

**Investigation into the circumstances surrounding the  
death of a woman in June 2006,  
following her absconding from HMP Askham Grange**

**Report by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman for  
England and Wales**

**September 2007**

This is the report of an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of a woman whose body was found in Hull on 24 June 2006. At the time of her death, she was unlawfully at large from HMP Askham Grange. She had absconded at the end of April 2006. A man has since been charged with her murder.

I offer my sincere sympathy and condolences to her family and friends for their tragic loss.

At the time of her death, the woman was still technically a prisoner and under my terms of reference I considered it right and proper to conduct an investigation. However, because of the criminal proceedings, this report is much shorter than those I normally issue following a death in custody and its focus is upon the period leading up to her absconding.

One of my deputy ombudsmen and one of my investigators conducted the investigation. I would like to thank the Governor of Askham Grange and his staff for their help and co-operation.

I am content that Askham Grange took reasonable steps to assess the woman's suitability for release on temporary licence (ROTL) and also took the appropriate action when it was discovered that she had absconded. Nobody could reasonably have predicted that the woman would take the action that she did. However, I am concerned that only limited steps were taken by police to apprehend her once she was unlawfully at large.

Despite the fact that 702 prisoners absconded from open conditions in 2005/2006, it seems the re-arrest of prisoners such as the woman may not be classed as a policing priority. Public confidence in the criminal justice may be undermined if the re-arrest of prisoners unlawfully at large is not treated as a serious matter. I have therefore recommended that a copy of this report is sent to the Home Office Minister of State with responsibility for police policy for his attention and any action that he may deem appropriate.

This investigation has also highlighted, not it must be said for the first time, the problems which can occur with a prisoner's documentation when they transfer between establishments. I have made a general recommendation on this matter. My report also demonstrates that allocation to an open prison can be a disorientating and anxious experience for some prisoners, and one which they are not necessarily equipped to face. Accordingly, I have made a recommendation for Askham Grange to review its induction procedure.

**Stephen Shaw CBE**  
**Prisons and Probation Ombudsman**

**September 2007**

## **SUMMARY**

On 24 June 2006, the body of the woman was discovered in Hull. She had absconded from HMP Askham Grange almost two months earlier and been unlawfully at large since that time. Humberside Police launched a major inquiry and a man has been charged with her murder. She was 29 years old.

Before absconding, the woman was serving her first prison sentence. She appeared to be making good progress against her sentence plan, having attended offending behaviour programmes as well as education.

The woman had begun her sentence at HMP New Hall before being transferred to open conditions at Askham Grange in December 2005. As part of her progression through sentence, she gained approval to be released on temporary licence to attend medical/dental appointments, the 'Think First' programme, and one day family support visits in the vicinity of York. The prison took the necessary steps in assessing her suitability for release on temporary licence

The woman appeared to fellow residents and staff at Askham Grange as a larger than life, streetwise character. However, it emerged that she was an anxious woman who felt that illicit drugs gave her the support she needed to cope with the pressures of life. She had concerns about leading a normal life and becoming the primary carer for her son. However, it is clear that she kept her feelings and anxieties well hidden.

On 30 April 2006, having been released on temporary licence to be with her family, the woman failed to return to Askham Grange. This was to the surprise of her family, staff and fellow residents.

Askham Grange took appropriate and timely action in informing North Yorkshire Police of her disappearance. However, the woman was considered to be a low risk prisoner and police efforts to establish her whereabouts and return to prison appear to have been limited and shortlived. It is likely that she had fallen back into her previous chaotic lifestyle.

This investigation has highlighted that some prisoners can feel ill equipped to deal with the challenges, responsibilities and temptations that an open prison presents. Whilst I am satisfied that support is available to prisoners, I have asked Askham Grange to review its induction procedures. The investigation has also drawn attention to the importance of ensuring that all relevant documentation transfers when a prisoner moves from one establishment to another, thus enabling continuity of professional care and treatment.

## THE INVESTIGATION PROCESS

1. Although she was not in custody when she died, the woman was an absconded prisoner. As a consequence, an investigation into the circumstances surrounding her death came within my remit. My office was informed of her death on 27 June 2006.
2. My deputy ombudsman visited HMP Askham Grange on 28 June 2006. She met with the deputy governor and was able to review the custodial documents. On 17 August 2006, the deputy ombudsman and one of my investigators re-visited Askham Grange to interview staff and residents. The terms of reference were to investigate the circumstances leading up to the woman absconding. Notices were issued to staff and residents informing them about the investigation and giving them the opportunity to speak with the investigation team. Several residents came forward as a result.
3. The Governor and his staff produced the core record and a number of other documents for examination. The investigation team spoke to members of staff who had known the woman, as well as to staff who could clarify operational matters in regard to risk assessment of residents and to reporting those who abscond.
4. One of my Family Liaison Officers contacted the woman's father and mother by letter. She offered the family an opportunity to meet with the investigation team to discuss the purpose of the investigation, and to raise any concerns or questions about the woman's time in prison that they would like explored and addressed. To date, the family has not contacted my office and I am therefore not aware of any issues that they would wish to raise.
5. The circumstances of the woman's death will be the subject of a criminal trial. A copy of this report will be sent to Her Majesty's Coroner.

## **HMP ASKHAM GRANGE**

6. HMP Askham Grange is an open prison for women, situated in the village of Askham Richard outside York. According to its entry on the Prison Service website, decency and resettlement are the key focus of the establishment, and residents receive support to achieve personalised development plans that will place them in a strong position for their return to the community.
7. The main accommodation is in a converted manor house which dates back to 1886. The establishment can accommodate up to 96 women in dormitories of varying size. A small number of single rooms are available for life sentenced women.

## KEY EVENTS

8. On 16 November 2005, the woman was refused a day release on temporary licence because Humberside Probation Service would not support her application in light of previous breaches of trust. However, on 6 December 2005, she was transferred from HMP New Hall to Askham Grange. She had been assessed as a low risk prisoner of good behaviour who was keen to address her offending behaviour through sentence planning. On arrival at Askham Grange, she spent a few days on the induction unit before moving to a dormitory block.
9. On 2 February 2006, the woman attended the Risk Assessment Board at Askham Grange and, following favourable reports, a ROTL was authorised for her to attend the 'Think First' programme and medical and dental appointments. These visits were unescorted. On 14 February, the Risk Assessment Board recommended ROTL licences so that she could attend days out with her family in the York area to develop and sustain family relationships, particularly with her son. Her records indicate that the relationship with her son was improving.
10. Throughout her sentence and as part of her resettlement plan, the woman was keen to further her education and she undertook a number of adult learning courses. She also participated in a family learning programme as she and her family hoped that she would eventually become the primary carer for her son. Her records also confirm that the woman attended a number of offending behaviour programmes including 'Think First'. Attendance and progression on these programmes are designed to help the individual tackle their offending, and build up their self-esteem and confidence. It was envisaged that participation would allow the woman to find gainful employment in charitable or paid work. She appeared to progress well and was working for a short time in a charity shop. According to her records, she was free from drugs - although an entry in her CARATs file for 1 February indicated that she did not think she could cope with life without using drugs.
11. On 12 March, a Security Information Report (SIR) indicated a suspicion of drug activity by one or more of the residents in the woman's houseblock. The report focussed on another prisoner who was not complying with the regime. On 20 March, that prisoner absconded from Askham Grange. My investigators also established that another prisoner from the woman's dormitory had absconded about two weeks previously. It is possible their example may have had an impact on her own decision to abscond.
12. On 10 April, her record indicates that the woman tested positive for morphine on a voluntary drugs test (VDT), and she was subsequently referred to CARATs for counselling. The woman was described as blasé about the incident. Another VDT conducted on 24 April was negative.
13. The application for ROTL for a family ties visit on 30 April was approved. Under the terms of her licence, the woman was required to remain within a ten mile radius of York and to return to Askham Grange by 6.00pm. She did not do so.

14. The fact that the woman had not returned by 6.00pm was noted by the prison. As she had still not made contact by 7.30pm, and as part of the prison's contingency plan when a prisoner fails to return from an authorised absence, the police were notified she was missing.
15. The police attended Askham Grange on 1 May to make further enquiries, and they contacted her father. From the information received, they checked likely addresses where she might be. However, she was not found and remained at large. It appears nothing more was heard of the woman for almost two months.

### ***Events after the woman's death***

16. Some staff and residents at Askham Grange first learned of the woman's death from the local news on 24 June. The deputy governor contacted North Yorkshire Police so that they could confirm with Humberside Police whether the named victim was the woman. North Yorkshire Police would normally have been contacted by Humberside Police because of a warning flag on the Police National Computer. However, this does not appear to have happened. The Police Liaison Officer for Askham Grange, told my investigators that Humberside Police subsequently attended the prison to collect her property.
17. A serving prisoner at HMP Leeds, also heard of the woman's death from the local news. He told my investigator that he had not heard from her since 30 April and had wondered what was wrong. He told my investigator that he had received a good level of support from Leeds. He was released from prison in August 2006.
18. Prisoners at Askham Grange were formally told of the woman's death on 25 June and offered the support of staff and the chaplaincy. Askham Grange is a small, close knit community and the death came as a profound shock to residents and staff alike. The prison appointed the deputy governor as the family liaison officer and condolences were given by telephone to the woman's father and step-mother on 26 June. Since her death, continued offers of support have been given to the family, although telephone contact has been difficult to maintain and establish.
19. On 28 June, a memorial service was held for the woman in the chapel at Askham Grange. The service was very well attended, reflecting her popularity and the impact of her death.
20. The woman's funeral took place in July and was attended by staff and two residents from Askham Grange. The prison offered the family financial assistance towards the funeral.

## ISSUES

### *Transfer to open conditions*

21. Although there is nothing in the woman's records to indicate that she was finding it hard to adapt to Askham Grange, my investigators were told that she had found it very difficult to adjust to open conditions. Apparently she felt that, whilst she was given more scope to develop and progress at Askham Grange, it was difficult to cope with the responsibility. Her feelings would not necessarily have been known by other residents or staff. During the investigation, most residents whom my investigators spoke to reported that they too had found it very difficult to acclimatise to open conditions, having transferred, from prisons with more structured regimes sometimes at short notice. In a number of instances, residents said that they were not allocated a 'buddy' on arrival and felt very uneasy and adrift. Whilst some of the residents reported that they had frequent and constructive relationships with their personal officers, this was not universal.
22. My investigators learnt that, on first arrival at Askham Grange, some residents felt they would prefer to serve the rest of their sentence in closed conditions. This prompted some of them to abscond in order to be recaptured and returned to closed conditions. Whilst some recognised that they had a lot to lose if they absconded from Askham Grange, others said the temptation was always there.
23. There can be no doubt some prisoners who had spent a lot of time in closed conditions found a transfer to Askham Grange to be a disorientating, anxious experience, particularly in the first month. It was also apparent that some prisoners needed more support than others if they were to complete their sentence and realise their potential.

**The Governor should review the effectiveness of the induction procedures at Askham Grange to ensure that clear information and support is given and individual needs are met.**

### *The woman's state of mind*

24. Residents told my investigators that, in the week before she absconded, the woman's mood had changed. They attribute this to telephone calls she was receiving from a long term male acquaintance who had apparently just been released from prison. (Residents at Askham Grange are able to receive incoming telephone calls, as well as make outgoing ones.) The investigation has been unable to establish the identity of this man, but he could have influenced her decision to abscond. Residents also told my investigators that, on the day before she absconded, the woman was subdued and had taken her posters down from the dormitory wall and collected her CDs. However, they and staff were surprised by her decision to abscond as she appeared to have settled down and was progressing well through her sentence.
25. The male prisoner from Leeds told my investigators that she could have been upset about being 'knocked back' for parole, and that this may have been a reason for her decision to abscond. However, residents at Askham Grange told

my investigators that the woman was very anxious about being released and had talked about 'sabotaging' her parole. The woman had also told her 'Think First' tutor that she was scared of failure in leading a normal life. At the woman's last meeting with her probation officer at Askham Grange on 13 March, she mentioned her anxieties about release from prison because of the lure of drugs. Following her disclosure, Humberside Probation Service was contacted by the prison to establish what drug support services were available to the woman in the community, should she be released.

### ***Release on Temporary Licence***

26. Temporary release on licence (ROTL) is designed to ensure that suitable prisoners are released only for precisely defined and specific activities which cannot be provided for in the establishment, and to support them in their resettlement plans. All prisoners arriving at Askham Grange have a sentence plan (reviewed every six months) as part of the resettlement process. This may include an aspiration or a target to attend some form of education or employment in the community. The resident will make an application for ROTL. Before a licence is approved, reports are requested from a number of sources which may include Healthcare, Probation Service, CARATs and Education. A report is also requested from the personal officer who comments on behaviour, application and compliance with the prison's regime. A key feature in considering whether a prisoner is suitable for temporary release is the risk assessment process which considers the level of threat to the general public and the potential for re-offending.
27. The Principal Officer who oversees the Resettlement Process, said that a risk assessment board is held around the sixth week following arrival at Askham Grange. Available information on the resident is assessed to determine whether they are suitable for temporary release in terms of the risk of re-offending or breach of trust. The risk assessment board is multi-disciplinary. If someone is assessed as suitable for temporary release, they will be authorised to attend specified activities within a 10 mile radius of York. Someone who over time consistently complies with the terms of her licence may be authorised to travel further a field and unaccompanied. The purpose of the licence is to fulfil the individual's sentence plan and is also used to develop and sustain a consistent level of trust and responsibility.
28. It was established during the investigation that a resident must have completed 13 weeks of unpaid community work before consideration for paid employment. The Governor's approval is required for a resident to look for and gain paid employment. Good relationships have been nurtured between the prison and the local business community. Suitable residents are encouraged to look for their own employment opportunities in order to build confidence and self esteem. This also gives them some financial independence on release. Consequently, there is a significant daily movement in and out of the establishment in order to attend a range of activities.
29. The Principal Officer explained that, if a resident is assessed as suitable for a licence specifically for the development and maintenance of family ties, they are

placed under the supervision of a suitable adult. In the woman's case, this was her father. The licence condition required her to remain within a ten mile radius of York and to return to Askham Grange by 6.00pm. The investigation established that the woman would have been made fully aware of the terms of her licence and the consequences if she failed to comply. However, her father would not necessarily have been aware of the specific conditions in her licence.

30. Before 30 April, the woman had been on day release on a number of occasions in order to attend 'Think First', medical appointments and voluntary employment as well as for family visits. No problems had been reported. She was considered to be progressing well and developing a sense of responsibility and trust.

### ***Procedures for reporting an abscond***

31. As noted, the woman was expected to return to Askham Grange by 6.00pm on Sunday 30 April. Staff told my investigators that in many cases some additional time is allowed for residents to report to reception because of delays on the roads or on public transport. In many instances, residents will attempt to make contact by telephone to alert staff that they may be delayed. If a resident fails to return or otherwise contact reception within about 40 to 50 minutes of their specified time for return, staff in consultation with the duty manager will initiate the abscond procedure.
32. By 7.30pm on 30 April, staff were concerned that the woman had not reported back and had not made contact with them. Consequently, the Acting Senior Officer contacted the duty governor who implemented the prison's contingency plan in the event of an abscond. As part of the contingency plan, a roll call was taken and the area was checked. The Senior Officer then contacted the North Yorkshire Police control room at York and officially reported the woman as missing. This call was logged at 7.33pm. The Prison Service's Incident Reporting System was also updated to reflect that the woman had breached the terms of her licence and was an absconded prisoner.
33. The Police Liaison Officer said that the woman would have been reported as a person missing from home, although as a prisoner she would have been dealt with similarly to a member of the armed forces who was absent without leave. In these circumstances, rather than wait 24 hours for a missing person to turn up as is usual in the wider community, initial telephone enquiries would have been made to try and locate the individual. Once the incident had been logged by North Yorkshire Police, it would have been given a unique reference number and allocated to the next available officer. That officer would have made initial enquiries by telephone to Askham Grange to establish some facts about the woman and the circumstances behind her absconding. In view of the fact that she was not considered to be a violent prisoner or a danger to the public, she did not warrant immediate police action. On 1 May, police attended Askham Grange to make these further enquiries.
34. The Police Liaison Officer confirmed that the Police National Computer (PNC) would have been updated and details of the woman would have been circulated nationwide as a wanted/missing person. As the force was notified of her

abscond, North Yorkshire Police became the 'owners' of that PNC record. If the woman had been stopped by police and a PNC check carried out, the record would indicate that she was wanted by North Yorkshire Police. On arrest, she would have been returned to closed prison conditions.

35. On 1 May, the officer allocated the enquiry from North Yorkshire Police spoke by telephone to the woman's father. It was ascertained that, at about 1.00pm on 30 April, he had driven her to a supermarket in Hull and dropped her off in order to meet her boyfriend. Although the woman was in breach of the terms of her licence, her father had no reason to believe that she would not meet him later on for the journey back to Askham Grange by 6.00pm. Her father gave the police her boyfriend's address in Hull.
36. Humberside Police were asked by North Yorkshire Police to conduct address checks at the woman's parents' address as well as at her boyfriend's home. There was no reply from the boyfriend's house on 1 May, and neighbours reported that they had not seen a woman there. Humberside Police also made enquiries at a hotel in Hull where it was reported that she might have been staying with her boyfriend, but again there was no trace of either of them. Despite not receiving a response from the boyfriend's home address, it does not appear that Humberside Police made any further attempts to find the woman. In light of recent national controversies regarding levels of absconding from open prisons, there must be concerns about the initial address checks made by Humberside Police and the subsequent failure to follow them up. Whilst the woman's re-arrest may have been considered a low policing priority given other operational demands, it is surprising that no further efforts were made to locate her in the two months that she was unlawfully at large.

**In light of my concerns regarding the apprehension of prisoners unlawfully at large, I recommend that a copy of this report is sent to the Home Office Minister of State with responsibility for police policy for his consideration and any action he may deem appropriate.**

#### ***Documentation on prisoners transferring between establishments***

37. It emerged during the investigation that, when a prisoner is transferred to Askham Grange, important information about them in the form of paper records can be delayed. Whilst the prisoner's medical record is placed in a sealed confidential file that accompanies the prisoner, probation files and the CARATs file do not necessarily arrive at the same time. I understand that files are often despatched by post after the prisoner has transferred and can take up to one week to arrive at Askham Grange. This was a source of some frustration for staff working in the disciplines concerned and meant that, in some instances, they would have to start afresh when a new prisoner arrives. This situation is by no means unique to Askham Grange. I do not consider the delay in transferring this information to be reasonable or in the prisoner's best interest. In view of the fact that the medical record will invariably accompany a prisoner, the same level of importance should be attached to other relevant information in the records to ensure continuity of care and treatment.

**The Prison Service should review arrangements for the transfer of paper files when a prisoner is moved from one institution to another.**

***Conclusion***

38. On the surface, the woman was making determined efforts through her sentence plan and with the support of staff to prepare herself for a decent life in the community. This included efforts aimed at becoming the primary carer for her son. Her transfer to Askham Grange reflected these efforts and was considered to be a positive step towards her resettlement and eventual release. However, it is also clear that, despite portraying herself as a confident individual, the woman had anxieties about leading a full and responsible life. These anxieties focussed on letting down those she loved and reverting back to a chaotic lifestyle, primarily drug misuse. However, she kept these feelings well camouflaged from staff at Askham Grange.
39. Many prisoners who transfer to open conditions find this a disorientating and anxious experience. Taking personal responsibility for their own lives and preparing for a constructive life in the community is not easy. With additional responsibility there comes opportunity, and in all open prisons there is the temptation to abscond. Many of the residents who spoke to my investigators said that the first month at Askham Grange can be very stressful, and the levels of support and induction required vary according to personal needs. Whilst I cannot know why the woman decided to abscond, I am satisfied that Askham Grange took reasonable steps to assess and review her suitability for ROTL. The prison could not reasonably have predicted she would abscond, nor reasonably have intervened to prevent her from doing so. I am also satisfied that once the abscond was discovered the proper procedures for reporting her to the police were followed.
40. Whilst I appreciate that police resources are finite, and that policing priorities should be risk-led, I am concerned that efforts to locate and apprehend the woman appear to have been very limited. In her case, despite her being regarded as a low risk to the public, it was highly likely that she would return to a life of drugs and vice and therefore herself become vulnerable. But quite separately, public confidence in the criminal justice may be undermined if the re-arrest of prisoners unlawfully at large is not treated as a serious matter.
41. It also emerged from this investigation, as it has from many others I have conducted that, whilst there is a wealth of relevant and important information about a prisoner on different files, this information is not always readily available when the prisoner is transferred. CARATs and Probation files were found to take up to a week to follow the prisoner, and this is a source of much frustration to staff responsible for providing consistent and continuous care.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**The Governor should review the effectiveness of the induction procedures at Askham Grange to ensure that clear information and support is given and individual needs are met.**

A new three day induction programme has been introduced that starts on the residents second day at Askham Grange. All new residents are allocated a buddy as they arrive and that support remains for their first full week. Within their first week all residents are seen on sentence planning and initial risk assessment boards.

**In light of my concerns regarding the apprehension of prisoners unlawfully at large, I recommend that a copy of this report is sent to the Home Office Minister of State with responsibility for police policy for his consideration and any action he may deem appropriate.**

A copy will be sent on receipt of the final report

**The Prison Service should review arrangements for the transfer of paper files when a prisoner is moved from one institution to another.**

C-Nomis should improve this process but until roll out Askham Grange will endeavour to work with sending establishments to improve this system.

It is mandatory under PSO 6400 Discharge for a prisoner's F2050, F2051, IMR and any open ACCT to be issued to the escorting officer when a prisoner is being transferred to another establishment or it is thought likely they will be sent from court to another establishment.