

*Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody*

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Minister of State Lucy Frazer QC MP  
Minister of State Nadine Dorries MP

Dear Ministers,

**Avoidable natural deaths in prison custody: putting things right**

We are writing to advise that some natural deaths in custody are avoidable and can and should be prevented. The number of natural (i.e. not self-inflicted) deaths in prison has reached unacceptably high levels. In ten years, numbers have increased from 103 in 2009 to 165 in 2019, with a high of 195 in 2017. The challenges posed by COVID-19 have thrown these issues into sharp relief: despite thorough and robust responses by NHS England, HMPPS and others to preserve life, natural deaths in prison in 2020 are set to reach their highest count yet.

In November last year, the Independent Advisory Panel (IAP) and Royal College of Nursing (RCN) held an expert roundtable to identify how this rise might be halted and the numbers of natural deaths in prison reduced. Delegates were asked to consider particular themes related to the prevention, or reduction, of deaths in custody, and to highlight potential solutions and interventions. The roundtable brought together academics, inspectors and regulators, and healthcare professions for presentations and roundtable discussions on how to prevent such deaths.

The final report draws on insights from these expert discussions, as well as prisoner consultation and wider research to analyse primary care and chronic disease management, care of older prisoners, dementia care, social care provision, compassionate release, palliative care, culture, workforce and training. It identifies how such deaths might be prevented, where possible, and end of life care managed with dignity and compassion.

The prison population is indeed getting older and will increase markedly under new sentencing proposals in the White Paper. Our recommendations outline areas where treatment and provision for this particular cohort must improve, and we welcome the conclusions of the Justice Select Committee's inquiry into older prisoners, which reported in July 2020, as well and the ongoing work of officials in this area. Yet, vitally, the high number of natural deaths in prison is not just a reflection of an ageing prison

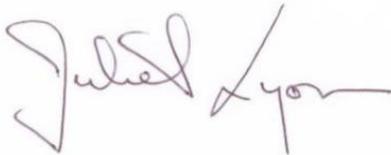
population. The average age of someone dying in custody is just 56 years-old, a significant contrast to almost 81 in the general population. Prisoners are dying earlier in the care of the state than they would in the community, with the quality of care received in prison closely dependent on age and sentence length.

Two other themes emerge. Firstly, specific cohorts, such as women and black and minority ethnic prisoners, continue to face unique challenges, and there is a clear need to take active steps to meet their needs. Secondly, the report must, inevitably, be read in the context of the ongoing challenges of COVID-19. We are grateful for how the prison service and health providers have responded in such a disciplined manner to the unprecedented circumstances presented by the pandemic, including through the use of new technologies, and are grateful to NHS England for the reassurance they provided about prison healthcare at meetings of the Ministerial Board on Deaths in Custody. Clearly, though, significant challenges remain and we hope that the recommendations made in our joint report will aid continued efforts to respond to the virus and its associated impact on health.

The IAP recognises the cross-department and agency nature of prison health partnership working, and how this brings both opportunity and challenge. The IAP and RCN will continue to support the delivery and monitor the implementation of recommendations made in this report in collaboration with roundtable attendees, other partners, and department and agency leads.

The report's practical, specific and deliverable recommendations are evidence based and urgently needed to protect life. We would very much welcome a meeting with you both to discuss the points made in this review and how your departments can carry forward the implementation of relevant recommendations.

Yours sincerely,



Juliet Lyon CBE  
**Chair, Independent Advisory  
Panel on Deaths in Custody**



Susan Masters  
**Director of Nursing  
Royal College of Nursing**