

## **Prisoners are taking their own lives within 48 hours of entering reception prisons**

**6 May 2026** – The latest learning lessons bulletin published by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) explores why reception prisons have one of the highest rates of self-inflicted deaths of all prison functions.

The PPO investigates complaints from prisoners and deaths in custody. The bulletin summarises research from 170 of their investigations where self-inflicted deaths of prisoners occurred in reception prisons over a five-year period. Their analysis revealed that reception prisons present a high-risk environment for self-inflicted deaths and the vulnerability of prisoners entering this type of prison.

Reception prisons act as the entry point into prisons and hold a population predominantly made up of remand and unsentenced prisoners. The PPO explained that this particular group of prisoners often experience uncertainty about their future, and that their anxiety is compounded by the fact that reception prisons are not designed to hold people for extended periods of time. The high-churn and limited regime mean there are less opportunities for prisoners to build meaningful relationships or access purposeful activity.

The bulletin exposed the vulnerability of this group of prisoners, where shockingly, 11% of self-inflicted deaths occurred within 2 days of entering a reception prison<sup>1</sup>. They also found that 30% of their sample took their life within three weeks of entering the prison, which means 41% took their life within the first month.

“I am truly shocked and saddened by the high number of prisoners taking their own life during their early days in reception prisons,” said Ombudsman Adrian Usher.

“77% of the cases we analysed had a prior mental health condition and it is evident that prisons need to have robust early days processes in place to account for this critical period”.

Given the heightened fragility of prisoners entering reception prisons within the first month, the PPO state that the early days period is therefore crucial in identifying those at risk of suicide and self-harm.

Reception staff in prisons are required to assess risk quickly, often with no prior relationship to the prisoner. The PPO found that a high number (66%) of prisoners were not supported by suicide and self-harm monitoring (ACCT) at the time of their death, and ACCT was not started when the prisoner first entered the reception prison when it should have been (21% of cases).

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the analysis of 170 self-inflicted deaths from December 2020 to November 2025.

“Staff carry a significant weight of responsibility in identifying and managing risk in the early days, especially during the initial reception process. They must be offered the right support and training to identify these risks and start ACCT where appropriate,” said Adrian.

“The lack of collaboration between prison and healthcare staff to identify and manage risk in early days assessment leads to avoidable deaths in my opinion. This must be improved.”

Furthermore, the investigative office also found a lack of communication and engagement with prisoners in their early days in reception prisons. They found several examples of staff basing their decisions of risk primarily on how a prisoner was presenting themselves at the time rather than an objective assessment of their known risk factors.

Ombudsman Adrian Usher has been vocal in the past about the importance of familial contact for prisoners and in 7% of cases, there were issues with the prisoner’s phone account, preventing them from having contact with their support network.

While the early days at reception prisons represent the highest period of risk, the PPO also highlighted that a proportion of prisoners remain in reception prisons for several months, sometimes years, which presents further challenges. 36% of individuals in the PPO’s sample took their life beyond spending three months in a reception prison, showing that risk of self-inflicted deaths continues beyond the early days.

The bulletin states that issues such as inadequate risk management around key dates such as court hearings, a lack of key worker schemes and poor ACCT management all contribute to this.

The Prison Safety Policy Framework states that prisoners must be risk assessed regardless of whether their court appearance was in person or by video link. 41% of the deaths assessed for the PPO’s research occurred near a court hearing and 32% of cases did not have an adequate risk assessment after their hearing.

The PPO explained that key worker schemes are an important part of HMPPS’ response to self-inflicted deaths and are intended to improve safety by engaging prisoners. They found that many prisoners had very few or no key work sessions, with some seeing different members of staff due to staff shortages. Furthermore, in many cases there were issues with how a prisoner’s ACCT was managed as 40% of checks were not carried out as frequently as required. Shockingly, in several cases, staff had also falsified records.

“In order to counter the risk of prisoners in reception prisons, I believe that staff training should be accredited and repeated regularly to ensure staff in this prison group have been properly trained. It is crucial to assess a prisoner’s risk properly when entering reception in a reception prison, and staff must have effective training and skills to identify and support those at high-risk,” said Adrian.

“These numbers must come down.”

ENDS

**Notes to editors:**

1. This release is available at: <https://ppo.gov.uk/media-releases/>
2. The bulletin is available at: [https://ppo.gov.uk/learning\\_research/fatal-incident-investigations-learning-lessons-bulletin-issue-22-self-inflicted-deaths-in-reception-prisons/](https://ppo.gov.uk/learning_research/fatal-incident-investigations-learning-lessons-bulletin-issue-22-self-inflicted-deaths-in-reception-prisons/)
3. Adrian Usher was appointed as Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) in April 2023.
4. 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), Prisoner Escort and Custody Service, the Home Office (Immigration Enforcement), the 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).
5. 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-probationombudsman-terms-of-reference/>
6. The PPO has three main investigative duties:
  - a. complaints made by prisoners, young people in detention, offenders under probation supervision and individuals detained under immigration powers (detained individuals)
  - b. deaths of prisoners, young people in detention, approved premises' residents and detained individuals due to any cause
  - c. deaths of recently released prisoners that occur within 14 days of release from prison (except homicide)
7. Please contact [ppocomms@ppo.gov.uk](mailto:ppocomms@ppo.gov.uk) if you require more information