

Strategic Plan

2020-2024



The
Prisoner
Ombudsman
for Northern Ireland



Introduction

The purpose of this Strategic Plan is to set out priorities the Ombudsman aims to achieve within the life of the plan and takes a dynamic approach, building each priority year on year via business planning with different priorities taking precedence in each year. All of the priorities will remain important throughout the life of the plan.

As an independent office it is important that the office establishes its own distinct identity in consonance with standards. The commitment, vision and mission aims to draw staff together to focus in one clear direction. How the work of the office is carried out among significant systems, namely the Prison Service, Healthcare Trust and Civil Service, while keeping individual prisoners and their experiences to the fore is guided by our vision and principles.

Since its inception, the Prisoner Ombudsman's Office has valued good relationships with prisoners and partners. This is an important emphasis and continues to influence how we go about our business. For the first time distinct values are included in this plan to enable us to ensure not only that we maintain good relationships but also that we improve them and more effectively turn the learning lens onto the work we produce and outwards from what we discover.

There is significant information and knowledge within the Office. There remains a challenge to put that information to work to form a data-driven evidence base and allow the Office to focus more effectively on outcomes from both individual investigations and evidenced themes arising from those investigations.

Outcomes-based accountability has been important in how this plan was developed and is a significant shift in thinking for the Office. To achieve an outcomes focus, the Strategic Plan is a refresh in both approach and terminology. Practically speaking, this is reflected in a longer period for the life of the plan, greater focus on wellbeing both for prisoners and staff, more co-design and prisoner feedback to inform our work and more significant public reporting using a variety of mechanisms.



A number of cross-cutting themes will assist in delivery of strategic outcomes, for example, a digitalisation strategy will contribute to the strategic priorities: improve investigative work processes and develop a learning environment that puts evidence to work; a formalised training plan will contribute to the strategic priorities: safeguard and reinforce independence, prepare for and implement statutory footing and improve investigative processes.

Alongside valuing good relationships the Office has consistently valued understanding how prisoners experience their time in custody. This plan specifically spells this out in its vision, mission and commitment which gives prominence to prisoner experience with a mission and commitment to carrying out investigations and to best practice standards and to use recommendations and grouped data to influence change where it is required.

This adds up to cultivating a robust and agile learning environment, building on the learning-lessons approach which has been critical to how the Office has always approached its work. During the period of this Strategic Plan the learning focus will be integral to developing the Office. Increased learning opportunities will be made available to partners in particular. In line with this emphasis, there will also be a focus on staff training and development.

Delivering independent, impartial, professional and timely investigations is critical. However, learning and change are critical for those investigations to make an impact both systemically and for individual prisoners. This requires that recommendations result in outcomes. Hence the emphasis on an evidence base and a learning approach.

It is crucial that continuous learning is at the centre of professionalism and independence not only for improvement within the Office but also for those for whom we work, specifically complainants and those who have lost loved ones while they were in custody.

Lesley Carroll
Prisoner Ombudsman for
Northern Ireland



Role and Standards

The Prisoner Ombudsman's Office was established in 2005 following the Steele Review of Prisons and has two specific functions:

- ▶ **To investigate and report on complaints from prisoners and their visitors; and**
- ▶ **To investigate and report on Deaths in Custody, including post-release deaths normally up to fourteen days after release and serious adverse incidents as referred by the Prison Service for investigation.**

The Prisoner Ombudsman's core work is, therefore, investigations.

Powers and duties

Powers to investigations complaints by prisoners or their visitors are set out in Rule 79I - 79N of the Prison and Young Offender Centre (NI) Rules 2009. Currently powers to investigate deaths in custody are by standing commission from the Director General of the NI Prison Service.

Standards for investigations

Investigations are governed by agreed Terms of Reference and standards as set out in the Principles of Good Complaints Handling. In addition standards are set out in handling manuals:

1. The Deaths in Custody Manual:

- ▶ **Impartiality**
- ▶ **Objectivity**
- ▶ **Thoroughness**
- ▶ **Fairness**
- ▶ **Accuracy**
- ▶ **Open to public scrutiny**
- ▶ **Accessible to the family**

2. The Principles of Good Complaints Handling:

- ▶ **Clarity of purpose**
- ▶ **Accessibility**
- ▶ **Flexibility**
- ▶ **Openness and transparency**
- ▶ **Proportionality**
- ▶ **Efficiency**
- ▶ **Quality outcomes**



Planning Context

Outcomes-based Accountability makes an important shift in thinking since the 2016 Programme for Government that focussed on designing targets that would demonstrate real change and improvement in the quality of people's lives. This is an important shift for the Office to make in planning and measuring our work.

Programme for Government

The work set out in this Strategic Plan will contribute to the existing Programme for Government (PfG) Outcome 7: **We have a safe community where we respect the law and each other.**

Within the PfG, the 2019 Outcomes Delivery Plan which currently operates to co-ordinate delivery of public services, our focus is on those outcomes that can be achieved or supported by the Office of the Prisoner Ombudsman NI, namely:

Improve health within Prisons by:

- ▶ **Collaborating with Social Care professionals to improve services for people in NI Prison Service (NIPS) care.**
- ▶ **Delivering a renewed person centred approach to supporting people at risk of suicide and/or self-harm.**
- ▶ **Completing Phase One of the joint health and justice review of vulnerable people in custody and begin implementation of recommendations by March 2019.**

This will be reviewed when a new Programme for Government is agreed.

Risk and Reporting

Reporting responsibilities are set out in the Framework Document agreed with the Sponsor Body and reported at quarterly governance meetings. Detailed Annual Reports are submitted to the Minister and published.

A risk register is in place and will be redrafted in line with this Strategic Plan.

Risks will be set out annually against annual Business Plans.

Financial Climate

The Office continues to be funded through an annual budget and the opening budget for 2020/21 was £710K. With increasing demand on finite resources there is no doubt that creating efficiencies where possible is a significant challenge but a necessary one given the financial climate.



Commitment, Vision and Mission

The commitment, vision and mission focuses the Office on making a difference to prisoners' lives through our work and how we go about that work, alongside bringing learning from investigations to inform improvement in the prison environment.

Our Vision

To contribute to ensuring prisons are places where:

- ▶ **Prisoners experience emotional and physical safety**
- ▶ **Fairness, respect and human rights are valued**
- ▶ **Learning and rehabilitation are valued**

Our Mission

To complete timely, professional and independent investigations that contribute to a learning environment in which we challenge others and ourselves

Our Commitment

To carry out independent, professional, learning focussed investigations and use recommendations and data from investigations to influence change



Values and Principles

The values and principles relate to how the Office will approach work and relationships, both inside the Office and with our partners and stakeholders.

VALUES	PRINCIPLES
<p>Our values inform how we go about our work and provide an accountability standard to be integrated into policy and practice.</p>	<p>Our principles, based on our values, guide us and guide our work.</p>
<p>▶ Independence and impartiality</p>	<p>We will act with integrity, treat everyone fairly and respectfully, listen to different points of view and build trust.</p>
<p>▶ Teamwork and making a difference</p>	<p>We will work collaboratively to remove barriers, accountable and focussed on improvement.</p>
<p>▶ Learning and adaptability</p>	<p>We will work from a strong evidence base, are inquiring in our approach and strive for excellence in our performance.</p>
<p>▶ People-focussed, integrity and curiosity</p>	<p>We will ensure we are professional, compassionate, patient and optimistic in our dealings with people.</p>

Our Values and Principles are expanded in our Terms of Reference.

Strategic Priorities

These priorities are intentionally broad, to cover the 4-year period of work. Each strand of work will be supported by cross-cutting business priorities to deliver an Office that makes a difference by focussing on learning lessons, continuous improvement and influencing change. Appropriate timelines, indicators, measures and outcomes for business priorities will be set in-year and detailed in the business plan.

Each priority will be given the necessary emphasis in each business year as we build on the previous year's work. Each annual business plan will, therefore, give emphasis to the strategic priorities in a way that structures them to build towards achieving them all within the four year plan and ensuring that indicators and outcomes are properly documented and outcomes realised.

Our four strategic priorities are:

1



**Improve
investigative
processes**

2



**Safeguard
and reinforce
independence**

3



**Prepare for and
implement
Statutory Footing**

4



**Develop a learning
environment that puts
evidence to work**



Strategic Priority 1

Improve investigative processes

Investigative processes must be adequate not only for complainants and the families of those who have lost loved ones in custody but also for reporting whether to the Minister, Department or the public. Processes must be robust and include:

- ▶ **Recording mechanisms with clear lines of sight for tracking the journey of an investigation**
- ▶ **Effective monitoring of an investigation's journey, including where there is delay and why**
- ▶ **Efficient work flow for each investigation in terms of the structure of the Office, and**
- ▶ **Easily accessible information regarding any investigation are critical to ensuring best practice**

Improved processes should increase efficiency and give confidence to those who interact with and depend on the Office. Initially this work is focussed on digitalising Office working due to complete in year 1 of the plan alongside preparatory work for a Case Management System with a specification to be completed in year 2 of the plan. In years 3 and 4 these new systems will be improved from learning and embedded into the life of the Office with some additional consideration to any technology to aid efficiency. Staffing & staffing structure is an aspect of this strategic priority to be considered in years 2-4 when a clear view of improved processes has been developed.



Strategic Priority 2

Safeguard and reinforce independence

The independence of the Prisoner Ombudsman's Office is at the heart of the confidence others can place in it. It is our intention to review what we do to ensure that we are not only safeguarding the independence we have but also considering mechanisms for reinforcing that independence.

Critical to this aspect of our work is staff training and communications with our key stakeholders. In year 1 we will begin to roll out a new staff training programme to ensure that all staff participate in professional investigator training which will complete in year 2. In years 3&4 we will ensure refresher trainings are provided as appropriate. In addition to investigator training a programme of training to ensure investigators reflect on their work, attend to their wellbeing and remain conversant with changes to standards and practices within prisons will be put in place throughout the period of the plan.

In year 1, with Statutory Footing in mind, we will develop an integrated set of principles governing investigative practice. These will cover all investigations, add the Principles of Remedy and take account of standards as set out in the Justice Act (NI) 2016. This new set of governing principles will assist in safeguarding independence.



Strategic Priority 3

Prepare for and implement Statutory Footing

Statutory footing has been proposed for the Office since 2015. The Justice Act (NI) 2016 was a first step on the way with regulations for implementation still to be agreed.

In year 1 we will work alongside the Department to set out a programme of work to ensure the Office is Statutory Footing ready. It is hoped this work will then conclude in year 2 of the plan and can be implemented when regulations are in place.



Strategic Priority 4

Develop a learning environment that puts evidence to work

In year 1 of the plan we will initiate a new and more formalised approach to learning where there are specific challenges arising from complaints investigations and in all death in custody investigations. This will include learning circles with partner organisations.

If the Office is to make an impact then it is essential that recommendations are not only made but monitored for implementation. In year 2 of the plan all historical recommendations will be gathered into a single register and information about implementation added to a register of recommendations. A recommendations monitoring process will be agreed.

Alongside this work consideration will be given as to how we can better record information, for example issues raised in complaints, to ensure that we have the kind of evidence to hand that can properly inform where change is required and standards, including human rights standards, improved. This will be a significantly bulky piece of work and is likely to complete in year 3 of the plan for implementation in year 4.