

Written evidence from Sue McAllister CB, Prisons and Probation Ombudsman

Re: Inquiry into Women in Prison

Further to giving evidence on 19 October to the above inquiry and my previous written evidence, I am writing to provide follow up evidence.

My role

The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) carries out independent investigations into deaths and complaints in custody. Our role and responsibilities are set out in our Terms of Reference¹.

We have two main duties:

- To investigate complaints made by prisoners, young people in detention (young offender institutions and secure training centres), offenders under probation supervision and immigration detainees.
- To investigate deaths of prisoners, young people in detention (including residents in secure children's homes), 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 we can make a significant contribution to safer, fairer custody and offender supervision.

My submission to the inquiry

In my previous submission I provided data about the PPO's investigations from 2019/20, I am now in a position to provide further up-to-date data.

Complaints investigations

I can now confirm that in 2020/21 we completed investigations into 39 complaints from 22 female prisoners. Our data shows that 3% of complaints completed in 2020/21 were from female prisoners.

The issues raised in complaints from women in prison are broadly similar to those we receive from the male estate. The largest proportion of complaints investigated are still about property, which is the same across the male estate and women's estate.

Over the past few years we have received some complaints from women in prison about being unable to get a transfer closer to home. We have seen cases where prisons, that maybe closer to the woman's family, refuse to accept them because of their behaviour in custody. In one case, a prison refused to accept a woman on transfer because of the high number of complex women they already had at the establishment. It is important to consider the impact that a loss of family ties and separation from children can have on a woman's mental health and subsequently their behaviour.

¹ www.ppo.gov.uk/about/vision-and-values/terms-of-reference/

Death in custody investigations

In 2020/21 we started 10 fatal incident investigations into the deaths of female prisoners, compared to 6 the previous year.

Of the 10 deaths (in 2020/21):

- 5 were from COVID-19
- 3 were from other natural causes (not Covid-19)
- 2 were self-inflicted

We also investigated a death of a woman who died in hospital some months after attempting to hang herself while in prison. The woman died following release from prison, however the woman was never released into the community.

Our investigations into the deaths of women prisoners generally identify similar issues to those of men. One key finding is that too often both prison and healthcare staff make decisions about risk based on their perceptions of a prisoner's presentation or the prisoner's assurances that they have no thoughts of suicide or self-harm. Known risk factors which might increase the prisoner's risk, such as a history of suicidal behaviour, can often be overlooked.

I understand that the women's estate is transitioning to the key worker model. For this to work it is important that officers are given dedicated time to focus on key work sessions. More consistent interactions with the women will enable staff to develop an understanding of their individual circumstances and therefore enable them to better support the women and be better aware of any risk factors or triggers.

I hope that, along with previous evidence submitted, this is helpful.

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