



HM INSPECTORATE OF CONSTABULARY IN SCOTLAND

Thematic inspection of police response to missing persons in Scotland:

Terms of Reference

November 2023

HM Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland

HM Inspectorate for 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 thematic 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 Strategy 2017-20](#), (November 2017).

Our audit

Introduction

1. HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) has committed to a statutory inspection of the police response to missing persons in Scotland as part of its Scrutiny Plan for 2022-25.³
2. This followed a wide-ranging consultation undertaken by HMICS during 2021 to inform future scrutiny planning. The Police Scotland response in respect of missing persons was raised by several respondents to the consultation. The main themes raised related to the increased level of demand on police resources and inconsistency in the partnership response across Scotland, which could potentially impact on outcomes.
3. The HMICS Scrutiny Plan states that we will seek to review and provide assurance around the processes and practices employed and examine the effectiveness of the new Missing Persons Database application.

Aim

4. The aim of this thematic inspection will be to assess the state, efficiency and effectiveness of the police response to missing persons in Scotland. It will examine this from the perspective of Outcomes, Delivery and Leadership & Vision, which are the key indicators outlined within the EFQM framework.
5. It will consider the role of partners and key stakeholders in respect of the planning and delivery of services for missing persons. This will include Scottish Government, local authority and health services and third sector organisations. Our inspection will also consider the effectiveness of outcomes resulting from the interventions and services provided by partners.
6. The inspection will aim to achieve an insight into the views and experiences of people who have been missing and those of parents, carers and families who have had involvement with police and other missing persons services.

³ HMICS, [Scrutiny Plan 2022-25](#).



Background

7. The most recent inspection of police response to missing persons by HMICS was undertaken in Aberdeen City and published in June 2015.⁴ The inspection report made eleven recommendations, most of which were for Police Scotland and the local division. It was recommended that Police Scotland work with Scottish Government to establish an agreed definition of missing persons and a consistent approach to risk assessment.
8. It was further recommended that Police Scotland should work with local authorities and local child and adult protection committees to develop more routine analysis and sharing of data about missing persons to inform shared partnership tactical assessments.
9. The remaining recommendations were, in the main, related to operational practices. These will be considered during the course of our inspection.
10. Subsequent to this, Scottish Government published a National Missing Persons Framework.⁵ It was the first of its kind in Scotland and was developed through close collaboration between the Scottish Government, Police Scotland, local authorities, NHS Scotland and a number of third sector organisations, including the charity Missing People,⁶ Barnardos and Shelter Scotland.
11. The framework sets out the roles and responsibilities of the respective agencies, as well as key national objectives and supporting commitments on which to focus collective efforts on missing persons. It promotes the ongoing development of an effective frontline response when someone goes missing but also encourages a preventative approach to reduce the number of persons going missing in the first place.

⁴ HMICS, [Local Policing+ Inspection of the Approach to Missing Person Investigations](#), 22 June 2015.

⁵ Scottish Government, [National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland](#), May 2017.

⁶ Missingpeople.org.uk, www.missingpeople.org.uk



12. A multi-agency working group has been established by Scottish Government to promote the implementation of the missing persons framework and to provide practical support to police and partners to meet agreed objectives. Scottish Government is reviewing the National Missing Persons Framework with the support of the working group in order to update it and include learning since its initial publication.
13. Police Scotland have recently reported that 17,995 police investigations regarding missing persons took place during 2022-23.⁷ This reflects an increase of 686 from the 2021-22 reporting year. There have been increases in the number of people that go missing from NHS facilities and from Foster Care settings. The number of children who go missing from residential childcare, and the number of investigations involving a person with a mental health indicator have both decreased compared to the same period last year.
14. In terms of individual categories for the year 2022-23, the greatest number of missing persons were adults (5,145), with the second largest being children (4,936), not including care experienced children. However, despite the above-noted decrease in children missing from residential childcare, the overall number of missing episodes related to care experienced children (3,818) remains significant.
15. The number of people who have gone missing previously, sometimes referred to as repeat missing persons, has also seen a small decrease of 139 between 2021-22 (3,484) and 2022-23 (3,345).
16. Responding to the annual number of missing persons, places considerable demand on police time and resources. Our inspection will examine this further including the extent to which Police Scotland understand demand patterns, trends and geographical differences. The above noted Police Scotland performance report highlights that a full time equivalent of just over 900 police officers have been involved in missing persons investigations during the reporting period of April 2022 to March 2023.

⁷ Police Scotland, [Performance Report - Q4 2022-2023](#), Page 60-65.



17. Research findings, including a 2022 report undertaken by the UK based Missing People charity,⁸ outlines the considerable impact on people who have experienced being missing. The report outlines that the most common reasons adults go missing are linked to mental health, suicide, and relationships with other people. It notes that going missing can exacerbate risk with 66% of returned missing adults disclosing that being missing had impacted their mental health. Over 3 in 4 adults that responded to a survey for the report disclosed experiencing harm while missing.
18. Annually in the UK, an estimated 80,000 children go missing in over 210,000 reported incidents. Missing children are at significant risk of harm, although it is hard to quantify what proportion come to harm while missing. Research by the Children's Society found that 11% of missing children had been "hurt or harmed while away from home on the only or most recent occasion".⁹ Other research has found that one in every eight young people reported missing had been physically hurt and one in nine had been sexually assaulted while away.¹⁰
19. In addition, the parents, carers, family and key contacts of missing persons can experience considerable upset and distress when a loved one goes missing. The quality of police response, engagement and communication with these groups is therefore considered to be of high importance.


Scope


20. This inspection will be undertaken by HMICS in terms of the Section 74(2)(a) of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012.
21. It is our intention to consider the Police Scotland response to missing persons in Scotland by assessing:

⁸ Missingpeople.org.uk, [The nature and scale of harm experienced by missing adults in the UK](#), April 2022.

⁹ Missingpeople.org.uk, [A Safer Return - An analysis of the value of return home interviews in identifying risk and ensuring returning missing children are supported](#), June 2019.

¹⁰ Biehal, N., Mitchell F., and Wade J. Lost from View, 2003.

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- How well Police Scotland understand the demand resulting from missing persons and whether there is a well-developed strategy, vision and clearly defined objectives in place to respond effectively
 - How well Police Scotland provide the necessary guidance, training and support to staff at all levels to enable them to effectively respond to missing persons
 - How well police officers and staff are equipped to meet the challenges and requirements of missing person investigations, including the availability of specialist operational support services where required
 - The effectiveness of Police Scotland's response from initial point of contact including the consistency of risk assessment, risk management and resolution of missing persons incidents
 - The effectiveness and value of the Police Scotland National Missing Persons Application, and how well other police information systems are connected and utilised
 - The impact and effectiveness of the Police Scotland Missing Persons unit and of divisional response, including the role of Missing Person Coordinators in improving outcomes for missing persons
 - How well Police Scotland work in collaboration with partners and key stakeholders to share relevant information and to plan for and deliver effective and efficient services for missing persons
 - How well Police Scotland policy aligns with national policy to achieve a rights respecting approach relevant to missing children, young people and adults, giving due consideration to key policies including The Promise
 - The extent to which key stakeholders and service providers including Scottish Government, local authorities, health services and third sector organisations make an effective contribution to improving outcomes for missing persons through meeting their statutory responsibilities and partnership agreements

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- The effectiveness of Police Scotland's involvement in preventative approaches including national and local protocols and initiatives intended to reduce demand and the impact on missing persons
 - The extent to which preventative approaches, protocols and initiatives are adopted by partner agencies and delivered consistently across Scotland
 - The quality of Police Scotland's engagement and communication with missing persons once returned and their families, carers and key contacts throughout investigations
 - How well Police Scotland evaluate service delivery and capture learning in order to drive improvement, reduce demand, and achieve better outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

Exclusions from scope

22. This inspection will not consider:

- The policing of mental health as this has been explored extensively in a recent HMICS inspection report published in Autumn 2023
- A full evaluation of partner and multi-agency practices, initiatives and protocols that may be subject to separate evaluations
- The state, efficiency and effectiveness of specialist operational support services as this will feature in a forthcoming HMICS inspection.

Objectives and outcomes

23. The main objectives for this inspection are:

- To assess whether current police policies and procedures support an effective response to missing person demand and challenges
- To assess the effectiveness of Police Scotland strategic direction and vision for missing persons response and how well this aligns with national policy and objectives in Scotland
- To assess the quality of operational response to missing persons



- To consider the effectiveness of partnership work, information sharing, collaborative initiatives and preventative approaches
- To consider how well police and partners understand what outcomes are being achieved for missing persons and plan accordingly to improve services and outcomes.

24. The key output from the inspection will be the final report. The intended outcomes from this inspection and its publication are to:

- Provide assurance on whether Police Scotland has the right strategy, policies and procedures in place to respond effectively to missing persons incidents
- Provide an assessment of Police Scotland's operational response to missing persons, including divisional access and availability of operational support
- Provide an assessment of the extent to which police officers and staff are provided with the necessary guidance, training, resources and support to undertake their role and function in respect of missing persons
- Provide an assessment of how well Police Scotland make use of police information systems and databases relevant to missing persons
- Provide an assessment of the extent to which Police Scotland work collaboratively with partners and key stakeholders on preventative approaches and protocols, including the effectiveness and consistency of partner agency response
- Provide an assessment of how well Police Scotland engage and communicate with missing persons once returned, and with families, carers and key contacts during investigations
- Outline where potential improvements can be made in respect of police planning, delivery and response in order to achieve better outcomes for missing persons.



User Perspective

25. 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 users in the scrutiny process. As such, we will undertake the following:
- We will endeavour to obtain the perspective of key stakeholder groups through self-evaluation and consultation.
 - We will engage directly with Police Scotland officers and staff to obtain views and perspectives on the effectiveness of missing persons response.
 - We will engage with organisations that are involved in providing services to missing persons and their families in order to better understand their experiences of interaction with the police and partner agencies.
 - We will liaise with scrutiny partners and third sector organisations operating in this sector to assist us to understand the experiences of missing persons and to obtain direct responses, where possible, on their views on how the policing approach and related services could be improved.

Methodology

26. We will use the HMICS Inspection Framework which is based on the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model and Best Value Characteristics.
27. The inspection framework will provide a structure for our inspection, which will be risk based, proportionate and focused on improving policing in Scotland. We will structure our inspection around our objectives and key themes of:
- Outcomes
 - Delivery
 - Leadership and vision



28. During the course of our 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
- Issue a self-evaluation to Police Scotland and analyse returns
- Undertake a review of key documents provided by Police Scotland relevant to strategy, policy, delivery and performance in respect of missing persons
- Review key findings from existing research and reports relating to missing persons
- Examine missing persons demand and how well Police Scotland utilise demand data to plan service response
- Undertake an audit of calls made to Police Scotland regarding missing persons to assess the quality of initial response, risk assessment and resulting action
- Undertake interviews with key personnel from Police Scotland and relevant partners regarding the collective response to missing persons
- Undertake onsite inspection activity within selected police divisions including interviews, focus groups, and observations to assess the operational response, partnership working and potential areas of good practice
- Engage with partners and key stakeholders with a role in planning and delivering services and supporting missing persons and their families
- Develop an understanding of the experiences and views of missing persons and their families, carers and key contacts
- Benchmark with other police forces to consider opportunities for learning and to identify where Police Scotland practice may be ahead of others.



29. Where we identify concerns regarding the potential safety or wellbeing of an individual during the course of our inspection, we will escalate this to our single point of contact in the first instance in order that any risks can be addressed timeously.

Publication and reporting timescales

30. We anticipate publishing a report on our findings in Summer 2024. 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 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.
31. For further information about the HMICS Thematic Inspection of Police Response to Missing Persons in Scotland, please contact Ray Jones, Lead Inspector (Ray.Jones@hmic.gov.scot).

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