The Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland

2026-2027 BUSINESS PLAN

Foreword from the Prisoner Ombudsman

It is with purpose and ambition I present the 2026–2027 Business Plan for the Office of the Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. This document sets out a clear and aspirational programme of work that supports my Strategic Plan 2025–28. It reflects my commitment to operational resilience, transparency and continuous improvement.

As Ombudsman, I lead with professionalism, impartiality and professional curiosity. This plan builds on my commitment in 2025-2026 to reduce backlogs in both investigations of deaths/serious adverse incidents and complaints. Our investigations into deaths in custody, post release deaths, serious adverse incidents, and complaints are now being concluded in a timely manner. My focus on building trust with prisoners, their families and the wider public by strengthening investigative processes and reinforcing the independence that is central to our role has been realised by the significant work put into reducing our backlog of cases and staff development.

My priorities set out here are aligned with my strategic objectives and grounded in a culture of accountability and learning. Key strategic aims for this year will see timeliness in investigative conclusions maintained, enhancement of our digital capabilities with scoping conducted for the introduction of a Case Management System, development of a Social Media Strategy and exploratory work for the implementation of Statutory Footing. I will continue to meaningfully engage with our stakeholders to ensure our work remains accessible and impactful.

I am confident that with the continued dedication of my team and the support of our stakeholders, I can deliver on the strategic aims 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 The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) and the Department of Justice (DoJ). 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 NIPS as well as 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[1] 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.

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 the 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 NIPS we investigate serious adverse incidents that occur within custody.

1 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.

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 (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 their complaint 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 Minister of Justice 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 Minister of Justice;**
- **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 DoJ on expenditure and financial performance. A Risk Register is in place 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 a MoU which will clearly set out reporting lines, accountability mechanisms, operational independence balanced with departmental oversight and procedures for dispute resolution and escalation.

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. The Office will publish an Engagement Strategy this year detailing how we will do this.

Strategic Context

The Business Plan addresses key operational deliverables that underpin 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.

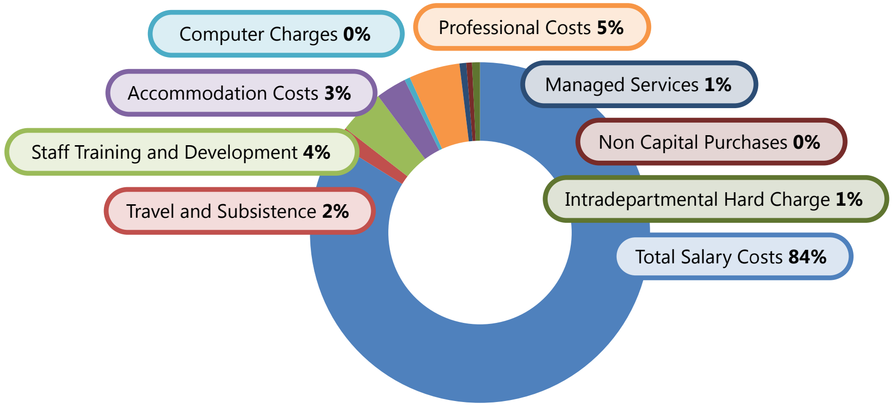
Financial Resources

The current Business Plan is based on *the proposed draft budget indicative allocations for Resource DEL which covers a three-year period from 2026-27 to 2028-29. For 2026-27, the proposed draft Budget indicative allocation for Non-ringfenced Resource DEL is £948k.* 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.

In the event that a final agreed budget differs from the revised indicative allocations, or if the draft allocations are amended in a way that affects planned delivery, it will be necessary to review and update the Business Plan.

Expenditure

The Office will manage spending plans for 2026-2027 in line with the 2026-2027 indicative draft budget allocations issued. As we await revised indicative budget allocations, 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 the Strategic Plan and this Business Plan.

Our Investigating Officers have attained professional qualifications in Investigative Practice and PEACE Interviewing Techniques which strengthens our investigative capability and enhances our service delivery. Training will be provided to all new Investigating Officers and refresher training will be provided to all current staff to ensure consistency in investigations.

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. A review of staffing will be commissioned within the year.

Strategic Aims

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 current workloads.	Complete a minimum of 8 Death related and Serious Adverse Incident investigation reports. Complaints responses to be completed within 3 months of receipt by Office of the Ombudsman.	31 March 2027
Recording mechanisms	**1.2** Enhance recording mechanisms with clear tracking and transparent explanations of case handling.	Report quality data on trends and categories for cases handled in Annual Report 2025-26.	31 December 2026
Work Flow Structures	**1.3** Prepare a business case for a new Case Management System (CMS).	Develop scoping mechanisms to progress the establishment of a case management system to enable retrieval of tracking and trending data. *The establishment of a CMS will be subject to approved budget.*	30 September 2026

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Strategic Aims

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.	Continue monthly information sharing 'guest speakers' from external organisations 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. Follow up surveys to be completed on Baseline data.	30 September 2026 31 March 2027
Professional, Investigative and Administrative Training	**2.3** Enhance staff skills through professional investigative training.	All new staff to complete bespoke Investigative training as well as all established Investigation Officers to complete refresher 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 and NICS mandatory training.	31 March 2027

Strategic Aims

PONI Strategic Aim 3 – Improve Visibility and Accessibility			
Objectives	**Priorities**	**Measure of success**	**Completed by**
Best practice	**3.1** Benchmark against similar organisations to ascertain best practice.	Engage with other professional organisations to identify and implement best practices.	31 March 2027
Engagement	**3.2** Expand and continue to strengthen stakeholder engagement with DoJ, NIPS, the Trust, Coroners Service NI, IMB and other partners with detention oversight.	All Memorandum's of Understanding established and updated/ agreed to facilitate effective working relationships. Publish an Engagement Strategy.	31 March 2027 30 June 2026
Promotion material and events	**3.3** Increase awareness through publications, surgeries and engagement initiatives with stakeholders, Service Users and their advocates.	Ensure at least 6 regular prisoner surgeries are held in each Prison establishment. Creation of a new website.	31 March 2027 31 March 2027

Strategic Aims

PONI Strategic Aim 4 – Optimise Resources for Efficiency and Effectiveness			
Objectives	**Priorities**	**Measure of success**	**Completed by**
Staff Well Being	**4.1** Strengthen staff well-being procedures related to controllable risks, to support staff well-being.	Initiatives identified, available, accessible and used by staff to support their well-being. Publish a well-being strategy.	30 September 2026 31 December 2026
Staffing levels	**4.2** Ensure there are adequate staff to meet the needs of the business.	Commission a report to determine the amount of staff needed for the office to run efficiently. Develop a knowledge transfer process which is embedded into the induction process.	31 December 2026 31 March 2027
Independent Monitoring Board (IMB)	**4.3** IMB Secretariat Staff are housed in the Office and supported if required.	IMB Secretariat Staff feel supported.	31 March 2027
Customer Freephone	**4.4** Source Freephone cover that adapts to hybrid working model.	Freephone can be covered by staff when access to office is not available.	31 October 2026

Strategic Aims

PONI Strategic Aim 5 – Governance			
Objectives	**Priorities**	**Measure of success**	**Completed by**
Budget	**5.1** Demonstrate financial probity.	The outturn expenditure will remain within budget with no overspends.	31 March 2027
Governance	**5.2** Effective Sponsor relationships and compliance with DoJ governance requirements.	Track the implementation of Ombudsman Recommendations. Attend quarterly governance meetings with the Sponsor Team. Complete a test of the Business Continuity Plan.	31 December 2026 31 March 2027 30 June 2026