



HM INSPECTORATE OF CONSTABULARY IN SCOTLAND

Strategic review of policing violence in Scotland – terms of reference

September 2026

Improving Policing Across Scotland



HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) is established under the [Police and Fire Reform \(Scotland\) Act 2012](#) and has wide ranging powers to look into the 'state, effectiveness and efficiency' of both the Police Service of Scotland (Police Scotland) and the Scottish Police Authority (SPA).

We have a statutory duty to ensure that the Chief Constable and the SPA meet their obligations in terms of best value and continuous improvement. If necessary, we can be directed by Scottish Ministers to look into anything relating to the SPA or Police Scotland as they consider appropriate. We also have an established role in providing professional advice and guidance on policing in Scotland.

- Our powers allow us to do anything we consider necessary or expedient for the purposes of, or in connection with, the carrying out of our functions
- The SPA and the Chief Constable must provide us with such assistance and co-operation as we may require to enable us to carry out our functions
- When we publish a report, the SPA and the Chief Constable must also consider what we have found and take such measures, if any, as they think fit
- Where our report identifies that the SPA or Police Scotland is not efficient or effective (or best value not secured), or will, unless remedial measures are taken, cease to be efficient or effective, Scottish Ministers may direct the SPA to take such measures as may be required. The SPA must comply with any direction given
- Where we make recommendations, we will follow them up and report publicly on progress
- We will identify good practice that can be applied across Scotland
- We work with other inspectorates and agencies across the public sector and co-ordinate our activities to reduce the burden of inspection and avoid unnecessary duplication
- We aim to add value and strengthen public confidence in Scottish policing and will do this through independent scrutiny and objective, evidence-led reporting about what we find.



Our approach is to support Police Scotland and the SPA to deliver services that are high quality, continually improving, effective and responsive to local needs.¹

This strategic review will be undertaken by HMICS under section 74(2)(a) of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 and will be laid before the Scottish Parliament under section 79(3) of the Act.

¹ HMICS, [Corporate plan 2025-28](#), 12 March 2025.



Our strategic review

Introduction

1. HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) has committed to an inspection of policing violence in Scotland, as part of its [Scrutiny Plan for 2025 – 2028](#). This commitment followed a wide-ranging consultation undertaken by HMICS in 2024 to inform future scrutiny.
2. Violence affects all sections of society and has long been an operational priority for Police Scotland. The current evidence shows a complex and changing picture of violence in Scotland. Whilst overall levels of violence remain below historical peaks, trends vary, and there have been recorded increases in several areas in recent years^{2,3}, generating significant public and political concern.
3. The scrutiny plan states that we will consider how effectively policing in Scotland addresses violence and violent crime, including violence against women and girls (VAWG). It commits to looking at how well preventative approaches are embedded and coordinated, including the public health approach to reducing violence.
4. We will do this through conducting a strategic review of policing violence in Scotland in the first instance. HMICS strategic reviews provide assurance, identify issues and make recommendations for improvement. If significant issues are identified in the course of this strategic review, we may subsequently undertake more directed scrutiny such as through thematic inspection(s) of one or more areas of violence.

Aim

5. The overall aim of this strategic review will be to assess the state, efficiency and effectiveness of policing violence in Scotland, with an emphasis on work to reduce and prevent violence, including the public health approach.

² Police Scotland, [Policing Performance Committee](#), 17 March 2026.

³ Scottish Government, [Recorded Crime in Scotland 2025-26](#), 2026.



Background

6. Violence is a broad and complex concept and topic, lacking a standard definition. Both Police Scotland and the Scottish Government (SG) describe it as a cross cutting issue that can take many forms, with Police Scotland stating that it can ‘have a profound and lasting effect on individuals, families and communities’.⁴ The definition of violence given by the [Scottish Violence Reduction Unit](#) (SVRU) also outlines its complexity, referring to the World Health Organisation’s typology of violence in categorising it as self-directed, interpersonal or collective, whilst stating that many forms are interrelated and cannot be treated in isolation.
7. Other forms of violence are being increasingly explored in critical criminology literature, such as structural or indirect violence, whereby physical, psychological and socio-economic harms that are connected to social and political institutions, systems and structures are identified. Whilst these wider perspectives are gaining visibility in the Scottish policy landscape, the more conventional and legal definition of violence as ‘intentional, physical, interpersonal and discrete incidents of harm’⁵ is still dominant.
8. The [Scottish Crime Recording Standard \(2026\)](#) includes violent crimes within two groups, Group 1 – Non-sexual crimes of violence, and Group 2 – Sexual Crimes. Within each of the categories are detailed a large number of specific crimes, although not all would necessarily be viewed as *physically* violent crimes. This illustrates the complexity of the topic, and current debates around definitions of violence.
9. Violent offences are often divided into broad categories such as violence against women and girls (VAWG); violence affecting young people; assaults on workers including emergency workers and those within care, education, transport and retail settings; violence linked to serious and organised crime; violence linked to extremism and terrorism; and violence linked to community tensions. Such categorisation can mean that the complex and varied factors that influence patterns of violence in Scotland can sometimes be obscured.

⁴ Scottish Police Authority, [Deep Dive Analysis of Violence - Agenda item 3.3](#), 18 September 2026.

⁵ Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, [Taking Stock of Violence in Scotland](#), August 2019.



10. What is not always evident in reported figures of violent crime is the issue of repeat perpetration or victimisation. This is the experience of being the perpetrator or victim of the same type of offence more than once. For example, the [Scottish Government Recorded Crime in Scotland \(2025 - 2026\)](#) does not show the extent of demand driven by repeat victims, repeat offenders or repeat locations. This was raised as an issue by the [Chief Constable in her 2024 - 2025 assessment of policing performance](#).
11. The role of Police Scotland in addressing violence is set out in the [Police and Fire Reform \(Scotland\) Act 2012](#). Whilst policing has a clear requirement to enforce the law in relation to violent crimes, the Act also details the police role in preventing and reducing violence. It states that its purpose is to 'improve the safety and wellbeing of people, places and communities in Scotland', and that it should do so in collaboration with others where appropriate, engaging with local communities and promoting measures to 'prevent crime, harm and disorder'. This commitment was reiterated by the Chief Constable in her recent [report](#) to the SPA Board meeting in July 2026.
12. The partnership approach within Police Scotland to addressing violence has a long history. In 2002, the World Health Organisation published its [World report on violence and health](#), and subsequently set up its Violence Prevention Alliance. In 2005, responding to an epidemic of violent crime, Scotland led the way by opening the first violence reduction unit in the UK (the SVRU). The SVRU became the first police member of the WHO Violence Prevention Alliance, adopting its core principles, particularly its public health approach, in its efforts to reduce violence.
13. A public health approach to violence reduction means recognition of its wide-ranging causes, seeing it as a health epidemic, rather than focusing on the individual.⁶ This is the national Scottish approach, as seen in the Scottish Government [Violence Prevention Framework for Scotland \(2023\)](#). Police Scotland is a key partner in this whole-system approach. The current Scottish Government programme cycle concluded in March 2026, with future arrangements yet to be fully articulated.

⁶ Fraser A & Irwin-Rogers K. (2021), [A public health approach to violence reduction](#). Dartington: Research in Practice.



14. Police Scotland is currently developing their organisational Violence Prevention Strategy, with publication planned to follow that of the Scottish Government Framework. HMICS understand that Police Scotland's strategy will be structured around four core pillars – Pursue, Prevent, Protect and Prepare, consistent with established policing models, and aims to be complemented by a strong focus on performance and outcomes. This aligns with their [2030 vision](#) of safer communities, less crime, supported victims and a thriving workforce.
15. There are different Police Scotland business areas and operations involved in policing violence, which are aligned to various strategies and policies. These include but are not limited to the Specialist Crime Division departments of Major Crime, Public Protection, Local Crime, Organised Crime and Counter Terrorism and Intelligence Support, Digital Forensics, Cybercrime, Policing Together and Safer Communities, Operation Stardrop,⁷ and the VAWG portfolio, as well as frontline uniform and detective resources in local policing divisions.

⁷ Scottish Police Authority, [Violence Affecting Children & Young People - Agenda item 3.4](#), 16 September 2025.



Terms of Reference

Scope of the strategic review

16. The policing of violence involves response and enforcement, and prevention and intervention. Whilst these activities are interlinked, the intention of this strategic review is to focus primarily on the prevention and intervention space, including the work of the SVRU, but where relevant, consider how Police Scotland's enforcement activity supports its wider approach to reducing and preventing violence.
17. As public bodies, including Police Scotland, move towards a more public health focused approach to the prevention of violence, as aligned with national [Scottish Government framework](#), the review will examine the extent to which Police Scotland is setting out a clear strategic direction to achieving an effective balance between a public health approach and the enforcement action that is taken to address violence.
18. The review will also assess the extent to which the national strategic framework for violence prevention provides a clear articulation of policing's role within the wider public health approach, and whether Police Scotland has a clear understanding of its own role, responsibilities, and contribution within that framework. It will explore how this understanding is reflected in Police Scotland's strategic direction, governance arrangements and partnership working, and whether there is a shared vision of policing's contribution to violence prevention and reduction.



Exclusions from scope

19. The following will not be considered within the scope of this strategic review:

- Any in-depth focus on any one area of violence
- The detail of the delivery of frontline operational work.
- The detail and operation of local partnerships and initiatives to address violence.
- The delivery of national projects (e.g. National Mentors in Violence Prevention) at the local level.
- The effectiveness or detail of investigations into crimes of violence, nor any detailed case file analysis.

These areas may be included in any subsequent thematic review of a specific area of violence, or in subsequent related inspections.

Objectives

20. The HMICS objectives for this strategic review are to:

- Assess the strategic direction, governance and oversight of the policing of violence in Scotland.
- Assess the effectiveness and coherence of Police Scotland's national strategic approach to policing violence.
- Assess whether effective prevention, early intervention and partnership approaches are in place to reduce violence.
- Assess the extent to which Police Scotland's work in relation to violence addresses the issues of repeat perpetrators and repeat victims.
- Assess the alignment of Police Scotland's violence strategies to national Scottish Government frameworks and strategies.



Output and outcomes

21. The key output from the review will be the final report. It will make recommendations for improvement where appropriate, which will subsequently be monitored by HMICS with progress updates available on the [HMICS website](#).
22. The review will also establish a clear evidence base with regards to the current strategic landscape for policing violence in Scotland, identify strengths and gaps, and thus suggest where further inspection activity can add the greatest value.
23. The intended outcomes from this review are to provide an assessment of how efficiently and effectively Police Scotland is policing violence. This will be to:
 - Provide assurance on whether Police Scotland has the right overarching framework, strategies and policies in place to respond effectively to violence.
 - Provide an assessment of whether Police Scotland's role in violence prevention, alongside partners, is clear and understood at both national and local level.
 - Provide an assessment of whether appropriate measures are in place to monitor progress of strategic aims.

User Perspective

24. As set out in the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010, HMICS has a duty to demonstrate continuous improvement in user focus, i.e. involving users in the scrutiny process. HMICS will engage directly with key stakeholders and governance groups including the SPA, Police Scotland, Scottish Government, other public sector bodies as appropriate, third sector organisations and academics.



Methodology

25. We will use the HMICS Inspection Framework which is based on the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model and Best Value Characteristics.
26. The Inspection Framework will provide a structure to our inspection which will be risk based, proportionate and focused on improving the delivery of policing in Scotland. We will structure our strategic review around our objectives and the key themes of:
 - Leadership, governance and direction
 - Delivery and coordination
 - Understanding and impact
27. Between August 2026 and March 2027, we will:
 - Liaise regularly with Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority through the identified single points of contact (SPOC) in each organisation, who will support the review and facilitate appropriate access to people and information.
 - Undertake a review of key documents as relevant to the policing of violence in Scotland, including Police Scotland documents, academic research, and other organisational reports.
 - Review available data and information to understand how violence is assessed, prioritized and resourced, and to understand how progress to meet strategic aims is measured.
 - Observe relevant meetings and boards of Police Scotland and partners.
 - Undertake targeted engagement with selected local policing divisions and partners to understand how national approaches are communicated to divisions and understood, and how challenges, measures of progress, learning and good practice are fed back to the national level.
 - Engage with relevant police officers and staff using interviews where appropriate.
 - Engage with selected individuals and organisations outside of Police Scotland as deemed appropriate to meet the objectives of the review.
 - Benchmark with other appropriate police (or other) organisations as relevant to consider and share any opportunities for learning.



Publication and reporting timescales

28. We anticipate publishing a report of our findings in Spring 2027. Our report will be published in terms of Section 79 of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012. A copy of the report will also be provided to the Chief Constable, the Scottish Police Authority and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and laid before the Scottish Parliament. A copy will also be made publicly available on the HMICS website.
29. For further information about the strategic review of policing violence in Scotland, please contact HMIC@hmic.gov.scot.

Craig Naylor

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September 2026