

Press Release

The Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland today published his 2015-16 annual report.

During 2015-16 the Ombudsman's office commenced investigations into two deaths at Maghaberry Prison. There were no deaths in Magilligan, Hydebank Wood or Ash House.

1,593 complaints were received from prisoners, an 11% increase on 2014-15. While Magilligan Prison, Ash House Womens Prison and Hydebank Wood College remained stable throughout the year and had very low complaint rates, there was a 25% increase in complaints from integrated prisoners at Maghaberry Prison. Around three quarters of all complaints came from separated Republican prisoners held on Maghaberry's Roe 4 landing.

Concerns that the Prisoner Ombudsman expressed about Maghaberry Prison last year were highlighted in a report published by the Criminal Justice Inspectorate in November 2015. The inspection found Maghaberry's Internal Complaint Process was "*in disarray*," though improvements were noted in a follow-up inspection in January 2016.

The Prisoner Ombudsman upheld 41% of complaints. While the majority related to procedural failings, their significance for complainants, and for stability of the prisons, should not be underestimated: matters such as lengthy lockups, delayed mail and loss of privileges can seriously unsettle prisoners who have limited opportunities for contact with their families and few personal possessions.

There were some positive developments during 2015-16:

- The Northern Ireland Assembly passed legislation in March 2016 to place the Prisoner Ombudsman's office on a statutory footing. It is hoped the supporting Regulations can be drafted in time for the legislation to commence in early 2017;
- The Department of Justice (DoJ) commissioned an independent review of the Ombudsman's complaints-handling practice. The review was published in November 2015 and its findings were very positive.

The Prisoner Ombudsman expressed concern about inordinate delays in obtaining material for investigations from the South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust and the NIPS, and in receiving factual accuracy responses to draft reports. He acknowledged the Prison Service's and the Trust's operational priorities, but said "*It is important that this situation improve if the benefits of publicly-funded prison oversight are to be fully delivered.*"

Five staff moved on from the Prisoner Ombudsman's office during 2015-16. While the office's investigative capacity was maintained, Ombudsman Tom McGonigle concluded "*There has been a significant loss of familiarity with prison culture, personnel and processes. A key task for the incoming year is therefore to begin rebuilding this important knowledge base.*"

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