



HM INSPECTORATE OF CONSTABULARY IN SCOTLAND

Thematic inspection of police response to drug harm reduction

– terms of reference

March 2025



HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) is established under the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012¹ 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.

¹ [Chapter 11, Police and Fire Reform \(Scotland\) Act 2012.](#)



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.²

This inspection 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.

² HMICS, [Corporate Plan 2025-28](#), 12 March 2025.



Our inspection

Introduction

1. HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) has committed to a statutory inspection of the police response to drug harm reduction as part of its scrutiny plan for 2022-25.
2. Scotland has one of the highest drug death rates in the developed world. In 2020, 1,339 people died from drug-related causes; the highest on record in Scotland and the highest rate in Europe at that time. The rate has increased substantially over the last 20 years with 4.6 times as many deaths in 2020 when compared with the year 2000.
3. In 2023, a total of 1,172 people died from drug related causes in Scotland, an increase of 121 from 2022. However, this figure also represents the second lowest number of drug deaths since 2017. Drug deaths are widely recognised as a critical public health issue and one of the biggest contributors to Scotland's falling life expectancy.
4. In January 2021, the Scottish Government announced a new 'national mission to reduce drug related deaths and harms'. This was followed by the introduction of the [National Mission on Drug Deaths: Plan 2022-2026](#), which sets out in detail how Scottish Government plan to deliver the national mission over the duration of this parliament. The national mission complements and builds upon the drug and alcohol strategy for Scotland; [Rights, Respect and Recovery](#), published in November 2018.
5. While many of the strategies and approaches outlined in the national mission to alter Scotland's problem with drugs require the intervention of Scottish Government as well as the NHS, local government, and third sector organisations and services, there are important aspects relevant to policing.
6. These include the role of Police Scotland in the strategic planning for drug harm reduction at a national level (through participation in national groups and forums); the provision of effective leadership and direction to police officers and staff; partnership working at national and divisional levels on preventative approaches; the role of local policing in reducing drug harms; and the roll-out of naloxone across frontline police services. All of which will be examined through our inspection activities.



Aim

7. The aim of this inspection will be to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of Police Scotland's strategic and operational approach to the reduction of drug related harms in Scotland, and the outcomes achieved.
8. As noted, we recognise that while Police Scotland is a key partner in contributing to drug harm reduction, it does not have lead responsibility for national strategy, funding and resources, nor the wide range of intervention and support services delivered by health, social work and third sector organisations to address this issue.

Background

9. There has been considerable academic research on the subject of reducing drug related harms. In addition, the Scottish Government has established a range of national groups and taskforces over recent years with the aim of informing policy and strategy, and reporting on areas for improvement. We will refer to the product of these in order to inform the background and context of our inspection.



Terms of Reference

Scope, objectives and outcomes

10. During interviews and discussions with police and key stakeholders as part of the scoping phase of this inspection, it was highlighted that drug harm reduction is often seen as ‘two sides of the same coin’ within policing – with disruption and enforcement on one side and prevention and intervention on the other.
11. While these important aspects of the policing approach cannot be separated from each other, our intention is to focus primarily on the prevention and intervention space and, where relevant, refer to the impact of disruption and enforcement activity on reducing crime and the supply of illegal drugs.
12. In addition, as public bodies including Police Scotland are adopting a more public health focused approach to reducing drug harms – aligned with national policy – we will examine the extent to which Police Scotland is achieving an effective balance between a public health approach and the enforcement action that is taken to reduce drug harms.

Exclusions from scope

13. The following will not be included within the scope of this inspection:
 - We do not intend to examine the operational performance of local policing and specialist police teams involved in the disruption of supply and enforcement action regarding illegal drugs.
 - While police work closely with partner organisations and agencies at various levels, and in partnerships across the country, we do not intend to examine the performance of agencies out with policing.

Objectives and outcomes

14. The key objective of the inspection is to provide an assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of Police Scotland’s response to drug harm reduction, and to make recommendations for improvement where required.



User Perspective

15. 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 service users in the scrutiny process. We will endeavour to obtain the views and perspectives of people with lived and living experience through engagement with key support services and agencies. Where possible, we will also consider the views of families on their experiences.

Methodology

16. We will use the HMICS Inspection Framework which is based on the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model and best value characteristics. The Inspection Framework will provide a structure for our inspection which will be risk based, proportionate and focused on improving the delivery of policing in Scotland. We will structure our inspection around our objectives and three overarching themes:

- Leadership and vision
- Delivery
- Outcomes

17. During the course of this inspection we will:

- Liaise regularly with Police Scotland through the identified single point of contact for HMICS, who will support the inspection process and facilitate appropriate access to people and information, and maintain ongoing engagement with other key stakeholders.
- Conduct a review of relevant police strategy, policy, and procedural guidance documents.
- Examine open-source documents and key findings from academic research.
- Issue a self-evaluation to Police Scotland and review its response.
- Consider the effectiveness of Police Scotland's strategy for drug harm reduction, including the quality of leadership, guidance and direction provided to officers and staff to fulfil their role.



- Review the effectiveness of strategic oversight at a national level, to consider how well the multiple activities and efforts of key organisations involved in drug harm reduction are coordinated, monitored and measured.
- Examine the contribution of policing to prevention and intervention approaches to drug harm reduction.
- Consider the effectiveness of information sharing arrangements between agencies and organisations.
- Undertake interviews with key personnel from Police Scotland and relevant partners.
- Undertake onsite visits to selected local police divisions to assess the operational response, and to evaluate partnership working and progress against national and local initiatives.
- Conduct benchmarking activities with other police services to identify good practice and consider where learning could be shared and implemented within policing in Scotland.

Publication and reporting timescales

18. We anticipate publishing a report of our findings in October 2025. 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.
19. For further information about this inspection, please contact Ray Jones, Lead Inspector (ray.jones@hmic.gov.scot).

Craig Naylor

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March 2025

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