

13 July 2017

020 3681 2775

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**PRISON SAFETY MUST BE TRANSFORMED BEFORE OTHER REFORMS
CAN TAKE PLACE, SAYS OMBUDSMAN**

The past year saw an 11% rise in prison suicides, more deaths from natural causes and eligible complaints up 9%, said Prisons and Probation Ombudsman Nigel Newcomen. Today he published his sixth and final annual report and warned that these statistics, combined with high levels of violence and incidents of significant disorder, indicate a prison system still very much in crisis.

The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) independently investigates the circumstances of each death in custody and identifies lessons that need to be learned to improve safety. In 2016-17:

- PPO investigations were started into 361 deaths, 19% more than the year before;
- the PPO began 19% more investigations into deaths from natural causes (208 deaths), largely as a consequence of rising numbers of older prisoners;
- investigations were started into 115 self-inflicted deaths, an 11% increase on last year's record number of self-inflicted deaths (104) ;
- there were four apparent homicides, a decrease from six the previous year;

- investigations started into three deaths of immigration removal estate residents, the same figure as the previous year; and
- a further 16 deaths were classified as 'other non-natural' (usually drug related).

Nigel Newcomen said:

"The previous Government recognised the need for reform and a range of changes to the prison system was begun. However, the problems are significant and systemic. Reforms will founder unless they are underpinned by a transformation in prison safety.

"One of the systemic failures is the apparent inability of prisons under pressure to learn lessons or to sustain improvement based on that learning. It is not lack of knowledge, but a lack of effective action that is at issue. This level of repeat failure must not be allowed to continue. As I leave office, I must hope that prisons and their hard-pressed staff can emerge from a uniquely challenging and dispiriting period and address the well-evidenced concerns of scrutiny bodies such as mine.

On suicides, he said:

"Self-inflicted deaths rose 11% last year. While I welcome the fact that this rate of increase was less rapid than the 34% increase the year before, it was still unacceptably high. I do not think there is a simple, single explanation for these continued increases. Each self-inflicted death is the tragic culmination of an individual crisis for which there can be a myriad of triggers.

"Some major themes emerge from my investigations that must be acted upon, for example the pervasiveness of mental ill-health and an epidemic of new psychoactive drugs, but whatever the explanation for the rise, self-inflicted deaths are just too prevalent in prison. That is why the

safety net of effective suicide prevention work is essential, although too often my investigations identify repeated failings in these procedures.

The other principal part of the PPO's remit is the independent investigation of complaints. In 2016-17:

- the total number of new complaints received was 5,010, a 5% increase on the previous year;
- 2,568 investigations were started, compared to 2,357 cases the year before;
- overall, 2,313 investigations were completed, 23 more than 2015-16;
- in 39% of the investigations, the PPO found in favour of the complainant, compared with only 23% in 2011-12; and
- the largest category of complaints was about lost, damaged and confiscated property.

Nigel Newcomen said:

“The ability to complain effectively is integral to a legitimate and civilised prison system. A meaningful internal complaints process, overseen by an independent adjudicator, such as my office, is an important means for prisoners to ventilate grievances legitimately. It can also help avoid illegitimate explosions of anger about perceived failings, which have been all too common in prisons in the past year.

“Many of the complaints reaching my office should have been resolved at source by an effective local complaints process. When prisons fail to manage complaints effectively, it leads to frustration for prisoners, places additional burdens on staff and uses up my scarce resources, which could be better deployed on more serious or complex cases. The prison reform agenda needs to include a requirement on each prison to have a fully functioning complaints process.”

The recommendations made as a result of PPO investigations are key to making improvements in safety and fairness in custody. The past year also saw the publication of a range of learning lessons publications which look across individual investigations to identify broader themes. In 2016-17, six bulletins were published. Two provided important analyses of how prisons should respond to violence. One of these set out lessons from investigations into homicide in prison. Another provided lessons to minimise the inappropriate use of force by staff having to deal with escalating rates of assault. Other bulletins looked at how to support particularly vulnerable populations: children, transgender prisoners and elderly prisoners with dementia. The year's final bulletin identified lessons to reduce the increase in self-inflicted deaths of female prisoners.

Nigel Newcomen said:

"I leave office shortly and do so with a mixture of pride in the efforts of my staff to contribute to safer, fairer custody, and sadness that I can report only limited improvement in prison safety and conditions over the past year."

- ENDS -

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. A copy of the report can be found on our website from 13 July 2017. Visit www.ppo.gov.uk.
2. The PPO investigates deaths that occur in prison, immigration detention or among the residents of probation approved premises. The PPO also investigates complaints from prisoners, those on probation and those held in immigration removal centres.
3. Please contact Jane Parsons, PPO Press Office, on 020 3681 2775 or 07880 787452 if you would like more information. Alternatively please send requests or feedback to Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, PO Box 70769, London, SE1P 4XY.