



“The time is right for independent oversight of prison staff conduct”, says Prisons and Probation Ombudsman

9 July 2026: In a report published today, Prisons and Probation Ombudsman Adrian Usher has called for the creation of an independent body to scrutinise prison staff conduct.

The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) investigate the deaths of prisoners, those on probation and in immigration detention, as well as deaths that occur within 14 days after release from prison. They also investigate complaints from those in custody.

In his 2025 to 2026 Annual Report, the Ombudsman raised his most serious concern around the lack of independent oversight of staff conduct within HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS).

“HMPPS is the largest public service body that I can bring to mind that has no independent oversight of staff conduct,” said Adrian. “Investigations into staff conduct, and any subsequent disciplinary hearings... take place within the very institution where the member of staff works.”

He went on to highlight the contrast with policing, noting a “very stark and obvious difference between the consequences for police officers compared to prison officers who are facing investigations, often for actions taken in very similar circumstances”.

“I believe it is the right time for this to change,” he added.

Demand for the PPO’s investigative services remained high, with 5,226 complaints sent to them in 2025 to 2026.

“I believe that prisons are still not incentivised to focus upon early complaint resolutions properly,” said Adrian.

The PPO had to push back 95 complaints received to the relevant establishment to reconsider this year after assessing there had been an insufficient attempt by them to resolve the matter. Furthermore, complaints about property were again reported as the most common category for the PPO, accounting for a staggering 34% of their completed cases.

“Too often we revisit cases prisons have already assessed, reaching different conclusions in just over 50%. That is neither sustainable, nor a good use of public funds”, said Adrian.

The Ombudsman’s office is working with HMPPS on a pilot across 10 prisons to explore more effective ways of addressing these on-going high numbers.

The PPO highlighted that the number of deaths in custody also remains high as they started investigations into 455 deaths in 2025 to 2026.

The report showcases shocking numbers of self-inflicted and drug-related deaths in prisons this year – an on-going concern for Adrian and his staff on a yearly basis. Learning from the PPO’s investigations indicated that the risk of self-inflicted deaths in prisons is not evenly spread; their

recent research revealed that the Long-Term High Security Estate and reception prisons present the highest level of self-inflicted deaths.

“The rate of self-inflicted deaths means that a prisoner in England and Wales will kill themselves approximately every five days,” said Adrian.

They revealed in a bulletin published in 2026, that of those who take their own lives, 11% of them do so within the first 48 hours of entering a reception prison – a sobering statistic.¹ Segregation is also a concerning contributory factor for self-inflicted deaths, as the Annual Report highlights cases where individuals at risk of suicide and self-harm were in segregation and on open ACCT plans at the time of their death.

Concerningly, drug-related deaths accounted for 13% of prison deaths the PPO investigated in 2025 to 2026.

“In a world of increasingly sophisticated drone technology, this number is fuelled by unknown chemical compounds with unpredictable effects,” said Adrian.

He stressed the need for prison drug strategies to combat both the supply and demand of drugs. Other non-natural deaths (what the PPO typically class as drug-related) also made up 54% of post-release deaths they investigated.

During the year, the PPO also expanded their remit to special investigations and published a report into the failures at Medomsley Detention Centre, revealing the full scale of abuse suffered by victims.² They also began their independent review of the restraint of pregnant prisoners who attended medical appointments.

Adrian said: “The 12 months covered in this report represent a huge amount of effort in delivering a substantially improved output and performance while accommodating rising demand and no greater resource. All three areas of focus for the PPO... have risen to these challenges impressively. My last word will, as always, go to my staff. The successes described in this report belong to them”.

ENDS

¹ Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (2026). Fatal Incident Investigations Learning Lessons Bulletin Issue 22: Self-inflicted deaths in reception prisons. Available online at: https://ppo.gov.uk/learning_research/fatal-incident-investigations-learning-lessons-bulletin-issue-22-self-inflicted-deaths-in-reception-prisons/

² Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (2025). Investigation into the failing of Medomsley Detention Centre between 1961 and 1987. Available online at: https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/14/2025/11/31.122_PPO_Special-investigation-report_WEB.pdf

Notes to editors:

1. This release is available at:
https://ppo.gov.uk/corporate_document/the-time-is-right-for-independent-oversight-of-prison-staff-conduct-says-prisons-and-probation-ombudsman/
2. The report is available at:
https://ppo.gov.uk/corporate_document/annual-report-2025-to-2026/
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-andprobation-ombudsman-terms-of-reference/>
6. 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)
7. Please contact ppocomms@ppo.gov.uk if you require more information