



HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland
Improving Policing across Scotland

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PRESS RELEASE

Highland and Islands police division response to missing persons praised

A review of Police Scotland's response when someone is reported missing has highlighted the 'impressive' work of officers in the Highlands and Islands.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) paid visits to three divisions within Police Scotland – including the Highland and Islands division – as part of an in-depth review into how Scotland's national police force deals with missing person investigations.

It found a number of approaches adopted by officers in Scotland's most northerly division deserved to be shared across Police Scotland as areas of good practice.

HM Assistant Inspector of Constabulary, Mr Mark Hargreaves, said: "We visited Highland and Islands, Lanarkshire and Edinburgh City divisions during our inspection and the collaborative approach and practical arrangements put in place by police and partners in those areas was impressive.

"There was a clear focus on working together to achieve the best possible outcomes for missing people, to reduce repeat incidents, and to provide support to missing people once returned."

The HMICS review praised the way police officers working across the Highland and Islands division used 'harbouring notices' to respond to adults found in the company of children and young people who had been reported missing.

The notices are served on anyone suspected of either knowingly concealing a child who has gone missing, or who has encouraged them to abscond.

They effectively serve as a warning to the adult that criminal charges may follow if they are found in the company of the child again in similar circumstances.

They are seen by the division and relevant partners as a useful tool and safeguarding measure, particularly in cases involving youngsters who regularly go missing and who are deemed to be at risk of harm.

The report also commended the Highland and Islands division for ensuring its designated Missing Person Coordinator is a protected role, and for setting up quarterly missing person tactical/strategic meetings chaired by superintendents, to provide scrutiny of its approach to missing persons and highlight any areas for improvement.

Mr Hargreaves said: "Additionally, the Highland and Islands command team regularly warns officers against complacency, clearly stating that all missing person incidents should be considered individually – regardless of how often a person may have gone missing.

"This serves to promote a positive culture among officers required to respond to a significant number of missing incidents."

Other areas in which the Highland and Islands division was praised in the HMICS report included the way it ensures all adults from mental health hospitals receive a 'return discussion' after being found following a missing incident.

The report noted the division's adoption of the early intervention and prevention Herbert Protocol, which assists in missing people investigations for those living with Alzheimers and dementia.

It also noted that the division, in partnership with social work services, had embedded the equivalent protocol for youngsters, the Philomena Protocol, into its procedures relating to the placement of asylum-seeking children and young people placed within their area.

HMICS published its full 'Thematic inspection of police response to missing persons in Scotland' report last week.

The review stated more than 16,000 missing person investigations were carried out by Police Scotland last year.

Data for the last four years showed that of those who went missing – of which more than half were aged under 18 – over 99 per cent were traced alive.

But the inspection found while overall the policing response was 'very good', there were areas where improvements could be made.

It said missing person investigations placed a significant demand on policing in Scotland, with the equivalent of 900 full-time officers dedicated to such inquiries each year.

And HM Assistant Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland, Mark Hargreaves, said despite the vast majority of missing people being traced, the heartbreak experienced by those whose loved ones were not found safe and well must never be forgotten.

Mr Hargreaves said: "Police Scotland has demonstrated consistent success in resolving missing person incidents and locating people as swiftly as possible.

"However, the impact on families in the relatively small number of situations where a person is not found, or tragically is found dead, can be devastating.

"We have highlighted where improvements can be made in the operational response when someone is reported missing.

"More too needs to be done to ensure that clear leadership and strategic direction is in place."

As well as praising the work of police officers in the Highlands and Islands, the HMICS report also praised the role of youth street workers in the area who assisted the police by carrying out 'return discussions' with many of the young people who went missing, then had been found or returned home themselves.

The report stated: "In Highland and Islands division, youth street workers are trained to carry out return discussions, with a particular focus on child sexual and criminal exploitation.

"Positive relationships have been developed between the street workers and vulnerable children and young people, which has shown a reduction in repeat missing incidents."

Ends

Notes

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) was 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).

HMICS has a statutory duty to inquire into the arrangements made by the Chief Constable and the SPA to meet their obligations in terms of best value and continuous improvement.

Ends notes

NOTES TO EDITORS

The 'HMICS Thematic Inspection of police response to missing persons in Scotland' is available to download at the [HMICS website](#).

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