



HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland
Improving Policing across Scotland

Wednesday, 26th August 2026

PRESS RELEASE

Call for police custody services to be improved at pace

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland have urged Police Scotland to act 'at pace' to improve police custody services across the country.

Over the past three years His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) and Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) have published 10 custody inspection reports, after visiting police custody centres in areas ranging from Orkney and Shetland, to Glasgow and Edinburgh.

As part of each inspection, recommendations were made aimed at improving detainee safety and care.

Now HMICS and HIS have carried out a review of those recommendations to assess what progress has been made.

While the review found a number of improvements since the programme of joint custody inspections began, it said many issues raised in previous reports were still of concern.

Assistant Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland, Brian McNulty, said: "Our custody inspection review outlines that progress has been made against several recommendations - however, a number of thematic issues have persisted.

"These ongoing challenges relate to the custody operating model, the ageing custody estate, staffing and workforce planning, and operational practices associated with the supervision of vulnerable detainees, including children and those assessed as high risk.

“While we recognise that many of these pressures are exacerbated by financial constraints and the increasing vulnerability of the custody population, we consider that further action is required at pace to progress outstanding recommendations and secure sustained improvement.”

The management of detainee risk was one area where the new inspection review said inspectors had continued to find ‘ongoing inconsistencies’.

It said there was a ‘stubborn disconnect’ between detainees being assessed as ‘high risk’ but managed at a lower level, with gaps found in the recording of vulnerability information, cell visits and observation checks carried out.

Inspectors reported some improvement regarding the oversight of children in police custody, and noted a reduction in the number of children held in custody.

However, they also found fresh cases where children were held in custody for an extended period without a clear rationale being recorded on the system. Inspectors were informed that in some cases this was exacerbated by delays in children being picked up by their care providers.

The review report also noted instances of adults being detained in custody long after a decision had been made to release them – including one case where a detainee was held for a further 25 hours, and two cases where detainees were held for an extra 10 hours, which remains a cause for concern.

The report states: “We have been clear in our previous custody inspection reports that there may, at times, be legitimate reasons for extending an individual’s detention, however, it is essential that a clear rationale is recorded to explain and justify the extension.”

The report highlights that gaps remain, in some locations, in the regular and consistent presence of managers within custody centres. This can lead to variable staff experiences and inconsistent leadership and oversight. Where gaps exist, this can impact on the quality of communication with staff and on the delivery of services as new or less experienced staff are more reliant on leadership direction.

The inspection review outlined ongoing issues across several areas including the rationale for strip searches not always being recorded, and handovers between supervisors about detainees being too generic.

It also detailed limitations with the existing custody ICT systems which were described as 'inefficient and outdated'. The review report said while senior officers recognised these limitations, progress towards improved digital solutions remained at an early stage.

As part of the joint inspection review, HMICS and HIS have made three new recommendations, including that Police Scotland revise its 'custody operating model' as a matter of priority.

The current model - which sets a minimum staffing ratio of one member of staff to 10 custody cells - was based on the custody estate and staffing levels that were in operation before the inception of Police Scotland in 2013.

The inspection review says the staffing ratio is now widely viewed by staff as both 'unsafe and unsustainable'.

Inspectors found that while there may be a sufficient number of police custody cells nationally, in the more populated parts of the country weekend cell capacity was widely described as 'critical', with some detainees having to be transferred long distances between centres.

The report states: "Our review, and previous custody inspections, have highlighted that the operating model is not suitable for the existing estate, the current level of demand and available staff resource.

"Workforce pressures remain a significant concern.

"Inspectors found evidence of high reliance on staff movement, limited breaks, and reduced morale.

"Police Scotland's senior leadership team for custody have identified the development of a new operating model as a top priority, noting that the current model is not fit for purpose."

In respect of healthcare provision, inspectors said they had identified 'meaningful, though variable, progress across police custody centres.

They said improvements had been found in areas including equipment and medicines management, infection prevention and control, and clinical governance.

They found a number of NHS boards and Health and Social Care Partnerships had demonstrated effective implementation of national recommendations.

However, they said recurring issues included persistent delays in access to mental health services, limitations in digital systems, weaknesses in incident reporting, adverse event review, staffing resilience and inconsistencies in staff training and supervision.

The report said: "Until access to specialist mental health assessment is more timely, equitable and consistently embedded across Scotland, mental health will remain one of the highest-risk areas for healthcare in police custody."

HMICS and HIS will continue with its intelligence-led programme of joint custody inspections and continue to monitor progress.

To date, the organisations have made 45 recommendations and given 30 areas of improvement to Police Scotland in relation to its custody centres, and 104 recommendations to NHS boards.

In addition, HIS has made 11 areas for improvement for NHS boards and outlined 32 examples of good practice where these have been identified during inspections.

Mr McNulty said: "Overall, the joint inspection programme has contributed to measurable improvement, strengthened assurance, and enhanced national understanding of risks, good practice, and areas requiring further development across police custody.

“Notwithstanding this progress, the pace of change in some key areas remains limited.

“It is essential that Police Scotland’s custody division and NHS boards maintain momentum and deliver the sustained improvement necessary to achieve consistent, safe and rights-based custody services and healthcare provision.”

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 review was a targeted assessment of progress against recommendations arising from previous joint custody inspection reports, rather than a full inspection of individual custody centres.

The inspection team reviewed all recommendations from previously published joint custody inspection reports to assess the extent to which these had been progressed and embedded across police custody services.

HMICS inspectors examined custody records on the National Custody System (NCS) to assess operational practice, including compliance with risk assessment, care planning and recording requirements.

Onsite visits were carried out at custody centres in Dunfermline, Motherwell and Greenock to observe custody operations and assess implementation of inspection recommendations in practice.

Interviews were also conducted with custody staff, supervisors and senior officers to assess awareness of key challenges and the extent to which recommendations were being progressed.

Ends notes

NOTES TO EDITORS

The 'HMICS Joint review of police custody recommendations' will be available to download at the [HMICS website](#) from 00.01hrs, 26th August 2026.

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