

Research Governance Group

Research Conference November 2025 Summary Report

Background

RGG supported proposals to hold a research conference in 2025 with the aim of promoting the Parole Board as an evidence-based organisation when developing its policy, practice and guidance.

It aimed to generate interest across the academic community in undertaking studies that relate to parole, highlighting the Board's research priorities, showcasing RGG approved studies, and demonstrating the drive for greater transparency.

The over-arching theme was to reinforce the importance of good quality research to shape future policy and practice, and what the future looks like following the Sentencing Review and the measures which flowed from it in the Sentencing Act 2026.

A working group was established to develop the programme that included:

- Professor Mike Maguire, University of South Wales (and former member of RGG)
- Professor Nicky Padfield, University of Cambridge
- Professor Stephen Shute, University of Sussex
- Professor Harry Annison, University of Southampton
- Glenn Gathercole and Kate Taylor providing RGG representation

The conference programme was endorsed by RGG and approved by the Parole Board Chief Executive, Cecilia French. The Parole Board funded the event and there were no delegate fees.

Professor Nicky Padfield jointly co-hosted the event with Alexandra Marks (Parole Board chair) which took place at West Court, Jesus College, Cambridge on Thursday 20 November 2025.

Attendees

The conference was open to a selection of invited researchers, academics, prisoner representatives, professionals and stakeholders from across the criminal justice sector together with Parole Board members and staff. Over 50 delegates attended on the day.

Speakers and Programme

In order to provide a varied programme the following speakers attended and presented on the subjects below:



Speaker	Session	Topic
HHJ Peter Rook KC HHJ Michael Topolski KC Professor Stephen Shute, University of Sussex	Plenary: A Transparent Parole Board: The current context	Transparency
Lisa Smith and Jo Capelin, HMPPS Psychology Services Group	Break out: IPPs and Mental Health	IPPs
Professor Mary McMurrin, Cardiff Metropolitan University	Break out: Case formulation of Psychological Risk Assessments	PRAs
Dr David Peplow, Sheffield Hallam University and Dr Jake Phillips, University of Cambridge	Break out: Effective Remote Hearings	Remote Hearings
Ellen Bishop, University of Greenwich	Break out: Women prisoners and trauma	Women and trauma
Cecilia French, Parole Board CEO	Plenary: Research and the Parole Board	RGG
Professor Harry Annison, University of Southampton	Plenary: Parole Futures – Conceptual and comparative insights on the possible futures of parole	International comparisons
Professor Nicky Padfield, University of Cambridge	Plenary: Icebergs Ahead: Parole post-Sentencing Review	Sentencing Review
Cecilia French, Parole Board CEO Lucy Linton-Briggs, Parole Board COO	Plenary: Navigating the challenges and identifying the opportunities	Future

Feedback

Following the conference all delegates were invited to complete an online questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised of 12 sections. One for each of the four plenary sessions, one for each of the four break-out sessions and a further four for a) practicalities b) the agenda c) the venue d) any additional comments.

We received 25 responses as follows:

Researcher/academic	8
Parole Board Member	10
Legal Representative	0
Criminal Justice practitioner	0
Medical Specialist	0
Parole Board Staff	1
Other	6
Total	25

We have summarised the key themes coming out of the conference below.

Transparency

Feedback summary: There were a wide range of suggestions on improving the Board's transparency including quick wins such as improvements to the web pages, making more information publicly available, through to more fundamental changes to how the Board operates and makes its decisions. These have all been passed to the Board's Transparency Working Group to consider.

Funding for research

Feedback summary: A major issue in conducting research is funding. The Parole Board needs to have its own funding or access to a Government funding stream. The Board can publicise its research priorities and commission studies with identified funding streams.

Research Application process

Feedback summary: Could a joint process be established where an application to both RGG and NRC is required. The current process seems to be quite slow which can present considerable difficulties for researchers who experience acute pressures for their research to be proceed in a timely manner.

IPPs

Feedback summary: The value of retaining hope for IPP prisoners and ensuring IPPs feel like their specific situation is being recognised. The complexity and uncertainty in understanding the risks posed specifically by IPPs. Also, further work on understanding how sentence-related experiences may distort and interfere with 'business-as-usual' understandings of risk would be valuable in informing members' risk appraisal and decision-making in these cases.

There was a suggestion for written decision (regardless of outcome) to instil some hope for prisoners, which comes out of a research study (possibly from Canada) where the therapeutic content of Parole Board decisions was considered - of course not the Parole Board's primary aim, which is public protection, but could be a consideration to ensure no iatrogenic harm is caused by our oral hearings and decision letters.

Remote Hearings

Feedback summary: Further research in this area would be useful, including, looking at the differences in parole outcomes when comparing remote vs face to face hearings, considering what is it about remote hearings that makes people act differently? Comparing outcomes from remote and in-person hearings, not just in terms of release/no release but also the satisfaction of the parties with the hearing itself. There were issues raised about the data being outdated now and member training subsequently addressing and, in some ways, mitigating the concerns raised. There was a suggestion that potentially giving prisoners a chance to express a preference over whether their hearing is held remotely or in person might be something to consider.

Women and Trauma

Feedback summary: Consider developing a bespoke approach for women, looking at the effects of periods and menopause on female prisoners and developing member guidance.

PRA's

Feedback summary: The session raised important questions about transparency and the balance needed between procedural and substantive fairness: do panels spend too much time on crafting reasons but not on making the decision itself? Should the Decision Making Framework be revised to provide more about PRA's, and in particular when, and when not to direct a PRA.

Communications and Research Network

Feedback summary: Promote the findings from RGG approved studies more – add to website etc. Expand the research community who we issue the research updates to. Encourage students, trainee psychologists etc to undertake studies in parole related fields. Further events to bring research community together.

Collaborations

Feedback summary: Establishing Grants and Fellowships. Suggestion to [establish a relationship with] training courses of Doctoral Degree Forensic Psychology who have to do a doctoral level piece of research (Nottingham, Exeter, Birmingham).

Prisoners' perspective

Feedback summary: Future research by the Parole Board should explore the perspectives of people in prison. Important to involve them in reviews and surveys.

Future research topics

The following suggestions were put forward which we believe are covered by the current Research Priority Areas:

Procedural fairness and the impact of parole reforms and legislative changes on undertaking fair and timely parole reviews

- *Given the significant impact of the independent sentencing review, it would be helpful to consider research that evaluates the impact of these changes either with the parole board or upon public confidence in the PB*
- *Definite opportunities to research the impact of the ISR.*
- *Where there may be more value is in the evaluation of new policies after implementation. For example, I am interested in the impact that redacted decisions will have versus decision summaries so an analysis of that would be valuable.*

Transparency and the involvement of victims in parole reviews

- *I think research into the impact on hearings (public and victim attendance) on: process, outcomes and the people involved would be really helpful.*
- *Need for further research regarding experience of victims, press and public's perception of parole hearings observed.*
- *An important feature of future research for the Board should be to seek to understand what the full range of stakeholders want, need, and how they experience Parole Board processes - here specifically of efforts to increase transparency. At present, much of this appears to be based on rather anecdotal data, or arguments by particular influential stakeholders. It seems at present that certain groups (for example people with direct experience of the parole system as prisoners) are barely included.*

The prisoner experience of parole in particular marginalised and vulnerable groups

- *In terms of future research, I'd suggest that it will be vital to embed a means of tracking outcomes for prisoners subject to public hearings, and comparing outcomes to a matched (as far as possible) group who were not, in order to understand the effects that public hearings have on broader rehabilitative and public protection goals, and ensuring that understandings of consequences are empirically derived, rather than assumed.*

The following suggestions will be helpful when we come to update the Parole Board's Research Priority Areas in late 2027.

- The impact on release rates and SFOs etc following all the sentencing changes, probation staffing/case load issues, and changing 'caseload' of the parole board to the more complex cases, would be very valuable, an increase in SFOs is likely given change in 'make up' of the cases 'seen' by the parole board, but also due to the increase caseload and resource pressures within probation - lots of moving parts, would be interesting to see how (if?) these can be teased out at all. [NB. Research into SFO was a Priority Area in 2023-2025, which prompted discussions with PRT/Russell Webster resulting in their current Big Data study.]
- How much does the Parole Board routinely engage in comparisons with other jurisdictions, even in the UK? In preparing PRT's Bromley Briefing, I decided this year to compare release rates between England/Wales, Scotland and NI, and the differences are striking - but with competing explanations for why they exist, and some limitations on direct comparison (which could be resolved with the right approach to data compilation). I wonder if the PB could learn something about its own approach through contextualising itself in comparison to others.

RGG hopes that the conference inspired delegates to consider taking forward research and make applications to RGG. The RGG is considering all the feedback as part of future planning. The RGG wishes to thank everyone involved in making the conference a success.