

Annual Report 2008–2009
Summary



A PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATION



The PPO annual report for 2008-09 differs in one important respect from the previous ones for which I have been responsible. Examples of fatal incidents and complaints that we have investigated remain the focus of the report, but I also say much more about the business side of the office; our aims, outcomes and use of resources. Indeed, our main goal during the year has been to create a more professional and business-like organisation.

As our stakeholders and those interested in our work will be aware, I believe that the PPO's continued position as a non-statutory body cannot possibly be right. I repeat this view in the report and suggest that the absence of legislation undermines the degree to which the office is sufficiently independent in terms of Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Nevertheless, while legislation and status as a Non-Departmental Public Body remains this office's objective, throughout the reporting year we have worked hard to enhance our independent professionalism in other ways.

We have invested in the development of staff skills through the provision of bespoke training courses for investigators. We have extended the support that we offer to staff, reflecting the fact that they operate in a specialist and emotionally demanding environment.

We have improved the way we communicate the learning from our reports, and have revised our website. We have also conducted comprehensive customer and stakeholder surveys and carried out a major review of the complaints function.

Perhaps the year's most significant initiative has been work to revise our terms of reference and to prepare a framework document setting out our freedoms and accountabilities. I record my disappointment over the bureaucratic delays that have prevented both documents from being finalised¹.

Investigating fatal incidents

My office conducts independent investigations into all deaths of prisoners, residents of Approved Premises and immigration detainees. I also investigate deaths in other places where there are prisoners, such as escort vehicles and court cells. In the five years since my office was entrusted this responsibility, we have opened almost 1,000 investigations and made more than 5,000 recommendations.

I am pleased to report upon a significant reduction in the numbers of those who took their own lives in prison during 2008-09, and I hope that the findings from my office's investigations have played their part. The number of deaths in Approved Premises remained low and no one died in immigration detention. However, because my office's work on any death is not over until there has been an inquest, the number of active cases and the consequent pressures upon investigators have grown. For this reason, I have decided that we cannot take on any more discretionary investigations into deaths occurring after release from prison or detention. (I will keep this decision under review.)

¹ New Terms of reference were issued on 11 June 2009

The annual report identifies a number of themes that have arisen from the year's investigations. It details findings relating to healthcare in prisons, and focuses upon the destabilising effects of a mismatch between the size of the prison population and the available accommodation. I also provide examples of the work of my Family Liaison Officers, and comment upon the number of prison staff whose positive actions I have commended formally.

To date, I have found the arrangements for sharing and implementing national recommendations to have been rather insubstantial and I have taken action to improve them. I now routinely share my recommendations with HM Chief Inspector of Prisons and am in consultation with NOMS about their own systems for disseminating the learning from investigations.

Investigating complaints

This year we have changed the way in which we record complaints with the consequence that the year's figures cannot sensibly be compared with those in past reports. However, what is not in doubt is that the number of complaints that we can investigate has increased once more.

To ensure that we devote sufficient resources to the most serious matters such as allegations of assault, racism or other misuse of power, we have begun to differentiate more rigorously between complaints in terms of the depth of investigation conducted. Of course, all members of the PPO office recognise that no complaint is trivial. Nevertheless, I am confident that we can identify complaints where it is both proportionate and reasonable to devote fewer resources, allowing more significant issues to be given more time and effort.

In the annual report, I provide examples of the wide range of problems that have been

brought to my attention by prisoners, people subject to probation supervision, and detainees in Immigration Removal Centres. Complaints about property and cash remain high, as do those about conditions in prison. But I have seen a steady increase in complaints about regimes, security and, in particular, the fairness and accuracy of information in reports.

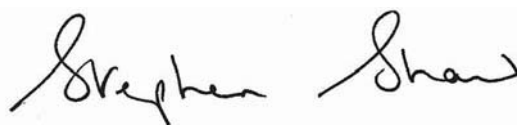
I highlight a number of complaints that have raised particularly significant issues. Amongst others, I cite the cases of a mother whose son died while he was on a probation drugs course, a prisoner who was placed in a cell with a known racist, and a woman who alleged that a serious assault had taken place during her removal from the country.

Proportionately, I receive more complaints from prisoners in the high security estate than from elsewhere. Complaints about the Probation Service account for about a tenth of PPO's work.

The year in figures

The annual report details the number and types of deaths investigated. I also provide information about the number and categories of complaints received, and about the investigations completed during the reporting year. In addition, I report upon the performance of the office against our targets and the costs of the office.

The office's mission statement, statement of values, terms of reference, and a comprehensive staff list are also included.



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