

JUSTICE MINISTER CLAIRE SUGDEN STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY

MENTAL HEALTH IN PRISONS – NOVEMBER 21, 2016

“With permission Mr Speaker, I wish to update members on matters relating to mental health in the Northern Ireland Prison Service following recent deaths in custody.

“Firstly, my thoughts and sympathy are with all of those affected by the recent deaths in Maghaberry Prison. Every death in custody is a tragedy. It is a tragedy for bereaved family and friends. It greatly affects prison staff, particularly those officers who have worked with these vulnerable people, and have come to know them. It is a tragedy also for other inmates who are affected too.

“As Justice Minister, I take extremely seriously the responsibility placed on me, to care for every individual in custody in Northern Ireland. It is a very sad fact that the prison population includes groups of highly vulnerable people and, for some, the confinement regime itself presents a significant burden on their mental health.

“Since November 2015 there have been five deaths in custody in Northern Ireland, four relating to mental health issues.

“On November 17, 2016 the prison population totalled 1,533. Of these, 417 were recorded as having a mental health illness and a further 740 prisoners recorded as having an addiction. That amounts to just over 75 per cent of the prison population.

“The needs of those in prison are complex and, in comparison to wider society, there are disproportionately higher numbers of prisoners who present with mental health problems and personality disorders. In addition, the problems associated with alcohol and substance misuse, mental illness and generally poor coping skills are all higher among the prison population.

“Research also tells us that people in custody are more likely to have either undiagnosed or unmet health needs. For many their first mental health diagnosis occurs only when they are in custody.

“The prison service supports vulnerable prisoners through the Supporting Prisoners at Risk (SPAR) process. This helps staff identify, at an early stage, behaviours that suggest a prisoner may be in personal crisis and in need of additional and immediate support and care.

“The emphasis is on individualised care of the prisoner and engagement to understand what is causing the distress.

“The SPAR process is designed to be a short-term crisis, first aid management tool and is not designed to provide long-term care or to address the underlying issues such as poor mental health or historical trauma. The process provides for an immediate plan for keeping the person safe, for a swift assessment of the concerns causing the crisis and a pathway for longer-term interventions and support to prevent or reduce a recurrence.

“However we portray it, the custody environment is not designed to deal with those experiencing severe chronic mental health issues. Whatever level of training we provide to staff they remain prison officers.

“The Northern Ireland Prison Service cannot meet this challenge alone. We need the ongoing help and support of the Department of Health, other departments, and partners across the justice system, and in the wider community.

“Prison officers play a vital role in assessing and supporting vulnerable offenders during periods of crisis. Countless lives have been saved by prison officers who identify prisoners at risk and care for them successfully. We owe them a debt of gratitude for the work they do around the clock, keeping prisoners as safe as possible in very challenging circumstances.

“The management of the prison service, governors and their teams work tirelessly to reduce the rate of self-harm and to prevent suicide. Identifying and supporting prisoners with mental health issues remains a high priority for the Northern Ireland Prison Service. However, not every episode of self-harm can be prevented and, tragically, some suicides will happen despite the best efforts of staff.

“The prison service and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which delivers healthcare in prisons, are committed to providing effective services to vulnerable people in custody. The Health Minister and I want to reassure the Assembly, and the public, that we are working together on this issue.

“Following the most recent tragic death at Maghaberry Prison, a meeting was held on Friday, November 18 to develop a Community Response Plan. This followed the same model that is adopted whenever there are potential clusters of suicide in the community.

“The aim of using this approach is to detect a potential suicide cluster and thereby prevent further deaths by suicide. Full investigations into the circumstances of the recent deaths at Maghaberry are ongoing and, while it would be wrong to pre-empt the findings of the prisoner ombudsman or a coroner’s inquest, I believe it is crucial to act immediately.

“I also believe this is the first time this model, which has been used successfully in the community, has been adopted in a prison in Northern Ireland. The objectives from this work are to:

- Identify and support those potentially at risk through timely and coordinated support from all sectors
- To co-ordinate local and additional resources throughout the response period

AND

- To monitor and evaluate the response put in place

“Furthermore, the prison service is also working in partnership with the South Eastern Trust, reviewing the Suicide and Self-Harm Policy. The new policy is still in development but is likely to adopt a two-strand approach to the management of prisoners at risk.

“The first strand is called Proportional Response and encompasses the essence of providing ‘Keep Safe Care’ through positive staff engagement and immediate response and intervention if required.

“The second strand is called Tailored Support and will provide a multi-agency approach to prisoner-specific medium to long term care. All mental health and therapeutic care streams will be managed in partnership with South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust and is facilitated by the Northern Ireland Prison Service through Tailored Support.

“The Department of Health and the Department of Justice are continuing to liaise in respect of a joint Healthcare and Criminal Justice Strategy, which covers the health and social care needs of people at all stages of the criminal justice journey - as suspects, defendants and those serving sentences - in Northern Ireland.

“The draft Criminal Justice and Healthcare Strategy and Action Plan has been through consultation and an analysis of the responses has been completed to inform the final strategy. I believe that is an excellent example of how departments can work together and expect it to be finalised, agreed and brought forward for implementation as a matter of urgency.

“Minister O’Neill and I have agreed to conduct an immediate review of vulnerable people in custody. Officials from both departments are now working together to define the structure, scope and timeframe of this review.

“I know members appreciate the scale of the challenge in respect of mental health in prisons and the need for joined up partnership working to address that challenge.

“I hope members will also agree that, at a strategic and operational level, steps are already being taken to meet the needs of vulnerable individuals in custody.”