More people behind bars nearing end of life

Prisons must develop a national care strategy to cope with the ageing make-up of the prison population

As prisons and probation ombudsman, I investigate deaths in prison in England and Wales. Demand for my services has never been greater, with a record 304 deaths to investigate in 2015-16, 42% more than 5 years before.

It has been difficult to explain the sharp increase in suicide and homicide in prison, but the 172 deaths from natural causes last year are easier to explain. Mostly, they reflect a rapidly ageing prison population due to longer sentences and more late-in-life prosecutions.

As a result, the number of prisoners over the age of 60 has tripled. With age comes related health conditions — and death.

Adjusting to care

In some ways these challenges are obvious: prisons are designed for the fit and young and they need to adjust to care for older people. Increasingly, prison staff are managing prisoners’ end of life care.

Prisons should have local leads for adult social care to coordinate provision and get the best out of local authority support under the Care Act 2014. But, worryingly, there are examples of unacceptable neglect.

There is also the inhumane use of restraints for low-risk, frail, confused and terminally ill prisoners when they go to hospitals or hospices. Shamefully, there is evidence of one prisoner with dementia remaining chained until death.

There are other issues, such as appropriate training for prison staff and adjustments to the prison environment.

Despite these concerns, prisons and their healthcare partners are moving in the right direction, but there is a long way to go and the evidence shows that there needs to be a properly resourced national care strategy for the rapidly growing population of older prisoners.