

**Prisons &
Probation**

Ombudsman
Independent Investigations

Independent investigation into the death of Ms Melissa Ridley on 27 February 2025, following her release from HMP Low Newton

A report by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman

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OUR VISION

To deliver high quality and timely independent investigations and work closely with partners to achieve tangible benefits for the safety and confidence of those in custody and under community supervision.

WHAT WE DO



WHAT WE VALUE



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Summary

1. The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman aims to make a significant contribution to safer, fairer custody and community supervision. One of the most important ways in which we work towards that aim is by carrying out independent investigations into deaths, due to any cause, of prisoners, young people in detention, residents of approved premises and detainees in immigration centres.
2. Since 6 September 2021, the PPO has investigated post-release deaths that occur within 14 days of the person's release from prison.
3. If my office is to best assist His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) in ensuring the standard of care received by those within service remit is appropriate, our recommendations should be focused, evidenced and viable. This is especially the case if there is evidence of systemic failure.
4. Ms Melissa Ridley died from mixed drug toxicity on 27 February 2025, the day after her release from HMP Low Newton. She was 39 years old. We offer our condolences to those who knew her.
5. Prior to Ms Ridley's release, the prison's substance misuse service (SMS) arranged a community SMS appointment for her in Carlisle for the afternoon of her release, where she would collect her methadone prescription (used to treat heroin addiction). However, the day before her release, Ms Ridley's community offender manager (COM) was told that Ms Ridley had been given temporary accommodation in Cleator Moor, so she changed her community SMS appointment to the following afternoon in Whitehaven, which was much closer than Carlisle. When she told Ms Ridley this on the day of her release, Ms Ridley was distressed that she would have to wait until the afternoon to get her methadone when she normally took it in the morning. She said she would not cope and would have to seek methadone, or an alternative drug, elsewhere to prevent her suffering withdrawal symptoms.
6. We accept that the location of the CAS3 accommodation was outside the COM's control and that she did her best to change the community SMS appointment to a more convenient location at short notice. However, it was unfortunate that an earlier appointment could not have been made as the timing of the new appointment had a detrimental impact on Ms Ridley. While we make no recommendation, we highlight this issue as it is possible that if attempts had been made to move the appointment to an earlier time, Ms Ridley may not have sought illicit drugs elsewhere.

The Investigation Process

7. HMPPS notified us of Ms Ridley's death on 27 February 2025.
8. The PPO investigator obtained copies of relevant extracts from Ms Ridley's prison and probation records.
9. We informed HM Coroner for Cumbria of the investigation. She gave us the results of the post-mortem examination. We have sent the Coroner a copy of this report.
10. The Ombudsman's office contacted Ms Ridley's mother to explain the investigation and to ask if she had any matters she wanted us to consider. She did not respond to our letter.
11. The initial report was shared with HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). HMPPS pointed out some factual inaccuracies and this report has been amended accordingly.

Background Information

HMP Low Newton

12. HMP Low Newton is located near Durham. It holds women on remand and serving short and long sentences including some high security prisoners. Spectrum Community Healthcare CIC provides physical healthcare services and Tees, Esk & Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust provides mental health services. The prison has 24 hour a day nursing cover.

Probation Service

13. The Probation Service works with all individuals subject to custodial and community sentences. During a person's imprisonment, they oversee their sentence plan to assist in rehabilitation, prepare reports to advise the Parole Board and have links with local partnerships to which they refer people for resettlement services, where appropriate. Post-release, the Probation Service supervises people throughout their licence period and post-sentence supervision.

Key Events

Background

14. On 21 December 2023, Ms Melissa Ridley was sentenced to 16 months in prison for shoplifting. She was taken to HMP Low Newton. She was released on licence on 10 July 2024.
15. On 19 July, police arrested Ms Ridley for shoplifting, and she was recalled to Low Newton for the rest of her sentence. On 9 August, she received an additional one-month sentence for the offence.
16. Ms Ridley had a history of drug use. Before her initial release, she was on an opioid maintenance plan and was prescribed Espranor (buprenorphine, a synthetic opioid medication used to treat withdrawal from opiates such as heroin).

Pre-release planning

Substance misuse

17. When Ms Ridley was recalled to Low Newton, she appeared to be under the influence of drugs. A substance misuse service (SMS) worker assessed her for withdrawal symptoms.
18. The next day, Ms Ridley told a SMS worker that she had stopped taking her opioid substitution treatment (OST) while in the community. The day before her arrest she had visited the community SMS, who gave her a dose of Espranor.
19. On 21 July, Ms Ridley restarted OST with a methadone (another synthetic opioid) prescription.
20. On 24 July, a nurse reviewed Ms Ridley five days into treatment. She asked the nurse to increase her dose of methadone from 30ml to 40ml as she had withdrawal symptoms. The nurse requested for her prescription to be increased.
21. On 3 August, Ms Ridley told the SMS team she wanted to reduce her methadone by 2ml every two weeks until she reached 20ml.
22. On 24 September, a nurse reviewed Ms Ridley after she had asked to stop reducing her methadone dose. Ms Ridley said she did not feel stable and had withdrawal symptoms. The nurse completed a Clinical Opiate Withdrawal Scale (COWS) assessment and calculated a score of 2 (very mild or minimal opioid withdrawal). She added Ms Ridley to the waiting list for an appointment to increase her dose.
23. On 4 October, Ms Ridley asked to increase her methadone to 40ml, saying she had reduced it too quickly and was struggling. The SMS team approved the increase.
24. On 6 November, Ms Ridley asked to start reducing her dose again, by 1ml each week until she reached 30mls.

25. On 1 January 2025, Ms Ridley asked for an appointment with the SMS team to stop reducing her methadone. The next day, a nurse saw her for a review. Ms Ridley decided to continue reducing her methadone until she reached 30mls. This was so she could be changed back to Espranor when released.
26. On 17 January, a SMS worker saw Ms Ridley on the wing. Ms Ridley told her that she had used gabapentin (a medication used to treat nerve pain and reduce anxiety and sleep problems but also widely abused – it was not prescribed to Ms Ridley) and had a positive drug test. She said she had taken the medication because she was unable to sleep and had requested an increase in her methadone which had not been actioned. The recovery coordinator said that she was on the waiting list to be seen by the clinical SMS team.
27. On 25 January, a nurse saw Ms Ridley for a 13-week review of her OST. During the appointment, Ms Ridley told the nurse that she wanted to increase her methadone dose from 30ml to 35ml to better manage symptoms and for stability upon her release.
28. On 27 January, a nurse was unable to complete Ms Ridley's methadone increase as the necessary forms had not been completed. The nurse added her back to the waiting list to have the required forms completed.
29. On 4 February, a SMS worker referred Ms Ridley to the community SMS in Carlisle and requested to increase her methadone prescription to 35mls. She arranged an appointment with the community SMS for Ms Ridley's methadone script on the day of her release after 3.00pm, as requested by Ms Ridley.
30. On 13 February, a SMS worker met with Ms Ridley for a one-to-one session. Ms Ridley said that if her methadone was not increased in the next week, she would stay on 30mls until release and change to Espranor in the community. Ms Ridley did not want to change to Espranor while in prison, as she said she found it easier to manage in the community. Ms Ridley's keyworker discussed harm reduction on release, including reduced tolerance levels, avoiding using alone, and not mixing substances.
31. On 21 February, a SMS worker saw Ms Ridley on the wing. Ms Ridley said her CAS3 accommodation had been confirmed, though she did not know the address. She did not want to change her script appointment as all her appointments were close together. They agreed that if her accommodation was confirmed for another part of Carlisle, then Ms Ridley would transfer her appointment to the nearest drug and alcohol team.

Housing

32. Before entering custody, Ms Ridley was homeless. During her reception at Low Newton, she told staff that she would have nowhere to live when released.
33. On 21 January, Ms Ridley's prison offender manager (POM) told her community offender manager (COM) that Ms Ridley did not want to be released to an approved premises. She said she wanted to return to west Cumbria.

34. On 28 January, Ms Ridley's COM referred her to the local council for housing support under the Duty to Refer policy (for individuals who are at risk of homelessness).
35. On 10 February, Ms Ridley's COM referred her for CAS3 accommodation (a type of temporary, supported housing for people leaving prison homeless, which provides up to 84 nights of accommodation).
36. On 24 February, the local authority told the COM that Ms Ridley did not meet the priority need criteria and would not be offered housing through the council.
37. The same day, the COM confirmed that CAS3 accommodation in Cleator Moor (about five miles from Whitehaven and 40 miles from Carlisle), had been reserved for Ms Ridley's release.

Release from HMP Low Newton

38. On 26 February, Ms Ridley was released from Low Newton. A member of the healthcare team offered her naloxone (a medication that can reverse an opioid overdose) to take with her, but she declined.
39. Ms Ridley's POM took her to her CAS3 accommodation, then to her first probation appointment.
40. At the appointment, Ms Ridley's COM told her that her Recovery Steps Cumbria (community substance misuse service) appointment which she was due to attend that day had been arranged for the Carlisle office. Since it was too far away for Ms Ridley to attend, the COM rearranged the appointment at the Whitehaven office. This meant the appointment would now take place the following day at 1.30pm.
41. Ms Ridley became upset and told her COM that she would not manage until the afternoon, as she usually had her methadone in the morning. She said that she would need to buy methadone or another substance to manage and could not see any other way of coping. Ms Ridley said that she planned to attend Recovery Steps after her appointment to 'kick off'. Her COM advised her not to do this. The manager of Recovery Steps Whitehaven confirmed that she did not attend the service.
42. Later that day, Ms Ridley went to the bank and tried to withdraw money without a card. Staff at the bank phoned the police, as they were concerned that she was under the influence and was withdrawing the money for someone else. When officers arrived, Ms Ridley said her card had been stolen or possibly lost. The bank allowed her to withdraw £50 and stopped her card. They advised her to come back when she was sober.

Circumstances of Ms Ridley's death

43. On 27 February, at around 11.15am, a member of staff at Ms Ridley's accommodation found her unconscious and not breathing. She phoned for an ambulance and started CPR.

44. At 11.32am, the paramedics arrived and took over CPR. However, despite their efforts, they were not successful. At 12.06pm, they pronounced life extinct.

Post-mortem report

45. The post-mortem report concluded that Ms Ridley died from combined drug toxicity. The toxicology report found evidence of methadone, bromazepam (a synthetic benzodiazepine) and pregabalin (medication not prescribed to Ms Ridley).

Findings

Substance misuse services

46. Ms Ridley's appointment with the community substance misuse service (SMS) in Carlisle needed to be rearranged, due to it being too far away from her release address. The earliest appointment Ms Ridley was able to get was the day after her release at 1.30pm. This meant she would not be able to take her methadone in the morning as she usually did.
47. The investigator spoke with Ms Ridley's COM, who explained that the initial appointment in Carlisle was made by Low Newton prior to Ms Ridley's release address being confirmed. When the release address was confirmed on 25 February, the COM changed the appointment at the earliest opportunity.
48. The investigator spoke with the area manager for the SMS at Low Newton who said that they were unaware of the change to Ms Ridley's appointment, however, they would not have been able to issue a script directly to a pharmacy. In exceptional circumstances, where a community appointment is not able to be arranged for the day after a prisoner's release, they may be able to issue an FP10 (a prescription that can be taken to a chemist for methadone before the community appointment). However, this was unlikely to have been appropriate in Ms Ridley's case as she had an appointment arranged for the day after her release. The area manager said that if they become aware of changes to appointments prior to a prisoner's release, they can contact the community services to see if they have any earlier appointments or walk in times. However, once a prisoner has been released, they are unable to help.
49. The area manager for Recovery Steps Cumbria told the investigator that to improve communication, the Recovery Steps Cumbria criminal justice lead now attends the pre-release meetings for Low Newton.
50. We understand that Ms Ridley's appointment had to be changed because her accommodation was confirmed late and there were time limits with the community drug service. We acknowledge too the efforts both her COM and POM went to to ensure that Ms Ridley had somewhere to live and an appointment with Recovery Steps. However, the delay in collecting her methadone had a big impact on her. On the day she was released, she found out she would have to go longer than usual without her methadone, which was very difficult for her. We consider it important to highlight this.

Adrian Usher
Prisons and Probation Ombudsman

September 2025

Inquest

At an inquest held on 7 October 2025, the Coroner concluded that Ms Ridleys death was drug related.

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