisoners, as we recognise the significant role played by community supervision, not only in facilitating enhanced reintegration into the community, but also in supporting offenders to desist from further offending. We are satisfied that the Bill is now better placed to achieve its aims of improving public safety and reducing reoffending, as well as helping victims of crime attain a greater understanding of sentencing and release.

To create as clear and straightforward a system as possible, Victim Support Scotland suggests that the approach to sentencing and release of **short-term prisoners** be re-considered. It is difficult for victims to understand why such prisoners are released automatically at the halfway point of their sentence with no restrictions or supervision arrangements. We would welcome the implementation of the McLeish Commission recommendation that all short-term prisoners be released with conditions, support and supervision. We note however, the restrictions of the long title of the Bill in relating specifically to long-term offenders. As such, we would welcome a future commitment from the Scottish Government to consider taking a similar approach to changing release arrangements for short-term prisoners as in this Bill.

Regardless of the changes made to the current system of automatic early release, it is **of paramount importance that victims are kept informed of the release arrangements of their offender**, including any conditions that are in place on release.

¹http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_JusticeCommittee/Inquiries/20150203_CSfJ_to_CG_AER_announcement.pdf

Knowing the release date of an offender can be extremely important to victims of crime; it allows them to put in place measures to ensure their safety, and can prevent situations in which they unexpectedly come face to face with their offender in the community. VSS continues to call for the expansion of the Victim Notification Scheme to allow **all** victims the opportunity to be kept informed and provide representations to the relevant authority on the release of the offender, as specified in Article 6(5) of the Victims' Directive².

Victim Support Scotland
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² <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32012L0029&from=EN>