

Prisoner backlog 'unsatisfactory'

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Urgent action is needed to clear the backlog in prisoners held on indefinite sentences and awaiting assessment for release, says the justice secretary.

Jack Straw told MPs it was "not right" that people were incarcerated if there was no need for them to be in prison.

IPP (indeterminate sentence for public protection) inmates are given a minimum tariff but must prove they pose no risk to the public before being released.

But some inmates argue jails do not give them the chance to do so.

Earlier, the chief inspector of prisons reported that HMP Manchester was struggling to cope with the increase in IPP prisoners.

High Court challenges

Ministers are already reviewing the way the sentences work after successful High Court challenges by prisoners.

Mr Straw told the constitutional affairs select committee that, as of July 2007, there were 3,019 IPP prisoners - serving an average minimum sentence of 38 months.

Since IPP sentences were introduced in 2005, he said there were 392 people still in prison whose minimum tariffs had expired - only 11 had been released.

"I don't regard that as satisfactory," said Mr Straw.

"We have to take some pretty urgent action to get these people through the system."

He said people on short tariffs were often not able to attend the courses the Parole Board requires to assess the likelihood that they will re-offend.

Clearing backlog

Mr Straw said it was one of the factors bearing down on prison overcrowding, adding: "Of course there has to be a judgement about whether it's safe to release them.

"But they shouldn't be held in prison after their tariff has expired, unless it is absolutely necessary, simply because the procedures are taking too long."

There have been estimates it would cost £10m and 100 judges to clear the backlog, the committee heard.

Mr Straw said £3m had already been spent on creating more courses, adding " if we have to put more in I will consider that".

The committee put it to him that there may be a large number of people wrongly imprisoned because no-one had assessed them, but the government's only short-term solution was to release them, without assessment.

Mr Straw said: "This is not a situation anyone in my position would have wished on their worst enemy still less on themselves, here we are, but I'm trying to work through it and work through it as quickly as I can."

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