Prisons & Probation Ombudsman
Independent Investigations

"Greater consequences are needed in response to staff behaviour issues" says Prisons and Probation Ombudsman

12 November 2026 - In a bulletin published today, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) highlights repeat failures found in complaints about staff behaviour.

The bulletin shares learning aimed at improving standards of professionalism and creating a stronger culture of safety in prisons. Ombudsman Adrian Usher has used the publication as an opportunity to call for greater consequences for staff and prisons in response to such failures.

The PPO investigates the deaths of prisoners, those on probation and in immigration detention, as well as deaths that occur seven days after release from prison. They also investigate complaints from people in prison, on probation, living in approved premises and those in immigration detention.

The bulletin analyses findings from four sub-categories of upheld complaints received from prisoners about staff behaviour: use of force, bullying and harassment, assault, and general complaints.[1]

"I am concerned about the failures presented in this bulletin. We identified repeat and ongoing issues with a lack of available evidence, staff professionalism, poor internal investigations into conduct and poor complaint handling", said Ombudsman Adrian Usher.

"Prison staff have a very difficult job and many of them do excellent work every day, however professionalism among all staff is crucial to ensuring safe prisons and building better staff-prisoner relationships."

The bulletin highlights the issue of a lack of evidence, which has become evident from the PPO's investigations into assault and use of force complaints where staff repeatedly failed to use body worn video camera footage. The PPO highlights that this is not compliant with policy as body worn video camera footage must be used to record events where force is used or events that could potentially lead to force being used. Shockingly, 36% of 143 complaint investigations reviewed were negatively impacted by the quality and/or lack of evidence provided by the prison. The PPO go on to share that in 64% of cases, where CCTV was requested, footage was not made available to them during their investigation.

The bulletin also sheds light on issues relating to the professional conduct of prison staff. Out of 113 applicable cases, 58% of the PPO's investigations were found to involve conduct that fell below expected professional standards. The investigative office highlighted the use of inappropriate language towards prisoners as a repeated issue, with staff also failing to follow procedures as set out in prison policy. For 47 use of force cases reviewed, the PPO found that there were not adequate de-escalation attempts in 30%.

[1] Complaints assessed were sent to the PPO by prisoners from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2026, during which the PPO received 956 eligible complaints within the four sub-categories.

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“Shouting or swearing at someone is an example of unprofessional behaviour”, said Adrian. “Professionalism is often an issue seen in our investigations and the importance of treating prisoners with respect and dignity cannot be overstated”.

Lastly, the Ombudsman’s office highlighted poor internal investigations into staff conduct and complaint handling as a major issue.

The PPO state that in 9% of complaints investigated where there was a formal internal investigation, the staff member being complained about was also involved with conducting the internal prison investigation. Their concerns around the independence and accountability of some prisons’ internal investigations prompted Adrian to make a strong statement:

“Greater consequences are needed in response to staff behaviour issues”.

The PPO also identified failings in complaint handling procedures in just over half of the complaints reviewed, which included delays in responding to complaints, failure to address all aspects of the complaint and poor communication with the complainant.

The Ombudsman reinforced his call for external scrutiny of staff behaviour, adding that “greater independent oversight is needed. This would improve accountability and identify poor practice earlier, creating a safer culture where staff and prisoners are reassured that failures would be investigated thoroughly."

ENDS

Notes to editors:

1. This release is available at: https://ppo.gov.uk/media-releases/
2. The bulletin is available at: https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/14/2026/11/46.92_PPO_Learning_lessons_bulletin_Issue_12_Staff-behaviour_v2a_Final.pdf
3. Adrian Usher was appointed as Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) in April 2023. 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).
4. 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/
5. The PPO has three main investigative duties:
    I. complaints made by prisoners, young people in detention, offenders under probation supervision and individuals detained under immigration powers (detained individuals)
    II. deaths of prisoners, young people in detention, approved premises’ residents and detained individuals due to any cause
    III. deaths of recently released prisoners that occur within seven days of release from prison (except homicide)
6. Please contact ppocomms@ppo.gov.uk if you require more information

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