

**Prisons &  
Probation**

**Ombudsman**  
Independent Investigations

# Independent investigation into the death of Mr Colin Young, a prisoner at HMP Altcourse, on 6 October 2021

**A report by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman**

## Our Vision

To carry out independent investigations to make custody and community supervision safer and fairer.

## Our Values

We are:

**Impartial:** *we do not take sides*

**Respectful:** *we are considerate and courteous*

**Inclusive:** *we value diversity*

**Dedicated:** *we are determined and focused*

**Fair:** *we are honest and act with integrity*



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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. We carry out investigations to understand what happened and identify how the organisations whose actions we oversee can improve their work in the future.
3. Mr Colin Young died in hospital from cancer on 6 October 2021, while a prisoner at HMP Altcourse. He was 87 years old. We offer our condolences to Mr Young's family and friends.
4. The clinical reviewer concluded that the clinical care Mr Young received at Altcourse was variable with some examples of good practice but also opportunities for improvement. She found that staff did not escalate Mr Young's care as they should have done when using the National Early Warning Score (NEWS) tool (used to assess clinical deterioration) and that despite Mr Young receiving a terminal diagnosis in April 2020, staff did not add him to the Complex Case Register until May 2021.
5. We are concerned that staff did not start an application for compassionate release for Mr Young in mid-September 2021, after a deterioration in his condition. While we accept that his health deteriorated rapidly and he died less than a month later, we consider the prison should have started an application.

## Recommendations

- The Head of Healthcare should ensure that staff are fully competent in the NEWS scoring system and understand the appropriate clinical response.
- The Head of Healthcare should ensure that staff are aware of the importance of adding prisoners with complex care needs to the Complex Case Register in a timely manner.
- The Director and Head of Healthcare should ensure that staff start applications for compassionate release promptly.

## The Investigation Process

6. NHS England commissioned an independent clinical reviewer, to review Mr Young's clinical care at HMP Altcourse. The clinical reviewer's report is attached as Annex 1.
7. The PPO investigator has investigated non-clinical issues, including Mr Young's location, the security arrangements for his hospital escorts, liaison with his family and whether compassionate release was considered.
8. The PPO family liaison officer wrote to Mr Young's next of kin, his son, to explain the investigation. He did not respond.
9. The initial report was shared with the Prison Service. The Prison Service did not find any factual inaccuracies.

### Previous deaths at HMP Altcourse

10. Mr Young was the 17<sup>th</sup> prisoner to die at Altcourse since October 2019. Of the previous deaths, 12 were from natural causes and four were self-inflicted. We have made recommendations to the Head of Healthcare in two previous cases about ensuring that healthcare staff are trained to use the NEWS tool. We were told that training should be completed by June 2021.

## Key Events

11. On 23 August 2016, Mr Colin Young was sentenced to 18 years imprisonment for sexual offences. He was sent to HMP Altcourse.
12. Mr Young, who was 82 when he entered prison, had several long-term health conditions including heart failure, angina, high blood pressure and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD – the term for a group of serious lung diseases).
13. On 24 April 2020, following abnormal blood test results and a series of scans, Mr Young was diagnosed with lung cancer. He was told it was incurable and that his life expectancy could be anything from a few months to a couple of years.
14. Mr Young's health remained stable until 14 September 2021, when a nurse noted that there was a decline in Mr Young's physical health, and that he had become increasingly frail.
15. On 25 September, a nurse saw Mr Young and took his observations. She noted that he had a National Early Warning Score (NEWS) of 7. (NEWS is a tool used to assess clinical deterioration in adult patients – a score of 7 indicates high clinical risk that should prompt an immediate emergency assessment.) There is no evidence that the nurse considered asking a doctor to assess Mr Young or considered escalating his care. She told Mr Young that he needed to be moved to the prison's inpatient unit for an increased level of support. Mr Young said that he did not want to move and signed a disclaimer to that effect.
16. Later that evening at 11.05pm, a nurse took Mr Young's observations and noted that he had a NEWS score of 5 (indicates a medium risk that should prompt an urgent medical assessment within an hour.) The nurse advised Mr Young to seek medical advice if there was any deterioration in his condition. She did not arrange to repeat Mr Young's observations and there is no evidence that she asked a doctor to assess Mr Young.
17. Mr Young did not improve overnight. Staff sought advice from the local hospice but were told no hospice bed was available. They decided, in view of Mr Young's increasing health needs, to send him to hospital for further assessment.
18. Mr Young was admitted to hospital. His health continued to deteriorate and he died on 6 October.

### Cause of death

19. At an inquest held on 22 October, the Coroner concluded that Mr Young died of pneumonia caused by metastatic lung cancer (cancer that has spread throughout the body).

# Findings

## Non-Clinical Findings

### Compassionate release

20. Release on compassionate grounds is a means by which prisoners who are seriously ill, usually with a life expectancy of less than three months, can permanently be released from custody before their sentence has expired. A clear medical opinion of life expectancy is required. The criteria for early release for determinate sentenced prisoners are set out in Prison Service Order (PSO) 6000. The criteria include that the risk of reoffending is expected to be minimal, further imprisonment would reduce life expectancy, there are adequate arrangements for the prisoner's care and treatment outside prison, and release would benefit the prisoner and his family. An application for early release on compassionate grounds must be submitted to the Public Protection Casework Section of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.
21. By 14 September 2021, Mr Young's health had deteriorated significantly and we consider that the prison should have started an application for early release on compassionate grounds. When the investigator asked the prison why they had not applied for compassionate release, they said it was because Mr Young's health deteriorated rapidly. We accept that he died less than a month after staff noted a significant deterioration in his condition, but this does not explain why staff did not start the application process. We consider that staff should be reminded to start applications for compassionate release at the earliest opportunity. We recommend:

**The Director and Head of Healthcare should ensure that staff start applications for compassionate release promptly.**

**Louise Richards**  
**Assistant Ombudsman**

**January 2022**

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