



Ministry  
of Justice

**Written Ministerial  
Statement: Government  
Response to Dame Lynne  
Owens' Independent  
Review into Releases in  
Error**

**April 2026**

## Written Ministerial Statement

### Government Response to Dame Lynne Owens' Review into Release in Error

On 27 February 2026, Dame Lynne Owens submitted to me her Independent Review into Releases in Error. I want to place on the record my personal thanks to Dame Lynne for the thoroughness of her findings and recommendations.

I will deposit a copy of Dame Lynne Owen's Independent Review into Releases in Error in the Library of the House

I made a commitment to this house that I would be transparent on this issue, and today I have fulfilled that promise through the publication of Dame Lynne's review in full, our immediate government response, and a further ad hoc data release on this issue.

Whilst the overwhelming majority of offenders are released correctly, I have been clear that the number of errors is unacceptably high, and recent cases have exposed deep-rooted issues across the criminal justice system. I am grateful to the police for all their work returning those mistakenly released to custody, and also want to express my profound sympathies to the victims of those prisoners who were released in error, especially to Hadush Kebatu's victim, whose family I met last December.

As Dame Lynne states in her review, releases in error are simply one 'symptom of a broken system'. As a result of fourteen years of austerity, staffing cuts, failure to build prison places, and underinvestment in digital infrastructure, the system was pushed to breaking point. This Government doesn't cover up failure – it fixes it. We took immediate action to bring our prisons back from the brink.

These errors are still unacceptably high, but the numbers are coming down. More must be done, so today we are accepting Dame Lynne's recommendations for any changes covered by this Spending Review period and making up to £82 million investment to do so. We will go further on several of them, and I am committed to all remaining recommendations, subject to future funding decisions. We will work to bring the number of errors over the medium term, with a plan to reduce them

to pre-capacity crisis levels and drive down the numbers year-on-year until we get there.

This is why I announced on 11 November 2025, my national five-point action plan to bear down on these errors. As part of this, I commissioned Dame Lynne Owens, the former Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, to undertake an independent review and make recommendations to prevent similar mistakes in the future.

Whilst the review was underway, this Government has made substantial progress against this five point plan:

- My new Justice Performance Board first met in November and most recently on 4 March. Chaired by myself, it brings together ministers and the most senior officials within the Ministry of Justice to ensure greater oversight of the system and drive improvements in prisons and criminal courts, laser-focussed on addressing key metrics including releases in error.
- To improve human processes and checks, an urgent query process with a dedicated unit and court experts was introduced, allowing prisons to quickly escalate warrant-related queries and reduce release errors. Since 2 December 2025, this unit has supported prisons with over 1,000 warrant matters. In March, we introduced new hourly checks in the Crown Court to flag all cases where custodial status has changed. As of 13 April, this has already prevented ten releases in error since 13 March.
- I announced up to £10 million to deliver AI-based solutions. The Digital Rapid Response Unit has been established and is developing digital and AI products to reduce the main causes of releases in error. Following successful prototyping and testing in selected prisons, we have begun deploying new tools across the estate. This includes using AI-enabled tools to automatically extract key information and ensure it reaches the right prison promptly, as well as linking data to prevent offenders from concealing information by using multiple aliases. These tools have been built by forward-deployed engineers at an unprecedented pace.

- My department is working closely with partners to simplify the release process to reduce the scope for errors through the implementation of the Sentencing Act, which secured Royal Assent on 22 January.

Dame Lynne Owen's independent review was commissioned to examine the mistaken release of Hadush Kebatu from HMP Chelmsford, to consider the wider causes of releases in error, to identify any systemic factors, to assess whether current discharge protocols are robust, and to consider whether the data collected and published is adequate.

Dame Lynne proposes 33 recommendations to reduce the number of releases in error. These recommendations span across data and digital, governance, system and process improvements, policy and procedural, training and culture.

These fixes to systemic problems cannot happen overnight and as Dame Lynne rightly warns 'it would be foolhardy to suggest that all risk in a highly challenging operational environment can be mitigated or negated'. But our ambition is clear: to drive down the number of errors.

Today, I am setting out a clear and comprehensive plan to address Dame Lynne's recommendations and to go further to bring releases in error back down to pre-prison capacity crisis levels. I will now set out how we will deliver this work in the immediate, short and medium to long term, guided by the key themes underpinning these recommendations.

### **Immediate term**

Immediately we will simplify complex process across the system. We are spending £8m to bolster manual checks across both Crown and Magistrate Courts. This will involve the recruitment and training of 90 additional Crown Court clerks and 75 extra administrative staff in magistrates' courts. This is alongside the joint HMCTS–MoJ digital delivery team established in November to improve information sharing between HMCTS and HMPPS systems. This has enabled early progress against Dame Lynne's recommendations, with the team on track to begin transmitting court documents directly to the appropriate prison record this month.

We have already revised the Early Removal Scheme operational guidance to improve clarity for staff, and this updated guidance has been published. In

addition, in line with recommendation 1 of Dame Lynne's review, we are extending the use of body worn cameras to all uniformed prison personnel working with prisoners and in the discharge process, and have invested heavily in increased training. Since the beginning of this year, over 6,000 key staff have received foreign national offender training, including instruction on Home Office protocols.

### **Short-term**

In line with recommendation 11 of Dame Lynne's review, we are improving communication with victims in the event of a mistaken release, alongside increased digitalisation, and strengthening system-wide data collection and information-sharing.

We recognise the distress that is caused to victims who learn that the person who harmed them is free when they should be behind bars. I give an unequivocal apology to all who have faced worry or worse as a result of releases in error.

Ensuring victims of crime have the information and support they need remains a government priority. We continue to invest in vital victim and witness support services, providing a record £550 million over the next three years to help these specialist services meet the rising cost pressures of delivery facing services.

Last year, we introduced the Victims and Courts Bill to Parliament. The measures in this Bill will help victims get the justice they deserve and ensure victims are better protected than ever. They will also give victims greater confidence about the routes available to receive information about their offender's release.

We also fully recognise and share the emphasis Dame Lynne placed on the importance of victim notification. To reflect this shared priority, we will accelerate our work to talk with the victims sector and ensure that victims' views are heard as we clarify our policies on victim contact.

Our digital transformation programme is already delivering substantial progress. Several of Dame Lynne's recommendations build on this and recognise that 'technology is essential', not only to reducing releases in error, but to the effective function of a modern criminal justice system. In total, we have already allocated up to £20m for the financial year 2026/2027 for the digitalisation of

processes that underpin manual sentence calculations. This includes accelerating staff-facing tools and increasing digital and AI investment in prisons.

We are investing up to an additional £4 million towards accelerating the expansion of the Calculate Release Dates Service, automating sentence calculation to directly address releases in error. This service already covers 98.5% of sentence types with exceptional accuracy. Within two years, this acceleration will deliver a fully end-to-end system, with court data flowing straight into the correct prison record—even when there are aliases or spelling mistakes.

### **Medium to long term**

In the medium to long term, we will build on the foundations created through increased digitalisation to drive reform across the CJS, in line with recommendation 15 of Dame Lynne’s review. This will be driven forward by a new Digital Justice Board, which will be established shortly. Dame Lynne’s recommendations underscore the need for a coherent, system-wide CJS strategy, including exploring how the use of biometrics could support tracking individuals across the whole system.

We are already working closely with the Home Office to develop Justice ID, which will provide a set of building blocks that together allow staff to consistently identify and track the same individual from arrest, through the courts and custody, and into the community.

This will be supported by up to £50 million of investment in data foundations and developing Justice ID, with initial uses to be rolled out this year. This represents a major transformation that goes far beyond simply issuing a new single ID number.

Justice ID will allow agencies to share trusted data that is complete, consistent and up to date. It will reduce duplicated data entries and minimise the risk of information being lost as cases progress through the system.

We are also actively exploring how biometrics, such as fingerprints and facial scans, could further strengthen Justice ID. This work builds on existing uses within policing to help verify and assure the identity of individuals subject to criminal proceedings as they move through the system. This transformation will also underpin work to develop a plan to phase out the use of paper records in prisons, as recommended by

Dame Lynne, helping to reduce the risk of omissions, inconsistent record-keeping, and the need for staff to navigate both physical and digital records. We will begin rolling out biometric fingerprint and facial recognition trials within the next six months, and we expect full rollout of biometrics across prisons before the end of this parliament.

We expect this to translate into a system where a single Justice ID allows us to reliably track individuals end-to-end, core data flows are automated, and there is measurable improvement in public protection, timeliness and productivity.

Dame Lynne's review also highlights the shortcomings in recording releases in error, under the last government and since the general election, which led to underreporting under successive governments. We are working with the Office for National Statistics to ensure our statistics reflect the totality of releases in error and will explore every tool available to ensure data shared with the public is robust and reliable.

In the meantime, I recognise it is in the public interest to publish new ad hoc data, which is why we are publishing this today alongside Dame Lynne's review and the government response. These numbers show that from April 2025 to March 2026, there have been 179 recorded releases in error from prisons. Compared with last year, this represents a 32% decrease.

This Government has already accepted the blueprint set out in Sir Brian Leveson's *Independent Review of the Criminal Courts* for bold, structural reform in our criminal courts. It is our intention to rebuild the system through investment, structural reform and modernisation.

Several of the broader recommendations in Dame Lynne's review align with the cross- criminal justice system reform already underway following the reviews led by David Gauke and Sir Brian Leveson. My department is driving this programme forward, and I am committed to ensuring that Dame Lynne's recommendations are part of a coherent, phased approach to wider system transformation, recognising both current financial pressures and the need for alignment across the system.

To support this long-term programme, I have appointed a new second Permanent Secretary, specifically tasked with providing leadership across the whole criminal justice system. The Ministry of Justice will continue to work closely with other government departments and stakeholders to deliver these recommendations.

Public safety is the Government's first duty, and I remain committed to bearing down on releases in error. The steps we have already taken and will take in response to Dame Lynne Owens' review are leaving no stone unturned. We are backing this up with up to £82 million investment over this Spending Review period.

Through a combination of reform, improved technology and better practice, we will reduce the number of releases in error to pre-prison capacity crisis levels, and drive them down year-on-year.