



The
**Prisoner
Ombudsman**
for Northern Ireland

2023-2024 BUSINESS PLAN

Foreword

In April 2023, the Permanent Secretary requested the Prisoner Ombudsman to submit a Recovery Plan by the end of May 2023. I did so, reflecting staff desire to see more resource coming into the Office, including additional resource to address the backlog of investigations. Prior to this request I had already recognised that a different approach was necessary and in February 2023, I suspended the investigation of complaints in date order instead ring fencing investigations to better manage the complaints backlog. I also set out a more proportionate and directed approach to death in custody investigations the purpose of which was to ensure more efficient handling.

This business plan therefore outlines the activities and priorities for the Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland in 2023-24 that are additional to those set out in the Recovery Plan. The targets set out in both plans are challenging given the budget provided for 2023-24. I remain hopeful that steady progress against all targets can be achieved. As with last year, staff numbers remain under complement and resourcing remains stretched.

The plan supports the Prisoner Ombudsman's four year Strategic Plan for 2020-2024 and aims to ensure the delivery of evidence based outcomes from individual investigations and that the needs and concerns of persons in custody are brought to wider attention through these investigations. It also seeks to build on the learning culture now firmly embedded within the office and will provide clearer direction for staff as well as improved relationships with persons in custody and business partners.

We will continue to respond positively to challenges and ensure that an independent quality service is delivered to stakeholders. This is particularly important as confidence in the office will continue to be critical for those in custody and their families.

In closing, I want to take this opportunity to convey my thanks to staff and to commend them not only on the levels of resilience they continue to display but also on the professionalism, flexibility and support they provide despite the ongoing challenges faced.

Dr Lesley Carroll
Prisoner Ombudsman

The Prisoner Ombudsman's Office

The Prisoner Ombudsman investigates:

- a. Complaints submitted by individuals in custody, their visitors and, in certain circumstances, those formerly in custody who have been unable to resolve their concern through the Prison Service Internal Complaints Process (ICP). The Prison Service internal complaints process has two stages. Normally both stages must be completed before a complaint can be brought to the Prisoner Ombudsman however there are certain circumstances where complaints turned down at Stage 1 of the ICP can be considered and accepted.
- b. Deaths in prison custody in Northern Ireland. This also includes the deaths of people formerly in custody normally occurring within 14 days after their release from prison and incidents of serious self-harm. The purpose of the Prisoner Ombudsman's investigation is to find out, as far as possible, what happened and why, establish whether there are any lessons to be learned and make recommendations to the Northern Ireland Prison Service (the Prison Service) and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (the Trust) for improvement, where appropriate. By highlighting learning to the Prison Service, the Trust and others who provide services in prisons, the Ombudsman aims to promote best practice in the care of people in custody.

All investigations should meet the highest standards of independence, impartiality and professionalism.

Corporate Governance

The Prisoner Ombudsman is an 'Independent Statutory Officer Holder' appointed by the Minister for Justice under Section 2(2) of the Prison Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 as amended by Section 2 of the Treatment of Offenders Act (Northern Ireland) 1968. A Framework Document sets out the arrangements for the effective governance, financing and operation of the Prisoner Ombudsman's Office and reporting responsibilities in respect of the Department. Staff working in the Prisoner Ombudsman's Office are currently NICS civil servants and are subject to NICS HR policy and terms and conditions.

Strategic Context

The 2023-24 Business Plan is aligned to the four year Strategic Plan which sets out a commitment to carrying out investigations in a way that improves the lives of those in custody by addressing the mission for the Prisoner Ombudsman's Office: developing a learning environment in which we challenge others and ourselves to achieve improvement. Our mission requires that process and practice are founded in a culture of collaboration, openness and readiness to change. The strategic priorities are designed to enable the change required to modernise the work of the Office and support the commitment to improvement. The Strategic Priorities are:

- ▶ **Improve investigative processes**
- ▶ **Safeguard and reinforce independence**
- ▶ **Prepare for and implement statutory footing**
- ▶ **Develop a learning environment that puts evidence to work.**

This Business Plan sets out a programme of work that will help support the achievement of recovery plan priorities and improve policies, standards and procedure. Focus remains on improving the culture within the office and between the office and our stakeholders and partners. The outcomes will contribute to improvement. The Business Plan is a live document and will be reviewed on a quarterly basis to ensure that work required to achieve key priorities is both named and monitored.

Financial Resources

The table below shows the opening budget allocation for 2023-24 and how the Prisoner Ombudsman's Office plans to allocate the budget, much of which is allocated to salary costs. Any new or refreshed business needs will be appraised via the normal business case process and the funding for same will be from within the existing budget or bid for via the relevant financial exercises. Pressures and/or easements will continue be identified at an early stage and appropriately reported.

PRISONER OMBUDSMAN REVISED BUDGET ALLOCATION FOR 2023/2024	
BUDGET ALLOCATION	£
Resource Pay Costs	772,000
Resource Non Pay Costs	63,000
TOTAL NON RINGFENCED RESOURCE DEL BUDGET	835,000

Staffing Resources

Although good progress has been made to fill vacant posts, overall staffing remains under complement and this continues to adversely affect the delivery of core business. It was not possible to recruit a substantive Director of Operations in 2022-2023 as had been anticipated therefore the temporary promotion arrangement for the Director of Operations post remains in place and will continue to be reviewed periodically pending a substantive appointment. Additionally, the length of time to recruit other replacement staff and the requirement for incoming staff to focus on training in the early days are likely to adversely impact on the office also.

Staff continue to avail of formalised hybrid working arrangements. These will be reviewed periodically to ensure that they remain appropriate for effective service delivery.

A comprehensive review of the adequacy of staff resources and workflow processes has remained outstanding for the last few years with no progress achieved to date. It is likely that this work will once again be deferred possibly until 2024-2025. In preparation for this review, a business case for approval has been included as an action within this business plan.

As previously outlined the purpose of the review will be to ensure that processes are not only efficient but that staff are undertaking grade appropriate work and that the level of staff resources is sufficient to enable business objectives to be achieved. Although the majority of Investigators have now attained a professional qualification in investigative practice, a key aim for this year will be to ensure that all Investigators become fully qualified in investigative practice.

Business Planning for 2023-24

A consultation process on the new Programme for Government Plan (PfG) took place January to March 2021. This Business Plan has been developed using the Outcome Based Accountability methodology in line with the commitment to support the DoJ in delivering the Executive's existing draft PfG and will be reviewed against any developments arising from the consultation process as required. In delivering our business we will work to ensure *"everyone feels safe and that we respect the law and each other"*. Individual Personal Performance Agreements are linked to the achievement of business plan objectives which enables staff to clearly identify how what they do impacts on the achievement of higher level business objectives.

Delivering the Plan

KEY: On target for achievement Behind expected target but likely to be achieved Target unlikely to be achieved

Progress against the 2023-24 Business Plan will be reviewed throughout the year and will be reported to the Department quarterly. Should resources either financial or otherwise be unavailable to achieve the objectives outlined then the office will focus on conducting high quality investigations with more aspirational work deferred until 2024-25.

Programme for Government Outcome 7	Indicator 38	STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1: IMPROVE INVESTIGATIVE PROCESSES	BUSINESS OBJECTIVE: To conduct timely, thorough and proportionate investigations		
Actions	Indicators	Business Lead	Progress	Target	
Provide support for investigators to ensure timely, thorough and proportionate investigations	Investigations carried out within allocated budget			31/03/24	
	Complaints Handbook redrafted and/or desk aids provided based on updated Complaints ToR	SIO		30/06/23	
	DiC ToR updated and issued			30/09/23	
	DiC Processes, targets, Handbook and/or desk aids updated			31/12/23	
	Staff training in new DiC processes and practices arising from updated TOR.	SIO DiC		31/03/24	
	Complete and Publish standalone Standards Document to underpin all investigations	DirOps		31/09/23	
	Regular case conference model developed and applied appropriately			31/12/23	
Investigative processes, practice and targets	Milestone checks carried out for effectiveness and improvement and learning log updated	SIO		31/12/23	
	Report templates completed and case activity log maintained for each investigation	SIO DiC		31/03/24	

Delivering the Plan

Programme for Government Outcome 7	Indicator 38	STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1: IMPROVE INVESTIGATIVE PROCESSES	BUSINESS OBJECTIVE: To conduct timely, thorough and proportionate investigations		
Actions	Indicators	Business Lead	Progress	Target	
	Monthly reporting and response at SMT	SIOs			31/03/24
Improve quality assurance practice for investigations	Case Activity Logs - maintained for individual investigations	SIOs			31/03/24
	Case Activity Logs - quality assurance checks carried out at the right level				31/03/24
Information/education events with people in custody and others to inform about processes	Plan of engagement with partners, key and other stakeholders to increase knowledge of investigative work	SMT			31/03/24
	Plan of learning and improving knowledge through shared events relating to updated ToRs				30/09/23
	Review and improve use of the website for knowledge and information sharing and communicating the work of the Prisoner Ombudsman including complaints and evidence gathered in all investigations				31/03/24
Prison Officer training in addition to recruits	Ombudsman participation in information sessions to new PS recruits	Ombudsman			31/03/24
	Deliver targeted training to other PS staff (good complaints handling and PO complaints processes)				31/03/24

Delivering the Plan

Programme for Government Outcome 7	Indicator 38	STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1: IMPROVE INVESTIGATIVE PROCESSES	BUSINESS OBJECTIVE: To conduct timely, thorough and proportionate investigations		
Actions	Indicators	Business Lead	Progress	Target	
Communications with people in custody including; Feedback; Website - update and use of Twitter Improve reporting on website Advertising, complaints processes	Visible IO presence in prisons	SIO		31/03/24	
	Website overhaul including new information regarding post release investigations	SIO		31/03/24	
	Social media platforms developed with PR/Media service provider (including Twitter)	SMT		31/03/24	
	Quarterly Performance information published on website	Office Manager		31/03/24	
Partner/stakeholder engagements to improve business relationships and increase efficiency	Ombudsman's engagement with partners and key stakeholders	DirOps		31/03/24	
	Review of current promotional material for individuals in custody, e.g. at induction, on landings, at transfer, etc			31/12/23	
Monitoring and improvement	Issues based database developed including categorisation of complaints				30/06/24

Delivering the Plan

Programme for Government Outcome 7	Indicator 38	STRATEGIC PRIORITY 2: SAFEGUARD AND REINFORCE INDEPENDENCE	BUSINESS OBJECTIVE: To Increase confidence in the Prisoner Ombudsman's Office		
Actions	Indicators		Business Lead	Progress	Target
Ensure standards as set out in the Framework Document have been completed	Business Plan published		DirOps		30/06/23
	Annual Report published		DirOps		30/09/23
	Financial probity demonstrated		Office Manager		31/03/24
	Dedicated staff resource trained in Health & Safety		Office Manager		31/12/23
	Internal audit actions completed		DirOps		31/03/24
	Risk register maintained and monitored monthly by SMT		SMT		31/03/24
	Framework Document redrafted into a new Agreement with DOJ		DOJ and DirOps		31/03/24
Prisoner Ombudsman programme of regular engagement	Review for staff involvement, regularity and range of stakeholders engaged with		Ombudsman		31/03/24

Delivering the Plan

Programme for Government Outcome 7	Indicator 38	STRATEGIC PRIORITY 3: PREPARE FOR STATUTORY FOOTING	BUSINESS OBJECTIVE: To achieve a Statutory Footing Workplan		
Actions	Indicators		Business Lead	Progress	Target
Carry out a review of staffing structures and adequacy of staff resources within the office	Within the constraints of the Recovery Planning, obtain Business Case and funding approval to carry out review in early 2024-2025		DirOps		31/03/24
New Case Management Database to support delivery of quality, timely and effective investigations	Workflows and processes identified		SIOs and DirOps		31/12/23
	Business case approval and bid for funds to meet labour costs of engaging IT Assist in the development of a new bespoke case management database				31/12/23
	Work with IT Assist to scope needs and develop new bespoke case management database				31/03/24
Follow up actions required to achieve Statutory Footing	Follow up review on creation of the office of Prison Ombudsman; action plan agreed and implemented		DirOps		31/03/24

Delivering the Plan

Programme for Government Outcome 7	Indicator 38	STRATEGIC PRIORITY 4: DEVELOP A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT THAT PUTS EVIDENCE TO WORK	BUSINESS OBJECTIVE: To deliver a data driven evidence base		
Actions		Indicators	Business Lead	Progress	Target
Review monitoring of recommendations		Proactive review of existing process and proposals for improvement in advance of Researcher developing recommendations Register	Office Manager		31/12/23
Monitor and improve use of learning log		Monthly review of learning log entries at SMT	SMT		31/03/24
		Learning environment that puts evidence to work, promotes adaptability and encourages concerns to be raised	SIOs		31/03/24
Staff training programme (additional to professional investigator training)		Identify training/information sessions required	All staff		31/03/24
		Plan and implement learning opportunities			31/03/24
		Mandatory E-learning completed			31/03/24
		Training recorded in PDPs			30/06/23
Quality Assurance as learning		Consider and present proposals for peer working and review of reports	SIOs		31/03/24

Prisoner Ombudsman Organisation Chart

