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*Special Edition*  
50 Years of the Parole System  
for England and Wales

# Does Preparing for Parole Help Prepare for Life?

*Scott Martin served 16 years in custody as a life sentenced prisoner working to understand his offending past and build a future. He has been through the Parole System.*

**The prison service identifies risk factors for lifers based on their offence and lifestyle prior to custody. Many successful parole applicants spend years pursuing treatment to evidence that they understand these factors and then further years demonstrating that these factors are no longer active in their life. They will also develop new activities, hobbies or interests that show a full and healthy life free from these risk factors in custody and develop a convincing plan to continue this approach on release.**

Is this a useful approach? Does it require real change? Or does it just demand insight into the system and patience?

I discussed these questions recently in interviews with ten of my fellow mandatory lifers now living on licence in the community driven by a desire to investigate how those of us who lived through it think about the Parole System. These interviews combine with my personal experience and reflections on anecdotes and observations heard over the years to form this article. It has no academic pretensions or aspirations and seeks to stimulate conversation rather than provide answers.

## **Does anyone in here know how to get out?**

Like all lifers I was convicted, sentenced and given my minimum term in a local prison. Few of us knew anything about what would happen next. There were sometimes meetings with lifer managers back then — we would ask for televisions and extra clothing, they would refuse and keep us in the dark about when we would move on to a *proper prison*. I felt stuck in local, over 2 years with no idea of what my sentence meant or if I could survive it. Another lifer recalls, 'It felt like I had no idea of when I would get out, or even be given a chance to move forward.'

In local prison there is no opportunity to work on any of the factors which lead to imprisonment and no opportunity to plan. What little education there is on the parole process comes from other prisoners since the staff typically know nothing about lifer management. The most common misconception is that 'you should act up for a few years and then show them you've changed.' The system has a long memory and misdemeanours committed early in the sentence are

often seen as a source of risk much later down the line.

For lots of us it was only when we were got a solicitor to prepare for our first Parole Board that the true nature of the process became clear — risk is all that matters. Many lifers find that evidence from their time in custody does not support a release application. Even those who are successful are at a loss to explain how they managed it — 'I didn't know what the right thing to do was, I felt like I was winging it.' Another lifer commented that 'things weren't explained to me. I was asked which prison I wanted to move to — the officer told me where they are so I chose HMP Gartree cause my Dad's cousin once lived in Market Harborough.'

Lifers' risk factors are collections of characteristics which the system uses to recommend *treatment* and to assess the probability of further offences. In reality the most reliable predictors of future actions are static, based on unalterable facts such as the age at which the first offence was committed, whether there have been multiple offences and whether they were violent. Each lifer will also have a list of dynamic risk factors which are considered treatable or to have the potential to be mitigated against by protective factors. One lifer was told 'these will always be your risk factors, you just have to learn to manage them.'

Risk factors are harvested from information about the lifer and the offence gathered at the time of conviction. The lifers I spoke to felt removed from the process of identifying risk factors with only one feeling consulted:

*It felt like the psychologist was trying to put things in a bracket. Things aren't black and white. I explained to them the circumstances of my offence and why I didn't agree with two of the risk factors on the list. They told me they would be adding an extra one.*

## **So what do I do about it?**

Many lifers come to understand the importance of addressing risk factors by listening to the experiences of others. This advice need not necessarily be positive, the old adage that 'they have to let you

out some time' is not even remotely true for mandatory lifers. When it proves false many turn to coping strategies like drink or drugs for temporary relief from the frustration of being ten or twenty years over their minimum term.

Risk factors are context specific, in combination with personality traits serious offences are triggered by a set of environmental factors — perhaps poverty, social isolation, abusive intimate relationships or gang membership. In prison these environmental factors are absent and the lifer is left to work on risk factors removed from the context in which they were tragically relevant. The complex reality of how violent acts come to be cannot be usefully explored by focusing on a list of risk factors. This over simplification of the original act is mirrored in the release plan at the end of the sentence — often a mundane set of unrealistic aspirations which in no way inspires the individual or reflects their complex (and very human) needs.

Every lifer should have a sentence plan which details what is required of them during their years in custody, focused on areas of risk related to the offence. In common with the list of risk factors most lifers felt distanced from the compilation of these targets which normally involve attendance on offending behaviour courses with some additional goals focused on education or employment. Until the lifer has moved to open prison the emphasis appears to be exclusively on addressing risk factors — that is the focus is on unpicking the past, not in moving forward beyond the prison gate. A desire to learn new skills, develop relationships or to build release plans early in a life sentence is discouraged. Most lifers were cautious when pushing for progression or release as they felt it was perceived as suspicious by the system. One man was told not to ask for a move to a Category B prison from dispersal for at least 6 years. He was a Cat B when he asked.

One lifer commented that he began to understand what was required of him during his life sentence by listening to other men he came to trust and respect: 'I realised it's a game of chess, if you don't do these courses you aren't going to be released.'

Many of us questioned at the time whether undertaking offending behaviour work was just ticking boxes. Every lifer I have discussed this issue with has said that their primary motivation to attend these courses was the desire to be released, that they

took part because they believed it was necessary to progress through the system and the Parole Board would attach significance to it.

In terms of the experience of the courses themselves lifers often report that they feel manipulated onto the course and that facilitators as well as participants were simply ticking boxes. Non-offence focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy courses such as the Thinking Skills Programme are often seen as simply packaging common sense inside a few acronyms, as patronising and of little value. However, many lifers did say that techniques that they learned on courses have stayed with them and can be useful in 'managing life in general, not so much in managing risk.'

My experience of offending behaviour courses is in accord with many others I have spoken to — the process of selecting and assessing an individual for treatment is

dehumanising and threatening but it is possible to benefit from the opportunity if the imbalance of power in the room can be overcome. The fear which comes from the knowledge that a positive report at the end of the course can result in progression to less secure conditions or release is inhibiting, it stifles honesty and creativity and makes it extremely unlikely that participants will openly and fully engage.

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### How did we change then?

Each lifer I spoke to is free, has a stable family life and all but one of them is employed or in full time education. Prior to prison all led chaotic lives. All were convicted of murder. One man's reflections on the process of change for him summarises the majority of views:

*For me there was a process of maturing and reflecting through umpteen years — from local all the way through to release. Sometimes it was helped by courses and sometimes by family, the people around me or just by time.*

Asking released lifers about the existence of the previously crucial risk factors in their life today appeared to evoke a kind of nostalgia, 'It's been a while since I thought about it like that' was one comment which resonates with 'I can't remember what they were? Did I have 4 or 5? They seemed to be relevant at the time, they made sense, but they're not relevant to life now.'

As much as lifers frequently acknowledge that they developed some techniques from their offending behaviour work it appears that a toolkit for managing active risk factors is not one of them. It appears that this is simply because it is unnecessary — ‘Looking back 20 years I can see the problems in my life. All I’ve done is extracted the sense from the nonsense.’ The shared view is that committing the crime followed by two decades in prison has changed each person significantly. Each lifer also found the process of proving this to the Parole Board extremely confusing and each found that the plans developed during their time in prison to be somewhat differently to the reality.

*They are quite weird, Parole Boards.*

*The trouble is I was trying to prove a negative, that something wasn’t going to happen.*

*I went into the board full of mixed emotions but trying to appear confident and positive.*

*Is it useful? Only in the sense that once you’ve been through it you can face anything.*

*I think they were just trying to see if I still had a temper.*

Every lifer has their own experience of Parole Board oral hearings. On my first one the lay member told me she had read my dossier and that there was lots of good stuff in it, that I had clearly achieved a lot during my time in custody, ‘and I’m not going to ask you about any of it.’ She was, she said, the one who would ask the tough questions. Well, by this time I had been prodded and poked and provoked by group facilitators and fellow group members for years, nothing she was going to throw at me would provoke a strong reaction. I had answers to those difficult questions about the past. What I really didn’t know about was the future.

### **Why does nobody tell you just how hard it will be?**

I was in open prison for a long time prior to my final Parole Board. I worked in the community, had numerous day releases and a series of home leaves to a probation service Approved Premises. I worked with my solicitor and Offender Manager to put together a release plan covering housing, employment and my support network, even considering what kinds of hobbies I would have. And, of course, how I would

manage my risk factors on an ongoing basis in the community. Most mandatory lifers will prepare for their final board in a similar way.

‘Everything was focused on release, I had no idea just how difficult life outside would be,’ disclosed one lifer. This is a common theme, that the whole of the Parole Board process is focused on satisfying a set of criteria on that day but that very little attention is given to the reality of what happens next. One recently released lifer commented that ‘they released me and then left me to my own devices — it obviously shows I am trusted.’

There is general surprise from released lifers at the lack of supervision they are subject to — which is universally met with approval although there is also a view that being left alone means that support is lacking. Every lifer I have spoken to has commented that there are practical problems that they have had to

solve themselves, often this is accompanied by bemusement at the lack of information, ‘Surely they must have a list of landlords who will accept lifers?’

Plans for employment and housing are two areas where it appears that the package put together to satisfy the Parole Board is extremely unrealistic. Many lifers are released following 15-25 years in prison and yet have insufficient ID to enable them to accept

employment even if it was offered. This problem is somewhat mitigated by the fact that they need to disclose often inhibits lifers from applying for a job in the first place and frequently lack of guidance on how and when to disclose leads to rejection from employers. There are resources to guide lifers in this process from organisations such as Unlock 2000 but this knowledge is rarely passed on from the probation service.

Although almost every mandatory lifer will have spent time in open prison where they will have been offered employment support most still have many barriers such as lack of transportation or experience in using the internet and a large gap in their CV. Many have unrealistic plans for employment and an array of qualifications which appear to impress the Parole Board (presumably because they demonstrate purposeful activity and focus) much more than they impress the typical employer. Since discriminating against a job applicant on the basis that they have committed murder is in no way unlawful many released lifers experience similar problems — ‘they asked me what my offence was, I told them and they just hung up on me.’

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Finding housing can be a similar experience. Most mandatory lifers are described as high-risk and will live in an Approved Premise on release. How easy it is to move on from here varies enormously across the country and according to the knowledge and helpfulness of Offender Manager. The oft repeated line of 'look on the internet' or 'try the local council' is often as good as it gets but two lifers did tell of supportive Offender Managers who were able to secure housing association accommodation. For those lifers seeking a flat via a high street estate agent there appears a clear avenue to success — tick the box marked No on the application form when asked about a criminal record.

*Nobody tells you what it is really like to try and get a job or a house. Nobody is honest about it. Being on home leaves didn't get me ready for the reality.*

For many lifers it appears that society is not ready to accept them, work next to them or live in the same street as them. These rejections are never issued directly, nobody ever explains they won't rent a flat to a lifer. That is problematic since rejection is a pretty normal part of life but to some of us it can be accompanied by an unspoken question, 'Is it because I am a murderer?'

Before prison all of us had a space in society. Some of us had a job, a family, a few friends or a place to call home and, perhaps, someone to hold and to love. Keeping everyone safe meant removing us from that space. Naturally we recreated some of it in prison but in a contained and supervised way. We worked on our risk factors in a bubble away from all that difficult and complicated stuff like meaningful relationships and responsibility. We began to feel better about ourselves and pictured a way through the system,

though for most of us we weren't exactly clear on where this would lead to.

Some lifers make it through their sentence and retain friendships, some maintain family ties through phone calls and visits and some are released from prison knowing nobody from their previous life. Developing new relationships is accompanied for most with a sense of fear about disclosure and many lifers have supportive social networks of people who have no knowledge of their past. Others hold people at arm's length and struggle to engage. Very often the support network designed in prison is not the network which exists after release. For the majority, those people who were so supportive over the years — including family, friends and volunteers are not those who support the lifer after prison. 'Friends who I thought would be the mainstays disappeared off the scene.'

The complexities of human relationships, the barriers to jobs and housing and the difficulty of learning a new set of norms makes preparing for release from prison a huge challenge. It is a different challenge to that of preparing for parole. All lifers when asked directly 'Does preparing for parole help prepare for life?' answered 'No' but each could articulate how they faced the challenges of life in the community by building on a process of reflection and maturation within prison.

One lifer presented a release plan to the Parole Board which he has followed exactly — he worked in open prison whilst undertaking an educational course and carried this on after release. He lived in an Approved Premises and then was able to move to a privately rented flat (yes, he lied on the form). When asked if preparing for parole had helped he replied, 'No. I didn't ever prepare for parole, I prepared for life after prison. I didn't ever do anything for them, I did it all for me.'