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## **IMPORTANCE OF INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATIONS INTO COMPLAINTS AND DEATHS IN CUSTODY PARAMOUNT, SAYS OMBUDSMAN**

Jane Webb, Acting Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, welcomed the Government's decision to protect the office of the Prison and Probation Ombudsman as she published her annual report. She said the decision recognises the importance of transparent and independent investigations in prisons, immigration detention and probation.

The Prison and Probation Ombudsman's key tasks are to consider an individual's complaint and the circumstances of each death in custody. In a busy year, the office received 4,641 complaints, a rise of 14% since last year. Of these, 2,561 were eligible for investigation, 10% higher than last year. Two hundred deaths were notified to the Ombudsman in 2010-11, seven more than in 2009-10. The number of self-inflicted deaths fell slightly but the number by natural causes increased.

The recommendations made as a result of PPO investigations are key to effecting change when needed. This year, 26 national recommendations from fatal incident investigations have been made, with 18 accepted so far. Complaints investigations generated 15 national recommendations, with ten accepted so far. For example, findings from deaths in approved premises have resulted in the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) considering whether to supply safe ligature knives and defibrillators as they already do in prison, and a prison death led to NOMS agreeing that each prisoner should have a unified health record including information about substance misuse.

Jane Webb said:

“Some may say that it does not matter if a prisoner loses their property or a 70-year-old prisoner dies of cancer. Because something happens frequently, it does not make it acceptable or any less worthy of investigation. In fact, how a prisoner’s property is looked after may well be a measure of how the prisoner himself is treated, and a death being predictable raises questions about whether detention was still necessary as well as whether suitable care was given.

“Securing the future of the Ombudsman’s office means that these all too common situations will continue to be independently investigated and the lessons shared. Over 2,500 complaints investigations and 200 fatal incident investigations are testament to this.”

Despite the increase in workload, the office completed 20% more cases than last year and there has been progress on meeting published timeliness targets for complaints. In the coming year, given budgetary constraints and fewer staff, the office will want to reduce its workload by encouraging NOMS and others to resolve complaints at an earlier stage and consider how the number of avoidable deaths can be reduced.

- ENDS -

#### **NOTES TO EDITORS**

1. **The report:** A digital copy of the report can be found on our website. Visit [www.ppo.gov.uk](http://www.ppo.gov.uk).
2. **Prisons and Probation Ombudsman’s (PPO) office:** The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) office investigate deaths that occur in prison, immigration detention or amongst the residents of probation approved premises.
3. **Contact us:** Please contact Jane Parsons, PPO Press Office, on 0207 035 2123 or 07880 787452 from 0915 to 1415 Monday to Friday if you would like more information. Alternatively please send requests or feedback to Prisons and Probation Ombudsman’s Office, Ashley House, 2 Monck Street, London, SW1P 2BQ.