In prison,

we don't have freedom.

So the smallest things for us can mean a lot.

It could be something really, really trivial to somebody else,

but to you, it's such a big thing and you feel so passionate about it.

When you feel as though you have a voice in prison...

..it means a lot to you.

Somebody who isn't in prison, who has a complaint, can go out,

do something else and forget about it,

but it's very difficult sometimes

for a prisoner to put things behind them and move on.

Investigators in the Ombudsman's office
are very dedicated to the work.

Getting to the truth is very important for us as an organisation.

And often, the complaint to us is the prisoners last way of expressing their voice.

You've got two principal functions in the Ombudsman's office.

We investigate complaints from prisoners subject to probation supervision,

and those held in immigration detention.

And we have the mournful responsibility of investigating every death that occurs in prison and immigration detention,

or amongst the residents of probation approved premises.

Whenever a prisoner complains in an establishment and remains dissatisfied,
it comes to us to look at and consider.

We put a fresh pair of eyes on it just to see whether a decision that a prisoner has made is fair, reasonable and the right one.

What we hope to do is to provide a service to complainers so that they feel that their complaints are considered by an outside body, that it's not simply a service judging itself.

More or less immediately when somebody dies, our office will be notified.

We're looking for evidence, information...

Ultimately, we're looking at the level of care this particular individual received.

The majority of Ombudsman staff
describe their job title as Investigators.

They are looking into the circumstances that have given rise either to a complaint or the circumstances surrounding a death in custody.

And that's the heart of their professionalism - to make sure that investigations are proportionate because we talk about public money all the time, but nevertheless, to make sure that no stone is left unturned.

We investigate all deaths in prison custody approved premises and immigration detention centres.

Anybody who dies within that particular establishment, whether it be by natural causes or a self-inflicted death, we would investigate.
We also contact families because central to our investigation are the families' concerns and we like to understand what they are before we go to do the investigation. ..make sure that the prison did everything that is expected of them to look after your son. We deal with the emotions and the grief and the distress that they're suffering, as somebody providing the consistent point of contact for the family and obviously answer their questions. Put your thoughts in writing if that would be easier. Once we've established a chain of events, we look at anything that might be of concern. We have to keep an open mind
as to whether something could have been done that might have made the outcome different.

That's looking at the systems in place to protect that prisoner.

For example, suicide prevention monitoring.

I've noticed something in your inspection report and I really need to meet with the Head.

Obviously, recommendations are made on the reports.

These are passed on to the family so that they can see that we are making and taking positive steps to prevent this happening in the future, if there's been a lack of care or things that could have been done that should have been done.

COMPLAINTS INVESTIGATION

When a complaint arrives at the office,

I assess the paperwork,
I may visit the prison who interviewed the prisoner,

perhaps phone him.

The education department supports your application.

I speak to staff,

gather whatever documentary evidence and information the prisoner has,

look at policy and procedures in the office that govern prison life...

Then I decide on whether there is merit and value in the complaint

that has been investigated.

Obviously, in the interests of fairness,

both the prisoners' sides and the staff's sides have to be considered.

Some cases are very straightforward

and can be concluded with a phone call on the same day.

Other cases are much more complicated

and the investigations for those can go on for several weeks.
I'd like to ask you about the procedures you followed up.

Our aim is to really sort the problem.

It's not necessary to produce a long, detailed form of report.

Of course, there are complaints where that is what is required - the most serious complaints, allegations of assault or racism.

Then there, we will put additional resources to ensure that the problem is identified and remedy is found.

Often, I find that the initial letter that we receive from the prisoner is only the tip of the iceberg.

Of course, often, when prisoners make a complaint, it's an indication of a wider problem.

And when we think that the problem may be more widespread, we can make recommendations to the service.

And get the fundamental rules changed.

I think that they value that input.
They value that extra level of supervision, if you like.

So the leaders of the services are generally prepared to accept the Ombudsman's recommendations.

I pay particular personal attention to ensuring that the Ombudsman's office enjoys mutually respectful relationships with each of the services that we oversee.

It builds a level of trust so that we're not afraid of being examined by external bodies.

If it resolves the complaints to a satisfactory conclusion, then everyone is happy.

Not always, but sometimes, you can actually make the system better.

Putting something right is really rewarding.

And that's one of the reasons why I enjoy doing the job.
I hope our investigations make a real difference to the care of prisoners and I think that's what drives me and most of the office. It's also very satisfying when you can give something back to a prisoner, who may feel that he is being forgotten, written off and ignored. I think you need the Ombudsman to be fair and reliable and willing to listen. And they've done all those things for me. Sometimes it can be dealt with by landing staff POSO, but if it has to go to the Ombudsman, they do look into it. And if your case is valid, then something is done. This gives you self-esteem in a funny kind of way. It gives you confidence, as well, being able to communicate
and know that you can go through those channels and be heard

and your voice can make a change.

PRISONS AND PROBATION OMBUDSMAN FOR ENGLAND AND WALES

INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATIONS

PRODUCED BY CENTRAL OFFICE OF INFORMATION

CROWN COPYRIGHT 2009