

**2025-26**  
**BUSINESS**  
**PLAN**

## **Foreword from the Prisoner Ombudsman**

It is with purpose and optimism I present the 2025–26 Business Plan for the Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. This document sets out a clear and ambitious programme of work that supports the first year of our new Strategic Plan 2025–28. It reflects a renewed commitment to operational resilience, transparency and continuous improvement during a period of significant transition for the Office.

As Ombudsman, I will lead with integrity and ensure our investigations, whether into deaths in custody, post release deaths, serious adverse incidents, or complaints, are carried out with professionalism, impartiality and professional curiosity. This plan reinforces our focus on building trust with prisoners, their families and the wider public by strengthening our investigative processes and reinforcing the independence that is central to our role.

The priorities set out here, from improving timelines and workflow structures, to enhancing our digital capabilities and staff development, are aligned with our strategic objectives and grounded in a culture of accountability and learning. We are also committed to fostering meaningful engagement with our stakeholders to ensure our work remains accessible and impactful.

I am confident that with the continued dedication of our team and the support of our stakeholders, we will deliver on the goals outlined in this plan and continue to serve as a trusted and transparent voice for fairness within Northern Ireland's prison system.

**Darrin Jones**

Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland

## **The Prisoner Ombudsman's Office**

The Prisoner Ombudsman's office was established in 2005 as a result of a recommendation made in the Steele Review. The Ombudsman is appointed by the Minister of Justice and is an Independent Statutory Office Holder operating independently of Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) and the Department of Justice. The staff of the office are Northern Ireland Civil Service staff. 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 (NIPS) and the investigation of prisoner, ex-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 producing high-quality investigation reports. Our investigations focus on four core areas:

### **1. Deaths in Custody:**

We are commissioned by NIPS 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 complying with European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) Article 2<sup>1</sup> right to life 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Everyone's right to life shall be protected by law. No one shall be deprived of his life intentionally save in the execution of a sentence of a court following his conviction of a crime for which this penalty is provided by law.

2 Deprivation of life shall not be regarded as inflicted in contravention of this Article when it results from the use of force which is no more than absolutely necessary:

- (a) in defence of any person from unlawful violence;
- (b) in order to effect a lawful arrest or to prevent the escape of a person lawfully detained;
- (c) in action lawfully taken for the purpose of quelling a riot or insurrection.

## **2. Post Release Deaths:**

We investigate deaths (of which we are informed) which occur up to 14 days after release, examining what factors, if any, related to time spent in custody may have contributed to the outcome. These reports inform the Coroner's Inquest and comply with Article 2.

## **3. Serious Adverse Incidents**

At the invitation of the Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service we investigate serious adverse incidents that occur within custody.

Our work is guided by the principles set out in Article 2. When a death or serious adverse incident occurs, it is imperative that our investigations are prompt, thorough and effective, identifying any systemic issues in processes or procedures that may have contributed to the outcome. 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 prisoners 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 NIPS and the South-Eastern Health and Social Care Trust who are responsible for the delivery of healthcare in prisons. Report recommendations contribute to the enhancement of care standards for prisoners and promote a learning culture within the establishments with which we engage.

## **4. Prisoner, Former Prisoner and Prison Visitor Complaints**

If, after engaging with NIPS's internal complaints process, a Complainant remains dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint they may refer to us. Since 2010, those who are visiting prisoners have been able to refer their complaints to the Prisoner Ombudsman's Office after first seeking resolution through NIPS. The standards of independence, impartiality and professional curiosity 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 (IMB) and its Executive Committee. An IMB is in place for each prison establishment with IMB members appointed by the Justice Minister to each prison IMB in Northern Ireland under the Prison Act (Northern Ireland) 1953. The IMB deal with a variety of issues and are required to:

- satisfy themselves regarding the treatment of prisoners, the state of the prison premises and the facilities available to prisoners to allow them to make purposeful use of their time;
- consider requests and complaints made by prisoners;
- report matters of concern to the appropriate Governor and when necessary to the Justice Minister;
- examine the treatment of prisoners including provision for their health care and other welfare while in prison;
- ensure they are informed and visit prisoners on restriction of association; and
- attend some Adjudications of prisoners who have been charged with an offence against Prison Rules.

### **Financial Governance and Accountability**

Strict financial controls and regular monitoring are in place to ensure effective use of allocated funds, with monthly reporting to the Department of Justice (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)**

The DoJ is working with the Office to put in place an MoU which 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 Department's and the Ombudsman's objectives.

## 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

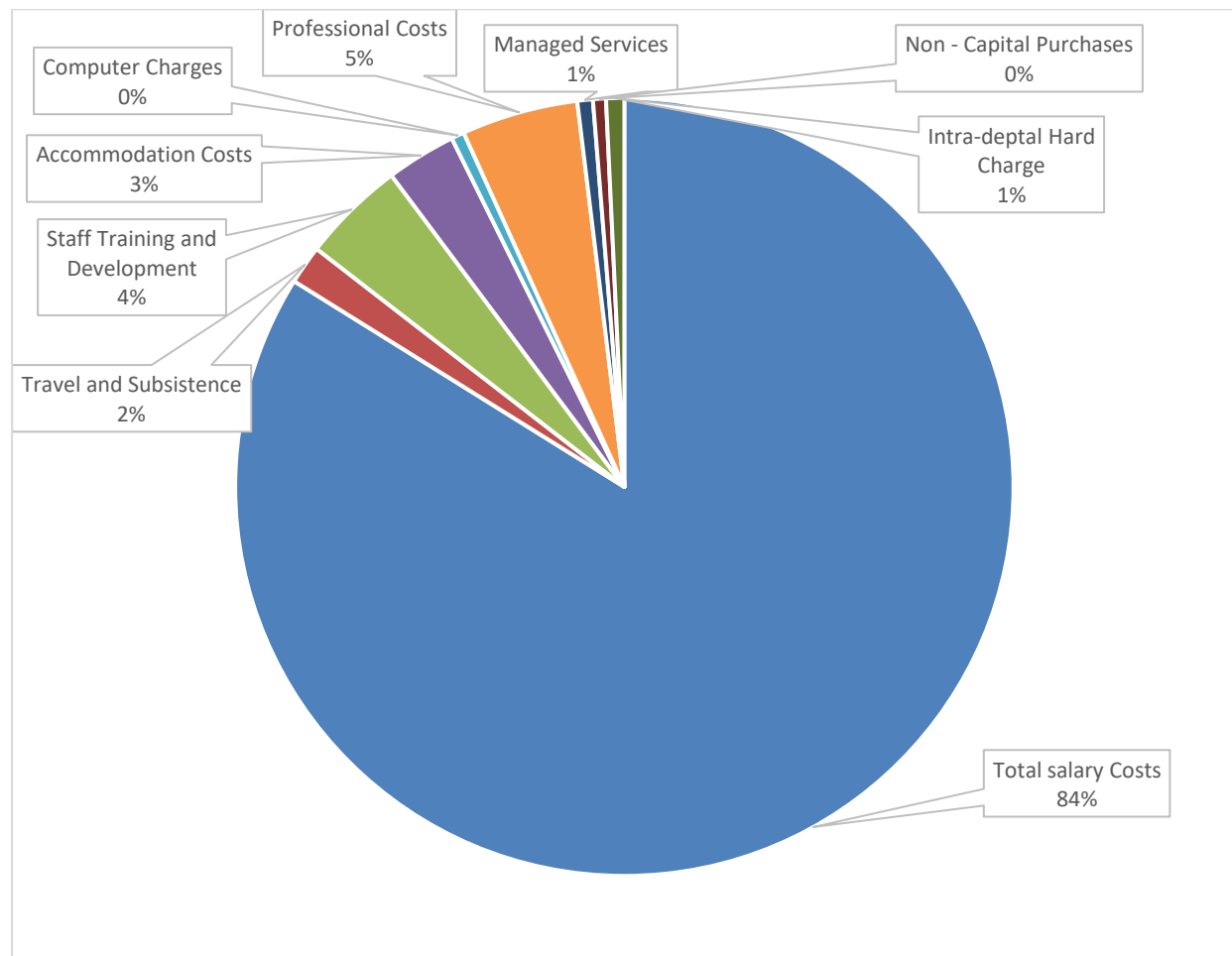
The Business Plan addresses key operational deliverables that underpin the first year of the Strategic Plan 2025-28 and is committed to supporting the Programme for Government 2024-27 *“Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most”*, particularly the *Safer Communities* priority of *“....keeping communities safe and enable them to have the confidence they need to live productively and engage fully in society”*. There is also alignment with the *Community Safety* departmental strategic priority as outlined in the DoJ Corporate Plan for 2025-28. The success of the Business Plan will be dependent on 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.

## Financial Resources

The opening non-ring fenced resource Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) budget for the Office is £948,000. This does not include the IMB, which has a separate budget. A significant portion of this budget is dedicated to salary costs reflecting our commitment to maintaining a skilled and effective workforce.

## Expenditure



The Office will strive to manage spending plans for 2025-26 in line with the 2025-26 budget allocations issued. Given the extent of pressures facing the Department in 2025-26, the Office will not commence any new areas of spend unless agreed by the Minister and will take action to reduce spend where possible, such as through vacancy management and minimising all discretionary spend, notifying to Financial Services Division (FSD) as soon as possible to help manage the overall Departmental position

## **Staffing Resources**

The staffing structure should ensure the staff in the Office, who are Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) staff, 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. 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 was completed in August 2024 and some of the recommendations are included in Strategic Plan and this Business Plan.

Our Investigation Officers have attained a professional qualification in Investigative Practice which has strengthened our investigative capabilities and enhanced our service delivery. We plan to further supplement our professional qualifications and have been working closely with business partners on the design and delivery of an accredited qualification in investigative practices that is bespoke to the work of the Office. All staff will have completed this training by October 2025.

## **Business Planning**

The Office of the Prisoner Ombudsman is committed to supporting the Programme for Government 2024-27 with operations aligned to the overarching aims of the programme and individual Personal Performance Agreements 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.

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 had led to a significant backlog in the consideration of both Death in Custody and complaints. However, work in these areas has seen significant progress.



## Strategic Aim 1

### PONI Strategic Aim 1 – Improve Investigative Processes and Timelines

Objectives		Priorities	Measure of success	Completed by
Delivery Plan	1.1	Develop a robust delivery plan ensuring consistency, quality assurance and clear report timelines to monitor progression of backlogs and future workloads.	Between 8 - 12 Death in Custody investigation reports published.  Backlog of complaints cleared to within 3 months of receipt by Office of the Ombudsman.	31 March 2026
Recording mechanisms	1.2	Enhance recording mechanisms with clear tracking and transparent explanations of case handling.	Complete IT migration of casework to database to enable tracking and trending. Publish quality data on trends and categories for cases handled in Annual Report 2025-26.	31 December 2025
Work Flow Structures	1.3	Review and test workflow structures to optimise efficiency.	All investigative staff working to set processes with no internal delay points.	30 September 2025
Case Management System	1.4	Prepare to digitalise processes within the Office.	Management information readily available to allow for progression of new work and monitoring progress on backlog of cases.	30 September 2025

## Strategic Aim 2

PONI Strategic Aim 2– Reinforce Independence				
Objectives		Priorities	Measure of success	Completed by
Strengthen Independence	2.1	Safeguard and strengthen independence through focused engagement with stakeholders and service users.	Set up monthly information sharing 'guest speakers' from external organisations with first guest speaker to attend May 2025 to develop staff understanding of the Standard Operating Models within stakeholder organisations.	Ongoing
Formalised feedback mechanisms	2.2	Implement formalised feedback mechanisms from and to stakeholders.	Have established a baseline benchmark through results of a survey issued to all stakeholders and service users.	31 December 2025
Professional, Investigative and Administrative Training	2.3	Enhance staff skills through professional investigative training.	All staff complete at least one development course annually. All staff have completed training as per PDP's in line with Training needs.	31 March 2026

## Strategic Aim 3

### PONI Strategic Aim 3– Improve Visibility and Accessibility

Objectives		Priorities	Measure of success	
Best practice	3.1	Benchmark against similar organisations to ascertain best practice.	Identify/implement best practices.	31 March 2026
Engagement	3.2	Expand and continue to strengthen stakeholder engagement with Department of Justice, Northern Ireland Prison Service, South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, Coroner's Office, Independent Monitoring Board and other partners with detention oversight.	All Memorandum's of Understanding established and updated/ agreed to facilitate effective working relationships needed. Engagement with stakeholder bodies as agreed in Memorandum of Understanding etc at all levels.	31 September 2025
Promotion material and events	3.3	Increase awareness through publications, surgeries and engagement initiatives with stakeholders, Service Users and their advocates.	Plan for regular prisoner surgeries in place and functional. Draft Communication Plan.	31 March 2026

## Strategic Aim 4

### PONI Strategic Aim 4– Optimise Resources for Efficiency and Effectiveness

Objectives		Priorities	Measure of success	
Staff Well Being	4.3	Strengthen staff well-being procedures related to controllable risks to staff well-being.	Initiatives identified, available, accessible and used by staff to support their well-being.	30 September 2025
Performance Framework	4.4	Monitor performance, effectiveness and efficiency.	Benchmark performance to enable effective working.	31 March 2026
Independent Monitoring Board (IMB)	4.5	IMB receives effective Secretariat support from within the Office.	Effective working relationship with and service delivery for IMB Executive Committee and members.	31 March 2026

## Strategic Aim 5

### PONI Strategic Aim 5 – Governance

Objectives		Priorities	Measure of success	
Budget	5.1	Demonstrate financial probity.	The outturn expenditure will remain within budget with no over spends.	31 March 2026
Governance	5.2	Effective Sponsor relationships and compliance with Department of Justice governance requirements.	Track the implementation of Ombudsman Recommendations.  Attend quarterly governance meetings with the Sponsor Team.	30 September 2025  31 March 2026