



The
**Prisoner
Ombudsman**
for Northern Ireland

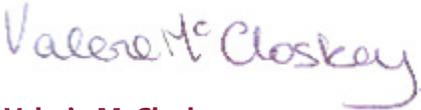
2024-2025 BUSINESS PLAN

Foreword

The Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (Ombudsman) appointment is currently vacant and a recruitment exercise is underway. Since the beginning of this business year the Chief Inspector, Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland has provided some interim cover, ensuring independence and operational continuity is maintained. On appointment, the incoming Ombudsman will establish the strategic direction of the Office through developing a new Strategic Plan. In the meantime this Business Plan focuses on key operational deliverables for 2024-2025, ensuring core functions remain robust while preparing the groundwork for future strategic alignment.

This Plan outlines the primary activities and priorities for the Office of the Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (PONI) in 2024-2025. Our immediate focus is to maintain the integrity of investigative processes, reduce accumulated backlogs and uphold the highest standards in delivering evidence-based outcomes. By refining our processes and sustaining high-quality investigations, we seek to embed a culture of continuous improvement and learning that benefits all stakeholders.

This Plan not only provides clear guidance for our team but also strengthens the Office's relationships with persons in custody, business partners and other key stakeholders. It aims to consolidate our operational resilience and ensure our work remains effective, relevant and impactful as we transition into a more strategically driven phase under new leadership.



Valerie McCloskey
Director of Operations

The Prisoner Ombudsman's Office

Established in 2005, the Prisoner Ombudsman's Office (the Office) operates independently under the Prisoner Ombudsman and is funded by the Department of Justice (DoJ). The Office's primary role is to investigate deaths in custody in Northern Ireland's prisons and other critical incidents under a standing commission from the Northern Ireland Prison Service (Prison Service) and the investigation of prisoner and visitor complaints; ensuring accountability and transparency. The Prisoner Ombudsman's independence is fundamental to maintaining public trust and the integrity of our work.

The Director of Operations' primary responsibility is to support the Prisoner Ombudsman in achieving the Office's strategic objectives. This involves leading a dedicated team of skilled investigators and support staff in delivering high-quality investigation reports. Our investigations focus on four core areas:

- 1. Deaths in Custody:** we are commissioned by the Prison Service to prepare detailed investigation reports on all deaths occurring in Prison Service custody in Northern Ireland. These reports are critical in informing the Coroner's Inquest and compliance with European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) standards including a positive Article 2 duty. The reports also ensure adherence to international standards for the care and treatment of prisoners, particularly the United Nation's standard Minimum Rules (Mandela Rules) adopted in December 2015. In these cases, the Prisoner Ombudsman has discretion to consider any concerns raised by family members.

2 & 3. Serious Adverse Incidents and Post Release Deaths:

we investigate serious incidents within custody and deaths occurring up to 14 days after release, examining what factors, if any, related to time spent in custody contributed to the outcomes.

Our work is guided by the principles set out in Article 2 of the ECHR, which obligates the State to protect life. When a custodial death occurs, it is imperative our investigations are prompt, thorough and effective, identifying any systemic issues in management or operations that may have contributed. The report not only clarifies what happened but also determines whether policy or procedural changes are necessary to prevent similar occurrences in the future.

The Mandela Rules further reinforce our duty to ensure those in custody are treated with respect for their inherent dignity, with a strict prohibition on torture and other forms of ill-treatment. Our investigations uphold these principles while striving to deliver objective, evidence-based findings.

Each investigation conducted by the Office seeks to uncover the facts, identify lessons learned and provide recommendations aimed at improving practices within the Prison Service and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. Report recommendations contribute to the enhancement of care standards for individuals in custody and promote a learning culture within the establishments with which we engage.

In addition to three areas of investigation, the fourth core area is:

- 4. Prisoner Complaints:** these occur when prisoners remain dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint after engaging with the Prison Service's internal complaints process. In specific cases, the Prisoner Ombudsman may also review complaints from recently released individuals. Since 2010, prisoners' visitors have been able to refer their complaints to the Prisoner Ombudsman's Office after first seeking resolution through the Prison Service.

The standards of independence, impartiality and professionalism are central to all investigations conducted by the Office. We remain committed to ensuring our work reflects these values and consistently meets the expectations of those we serve.

The Office also provides Secretariat services to the Independent Monitoring Board and its Executive Committee.

Financial Governance and Accountability

Strict financial controls and regular monitoring have been implemented to ensure effective use of allocated funds, with monthly reporting to the DoJ on expenditure and financial performance. A robust risk management framework will be developed with regular reviews and updates to identify, assess and mitigate risks related to governance, finance, and operations.

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)

With the appointment of a new Ombudsman, revising and updating the MoU between the DoJ and the Office will be prioritised. The MoU will clearly set out reporting lines, accountability mechanisms, operational independence balanced with departmental oversight, and procedures for dispute resolution and escalation. Engaging stakeholders in reviewing the draft MoU ensures alignment with both the DoJ's and the Ombudsman's objectives. Once finalised, the MoU will be formally approved and communicated effectively.

Performance Reporting and Continuous Improvement

Performance reports will be regularly submitted to the DoJ, covering key metrics, progress on achieving objectives and any emerging issues requiring attention. Periodic internal audits will be conducted to assess compliance with governance and operational standards, using findings to drive continuous improvement.

Stakeholder Engagement and Communication

Regular communication channels with stakeholders, including the public, government departments and civil society organisations, will be maintained to ensure transparency and accessibility. Internally, fostering a culture of open communication within the Office is essential, with regular updates provided to the team on changes in governance policies, operational procedures, and strategic goals.

Strategic Context

This Plan addresses key operational deliverables that align with our overarching mission. This mission is rooted in a culture of collaboration, transparency and adaptability, ensuring our processes and practices evolve in response to emerging challenges designed to meet immediate business needs.

The Plan also outlines a comprehensive programme of work aimed at enhancing internal processes, refining practices and fostering a positive culture within our team, as well as strengthening relationships with our stakeholders and partners. By targeting these areas, we will drive continuous improvement and optimise the performance of the Office. Recognising the dynamic environment in which we operate, this Plan will remain a live document, reviewed on a quarterly basis to ensure key priorities are rigorously monitored and achieved.

The Strategic Priorities established in the 2020-2024 plan continue to provide the foundation for the operational objectives set out in this Business Plan. These priorities include:

- ▶ **improve investigative processes;**
- ▶ **safeguard and reinforce independence;**
- ▶ **prepare for and implement statutory footing; and**
- ▶ **develop a learning environment that puts evidence to work.**

By maintaining focus on these strategic objectives, this Plan aligns immediate operational objectives with our broader vision, ensuring our work remains impactful and forward-looking.

Financial Resources

Draft opening non-ringfenced resource Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) budget and capital DEL budget for the Office are outlined in the table below. A significant portion of this budget is dedicated to salary costs reflecting our commitment to maintaining a skilled and effective workforce.

In light of financial pressures anticipated in this period, business areas should not commence any new areas of spend unless agreed by the Minister. All financial pressures or potential easements must be identified promptly and reported through the appropriate financial channels. Business areas are required to adhere strictly to their allocated budget for the financial year. There is no expectation of additional budget during in-year monitoring exercises. The Office will manage its financial pressures within the constraints of the budget, ensuring responsible and strategic use of allocated resources.

| OFFICE OF THE PRISONER OMBUDSMAN DRAFT NON-RINGFENCED RESOURCE DEL AND CAPITAL DEL BUDGET 2024/2025 | |
|---|----------------|
| NON-RINGFENCED RESOURCE DEL | £ |
| Resource Pay Costs | 685,000 |
| Resource Non Pay Costs | 231,000 |
| DRAFT NON-RINGFENCED RESOURCE DEL BUDGET | 916,000 |
| CAPITAL DEL | £ |
| Capital Costs | 84,000 |
| CAPITAL DEL BUDGET | 84,000 |

Staffing Resources

The staffing structure should ensure the staff in the Office, who are currently Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) DoJ officials, adhere to NICS Human Resource policies, terms and conditions. Consistency in performance management, development and conduct is crucial. A culture of integrity, fairness, and impartiality will be embedded within the Office, with regular communication of these expectations to maintain high ethical standards.

The Office has identified staff as a critical area for ensuring operational efficiency, particularly in light of ongoing vacancies and high levels of sickness absence. In response, we engaged a leading Management Consultancy Firm to review the organisational, management and staffing arrangements which are in place to support the work of the Office. The review, which commenced in March 2024, will be assessed by the incoming Ombudsman with a view to implementing all appropriate deliverable recommendations. Recognising the evolving nature of work, we have adopted a blended working model, balancing remote and in-office work. This approach is now embedded within our New Ways of Working Policy. Supporting this, Workstyle Agreements have been drafted in collaboration with Line Managers and will undergo annual reviews to ensure they remain aligned with organisational objectives and employee needs.

Through delivery of this Plan, we remain confident our Investigation Officers will attain a professional qualification in Investigative Practice within 2024-2025. This initiative will strengthen our investigative capabilities and enhance our service delivery.

Business Planning

The Office of the Prisoner Ombudsman remains committed to supporting Outcome 7 of the Programme for Government 2021: 'we have a safe community where we respect the law and each other' and the Departmental Strategic Objective: 'to provide the mechanisms to support an effective independent monitoring and complaints system for prisons that provides assurance that the prison environment and treatment of prisoners is appropriate'.

To align our operations to these overarching aims, individual Personal Performance Agreements are linked directly to the achievement of business plan objectives. This approach allows staff to clearly see how their contributions drive progress toward strategic objectives, fostering a stronger sense of purpose and accountability across the team.

The Plan will be reviewed in the context of the new draft Programme for Government 2024-2027 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most' within this business year as required.

Delivering the Plan

Progress against this Plan will be closely monitored throughout the year with quarterly reports provided to the DoJ. As a demand led service, the work of the Office faces significant challenges due to resource constraints. The growing gap between available resources and operational demands has led to a significant backlog in both Death in Custody and complaints.

This Plan will be published half way through the business year, work and work towards achieving objectives has already commenced or has been delivered. This work includes two Death in Custody published reports; the significant reduction in the backlog of complaints; six staff at an advanced stage of completing a professional qualification in Investigative Practice and the establishment of a case management database to support delivery of effective investigations for complaints and Death in Custody is under development.

KEY:

On target for achievement

Behind expected target but likely to be achieved

Target unlikely to be achieved

| Strategic Aim – Safer Communities | | | | | |
|--|-----|--|--|------------|------------------------------|
| We will work to ensure we have a safe community where we respect the law and each other. | | | | | |
| Obj 1 | | Priorities | Measure of success | RAG Status | Owner |
| | | | Improve investigative processes and service delivery | | |
| Investigative Reports | 1.1 | Update Death in Custody (DiC) processes in ensure consistency of approach. | All Investigative staff working to set process. | 31 Aug 24 | Senior Investigating Officer |
| | 1.2 | Investigate and produce reports for DiC, Serious Adverse Incident (SAI) and Post Release Death (PRD) cases | Publish a minimum of 6 DiC/PRD or SAI reports by 31 March 2025. Clear backlog and work towards achieving publication of reports within 18 months/2 years of date of incident. | 31 Mar 25 | Senior Investigating Officer |

Delivering the Plan

| Strategic Aim – Safer Communities | | | | | |
|--|-----|---|--|---------------|---|
| We will work to ensure we have a safe community where we respect the law and each other. | | | | | |
| Obj 1 | | Priorities | Measure of success | RAG Status | Owner |
| | 1.3 | Revert to normal complaints process and clear backlog of cases received before April 2024. | When backlog cleared, ensure all complaints are investigated and responded to within three months of receipt. | 31 March 25 | Senior Investigating Officer |
| IT development | 1.4 | Introduce a Case Management Database that supports delivery of effective investigations for complaints and separately Death in Custody. | Management information readily available to enable prioritisation of work to reduce the backlog of historic cases due to previous recovery plan arrangements. Effective case management and progression monitoring throughout the year on all work streams (DiC, SAI, PRD and complaints) | 31 Dec 24 | Governance & Compliance DP |
| | 1.5 | Agree secure use of IT to support on-site investigative work and witness statement collection with Prison Service. | Agreement finalised by Director of Operations (DoO) and Prison Service. | 31 Aug 24 | Director of Operations |
| IMB Secretariat | 1.6 | IMB receives effective Secretariat support from the Office. | Effective working relationship with and service delivery for IMB Executive Committee and members. | 31 March 2025 | Director of Operations and Secretariat staff. |

Delivering the Plan

| Strategic Aim – Safer Communities | | | | | |
|--|-----|---|--|------------------|----------------------------|
| We will work to ensure we have a safe community where we respect the law and each other. | | | | | |
| Obj 2 | | Priorities | Measure of success | RAG Status | Owner |
| Safeguard and reinforce independence | 2.1 | Review outdated Information Sharing Agreements, Service Level Agreements, Memorandums of Understanding, Protocols etc | Information can flow freely between business partners to ensure timely completion of investigations. | 31 Mar 25 | Governance & Compliance DP |
| | 2.2 | Establish and maintain effective working relationships with Prison Service, Trust, Coroners Office, CJI, IMB and other partners on detention oversight. | Regular contact established and timetabled to ensure ongoing communication channels are utilised. | 31 Mar 25 | Director of Operations |
| | 2.3 | Provide well-being support for staff. | Training needs analysis completed and reflected in individuals PDPs. Effective staff engagement to promote within team support fostered by regular team meetings and workshops. | 31 Aug 25 | Director of Operations |
| | 2.4 | Monitor external contracts. | Monitor value for money of current contracts, i.e MW Advocates, Legal, Website Management, Publication Design and Clinical Review. | 31 Mar 25 | Governance & Compliance DP |

Delivering the Plan

| Strategic Aim – Safer Communities | | | | | |
|--|-----|--|--|-------------------|----------------------------|
| We will work to ensure we have a safe community where we respect the law and each other. | | | | | |
| Obj 3 | | Priorities | Measure of success | | |
| Ombudsman Induction | 3.1 | Support the induction of a new Ombudsman. | Ombudsman receives effective induction and Office support. | October 24 | Director of Operations |
| Develop a learning environment that puts evidence to work | 3.2 | Ensure investigative staff are trained to professional standard. | All investigative staff are trained to Pearson Level 7 in Investigative Practices. | 30 Sept 24 | Governance & Compliance DP |
| | 3.3 | Compile registers of recommendations from DiC and complaints cases | Routinely check that accepted recommendations have been implemented | 31 Jul 24 | Director of Operations |

| Strategic Aim – Safer Communities | | | | | |
|--|-----|--------------------------------|--|--------------------|----------------------------|
| We will work to ensure we have a safe community where we respect the law and each other. | | | | | |
| Obj 4 | | Priorities | Measure of success | | |
| Budget | 4.1 | Demonstrate financial probity. | Remain within budget with no overspends. | 31 March 25 | Governance & Compliance DP |

Delivering the Plan

| Strategic Aim – Safer Communities We will work to ensure we have a safe community where we respect the law and each other. | | | | | |
|--|-----|--|--|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Obj 5 | | Priorities | Measure of success | | |
| Governance | 5.1 | Effective Sponsor relationships and compliance with DoJ governance requirements. | <p>Throughout the year, maintain effective working relationships with the DoJ Sponsor Team.</p> <p>Update all relevant and required governance documents to ensure they are fit for purpose including the maintenance and review of an effective Risk Register that reflects Business Plan risks.</p> <p>Undergo an Internal Audit Review.</p> <p>Respond to all Freedom of information, Subject Access Requests and correspondence in line with DoJ policy within the agreed timeframe.</p> | 31 March 25 | Governance & Compliance DP |