



HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland
Improving Policing across Scotland

Thursday, 21st May, 2026

PRESS RELEASE

Police custody in Edinburgh inspected

Police Scotland has been urged to review staffing levels at one of the country's busiest police custody centres.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) and Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) carried out a joint inspection of the police custody centre at St Leonards Police Station, in Edinburgh.

Staff at the custody centre described it as 'significantly understaffed' and told inspectors that gaps in staffing levels meant the care provided to detainees was not to the standard they would like to see, or that detainees deserve.

Inspectors found that staffing pressures could compromise the completion of routine tasks including the provision of showers for detainees and time spent with them.

Local policing officers taking detainees to the custody centre said there were rarely enough custody staff available to run the three charge bars at the police station.

They said this commonly resulted in queues of arresting officers with their detainees and had a knock-on impact on operational policing as officers remained delayed at St Leonards rather than returning to frontline policing.

HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland, Craig Naylor, said: “HMICS and HIS have now jointly inspected ten police custody centres across Scotland, and during this latest inspection we identified a number of issues that we have previously highlighted elsewhere – including issues around staffing levels.

“We recently made a recommendation to Police Scotland that they examine staffing levels and make arrangements to ensure that appropriate staff resource is in place to maintain safe and effective custody centre operations.

“While we have not repeated this recommendation, it has relevance for the St Leonards custody centre.

“Consideration should be given to reviewing the rationale for the existing staffing model to ensure it remains suitable and fit for purpose.”

Inspectors said the national custody staff model which is used by Police Scotland – with one sergeant and one staff member per ten detainees – did not meet the needs of such a busy custody centre.

St Leonards has 34 cells and serves as the main police custody centre for Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian.

Records show 7,157 people were held in custody at St Leonards police station during 2024-2025.¹

Staff reported limited ability to take breaks.

They also highlighted challenges associated with sickness absence, delays in body armour provision that restricted the deployment of new members of the custody team, and with some staff being on restricted duties which meant they were unable to assist at the charge bar.

¹ The number of arrested persons includes individuals who have appeared in custody on more than one occasion within the reporting period.

Limited management visibility was also raised by staff, with some expressing concern that Police Scotland was not responding effectively to pressures within the custody environment.

HMICS and HIS inspectors visited the St Leonards custody centre in September last year, as part of their review to assess the treatment of, and conditions for, any individuals being detained.

The joint review found child detainees who were brought to St Leonards custody centre were managed appropriately, with none placed in cells and the longest detention period under five hours.

Inspectors said this was a significant improvement from previous inspections.

However, the inspection found there were issues around the recording of information on the National Custody System, including details relating to wellbeing observations of detainees, their meals, healthcare interactions, care planning and legal rights.

Care plans and handovers were found to routinely lack case-specific details, while records frequently relied on 'generic, copy-and-paste entries' which diminished their value.

The inspection team said the physical condition of the custody cells at St Leonards was good, but they identified safety and operational concerns related to the recent addition of a new detainee holding room opposite the charge bar area.

The report said the narrow layout often resulted in congestion when accommodating multiple detainees and their escorting officers.

Inspectors stated: "Staff described incidents since the opening of this facility in which disorderly or incapacitated detainees obstructed exit routes, leading to unwanted physical contact and, on one occasion, a physical assault on a member of staff who was rendering assistance."

Inspectors also found that while the recently upgraded charge bar facilities were bright and spacious, the layout resulted in limited confidentiality during detainee processing, with conversations audible to others.

The joint custody report made 10 recommendations for improvement, including a number of healthcare-specific recommendations addressing infection prevention and control, training and the management of medicines.

The recommendations were directed at both Police Scotland and NHS Lothian who provides healthcare services in the custody centre.

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.

The aim of this joint custody inspection was to assess the treatment of, and conditions for, individuals detained at St Leonards custody centre. The inspection report provides an analysis of the quality of custody centre operations as well as the provision of healthcare services.

Inspectors reviewed the Police Scotland National Custody System (NCS) and examined a representative sample of detainees processed at the custody centres in August 2026.

They assessed the physical environment, including the quality of cells, and observed key processes and procedures relevant to police custody operations.

They also spoke with people detained at the custody centre and interviewed custody staff and healthcare professionals during their visit.

Ends notes

NOTES TO EDITORS

The 'HMICS Custody inspection report – Edinburgh' will be available to download at the [HMICS website](#) from 00.01hrs, 21st May 2026.

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