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Scotland



HM Inspectorate  
of Prosecution in Scotland

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## PRESS RELEASE

# Joint review calls for modernisation of the citation process

A new report has called on the Scottish justice system to modernise the ‘antiquated’ way it cites witnesses to attend court.

Inspectors from HM Inspectorate of Prosecution in Scotland (IPS) and HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) carried out a joint review into how effectively and efficiently prosecution witnesses are cited to give evidence in the sheriff court.

They found while witnesses in other parts of the UK are commonly notified of trial dates by email, in Scotland most civilian witnesses still receive citations by second class post.

The report calls for better use of digital technology across the ‘inefficient and largely outdated’ citation process and recommends the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) should use email or another electronic method as the principal means of citing all witnesses.

HM Chief Inspector of Prosecution in Scotland, Deborah O’Brien Demick, said: “The fact that in 2026 the citation system for witnesses requires paper and postage is antiquated and not environmentally sustainable.

“Many organisations in Scotland – from the NHS to hairdressers – now communicate with their customers digitally and indeed electronic communication is used routinely by most people in their daily lives.

“For witnesses to receive citations by post is not in keeping with an effective, modern criminal justice system with service delivery and customer care in mind.”

Currently officers from Police Scotland are the only witnesses COPFS cite by email.

A large number of citations are also hand delivered to prosecution witnesses by police officers.

Police Scotland estimate that in the 12-month period from October 2023 to October 2024, it had approximately 154,000 witness citations to serve.

HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland, Craig Naylor, said: “Demand on Police Scotland because of the need to serve personal citations is high and is challenging due to the significant competing priorities that officers face.

“Police Scotland aren’t able to provide exact figures on how much officers’ time is taken up delivering citations, but they told us it equates to the full-time workload of a high number of officers.

“Digitalisation of the citations process – expanding the number of citations sent by email – would have an added benefit of increasing the amount of time police officers can spend carrying out other duties, including patrolling local communities across Scotland.”

Inspectors from IPS and HMICS looked at the end-to-end citation process from both a prosecution and policing perspective.

During 2024/25, 48,360 summary and 5,919 solemn cases called for trial in sheriff courts across Scotland, with 398,714 witness citations issued.

However, evidence was led in only 13% of summary and 21% of solemn cases, meaning many witnesses will have been cited to give evidence and attend the sheriff court for trials that ultimately did not proceed.

The joint inspection found a 'lack of oversight, leadership, governance, strategy and monitoring' of the citation process across both Police Scotland and the Crown Office Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS).

It said systemic failings included Police Scotland rarely obtaining witness availability when taking witness statements, which led to unsuitable court dates being set.

When witnesses did provide availability, this was rarely considered when trial dates were being decided.

There was also a failure by COPFS to deal with witness excusal requests effectively which the report said was 'extremely impactful on all witnesses' including police officers who may be cited to give evidence in court when on rest days, nightshift or annual leave.

Inspectors were told of cases where citations were sent to witnesses who had died – despite COPFS having previously been informed of the deaths.

They also found evidence of witnesses receiving as many as six citations to appear at court on different dates to do with the same case.

Mrs Demick said: "The inefficient citation process is leading to trials being adjourned and contributing to the churn of cases in the justice system.

"It is also having a substantial impact on the lives of witnesses."

The report said COPFS could not give a figure for the staffing, postal or other costs it spent as part of the citation process.

Similarly, Police Scotland could not give an accurate figure for the cost of its citation related duties including attending court and any backfill that may be needed as a result of them being absent from their normal duties.

Inspectors found the only identifiable cost Police Scotland could give regarding the citation process was the overtime cost to the organisation such as when officers attended court during their annual leave or rest days.

During the 2024-25 financial year, the national force spent £2,663,643 on police overtime for officers attending the sheriff court.

The IPS and HMICS joint report made 50 recommendations for improvement including that the Scottish Government, COPFS, Police Scotland and Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (SCTS) develop an integrated, digital trial scheduling solution that takes account of all witness availability.

It said until such a digital solution is in operation COPFS and Police Scotland should ensure that information is continuously gathered on all witness availability and provided to SCTS in a manner that allows effective trial scheduling.

The report recommended mandatory training for both police officers and COPFS staff that gives a comprehensive understanding of the citation process and impact of unsuccessful citation on the criminal justice system.

It also recommended COPFS and Police Scotland provide more detailed information on the citation process on their websites, and that COPFS should consider initially issuing a trauma-informed 'notice of trial date' letter to witnesses - rather than a formal citation which is written in legal language and contains a threat of arrest.

The report acknowledged that the rollout of the new summary case management system to courts across Scotland was helping reduce the number of trials being set that didn't go ahead – with the knock-on effect of reducing the number of witness citations being issued.

An evaluation found that during a 19-month pilot period of summary case management across five court areas, an estimated 18,000 witnesses were not cited or recited due to summary case management, of which 11,000 were police witnesses.

The evaluation further estimated that had summary case management been in place nationally for the same period, 89,000 witnesses would not have been cited or recited, of which 50,000 would have been police witnesses.

Mrs Demick said: “Summary case management may have had success in reducing the number of citations being generated but it does not address the issues in the citation process nor the lack of modernisation and digitalisation.”

Mr Naylor said: “In addition to summary case management, the rollout of body worn video to police officers across Scotland has also reduced the citation of witnesses and improved the quality of citation decisions, but it has placed additional pressures on operational staff in COPFS and Police Scotland who are involved in the reporting and marking of cases.”

Mrs Demick added: “During our joint inspection we drew learning from how witnesses are cited in other jurisdictions where digital citation methods work effectively, and make recommendations for a more efficient, witness centred approach to citation.”

## **Ends**

## **Notes**

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).

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

The functions and powers of His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prosecution (IPS) are set out in the Criminal Proceedings etc. (Reform) (Scotland) Act 2007. IPS aims to promote excellence and confidence in Scotland’s prosecution service through independent, evidence-based scrutiny.

As part of their joint review of how effectively and efficiently prosecution witnesses are cited to give evidence in sheriff court, HMICS and IPS used several different methods of gathering evidence for the inspection, including desktop research, case reviews, fieldwork (interviews and focus groups), observations and benchmarking.

They also conducted two public surveys to gain an insight into people's experiences of being as a witness in sheriff court. One of the surveys was for those working in Police Scotland, and one was for members of the public and all other professional witnesses. The surveys jointly received 1,132 responses.

**Ends notes**

**NOTES TO EDITORS**

The HMICS and IPS report - Citing witnesses in the sheriff court - will be available to download at the HMICS website [www.hmics.scot](http://www.hmics.scot) and IPS website [www.prosecutioninspectorate.scot](http://www.prosecutioninspectorate.scot) from 00.01hrs, Tuesday 3rd March 2026.

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**Ends**