

Irish Prison Service statement to The Detail

December 2016

“Every death in custody is a tragedy. It is a tragedy for bereaved family members, other prisoners who are affected and for prison staff working with vulnerable offenders.

“It should be borne in mind that deaths in custody can occur for a number of reasons including age or underlining medical issues on committal, leading to death by natural causes, deaths by drugs overdose or deaths by suicide. It is a sad fact that the prison population includes a significant number of individuals who are highly vulnerable.

“The Irish Prison Service has a number of actions with regard to the prevention of deaths in custody such as:

- Assessments of prisoners on committal and referral to appropriate medical staff and development of specific care plans;
- The provision of in-reach arrangements provided by the National Forensic Mental Health Service (NFMHS) at the Central Mental Hospital (CMH);
- The delivery of Mental Health Awareness Programme to all its prison staff,
- The provision of peer support groups through the Samaritans Prison Listener Scheme – which is available in all closed prisons.

“As already stated, deaths in custody occur for a number of reasons and are mainly unforeseen events which do not follow any particular pattern. While in 2015 there were 15 deaths in custody across the prison estate, to date in 2016 there have been five deaths in custody. *[N.B. This excludes the number of people who died while on temporary release.]*

“The Irish Prison Service, working with its key partner organisations, has developed robust procedures from the investigation into the death of a prisoner in custody. All deaths in custody are the subject of a Garda investigation, a coroner’s inquest is held, and are also subject to an independent investigation by the Inspector of Prisons.

“The Irish Prison Service has also introduced a standard approach to the internal investigation of a death in prison custody. All prison governors are obliged to complete an internal investigation and to return an 'Internal Review Report' to the Director General within two months of the death. The internal review fully covers the background and circumstances of each death in custody, and its objective is to identify any possible measures which may be implemented which can contribute to a reduced risk of a death in custody in future.

“The Independent Review Reports are considered by the Irish Prison Service Steering Group for the Prevention of Self-Harm and Death in the Prison Population, chaired by the Director General of the Irish Prison Service. The steering group, which includes representatives from: the National Forensic Mental Health Service; psychology; healthcare; Samaritans, staff and prison management ensure that the relevant findings of reports are disseminated throughout the prison system.

“It is the aim of the Irish Prison Service to ensure that all releases from Irish prisons and places of detention are planned releases. The aim of this policy is to provide standard practice for pre-release planning across the Irish Prison Service estate and to ensure the informed and effective transition of the offender from prison to the community.

“A new prisoner pre-release planning policy is at an advanced stage that addresses issues arising for the individual in custody under six key pillars: Housing/Accommodation Needs; Financial Supports; Healthcare; Public Safety and Statutory Requirements; Families & Personal Relationships; Education, Training and Employment. A recent development has been agreement with the Health Service Executive on the issuance of medical cards to prisoners prior to their release. This arrangement commenced with persons in Cork Prison in September 2016 and rolled-out to all locations over 2017.”