

**Prisons &
Probation**

Ombudsman
Independent Investigations

Independent investigation into the death of Mr Philip Pope, following his release from HMP Altcourse, on 28 August 2025

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. Mr Philip Pope died from hanging on 28 August 2025, following his release from HMP Altcourse on 21 August. He was 42 years old. We offer our condolences to those who knew him.
5. We did not identify any significant learning relating to the pre-release planning or post-release supervision of Mr Pope. However, we found that Mr Pope's licence reporting instructions were not updated properly in line with his early release date. As this was a one-off administrative error, we do not make a recommendation.
6. We also found that Mr Pope was not referred to community substance misuse services in line with his licence condition. However, Mr Pope declined substance misuse support in prison, therefore we do not make a recommendation.

The Investigation Process

7. HMPPS notified us of Mr Pope's death on 9 September 2025.
8. The PPO investigator obtained copies of relevant extracts from Mr Pope's prison and probation records. She interviewed one member of staff on 5 November 2025.
9. We informed HM Coroner for Sefton, St Helens & Knowsley 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 Mr Pope's next of kin, his wife, to explain the investigation and to ask if she had any matters she wanted us to consider. She asked for a copy of our report.
11. Mr Pope's family received a copy of the draft report. They did not make any comments.
12. 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 Altcourse

13. HMP Altcourse is a category B prison which holds convicted male prisoners. It is managed by Sodexo.

Probation Service

14. 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

15. On 2 June 2025, Mr Philip Pope was convicted of violent offences and was sentenced to seven months in prison. He was sent to HMP Altcourse. During his reception screening with a nurse, he disclosed a history of substance use and anxiety/depression. It was recorded that he had tied something around his neck in 2017 but had no current suicidal ideation or thoughts of self-harm. He was referred to the substance misuse service and the mental health team.

Pre-release planning

16. On 3 June, an officer was allocated as Mr Pope's Community Offender Manager (COM). The substance misuse service saw him for his induction. He told them that he did not want to engage with them as he did not think he had a problem with drugs or alcohol. He signed a disclaimer and was given harm minimisation advice regarding drug use.
17. A nurse saw Mr Pope for his mental health assessment. Mr Pope reported that he had diagnoses of anxiety and depression. He said that he was stable on antidepressants and did not require further support for his mental health. A nurse recorded that Mr Pope had the mental capacity to make this decision and did not present with any psychotic characteristics. Mr Pope reported that he had no thoughts of suicide or self-harm. The nurse told him how to access support if he needed it in future.
18. On 6 June, Mr Pope's allocated pre-release worker, applied for Home Detention Curfew (HDC – early release from prison whilst subject to an electronically monitored curfew). Mr Pope had provided his brother's address for this application.
19. On 27 June, Mr Pope's HDC application was rejected due to the address provided. The COM told us that the address was unsuitable because it only had one bedroom and this would increase the pressure a curfew would have on the occupants.
20. The COM said that she spoke to Mr Pope to explain why his HDC application had been rejected. She said that during the phone call, she offered Mr Pope accommodation referrals, but he did not consent to them as he intended to go to his brother's address on release. (The COM told us that the requirements for accommodation on release are not as robust as they are for HDC, therefore the size of the property was not an issue if Mr Pope chose to stay there on his release.) She said that there were no risk or safeguarding concerns from the checks she completed and so she supported this as Mr Pope's release address. She told us that she did not record this conversation on N-Delius (the probation information system) due to workload pressures at the time.
21. On the same day, an officer saw Mr Pope for a keywork session. Mr Pope reported that he had no ongoing concerns about his mental health.

22. On 30 July, an officer saw Mr Pope for a keywork session. Mr Pope reported that he was coping well and that he was aware he could submit an application to see the mental health team if he needed to.
23. On 11 August, an entry was added to N-Delius stating that Mr Pope's expected release date was 21 August.
24. On 14 August, the COM emailed Mr Pope via the email a prisoner service to confirm whether he was still going to be released to his brother's address and to check that no emergency accommodation referrals were required. Mr Pope responded a few days later confirming that he was still going to stay at his brother's address.

Release from HMP Altcourse

25. On 21 August, Mr Pope was released from Altcourse one day early under the Discretionary Friday/pre-Bank Holiday release scheme (determinate-sentenced adult prisoners due for release on a Friday or the day before a bank/public holiday are released one working day earlier to mitigate the risk of community services being closed). He was given seven days' worth of his medication, including mirtazapine and venlafaxine (antidepressants). He did not report to the Probation Service office as they were expecting him to.
26. On 22 August, Mr Pope attended the probation office. He said he did not attend the previous day as his licence had reporting instructions in line with his original release date, directing him to attend on 22 August. In the COM's absence, a probation practitioner completed his induction with him. Mr Pope agreed to his licence conditions and confirmed he was staying at his brother's address. Mr Pope ticked that his accommodation status was 'friends/family (settled)' in his induction paperwork. The COM told us that the probation practitioner did not feedback any concerns regarding Mr Pope's mental health to her. Mr Pope's next appointment was booked for 27 August.
27. On 27 August, Mr Pope did not attend his planned probation appointment. The COM told us that they would have discussed Mr Pope's risk factors and long-term accommodation in this appointment.

Circumstances of Mr Pope's death

28. On 28 August, the COM received a text from Mr Pope's wife telling her that he had died. His wife then phoned the COM and told her that she had attended the property where Mr Pope was staying because she had multiple missed calls from him. She said that she found Mr Pope with white powder around his nose and the charger cord from his phone around his neck. She recorded that she informed Mr Pope's wife of the support available to her.

Post-mortem report

29. The post-mortem report concluded that Mr Pope died from hanging.

30. The toxicology report found that there was evidence Mr Pope had used a large amount of cocaine recently prior to death. However, the Coroner did not include this in the cause of death given that Mr Pope was a regular drug user, and they concluded that he died as a result of hanging.
31. The toxicology report also found concentrations of mirtazapine and venlafaxine which was consistent with therapeutic dosage.

Inquest

32. At an inquest held on 24 October 2025, the Coroner concluded that Mr Pope's death was due to suicide by hanging.

Findings

Mental Health and assessment of risk

33. Mr Pope was not referred to the community mental health team. As he told the mental health team in prison that he did not require any support, and was therefore not on their caseload, they did not refer him to the community service.
34. The COM told us that Mr Pope had refused referrals to the community mental health team throughout his previous prison sentence, stating that he was managing well on his medication. She said that there was no information to contradict this. She told us that Mr Pope did not express any thoughts of self-harm or suicidal ideation and she was aware that he did not wish to engage with mental health services in custody.
35. Mr Pope had attempted suicide at least once before but was not subject to suicide and self-harm monitoring procedures while at Altcourse. We did not find any evidence to suggest that prison staff should have considered him at increased risk or that additional information about his risk should have been passed to the COM.
36. The COM said that the second appointment with probation staff after release focuses on sentence planning, and that she was intending to discuss Mr Pope's mental health further with him then, which is in line with practice expectations. She told us that if any immediate risk was identified in his induction, he would have been referred to the community Crisis team or signposted to attend hospital. We are satisfied that Mr Pope gave no indications that he was at imminent risk of suicide at his induction appointment.

Substance use

37. Altcourse told us that they update release dates at the 14-day pre-release check. The COM did not change Mr Pope's licence reporting instructions until within 48 hours of his release date. At this point, his licence did not update properly on the system as it was too close to his release. She told us that she has since been informed that if any updates are made to licences within 48 hours of release, she should email the prison to inform them. As this is a one-off administrative error and did not negatively impact Mr Pope, who attended his induction with probation staff the following day, we do not make a recommendation.
38. Mr Pope had a licence condition in place to address his drug use. He was not, however, referred to the community substance misuse service by custodial services prior to his release as he refused to engage with the substance misuse team in prison. The COM told us that she would have discussed this with Mr Pope at his next appointment, which is in line with practice expectations.

Adrian Usher
Prisons and Probation Ombudsman

April 2026

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