

Marie Goldman

MP for Chelmsford



There are so many questions to be answered over inmate release

CHELMSFORD was in the news a lot at the weekend – and sadly not for positive reasons. At about 2.45pm on Friday, I received a phone call from Essex Police, informing me that a prisoner had been mistakenly released from Chelmsford Prison that morning.

This was instead of him being handed over to immigration services who were supposed to have then taken him to an immigration detention centre to await deportation. If that weren't worrying enough, the prisoner was Hadush Kebatu, the migrant sex offender who had been serving a 12-month sentence for sexually assaulting a 14-year-old girl and a woman in Epping – the same man who had sparked protests outside the Bell Hotel in Epping this summer.

The mistaken release sparked a manhunt, first in Chelmsford and then in London, as it was later discovered that he had boarded a train from Chelmsford to Stratford at 12.41pm.

It's worth noting at this point that Essex Police had been informed of the mistake at 12.57pm, by which point Kebatu was no longer in Chelmsford, although that was not known at the time.

My first action as Chelmsford's Member of Parliament was to call Chelmsford Prison and ask to speak to the Governor. I was disappointed not to be able to speak to him that day as he subsequently wrote to me saying that he was not "engaging separately with individual stakeholders at this time".

Whilst I fully appreciate and understand that he would have been incredibly busy, I think a short phone call with the elected MP for the constituency where his prison is located wasn't an unreasonable request.

It's a protocol and transparency issue that I intend to raise further as the investigation into what went wrong progresses.

Having already raised this publicly, I was then pleased to have a brief chat with the Duty Governor. I look forward to discussing the issue in more detail with the Governor himself when he is available.



The exterior of HMP Chelmsford on Sunday
ALISHIA ABODUNDE

As I write this article on Sunday afternoon, I'm relieved to know that Kebatu was apprehended in London earlier this morning, after a tip-off from a member of the public who spotted him in Finsbury Park. He is now back in custody awaiting deportation back to Ethiopia. Well done to the police – both Essex Police and the Metropolitan Police – who carried out the search and finally caught him, and a huge thank you to members of the public whose vigilance ultimately led to his capture.

But of course, that's just the beginning of the story. We must understand what on earth went wrong so that we can ensure it never happens again.

There are so many questions to be answered. A delivery driver who happened to be delivering items to Chelmsford Prison at the exact time of Kebatu's mistaken release describes Kebatu as seeming confused about what he should do and where to go. He told Sky News that

he had seen Kebatu go back into the prison maybe four or five times, asking for information and guidance.

Sadly, that means there were four or five opportunities for this error to have been spotted and fixed, but four or five times when that chance was missed.

We must understand how it is possible to release a prisoner by mistake, but also why there was a lack of professional curiosity from the prison staff when Kebatu kept coming back in.

I have no reason to suspect that Kebatu's release was anything other than a basic – if very serious and consequential – mistake. But it raises huge questions about how prisoners who are being released correctly are supported to reintegrate into society. If we assume that HMP Chelmsford thought that Kebatu was being released correctly, it seems that the current process sees nothing wrong with just opening the doors (yes, it's a little bit more complicated than that, but not much) and saying "off you go".

If it were standard operating procedure for support services to meet with a prisoner immediately on their release, it would surely have been

more obvious that something was horribly wrong when Kebatu kept coming back in asking for help.

And then there's the issue that HMP Chelmsford is largely a remand prison – it houses prisoners who are mainly waiting to appear in court, or who have recently been sentenced and are waiting to be transferred to another, long-term prison. That means Chelmsford Prison deals with a lot of prisoners being released or moved around. Surely, if any prison should have the correct procedures in place, it should be Chelmsford.

But when we learn that this isn't just something that has happened in Chelmsford but has been repeated over and over again in prisons across the country, we must recognise that a straightforward, local investigation is not going to be enough.

That's why I'm calling for a public inquiry into the prison service and the release of prisoners. If this can happen in Chelmsford to a very high-profile prisoner, it can happen anywhere. Indeed, we already know it has been happening elsewhere.

According to figures from His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, in the year to March 2025, 262 pris-

oners were released in error – up from 115 in the previous 12 months. That's utterly shocking, and it's a clear indication that this is a systemic problem, not an isolated one.

Only a public inquiry will truly give us all the information we need to fully understand what's going on and – more importantly – what we need to do to put it right.

However – and this is key – that does not mean we should wait until the conclusion of a public inquiry to get to work on fixing things. I am certain that there are plenty of sensible, common-sense changes that can be put in place right now, changes that don't necessarily need additional funds to implement.

Without knowing intimately how the prison service operates (I suspect I'm going to learn a lot more over the coming weeks and months), it's difficult to know for sure what those changes should be, but as a starter, I would suggest ensuring that crucial processes do not have a single point of failure, such as a single member of staff responsible for a vital aspect of the release process. I say this because I understand a member of staff was swiftly suspended by Chelmsford Prison. That may be appropriate, but I would suggest that any key process that relies on one person probably isn't fit for purpose.

I would also propose at least daily team meetings among prison staff to discuss the day's upcoming prisoner movements to ensure that multiple people are aware of what is supposed to happen, and then are in a position to question it if something doesn't look right.

And I would suggest an extremely simple change to some of the language that is used. In the brief conversations I've had on this subject, the word 'release' is used over and over again, but for different circumstances. The prison service seems to refer to releasing a prisoner when they mean simply letting them out of prison, but also when they are releasing a prisoner into someone else's custody.

I think that's confusing and makes it harder to spot and challenge mistakes. A simple change to a different word could help fix that.

Whatever happens, one thing is for certain: we must see change. I will keep pushing for this. It is unacceptable that the public was potentially put at risk because of such a fundamental failure of the system.

Marie

If this can happen in Chelmsford to a very high-profile prisoner, it can happen anywhere.

Marie Goldman MP