

**Suicide Prevention in Prisons  
Advisory Group Meeting  
2pm-4pm, Wednesday 10 June 2015  
1 Ardleigh Road, London N1 4HS**

**Attended:**

Frances Crook (Chair) , Lorraine Atkinson, Graham Durcan, Stephen Habgood, Fiona Malcolm, Richard Monkhouse, Andrew Neilson, Ann Norman, Jerry Petherick, Jane Powell.

**Apologies:**

Dr Meng Aw-Yong, Dr Nick Kosky, Tammi Walker.

Frances Crook explained that the Howard League for Penal Reform had highlighted the issue of deaths in prison custody for many years. A report on the high number of prisoners who had died by suicide in Leeds prison was published in the 1980s and the charity had worked with families. The Howard League was a founding member of the ministerial board on deaths in custody and had campaigned for the abolition of the use of strip cells. The number of deaths in custody had been reducing until last year, when the numbers began to rise again.

She asked members of the advisory group to introduce themselves.

**Stephen Habgood** is chair of Papyrus, prevention on young suicide UK, which provides confidential advice and support to young people and their families and training for professionals who work with young people. He is a former prison governor.

**Fiona Malcolm** is deputy chief executive of the Samaritans. Fiona Malcolm has responsibility for the Listener schemes which operate in prisons across the four nations. She is a member of the ministerial board on deaths in custody.

**Richard Monkhouse** is chair of the Magistrates' Association. The charity provides a voice for magistrates, offers support and training and educates the wider public about the role of the magistracy.

**Ann Norman** is the professional lead for criminal justice and learning disabilities nursing at the Royal College of Nursing.

**Jerry Petherick** is managing director of custodial and detention services for G4S. He is responsible for prisons and immigration removal centres. He is a former prison governor.

**Jane Powell** is director of CALM, the campaign against living miserably. The charity seeks to prevent male suicide by offering support to men in the UK and pushing for

changes in policy and practice. The charity receives over 5,000 calls and web-chats each month, mainly from men.

**Andrew Neilson** is director of campaigns at the Howard League for Penal Reform. He leads the campaigns team and oversaw its recent high profile campaign on Books for Prisoners. Andrew Neilson was previously press and communications manager at the Howard League and was a government press officer for seven years.

**Lorraine Atkinson** is senior policy officer at the Howard League for Penal Reform. She co-ordinated the work of the Commission on Sex in Prison which completed its 2 year inquiry into sex behind bars in March 2014. Lorraine Atkinson will be co-ordinating the programme of work on suicide prevention in prison with Graham Durcan (below).

**Graham Durcan** is associate director for the criminal justice programme at Centre for Mental Health. The Centre for Mental Health works across four nations. Graham Durcan has conducted research and evaluated mental health provision in the criminal justice system including liaison and diversion, street triage and resettlement for prisoners with mental health problems.

## 1. Reviews and consultations

There was a discussion about the various reviews that were taking place into deaths in custody and mental health services in the criminal justice system including:

- The Harris Review: independent review into self-inflicted deaths in NOMS custody of 18-24 year olds  
<http://iapdeathsincustody.independent.gov.uk/harris-review/>
- The NICE consultation on the guidance on the mental health of adults in the criminal justice system  
<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/indevelopment/gid-cgwave0726>
- NOMS review of ACCT system
- Royal College of Psychiatrists is developing a quality network for prison mental health services  
<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/workinpsychiatry/qualityimprovement/ccqiprojects/prisonmentalhealth.aspx>
- The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman had recently published a Learning Lessons bulletin on suicides in segregation.  
<http://www.ppo.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Learning-Lessons-Bulletin-Segregation-final.pdf>

It was suggested that it would be useful to map out who was looking at what and when it was due for completion. This could enable the project to feed into the various reviews.

Lorraine Atkinson agreed to compile a list of the various reviews, including contacts for each review. Members of the advisory group were asked to email suggestions to [Lorraine.atkinson@howardleague.org](mailto:Lorraine.atkinson@howardleague.org)

## **2. Keeping people out of prison custody**

The advisory group discussed what was being done to keep vulnerable people out of prison custody. The Magistrates' Association had launched a scheme to promote a network of mental health and learning disability champions in the magistrates' courts.

The Greater Manchester Intensive Alternatives to Custody (IAC) pilot was an example of what could be done.

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/217372/intensive-alt-custody-research-summary.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/217372/intensive-alt-custody-research-summary.pdf)

Concern was expressed that sometimes funding for good practice was not continued even when it was shown to be beneficial and cost effective.

The public view on the use of prison needed to change. Finland had demonstrated that the prison population could be reduced and the crime rate would not necessarily rise as a result.

## **3. The role of families**

The importance of families was discussed. Family members were separated from loved ones when they went to prison. Families could have a positive impact on a prisoner's mental health and rehabilitation but contact was often limited. Involving families could be beneficial.

The number of remand prisoners who died by suicide was disproportionately high. Prisoners were more at risk of suicide during the early days of custody. Contact with family members could help to prevent suicides.

There had been an increase in the number of older people in prison serving sentences for sexual offences. For some prisoners, family contact could be problematic, particularly if a family member was the victim of a sexual offence. Older prisoners could be more isolated due to the nature of their offence.

## **4. The cost of prison suicide**

There was a discussion about the economic impact of suicides in prison.

Samaritans had worked with Network Rail and British Transport Police to prevent suicides on the railway network. If a person died by suicide on the railway, the rail network was shut down, resulting in cancellations and huge financial costs for Network Rail and train operators. NR had worked to reduce the number of suicides on the railway track.

The human costs of a suicide in prison were often intangible. The financial costs of a suicide in prison included:

- The costs of a police investigation
- PPO investigation

- HSE investigation
- Serious case review for suicide of children
- Staffing costs
- Cost of counselling for staff and prisoners following a suicide
- Coroner's inquest costs
- Family inquest costs
- Legal representation for parties during the inquest
- Contributions towards funeral expenses

Highlighting the financial cost of a suicide in prison could encourage investment in preventative measures.

The reputational damage of a death in prison custody was intangible. There was a discussion about the accountability of NOMS and ministers who had a duty of care towards people in prison.

### **5. Trends in suicide rates**

There was a discussion about the increase in suicide rates in wider society and in prisons.

The establishment of a safer custody group in the prison service had coincided with a reduction in the suicide rate in prison. There was no longer a safer custody group and it had been replaced by the Offender Safety Rights and Responsibilities Group (OSRRG). The suicide rate in prison had risen.

The regional safer custody leads had recently been reinstated but there had been a two year period where there had been no regional safer custody leads. This had made it difficult for NGOs including the Samaritans to communicate with NOMS at a regional level.

### **6. Supporting men at risk of suicide**

There was a discussion about how to engage with men, who are at higher risk of suicide. Suicide was a huge issue with older men who often did not come forward to ask for help. Feelings of shame were a factor in preventing older men from seeking help. It was important to find a format that was acceptable to men. Peer to peer support had been shown to work well with men in prison. CALM had done a lot of work on engaging with men.

There were a number of different agencies providing a range of different services for people in prison. Research in one prison alone had shown that there were over 200 visiting services providing a range of support services to prisoners. Competition and the tendering of services in prisons did not necessarily lead to collaborative working.

It was suggested that the project could look at how people and organisations could work together to engage with prisoners.

### **7. In-cell telephones**

In-cell telephones had been introduced in some private prisons and other prisons were looking to introduce them. They did allow prisoners to talk to family members and also meant that prisoners could contact suicide and other helplines in private.

However, there were some concerns expressed about the potential for some prisoners to abuse the system or control partners outside of prison.

The Samaritans provided services to prisoners and had data on the number of prisoners who called on a prison service helpline. If a prisoner called from a mobile they would not be counted. It was not known how many mobiles were in prisons.

There were a range of organisations which ran helplines to support people at risk of suicide but prisoners were not always able to call an organisation of their choosing on the prison phone system.

## **8. Achieving change**

There was a discussion about how to bring about change. The importance of keeping key groups such as the POA on board was mentioned.

It was suggested it could be a struggle to get people to care about the suicide of an older male sex offender in prison. Evidence in terms of the impact and cost of a prison suicide could prove helpful.

Individual stories were helpful as it allowed people to think “that could be me”. The media had highlighted the case study of a man who was denied a book in his cell in the recent report on prison suicide on segregation by the PPO.

Anger management was an issue that could be investigated further. Young men often did something in anger which resulted in them coming into contact with the police and the criminal justice system. The link between anger, violence and suicide could be explored.

There was a need to change attitudes. People in prison were sometimes discouraged by staff from concerning themselves with the affairs of other prisoners. If they recognised that someone was in distress, for example if they had just arrived in prison, it was difficult or forbidden to give them a book or a cigarette. The human touches mattered and could make a difference.

The number of suicides fell when in-cell televisions were introduced in prisons, when there were more staff and when more prisoners could go to work or education.

There was a discussion about governor autonomy and whether governors in charge of private prisons had more autonomy than governors in the public sector. Suicides occurred in private and in public prisons. The nature of the prison was an important factor. Suicides were higher in local prisons and large prisoners with transient populations. People did not feel safe in large prisons.

If there was a problem in a prison it was important that governors had the levers to fix it. It was suggested that if the different services were broken up and given to different providers, there were more weaknesses in the system, accountability was less clear and it became harder for governors to make changes.

There had been a growth in the number of prisoner councils. If they were well run and staff bought into the idea they could be beneficial for prisoners and prisons.

There was a discussion about the use of short sentences. Research had shown short sentences were less effective compared to a community penalty.

There had been a drop in the number of people remanded by the courts. The effects of being remanded to custody could be devastating as people could lose their job, their home, their partner and their family. There was a discussion about the use of problem solving courts to reduce the use of remand and short prison sentences.

The problem of legal highs in prison was highlighted. Vulnerable prisons were being used to test out legal highs coming into the prison. The drugs affected behaviour in prisons and increased levels of violence and psychosis.

The impact of overcrowding in prisons was discussed. Placing people with mental health problems in overcrowded prisons inevitably led to anger. It was suggested that self-harm, drug taking and suicide were at epidemic levels. Overcrowding was unacceptable and staff needed to be able to speak out about it.

The problem around accessing mental health services in the community was raised. Men were being turned away when they asked for help with mental health problems. They sometimes ended up in custody after committing an offence related to their unresolved mental health problem.

#### **9. Forthcoming events**

The Howard League for Penal Reform and Centre for Mental Health planned to hold a roundtable event on suicide prevention in prisons. Members of the advisory group were asked to email suggestions for people to invite to the event to [Lorraine.atkinson@howardleague.org](mailto:Lorraine.atkinson@howardleague.org)

Frances Crook thanked everybody for coming and contributing to the discussion.

**The next meeting of the advisory group will take place on Wednesday 20 January from 2pm till 4pm at the Howard League for Penal Reform offices, 1 Ardleigh Road, London N1 4HS**