

Covid-19 early prisoner release: Victim service provider script

The government has announced new measures to protect the NHS from coronavirus risks in prisons, deciding to release selected low-risk offenders, who have served over half their sentence and are within two months of their automatic release dates.

Victim service providers may receive queries from concerned victims in the coming weeks about the early release of prisoners. Below we have provided responses to some of the most likely questions and in particular, how to find out whether their offender is going to be released under this scheme.

Why is the government releasing prisoners?

To protect the NHS from coronavirus risks in prisons. This action is necessary to avoid thousands of prisoners overwhelming local NHS services and to save lives.

Exclusions

- This early release scheme will only apply to offenders who are to be released in the next 2 months

The following are excluded and so will not be released early under this scheme:

- any offender who received a sentence for a violent or sexual offence;
- any offender with a history of domestic violence;
- any offender convicted of stalking or harassment offences (coercive/controlling behaviour, breach of restraining order or revenge pornography); and
- any offender who is of concern on the grounds of national security
- Additionally, no offender convicted of Covid-19 related offences, including coughing at emergency workers or stealing personal protective equipment, will be eligible.

Other safeguards

For any offender not automatically excluded, there will be:

- a thorough risk-assessment beforehand to ensure they do not pose a significant risk to the public, including any child safeguarding issues
- subject to strict licence conditions
- electronically monitored, including with GPS tags, to enforce the requirement to stay at home; and immediately recalled to prison for breaching these conditions or committing further offences.

What happens next?

- The releases will be phased over time but can start from this week (w/c 6 April)
- Phasing the release will ensure appropriate checks and risk assessments can take place. This will not lead to thousands of prisoners being released at the same time

For more information: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/asures-announced-to-protect-nhs-from-coronavirus-risk-in-prisons>

Can the victim find out if the offender in their case has been released?

- Victims who are not part of the [Victim Contact Scheme1](#), who wish to know if the offender in their case has been given early release, or if they have received unwanted contact from the offender, should contact Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service Victim Helpline on 0300 060 6699 (Monday – Friday 9.00am – 4.00pm) or by emailing <mailto:victim.helpline@justice.gov.uk>
- Victims support groups may ring the helpline on behalf of individual victims
- Helpline staff will make enquiries and then notify the victim as to whether the prisoner is due to be released or has been released.

The Helpline **cannot** provide any of the following information to victims:

- The exact date of the offender's release
- From which prison the offender will be released
- The offender's licence conditions
- Where the offender will be residing
- As always, if victims are concerned about their immediate safety, they should call the police on 999.

Why are all victims whose offender is being released not being contacted via the Victim Contact Scheme (VCS)?

- Only victims of violent or sexual offenders who received a sentence of 12 months or more are automatically eligible to choose to join the VCS. Those offenders are expressly excluded from early release under this scheme (see safeguards above).

Can the decision to release an offender be appealed?

- No. Only prisoners with a determinate sentence are eligible for release under this scheme and they are not subject to a parole board decision for release (which can now be challenged).

What support is available to victims?

- Victims can continue to access support during the Coronavirus outbreak. Further details are available on Gov.uk (<http://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-victim-and-witness-services>) or by contacting their local Police and Crime Commissioner (<http://www.police.uk>).