PPO Bereaved Families Survey 2013-15
Our Vision

To carry out independent investigations to make custody and community supervision safer and fairer.

Our Values

We are:

Impartial: we do not take sides
Respectful: we are considerate and courteous
Inclusive: we value diversity
Dedicated: we are determined and focused, and we
Act with integrity: we are honest and fair

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Foreword

My office seeks the views of a range of stakeholders about how we do our job. These views are key to understanding our strengths and weaknesses, as well as giving us examples from real experience of how we might improve the way we do things.

I especially appreciate that bereaved families who take the time to respond to the survey about our fatal incident investigations, do so at a difficult and distressing time. This generous act helps us ensure we provide the right support to others in the future.

Most families found the service provided by the PPO useful and felt they were dealt with sensitively and professionally. The hard work and dedication of our team of family liaison officers (FLOs) shines through in what families had to say about our service. Most families also considered that our investigators uncovered the information they needed to explain the circumstances of the death. I acknowledge that this will not always be sufficient to answer all the questions relatives have about ‘why’.

Inevitably, families will have different needs and expectations of our investigations. They will also want different levels of involvement. Generally, the family liaison officers were able to gauge this correctly, with most families saying they received enough (and good quality) contact.

One family wrote they were impressed by the ‘thorough yet un-intrusive’ work of our FLO. However, there were others who would have liked more detail, particularly to understand how the concerns they raised were taken into account during the investigation. We will strive to improve and aim always to make a hard time even just a little easier – as one respondent said:

“This was a very difficult time for the family and trying to cope with the ‘whys’ and ‘what ifs’ was hard. However, the procedure was made easier by all the work carried out by the PPO. Thank you”

Nigel Newcomen CBE
Prisons and Probation Ombudsman
Introduction

The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) carries out independent investigations into deaths and complaints in custody. The detailed role and responsibilities of the PPO are set out in his Terms of Reference (http://www.ppo.gov.uk/terms-of-reference.html). The PPO has two main duties:

- to investigate complaints made by prisoners, young people in detention (prisons and secure training centres), offenders under probation supervision and immigration detainees
- to investigate deaths of prisoners, young people in detention, approved premises’ residents and immigration detainees due to any cause, including any apparent suicides and natural causes.

The purpose of these investigations is to understand what happened, to correct injustices and to identify learning for the organisations whose actions we oversee so that the PPO makes a significant contribution to safer, fairer custody and offender supervision.

The bereaved families survey is one of several stakeholder surveys used by the PPO to help us deliver high quality services in line with our aims and values.

The PPO’s family liaison officers (FLOs) act as a link between the bereaved family and our fatal incident investigators. Once, the family has received the final report, we send them a feedback questionnaire. The survey is usually sent by post but there is also an online version if families prefer that method. None of the questions are compulsory.

This report summarises 69 responses we received between April 2013 and March 2015. Reports from previous years are available on our website.
Findings

The PPO issued 511 final reports between April 2013 and March 2015, but we received only 69 survey responses during this time. Although some cases have no, or very little, family involvement, the response rate to the survey is quite low. The responses that we have received are very useful, but it is unfortunate that we get feedback from only a minority of the families that we deal with. It would be good to get responses from more families.

Given the low number of responses the findings should be treated with caution.

Perhaps the most important question asked was whether families were satisfied that the PPO’s investigation had fulfilled its purpose to establish the circumstances of the death and provide an explanation to the family. Around three quarters (48 of 65 families answering) said that the PPO’s investigation had ‘fully’ met their expectations in this respect. This is an increase compared to the previous survey, responses between 2011 and 2013, when just over half (30 out of 55 families) had felt this way.

The comments provided in answer to this question indicated that families generally felt the PPO had given them sufficient detail about what happened. Meeting this expectation did not necessarily mean being able to answer all the questions that families had about the deaths.

‘I have some understanding now and answers to some of my ‘why’ questions.’

The 15 families who said that the PPO had ‘partly’ met their expectations expressed very similar sentiments. This suggests that these families had higher expectations, rather than that they were provided with a different level of service from the PPO. Or, as in many cases of self-inflicted deaths, it is simply not possible to know what was in the person’s mind at the time.

‘I don’t feel I have much insight despite facts well presented.’

Some who felt that the PPO had partly met their expectations said the investigator should have interviewed more, or different, people. One family, who said their expectations had not been met ‘at all’, considered that the PPO investigator had not asked the right questions during the investigation.

We asked families to feedback on a number of different aspects of their interaction with the PPO: the information we gave, the relationship with our FLO, the investigation and the report. On the whole, the responses were positive, and were similar to the results from previous years.

- 54 families said they received the right amount of contact from the FLO during the investigation, although 12 would have appreciated more contact.
- 49 families rated the quality of the contact as good, 9 as average and 7 felt it was poor.
Many wrote in praise of their contact with the FLO. The FLOs were described as ‘pleasant’, ‘helpful’, ‘sensitive’, ‘professional yet personal’ and ‘respectful’. It is clear how much both their manner and the information they provided was appreciated by most families.

‘Telephone manner at such a devastating time was second to none.’

‘Kind, considerate and caring, and ideally suited for [the] job.’

Where families did identify areas for improvement the main theme was being assured that the concerns they raised were being addressed by the FLO or investigator. For example, one person had worried, when giving feedback about the draft report, about whether what they said to the FLO had been written down. While these were the minority of responses, it seems a little more communication – written summaries of phone conversations, confirmation that information had been passed to the investigator – could have been helpful.

After a death in custody, the PPO FLO contacts the family to explain our role and what will happen in the investigation. We also send families a leaflet and DVD containing similar information and some useful contacts for them. Of the 65 people who answered the question, 53 had found the information good or very good.

We asked families if they understood our investigation report: 63 had understood all or most of it, but four had only understood some of it. Several people wrote that the bits they had struggled with were the medical and legal terminology. Two had found going through the circumstances of the death too upsetting.

**Actions**

Overall, the responses suggest families are satisfied with the service the PPO provide. In particular, the feedback suggests families feel very well treated by our FLOs.

The PPO should also keep in mind that not all families respond to the survey, and be sensitive as to whether these responses are representative of their experiences.

**Action 1** – We must maintain the current high level of service for families.

**Action 2** – We should ensure that families understand how their specific concerns or questions are taken into account in our investigation report.

**Action 3** – We should make every effort to improve the response rate to the survey, such as:
- Ensuring surveys are sent to all families by post as well as electronically where suitable
- Trialling sending reminders
- Ensure the survey is referred to in the information we provide to families
- Ensure FLOs mention the survey at various points in their liaison with families