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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES FOR PRISONERS
NEED TO IMPROVE FURTHER, SAYS OMBUDSMAN**

Some improvement has been made in managing the mental health needs of prisoners, but there is still a long way to go, said Prisons and Probation Ombudsman Nigel Newcomen. Today he published a review on prisoner mental health arising from his investigations into deaths in custody.

Mental ill-health is one of the most prevalent and challenging issues in prisons and is closely associated with high rates of suicide and self-harm in custody. These mental health needs range from mild forms of depression to serious and enduring conditions, such as psychotic illnesses and severe personality disorders, which can be much more difficult to manage. Echoing previous research, the review found that 70% of the prisoners who killed themselves had one or more identified mental health needs.

The report considers the deaths of 557 prisoners who died in prison custody between 2012 and 2014, including 199 self-inflicted deaths, where the prisoner had been identified as having mental health needs in 70% of those 199 cases. It goes on to identify the lessons learned from these investigations.

The review makes clear the importance of identifying mental health issues, as without accurate diagnosis, it is very difficult to provide appropriate treatment and support. Once a need is identified, effective intervention is required. However, the identification and treatment of mental health issues among prisoners was variable and many areas for improvement remain.

One particular challenge for prisons is that some mental health conditions cause sufferers to present very challenging behaviour, which staff may deal with as a behavioural, rather than a mental health problem. This may lead to a punitive, rather than a therapeutic, response. Often this only worsens the prisoner's underlying mental ill-health, further compromising their ability to cope.

Among other findings, the report found a number of cases where:

- there was poor information sharing, failure to make referrals to mental health professionals, inappropriate mental health assessments and inadequate staff training;
- there was a lack of coordinated care, with little evidence of prison staff and healthcare staff working together or a lack of joined-up work between primary healthcare, mental health in-reach and substance misuse services; and
- prisoners with mental health needs sometimes find it difficult to understand the importance of taking their medication and staff did not always remind or encourage them to do so.

Prisoners with mental health needs can sometimes be very difficult to manage. Commendably, investigations also found impressive examples where staff went to great lengths to ensure that prisoners in crisis received excellent care.

Nigel Newcomen said:

“While there were many examples of very good practice, there were also too many cases where practice could and should have been better.

Issues ranged from poor monitoring of compliance with medication and lack of encouragement to take prescribed drugs, to inappropriate care plans which were not reviewed and updated. There have also been investigations in which we found that the provision of mental health care was simply inadequate.

“Given the scale of mental ill-health in prison and the pressures in the system, it is perhaps not surprising that this review identifies significant room for improvement in the provision of mental health care.”

- ENDS -

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. A copy of the report can be found on our website from 19 January 2016. Visit www.ppo.gov.uk.
2. The PPO investigates deaths that occur in prison, immigration detention or among the residents of probation approved premises. The PPO also investigates complaints from prisoners, those on probation and those held in immigration removal centres.
3. Please contact Jane Parsons, PPO Press Office, on 020 3681 2775 or 07880 787452 if you would like more information. Alternatively please send requests or feedback to Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, PO Box 70769, London, SE1P 4XY.