



HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland
Improving Policing across Scotland

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PRESS RELEASE

Custody Review calls on Police Scotland to Modernise Fingerprint Taking

Police Scotland has been urged to modernise its fingerprint taking practices after a review found officers at some police stations still take fingerprints using ink and paper.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) and Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) carried out their latest joint review of custody facilities by visiting police stations across the Highlands and Islands.

They found that instead of using modern fingerprint scanning technology, officers based in Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles and Fort William, still take fingerprints using ink and paper.

The inspection report said this 'outdated approach' is not only 'prone to error and gives poor quality impressions' but is 'laborious' and slows down the process of identifying detainees who may be trying to conceal their identity.

HM Assistant Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland, Brian McNulty, said: "Our latest custody inspection saw us visit Police Scotland's Highland and Islands Division – known as N Division.

"We found common themes that have featured as recommendations in our previously published custody inspection reports, but we also found a need for improvement in other areas including the lack of availability of modern fingerprint identification facilities.

“Inverness and Wick centres had access to electronic fingerprinting machines commonly referred to as ‘Live Scan’, which digitally capture detainee finger and hand impressions and enable live time cross referencing with police databases for identification purposes.

“Notably, all the other custody centres we visited in N Division did not have these facilities, instead relying on traditional, and somewhat outdated, ink and paper processes.

“Our report recommends Police Scotland review the risks associated with not having modern fingerprint identification equipment available and address the deficits identified.”

HMICS and HIS inspectors visited police custody centres across N Division in June this year as part of their review to assess the treatment of, and conditions for, any individuals being detained.

Due to N Division’s size and dispersed population, the provision of custody services operates via a bespoke model with a primary custody centre in Inverness. Custody supervisors there provide support and direction via remote video links to 10 ancillary custody centres across the Highlands and Islands, which are staffed by local policing officers.

Inspectors found many of the ancillary centres operated with low officer numbers, with the work in the custody centres often secondary to their core duties – and that when a detainee is held, there is a drive towards just single officer care which the report said came with a potential risk for any officer performing unaccompanied custody duties.

The inspectors noted that on some occasions, detainees would be transferred from rural ancillary centres to the larger police custody centre at Inverness, often very late in the evening. They said while this was done to free up staffing resources at one of the ancillary centres, it could result in long trips for the detainees.

The report also noted that on other occasions, police officers who were off-duty or about to go off-duty were recalled or paid overtime to provide short term custody cover – which had a budgetary impact.

This latest HMICS and HIS joint custody review, like recently published inspection reports, highlighted concerns regarding a lack of consistency in the recording of information on the Police Scotland National Custody System.

Inspectors noted multiple recording gaps regarding observations, meals, handovers, healthcare consultations, care plan rationale, grounds to delay release, and provision of information on legal rights.

They continued to find disparities, in some cases, between the assessments undertaken to determine both the physical and mental vulnerability of a detainee and the corresponding care plans put in place.

They reported a lack of available appropriately sized anti-harm clothing at the custody centres they visited

And they found the CCTV observation facilities in both Lerwick and Stornoway were very poor, consisting of small single screens made worse when multiple images were required to be viewed.

The report also highlighted the need for increased management oversight of any children being held in police custody.

Mr McNulty said: “We have raised concerns in previous reports regarding a lack of management oversight of children detained in police custody and have found further instances during this inspection.

“Our review of custody records found examples of children held overnight in police cells at Inverness custody centre having been arrested for what inspectors considered to be relatively minor offences that took place in a residential childcare setting – only to be returned to the same setting the following morning.

“While the provision of suitable alternative accommodation remains a challenge for childcare agencies across the country, we do not consider police cells to be an appropriate interim option, especially for such long periods.

“We have previously raised a recommendation in respect of this matter but would like to see additional attention given to making the changes to culture and practice needed to address this issue.”

The inspection report made four recommendations for improvement to Police Scotland and 36 were directed towards the four health boards (NHS Highland, NHS Western Isles, NHS Shetland and NHS Orkney) which provide healthcare services in the custody centres across the area.

The recommendations ranged from ensuring that custody staff involved in the checking of controlled drugs have appropriate training, seeking improved communication between healthcare and custody staff, ensuring that sharps bins are correctly labelled and managed, and that all PPE is stored appropriately to reduce the risk of contamination.

Ends

Notes

Places of detention, including police custody centres within the UK, are monitored as part of the human rights treaty: ‘Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT)’.

OPCAT requires that all places of detention are visited regularly by a National Preventive Mechanism (NPM), an independent body or group of bodies which monitor detainee treatment and conditions. HMICS is one of several bodies making up the NPM in the UK.

This report relates to the inspection of the main custody centres servicing the regions covered by Police Scotland’s Highland and Islands Division, referred to as N Division. The division covers the local authority areas of Highland, Na h-Eileanan an Iar (formerly Western Isles), Shetland and Orkney.

The aim of the inspection was to assess the treatment of, and conditions for, individuals detained at the custody centres. The inspection report provides an analysis of the quality of custody centre operations as well as the provision of healthcare services in the custody centres and consequently makes recommendations for both Police Scotland and the health boards within NHS Highland, NHS Western Isles, NHS Shetland and NHS Orkney respectively.

Inspectors reviewed the Police Scotland National Custody System (NCS) and examined a representative sample of detainees processed at the custody centres between October 2024 and March 2025 inclusive.

They assessed the physical environment, including the quality of cells, and observed key processes and procedures relevant to police custody operations. They also spoke with people detained at the custody centres and interviewed custody staff and healthcare professionals during their visit.

Ends notes

NOTES TO EDITORS

The 'HMICS Custody Inspection Report – Highland and Islands' will be available to download at the [HMICS website](#) from 00.01hrs, 26th November 2025.

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