

GOOD PRACTICE FOR CHAIRS

Victim Attendance at Oral Hearings

In advance of the hearing

- Ascertain which Secretary of State (SoS) rep will be attending.
- Check who will be presenting the VPS. Do not assume it will be the victim even though they are attending.
- Confirm who will read it if the victim finds it too difficult on the day.
- If the victim is not attending but wishes the VPS to be read out and the VLO /SoS rep are also not present, direct the VLO to nominate an alternative person. A representative from the OMU may be possible. The Offender Supervisor is not usually appropriate unless all parties agree.
- Consider whether other witnesses should be present when the VPS is being read and verify the wishes of the prisoner. It may be preferable for the Chair to restrict the numbers in the room.

Room layout

- Decide on a seating plan that ensures there is maximum distance between the victim and the prisoner and an easy exit, sitting near to the door if possible.
- Place tissues and water near the victim and supporters.
- If a video link is being used ensure the panel is visible and audible before the victim is present in the video link room.
- Check where the camera is – it may not be on top of the screen! This could result in you not looking directly at the victim when they are speaking - looking at the camera gives more eye contact with the speaker. The VLO or court staff may be willing to assist by taking the victim's place to check these matters.

Introducing yourself to the victim before the hearing.

To ensure transparency and fairness it is good practice to make all parties aware that you are intending to introduce yourself to the parties, and the victim

The purpose of the meeting is to help put the victim at ease. You may be repeating information they may have heard from their VLO or SoS rep but this has value as people often forget information when in stressful situations.

- Briefly introduce yourself to the victim and their supporters in their waiting room/area.
- Thank them for coming and participating.
- Acknowledge that the prison environment (or video link) may be difficult.
- Explain your role as Chair and that of your co-panellist(s), if present.
- State who else will be in the room and their role (e.g. witness, observer).
- Set out any details about non-disclosure.
- Advise whether the prisoner will be in the room.
- Describe what will happen: e.g. you will let them know when to read the statement, they can take their time to read it, pause if they need to, and they will not be asked questions or permitted to stay for the whole hearing; they cannot say anything in addition to what is contained in their statement.
- Confirm who will read the VPS as a backup if they are unable to once they are in the hearing room.
- Agree order of arrival of all parties e.g. does the victim prefer to enter before or after the prisoner (if present).
- Ask the victim for their preference of where to sit taking into account possible eye contact with the prisoner (they may not wish to be facing them).
- If possible, offer the victim opportunity to see the room before they read the VPS.

Welcome and introductions

- Thank the victim for attending.
- Acknowledge it may not have been an easy decision to write the VPS and then attend a prison (or video link room) to participate. This may be repeating what you said in your introductory meeting.

- Introduce all parties and the reason for their attendance.
- Briefly explain the purpose of the hearing and the VPS. This could include: although the Panel's main purpose is to assess the risk of the prisoner committing a crime again if released, the VPS is important because it helps provide the context for what happened from the victims perspective, how it's affected their life, why they might want the prisoner to live and travel in certain areas and not in others. It can also help discussions with the offender about insight and empathy towards the victims.
- The VPS is always read by the panel in advance.
- The Panel won't ask any questions of the victim, however they will listen carefully to the statement.

Whilst the VPS is being read

- Indicate you are listening attentively, whilst being aware of your body language. This may include nodding, eye contact where appropriate with a caution to not indicate agreement or approval.

When the VPS has been read

- Leave a short pause and then thank the victim.
- Acknowledge it may not have been easy to participate and it probably took courage and determination.
- You may wish to repeat what you said previously regarding the purpose of the VPS, how it has helped to contribute to the Panel's understanding and context.
- Let them know what happens next in the hearing itself.
- Advise that the Parole Board aims to issue the decision within two weeks of the oral hearing but that this is not guaranteed. It is the responsibility of the VLO to contact the victim and let them know the decision. Point out that the full decision is not available to the victim and the Board cannot share any details directly with them.
- The VLO is the person to keep in touch with and the VLO will advise the victim of the outcome and provide some context.

January 2017