

Covid-19 update – victim interviews/Tribunal observations

Registered victims in cases where offenders have received a life sentence have a right to an interview with a Parole Board member in advance of the prisoner's case being considered by a parole tribunal. Following changes to the Parole Board Rules in March 2021, they also have the right to request to observe the parole tribunal at which the prisoner's case is considered.

The continuing number of positive Covid-19 cases, and guidance from the Scottish Government about safe working practices has had an impact on both victim interviews and requests to observe tribunals.

Victim interviews with a Parole Board member are currently generally being carried out by telephone or through a videolink such as MS Teams.

It has not been possible, however, to grant requests to attend tribunals via video link. It is the chair of each tribunal who decides whether a victim observation request can be authorised. In making that decision they will refer to the guidance from the Board's chairperson that sets out the practical issues that need to be considered in the current circumstances before approving a request. These include having a number of individuals present in a confined indoor space over a lengthy period of time. Our primary consideration must be the safety and security of all those involved.

In order for a tribunal observation to take place, significant forward planning and preparation has to be done, involving engagement with the victim, prisons, solicitors, social workers and the Parole Board members. Planning for a case can take up to 4 weeks and because of this, there will be a time lag between it becoming clear that it is safe for observations to take place and the first observations happening. . Whilst the current position is frustrating for all involved, the Board continues to work with the Scottish Government, Scottish Prison Service (SPS) and victims' organisations to ensure we can meet the needs of Scotland's victims when normal business resumes.

This includes: -

- The establishment of a dedicated victims team in Parole Scotland to manage the observation process and to oversee the Board's engagement with victims in other parts of the parole process.
- The development of a technical solution with SPS that will allow us to conduct future observations safely and securely between the remote videolink location (close to the victims home address) and the prison, (testing is underway). A member of staff will also be present to set up the equipment and to facilitate the observation.
- The initiation of the 'Safe Space' project which will involve engagement with local authorities and other bodies across Scotland to identify suitable venues for observations.

Parole Scotland remain committed to meeting the needs of victims and are ready to support tribunal observations as soon as it is safe to do so. We are constantly monitoring the situation and will update you when the position changes.

We would like to thank you for your patience at this frustrating time.