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Dear Cabinet Secretary,

Report on short, focused inspection of HMP Barlinnie on 14 October 2026

Following concerns raised by prisoners through our freephone service, members of the public, and reports from our Independent Prison Monitors regarding water supply issues at HMP Barlinnie, HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland conducted a short, focused inspection on 14 October. Our findings can be found at **Annex A**.

Access to reliable drinking water and running water for personal health and cleanliness are core needs for those deprived of their liberty. In the face of a water mains failure, we found the team at the prison had implemented contingency measures to meet the needs of those living and working at Barlinnie with bottled water to drink and bowsers to replace mains water for services to toilets and showers. Hygienic preparation and serving of food contingencies and alternative arrangements for laundry were in place while the causes of the problem were being investigated and resolved.

This incident reinforces our longstanding concerns about the inadequacy of the ageing infrastructure at HMP Barlinnie, and the risks associated with continued heavy reliance on a deteriorating estate. On the day of our inspection 1,415 men were being held in a prison, originally designed for 987 and currently designated as able to hold 1,021. Over a quarter of these men were being held on remand. I know I am telling you nothing new when reminding you that at 39% overcrowded, even on the uplifted figure, Barlinnie is the most overpopulated prison in Scotland. As well as our concern for the conditions and treatment prisoners experience when in prison, this incident also highlights the wider vulnerability of the prison estate in the context of ongoing overcrowding.

We recommend that the Scottish Government and the Scottish Prison Service ensure that nothing prevents the closure of HMP Barlinnie and the transfer of

prisoners to HMP Glasgow. With HMP Glasgow not expected to become operational for more than two years, effective contingency arrangements must continue to remain in place, alongside reducing the numbers of men held there.

Your sincerely,



Sara Snell
HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland

Inspection Findings

Overview

A major leak of mains water had affected the provision of fresh drinking water to prisoners, the ability to flush in-cell toilets and the supply of heating and hot water for showering and operating the laundry.

The situation was on-going with contractors on site. They were making progress with faults being detected and repaired. At the time of the inspection three of the residential halls were fully back to mains supply, with the two-remaining scheduled for reconnection that day

The establishment had taken effective steps to provide all prisoners with drinking water, or alternative drinks whilst the mains supply was interrupted. They were using water bowzers to top up storage tanks and allow toilet flushing and showering. Although intermittent pressure drops were affecting heating and hot water for showering, at the time of the visit all residential areas were planned to have full mains supply by the end of the day.

Findings

A major loss of water service was experienced at around 15:00 8 October 2026. This had a significant impact on prisoners through reduced access to fresh drinking water, in cell sanitation, showering and laundry facilities.

The establishment enacted contingency plans and within 20 hours, stocks of bottled water were on site and freely available to all prisoners affected. Up until this point the catering department had issued alternative drinks and flavoured waters that were held in stock. The catering department continued to issue additional fluids, small bottles of cola and cartons of apple juice, as well as more bottles of flavoured waters. One prisoner told us they did not eat prison meals and only ate products from the canteen, all of which required water to make which he said meant he had not eaten whilst he waited for the water to be provided. Prisoners provided a varying account of the availability of bottled water with some saying that this was limited to one bottle (1.5 litres) per day however, other prisoners stated that bottles were handed out with every meal. Staff advised that they handed out water every morning and then on request by the prisoner. In every cell visited during the inspection, prisoners had multiple bottles of water in their possession.

There had been some minor disruption to cooking facilities, but the catering staff had managed to ensure that suitable alternative meals were provided, without the need to activate use of the contingency food packs. The low water pressure also affected the normal operating of the laundry, and all laundry services had been redirected to HMP & YOI Polmont to meet the establishment's needs until service could be restored.

Despite needing to change the routine for offering showers to ensure there was sufficient water for everyone, the planned regime for prisoners operated throughout

the incident. The only exception to this was the education department which had been closed on 13 October as a potential location for the main leak.

With good foresight at the start of the calendar year, a contingency had been put in place to allow for the provision of water to each residential area, through a water bowser delivery system to top up storage tanks. This had proved invaluable as water bowzers had been on site since 9 October 2026. This system was effective in replacing lost water. As the contractor had been required to isolate some water supplies locally to carry out repairs, this had resulted in short periods of water being cut off. Contractors advised this had only been for an hour at a time whilst essential repairs were completed.

The ongoing water supply issues affected the heating system which was operating intermittently. Whilst the pressure was stable the heating worked, but when the pressure dropped the heating did not operate. This would have been more of an issue had the weather not been unusually warm for the time of year. In this instance the main effect on prisoners was their ability to shower as hot water was not readily available. Some prisoners told us that they had taken cold showers as this was viewed as better than no shower. E Hall, which was the final hall scheduled for return to mains supply was offering prisoners the opportunity to shower in Letham Hall where the water supply was unaffected. The hall First Line Manager maintained a list of those who had accepted the offer of a shower and those who had refused.

Communication about the issue was lacked clarity. Some prisoners knew there was an ongoing water supply problem which was being investigated while others said they had received no information about what effect the contractors work would have on the water supply. The previous full inspection of HMP Barlinnie acknowledged the good opportunities for information to be made available through the prison radio but found this could be better utilised for specific topics such as the Think Twice anti-bullying strategy. Staff felt an opportunity had been missed to keep prisoners informed by this means for this incident.

Inspectors could find no public information on the SPS website or social media platforms to let families or friends of prisoners know what was happening. Some only realised there was a problem when they were affected by it themselves when they visited. Keeping the public informed of the actions being taken to mitigate the impact of the leak, might have allayed the fears of prisoners' families about the welfare of their loved ones.

The contractor advised that several minor faults had been fixed but there remained a significant ongoing loss of water the cause of which had not yet been found. An estimated three million litres of water had been lost since the incident began. Work was continuing to locate the major leak and restore the water supply. The Estate Manager confirmed that the age of the infrastructure pre-dated modern mapping and some pipework was not shown on the plan. Of significant concern to us was that the fire suppression system operated from the same mains water supply as the rest of the establishment. Immediate reassurance from the Fire and Rescue Service that they have alternative sources to fight a fire should this be needed is advised.

On the day of our inspection, we were told that internet and telecommunications had been interrupted in A Hall. The cause was not known at the time, but contractors were due to attend to investigate the problem. Although, in-cell telephones had been affected the telephones located in communal areas were still operating and prisoners could access these

The ageing infrastructure of the prison means it is highly likely that failures will continue to be experienced. This further heightens concerns that the replacement HMP Glasgow is still over two years away from operation. The recent additional water contingencies have helped in managing this incident and we recommend further scenario planning to shape additional exigencies while HMP Barlinnie remains open and the fabric of the prison continues to degrade.

Desired outcome 1: Sufficient stocks of bottled drinking water are available on site should there be a further interruption to the mains water supply.

Desired outcome 2: Fire and Rescue Scotland are consulted on contingency plans for responding to any incident within the prison during any disruption to mains water supply.

Desired outcome 3: HMP Barlinnie is shut at the earliest opportunity, and prisoners are transferred to HMP Glasgow (and other prisons on sentence progression).

Desired outcome 4: The prison radio and/or in cell TV channel are utilised to improve communications to prisoners about situations affecting them and their living conditions.

Desired outcome 5: A communications officer is dedicated to internal and external communications in the case of an ongoing incident affecting the welfare of prisoners and the range of platforms for communicating publicly are utilised effectively.