



## Ombudsman finds systemic failings by authorities in report about abuse of young men

**Warning:** Readers may find the contents of this release distressing.

**12 November 2025:** In a report published today, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman Adrian Usher details how horrific accounts of abuse at Medomsley Detention Centre were able to continue for so long.

Medomsley Detention Centre, a senior youth detention centre located in Durham, was designed to hold offenders aged between 17 and 21. It was in operation from 1961 to 1987, and the offences for which the young men were sentenced ranged from shoplifting and non-payment of fines, to robbery.

Investigations by Durham Constabulary between 2001 and 2023 identified widespread physical and sexual abuse of over 2,000 trainees at Medomsley. In October 2023, the then Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, Alex Chalk, commissioned the PPO to undertake an independent investigation into this abuse.

Split into four parts, the PPO reports on what the authorities<sup>1</sup> knew about abuse that took place at Medomsley between 1961 and 1987, whether there were opportunities for them to have intervened at the time, and what action, if any, they took when faced with these opportunities. The Ombudsman's office reviewed nearly 8,000 evidence documents and interviewed 74 witnesses to gather an accurate understanding of what happened at the detention centre.

"The pages... are a very difficult read", said Ombudsman Adrian Usher. "I have chosen to omit many of the most heinous details of... abuse but I believe it is necessary to include enough to make clear the extent of the horrors that some of those young men endured".

The report highlights a culture of systemic physical abuse at Medomsley that became embedded as a practice of "short, sharp, shock". The lack of aims and objectives at the detention centre meant that staff based their approach on their own experiences and beliefs. The lack of leadership, governance, and oversight, which was ineffective, meant that violence was able to become a legitimate part of the detention centre regime without any repercussions. This was strengthened by societal attitudes at the time where detention centre trainees were seen as inherently bad and corporal punishment was still being used in schools.

The PPO reports that trainees were physically abused from the moment they arrived at the centre, when they were being bathed, strip searched, during physical education, whilst working and even during medical examinations. They also state that victims were targeted for being perceived as weak or gay, as societal attitudes to homosexuality were different to the present day.

"Leaders at every level at Medomsley, including the warden, failed in their duty to protect the best interests of those under their charge", said Adrian. "Either staff in leadership roles were aware of

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<sup>1</sup> Authorities refers to relevant public bodies and their employees, including the police, probation, the prison service, health and social care services, inspectorates, charities, local government and central government.

the abuse, in which case they were complicit, or they lacked dedication and professional curiosity to such an extent as to not be professionally competent”.

The abuse of young men also extended to sexual and psychological abuse. The sexual abuse committed on trainees by prison staff ranged from acts of sexual touching to oral and anal rape. The PPO shared victim accounts of painful and degrading sexual abuse, which they found was, at times, accompanied by extreme violence and acts of a sadistic nature.

Ombudsman Adrian Usher stated that "in order for the worst excesses of sexual abuse to continue for so long without detection, required the silence of many. To achieve that silence, perpetrators required a degree of power".

Trainees were banned from writing to their families and from seeing them. Some described the psychological abuse as having the most disturbing impact on them whilst at Medomsley, leading to issues such as bed wetting due to the constant atmosphere of fear. Many trainees reported that they were also threatened with the loss of remission, meaning they would stay at Medomsley for a longer period.

“The abuse at Medomsley continued, unchallenged, for the entire 26 years of its operation”, said Adrian. “The knowledge of abuse by the Prison Service, the police, the Home Office and other organisations of authority was ignored and dismissed. Sending these young men to Medomsley was supposed to instil them with more ordered, law-abiding lives. The authorities failed in their duty to keep detainees safe.”

The Ombudsman makes three considerations for authorities referred to in the report. He asks them to consider why there is not an independent party that proactively asks children about their custodial experience through a safeguarding lens. He also notes that the complaints process for children in custody remains the same today as it was when Medomsley was in operation. Finally, he acknowledges that the victims of Medomsley have never received a public apology.

"I leave it to all of the bodies in this investigation to examine their organisational consciences and determine if there is any action taken today, despite such an extended passage of time, that would diminish, even fractionally, the trauma that is still being felt by victims to this day”.

Adrian Usher’s last words go to the victims of Medomsley who have exhibited enormous, extraordinary courage in speaking to the Operation Deerness team about their experiences.

"The effects of the trauma they suffered effectively became a life sentence... with devastating consequences. However, it is my fervent hope that, for many victims, what this report represents is a victory for your tenacity, determination and courage. You may have had to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles over the last 40 years and more but, in the end, you were heard, and you were believed”.

**ENDS**

**Notes to editors:**

1. Adrian Usher was appointed as Prisons and Probation Ombudsman in April 2023.
2. The PPO is appointed by and reports directly to the Secretary of State for Justice. The Ombudsman's office is wholly independent of the services in remit, which include those provided by HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), the Prisoner Escort and Custody Service, the Home Office (Immigration Enforcement), HMPPS Youth Custody Service, and those local authorities with secure children's homes. It is also operationally independent of, but sponsored by, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ).
3. The roles and responsibilities of the PPO are set out in the Terms of Reference (ToR), the latest version of which can be found at: <https://ppo.gov.uk/document/prison-and-probation-ombudsman-terms-of-reference/>
4. The PPO has three main investigative duties:
  - complaints made by prisoners, young people in detention, offenders under probation supervision and individuals detained under immigration powers (detained individuals)
  - deaths of prisoners, young people in detention, approved premises' residents and detained individuals due to any cause
  - deaths of recently released prisoners that occur within 14 days of release from prison (except homicide)
5. Operation Deerness is the name given for this investigation.

For media queries relating to this special investigation, please contact [ppocomms@ppo.gov.uk](mailto:ppocomms@ppo.gov.uk)