

TURNS 30

CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF THE PPO

Since 2014, we have carried out:

19,824 complaint
investigations
(and received
46,773
complaints!)



3,404 fatal
incident
investigations



6 special
investigations



And... issued **39**
learning and research
publications



OMBUDSMAN ADRIAN USHER:

It is with substantial pride that I reflect upon 30 years of the PPO. It is also with a degree of humility as I am very conscious that I have only been in this post a comparatively short time and this causes me to reflect on all of the achievements of those that have held this office in the past.

Since 2000, the PPO has employed 446 people and we are lucky to have some very long serving staff, some of whom have been at the PPO very close to its inception in 1994.



Investigative excellence

Those staff, and previous Ombudsmen, have nurtured the organisation through periods of growth, changes in remit, taking on death investigations, difficult and complex complaint investigations, special investigations and have delivered learning back to the services in remit that have made them safer and more just establishments.



The PPO has grown and developed significantly and for every year of its existence has worked hard to build the confidence of prisoners, those on probation and in immigration detention, HMPPS and Home Office staff, bereaved families and the public that we are an office they can trust to be thorough, fair and demonstrably independent. So it is also with gratitude that I look back on 30 years of the PPO.

I am indebted to all those that have gone before, in every role and at every grade that have delivered tens of thousands of investigations resulting in just outcomes for prisoners and staff and extracting the learning from all of that work that provides such valuable lessons for the services in our remit. The PPO office in 1994 rose from the flames of the prison riots of the preceding years. Prisons have since largely remained free from such widespread and regular disorder and the PPO has played its part in that achievement. Thank you to all that have made, and all that still make, the PPO such a success.



COMPLAINTS DEPUTY OMBUDSMAN / INDEPENDENT PRISONER COMPLAINT INVESTIGATIONS DIRECTOR

Following the Strangeways riot in 1990, a public inquiry led by Lord Woolf concluded there was an urgent need for independent oversight of complaint investigations in prisons. In response in 1994, the office of the Prisons Ombudsman was created.

Our complaint investigation remit has changed over the 30 years, first to include those on probation supervision in 2001, which saw our name change to Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO). In 2006, we took up oversight of complaints from those in immigration removal centres.

In 2023, we launched IPCI, Independent Prisoner Complaint Investigations, in recognition that the name 'Ombudsman' was not easily understood and didn't describe what we do. This was driven by the need to tackle the high number of ineligible complaints we receive. We created clearer more user-friendly leaflets and posters and an IPCI form enabling prisoners to describe their concerns more easily and confirm they had followed local processes. Some of these materials are available in Welsh and 23 other community languages.

Our teams have been visiting every prison in England and Wales, talking to prisoners and staff to raise awareness of IPCI and how and when to use us. Currently we are focusing on driving up the quality of prison responses to complaints.

This has included publishing website summaries of upheld complaints and pushing complaints back to prisons where they have not adequately responded.

Later this year we are launching an IPCI Ambassadors scheme. These will be prisoners who signpost other prisoners on how to use local complaints processes and how and when to escalate to IPCI.

Building on our recent work with women, young people and d/Deaf prisoners, we are continuing our work to identify and address additional barriers some people in our remit have in complaining locally and using our service. This includes doing a deep dive into probation and immigration complaint processes.

We are extremely proud of how many complaints we have investigated and how we have helped prisoners.

Here are some quotes from those we have helped with their complaints:

2017/18

“It’s nice to have independent bodies like yours to turn to for assistance. Thank you.”

2018/19

“Thank you for being of great service to those who need to resolve or clarify on matters.”

2019/20

“I feel a lot safer knowing the PPO are there to help. Thank you.”

2019/20

“Overwhelmingly, I have found the PPO to be dedicated and fair even when they have NOT found the case in my favour. This case was exceptional in its adequate consideration of my concern.”



FATAL INCIDENT INVESTIGATIONS DEPUTY OMBUDSMAN

While the PPO office celebrates its 30 year anniversary, it's actually only the 20th anniversary for the fatal incidents investigation (FII) function which took on its first investigation in April 2004. To begin with, the FII team was formed of three PPO staff who oversaw a Prison Service investigator. As more PPO staff were recruited, we took over providing an independent investigation.

The very first fatal incident referred to the FII team wasn't the anticipated natural cause-related death of an older man, but a racially motivated cellmate on cellmate homicide in which we interviewed 58 people, wrote a report that was just under 90 pages long and made 24 recommendations for learning and improvement.

Many things have changed a great deal in how we investigate and report on fatal incidents since then, but many things remain similar. One of the most interesting aspects of working at the PPO is the relatively short-term nature of the Ombudsman's appointment. The FII function has worked with five substantive and three acting Ombudsmen in 20 years. Each has had their own priorities, vision for the function and approach to maximising the impact of our investigations. The way we make recommendations following a fatal incident investigation has been refined and focused over the years to the current position, under Adrian Usher's leadership, of concentrating on systemic and endemic issues.

The evolution of FII work and embracing a collaborative approach to improvement with the services in remit has led to some key successes. In the last year, we have seen tangible improvements in the approach to the use of restraints on elderly, frail and poorly prisoners (a constant and public source of frustration for this office over the years). Our work contributed to the provision of naloxone (an opiate overdose antidote) and the adoption of early learning reviews following the death of any resident of an approved premises in England and Wales. We continue to contribute to policy consultations – notably those relating to the effective management of suicide and self-harm risk, emergency response in prisons and the safe segregation of prisoners.

Our work should also contribute to conversations about best practice. Different Ombudsmen have had different views on whether our investigations should highlight good practice, but for Adrian, this has been an important focus.

While the remit of the FII function has changed over the years (latterly to include the deaths of babies and people released from prison), something that has not changed is the commitment and dedication of the staff in the team. The subject matter of our investigations can be difficult but we are all driven by our responsibility to provide answers to bereaved families, sufficient information to coroners to allow us to jointly discharge our duties under Article 2 of the Human Rights Act and to contribute to a safer, fairer criminal justice system.

Here are some quotes from the next of kin of those whose deaths we have investigated:

2012/13

“Just to thank all those with whom I had dealings for their professionalism and sensitive treatment of myself and the issues.”

2018/19

“The investigation the PPO undertook summed up all the failures surrounding my son’s death and I am truly grateful that they showed the truth.”

2014/15

“It was an absolute pleasure to work with your liaison officer during this investigation, she was very professional, very caring and very efficient. She took time to explain things to us - really well done, very supportive during an absolutely awful period for our family.”

2018/19

“I am very grateful for the information you gave me, and this helped enormously in coming to terms with the circumstances of my son’s death.”



LEARNING, ANALYSIS AND BUSINESS SERVICES DEPUTY OMBUDSMAN

The PPO's operational work is supported by the Learning, Analysis and Business Services (LABS) team which delivers the organisation's corporate services. LABS also has a key role to play in ensuring the learning from the PPO's investigations is captured, analysed and presented back to services in remit.

The PPO's original Office Support Team has evolved over the years, becoming Strategic Support and then joining forces with the separate Learning Lessons team. In its current iteration of LABS, the team has had renewed emphasis on sharing learning with prisons to identify thematic issues and highlight systemic failings.

The team has a diverse range of responsibilities. It supports the Fatal Incident Investigation Team's case management, provides research and policy input to the PPO and stakeholders, ensures the PPO has good governance processes in place and delivers corporate services such as HR, finance, IT and data management.

Over the past several years, the team's highlights have included:

- Writing 57 Learning Lessons Bulletins and thematic publications since 2010 on a range of issues relating to complaints and deaths in custody. Recent publications covered use of force, post release deaths, and self-inflicted deaths of IPP prisoners

- Revising the PPO Terms of Reference to expand our remit and producing the Bill clauses intended to provide the PPO with statutory footing
- Responding to HMPPS policy consultations on operational issues, and using the learning from our investigations to influence change
- Supporting the Fatal Incident Investigations and Complaints teams by transcribing around 400,000 pages of recorded interviews
- Producing the PPO's published strategic and business plans
- Revamping the PPO's website to make it more accessible and informative
- Leading the Future PPO change initiative which moved the organisation to modern IT platforms, accommodation and working patterns
- Helping the PPO cope with the impact of COVID-19 so that PPO services could still be provided while supporting staff and facilitating business recovery

Here are some quotes from stakeholders on the impact of our Learning Lessons Bulletins:

2017/18

"The bulletins offer some practical solutions and identified areas that have not previously been looked at as a concern."

2018/19

"We improved peer support and emergency alerts for older prisoners as a result of learning from an LL bulletin."

2020/21

"I think the publications have 'stiffened our resolve'. They are a useful reminder of how important it is for us to challenge practices and not accept the status quo."

2022/23

"These have helped inform practice and helped expand our learning. Some of them have informed policy changes."