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**VERY FEW WOMEN OR YOUNG PEOPLE IN CUSTODY TRUST
THE INTERNAL COMPLAINTS SYSTEM, SAYS OMBUDSMAN**

Women and young people in prison tend not to make formal complaints, as they mistrust the internal complaints system, said Nigel Newcomen, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO). Today he published a thematic report on lessons to be learned from how women and young people resolve issues in prisons, young offender institutions (YOIs) and secure training centres (STCs).

The report, *Learning from PPO Investigations: why do women and young people not make formal complaints?* sets out the findings of a project carried out to establish whether groups under-represented in the PPO caseload are sufficiently able to access the service the PPO provides. Focus groups were held in STCs, YOIs and women's prisons to understand how participants dealt with problems or complaints.

The project found that:

- there was a widespread mistrust of the internal complaints system and a belief that formal complaints were a waste of time, as they would not be dealt with or would be tampered with by staff;
- very few women and young people had made a complaint to the PPO and while some had made a complaint to the prison, very few had appealed against the decision or used the second stage of the process;
- many had made verbal complaints or dealt with the issue on their own;

- some had taken their problem to the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) or Barnardo's advocates; and
- some had good support from prison staff and were able to turn to them when problems arose and were therefore less likely to need the PPO.

The PPO is taking on board the findings of the study and is already making efforts to provide more information about how to make an eligible complaint and to counter fear of reprisals. Other lessons that need to be learned are:

- custodial staff should deal with problems when they arise, to ensure a quick and efficient resolution that avoids the need for a complaint;
- the Prison Service should redesign the prison complaint forms to make the process clearer;
- all prison staff should understand the internal complaint system and at what stage complaints can be sent to the PPO; and
- advocate services should promote their role in helping young people from YOIs and STCs with complaints.

Nigel Newcomen said:

“As would be expected from the make-up of the prison population, the majority of complaints to my office come from adult male prisoners. However, the number we receive from women's prisons, young offender institutions and secure training centres is even lower than would be expected from their proportions in the prison population.

“The aim of this research was to find out why these groups are under-represented in the complaints we receive and to identify any learning. This is not an exercise intended to drum up more business. Instead, it is intended to ensure that the low levels of complaints from these groups are for legitimate reasons and not because of inappropriate barriers to accessing our services.”

- ENDS -

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. A copy of the report can be found on the PPO website. Visit www.ppo.gov.uk.
2. The PPO investigates deaths that occur in prison, secure training centres, immigration detention or among the residents of probation approved premises. The PPO also investigates complaints from prisoners, young people in secure training centres, those on probation and those held in immigration removal centres.
3. **Contact us:** Please contact Jane Parsons, PPO Press Office, on 020 3681 2775 or 07880 787452 if you would like more information, or email mail@ppo.gsi.gov.uk.