

Strategic Plan

2025-2028



The
Prisoner
Ombudsman
for Northern Ireland





Foreword from the Prisoner Ombudsman

As the newly appointed Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, I am delighted to publish my first strategic plan for 2025-2028.

The plan sets out our key strategic objectives for the next three years, which consists of four pillars of work. The strategy is designed to be a living document with priorities evolving year by year through structured business planning. As my team grows and develops, enabled by effective and integrated information technology, different priorities will take precedence annually to ensure a phased and successful implementation.

Our first objective is to improve investigative processes and timelines. It is clear that the current backlog of investigations is unacceptable and we want to be in a position to deliver appropriate reports in a timely fashion so prisoners, stakeholders and bereaved families know that we are striving to deliver in every case.

Our second objective is to reinforce our independence so prisoners and their families, as well as those whose responsibility it is to keep people safe within the custodial environment can trust us to deliver a professional, well evidenced, transparent report that will highlight both learning and best practice.

Thirdly, we will be more visible and accessible. Through environmental scanning for best practice and alongside stakeholders, we will improve our messaging to inform service users of our services and signpost to other agencies if appropriate.

Finally, we will optimise our resources for efficiency and effectiveness. We will improve our information technology to enable our teams to track and trend complaints and recurring themes. We will also invest in continuous professional development for our staff to support and improve their skills and capability. This will be backed up by a comprehensive wellbeing strategy to enhance performance and ensure our work environment is inclusive and welcoming.

In all our work we will adhere to departmental governance policies and procedures.

I look forward to delivering this plan.

Prisoner Ombudsman NI



Mission and Commitment

Our Vision

To be a trusted, independent and transparent voice for fairness, accountability and learning in Northern Ireland's prisons – ensuring dignity, justice and continuous improvement in the treatment of prisoners.

Our Purpose

To complete timely, professional, evidence based and independent investigations that contribute to a learning environment, challenging both ourselves and others. To deliver high quality, timely, independent investigation reports. To protect the rights of prisoners and, when a death occurs, provide a transparent report to their families which will be published on our website. When appropriate, we will make recommendations to the Northern Ireland Prison Service and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust to influence meaningful change.

Our Commitment

- ▶ **Independence** – Acting with integrity, transparency, fairness and respect to build trust and ensure impartiality.
- ▶ **Engagement** – Removing barriers, fostering accountability and strengthening relationships through collaboration.
- ▶ **People centred** – Treating each individual interaction respectfully.
- ▶ **Professional Curiosity** – Being professional, compassionate, patient and honest in all dealings.

Strategic Objectives (2025-2028)

1



**Improve Investigative
Processes and
Timelines**

2



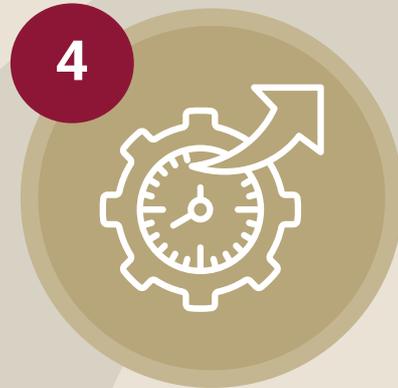
**Reinforce
Independence**

3



**Improve Visibility
and Accessibility**

4



**Optimise Resources
for Efficiency and
Effectiveness**



Strategic Priority 1

Improve Investigative Processes and Timelines

- ▶ Develop a **robust delivery plan** ensuring consistency, quality assurance and clear report timelines to monitor progression of backlogs to no more than 3 months from date of receipt.
- ▶ Enhance **recording mechanisms** with clear tracking and transparent explanations for delays.
- ▶ Improve **workflow structures** to optimise efficiency.
- ▶ Digitalisation of office processes (**Year 1**), followed by a new **Case Management System (Year 2)**, with full integration (**Year 3**).



Strategic Priority 2

Reinforce Independence

- ▶ Safeguard and strengthen independence through structured reviews.
- ▶ Conduct a service user survey to baseline perception of our service delivery.
- ▶ Implement formalised feedback mechanisms from service users and audits.
- ▶ Enhance staff skills through professional investigative training (e.g., statement-taking, evidence gathering and report drafting).



Strategic Priority 3

Improve Visibility and Accessibility

- ▶ Benchmark against best practices.
- ▶ Expand stakeholder collaborations.
- ▶ Increase awareness through quarterly publications, monthly clinics and engagement initiatives.



Strategic Priority 4

Optimise Resources for Efficiency and Effectiveness

- ▶ Implement IT improvements and enhance digital processes.
- ▶ Develop a modern Case Management System.
- ▶ Strengthen staff training, well-being and performance management.
- ▶ Staffing review in Years 2-3 to optimise structures.



Implementation and Monitoring

- ▶ Each objective will have specific **timelines, indicators and measures** set annually through business planning.
- ▶ The Strategic Plan will be structured to ensure **continuous progress**, with each year building upon the previous one.
- ▶ Outcomes and impacts will be documented, reviewed and reported transparently.

This revised Strategic Plan ensures a clear, structured and impactful approach to delivering on the Prisoner Ombudsman's mandate over the 2025-2028 period.



Appendix 1: Overview of the Prison Estate

Maghaberry Prison

- ▶ High-security prison housing adult male long-term sentenced and remand prisoners.
- ▶ **Separated Prisoners:** Following the Steele Review (2003), republican and loyalist prisoners with paramilitary affiliations are housed separately on a voluntary basis.
- ▶ Republican prisoners: Roe House
- ▶ Loyalist prisoners: Bush House

Magilligan Prison

- ▶ Medium-security prison housing shorter-term adult male prisoners.
- ▶ Low-security accommodation (Foyleview) for selected prisoners nearing the end of their sentence.

Hydebank Wood Secure College and Women's Prison

- ▶ Medium-security facility accommodating young male prisoners (18-24 years) with a focus on education, learning and employment.
- ▶ Women's Prison: Female remand and sentenced prisoners housed in Ash House and Beech House (established in 2004 and 2022, respectively).
- ▶ Female separated prisoners: Hydebank House Separated Unit.



Appendix 2: Role of the Prisoner Ombudsman

The Prisoner Ombudsman's Office, established in 2005 following the Steele Review, has two core functions:

- ▶ **Investigating and reporting on complaints** from prisoners and their visitors.
- ▶ **Investigating and reporting on deaths in custody**, including post-release deaths (up to 14 days after release) and serious adverse incidents referred by the Prison Service.

Powers and Duties

- ▶ Investigation powers are defined under **Rules 79I - 79N** of the Prison and Young Offender Centre (NI) Rules 2009.
- ▶ Death in custody investigations are carried out under a standing commission from the Director General of the NI Prison Service.

Investigation Standards

- ▶ **Deaths in Custody Investigations:** Impartiality, Objectivity, Thoroughness, Fairness, Accuracy, Public Scrutiny, Family Accessibility.
- ▶ **Complaints Investigations:** Clarity of Purpose, Accessibility, Flexibility, Transparency, Proportionality, Efficiency, Quality Outcomes.



Appendix 3: Alignment with the Programme for Government

This Strategic Plan supports the **Programme for Government (PfG)** priority of **Safer Communities**, ensuring citizens feel safe and confident in society. Adjustments will be made in response to any future revisions of the PfG.

Risk and Reporting

- ▶ Reporting responsibilities are detailed in the **Memorandum of Understanding** with the Sponsor Body and reviewed quarterly.
- ▶ Annual Reports are submitted to the Minister and published.
- ▶ A **Risk Register** is maintained and updated annually to align with the Strategic Plan and Business Plans.

Financial Considerations

- ▶ The Office is funded through an annual budget allocation. The opening budget allocation for 2025-26 was a Non-ringfenced resource **Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) of £948K**. This compared to a Non-ringfenced Resource DEL opening draft budget allocation of £916k for 2024-25 and represents a 4% increase. Of this £948k allocation, a significant portion of this budget is dedicated to salary costs (84%) and this reflects our commitment to maintaining a skilled and effective workforce with service delivery at its core.
- ▶ Budgets across all government departments will be under extreme pressure going forward and there will be significant pressure on PONI's budget in the years covered by this strategic plan.
- ▶ Given the extent of the pressures, the Office will not engage in unnecessary spending and will take action to reduce spend where possible, such as through vacancy management and minimising all discretionary spends.
- ▶ As the budget has not been set for PONI from 2026-27 onwards, this presents uncertainty and financial planning challenges. Whatever budget is set for each year of the remaining years in this plan, PONI will live within that budget and will ensure that resources are used effectively and efficiently.





