



**HMIPS**

HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland  
INSPECTING AND MONITORING

## **HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland publishes Annual Report 2024–25**

HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland (HMIPS) has today published its Annual Report for 2024–25, highlighting the most significant pressures facing Scotland’s prisons and calling for urgent, long-term action to address persistent overcrowding, unprecedented deaths in custody and increasing complexity in the prison population.

The report is the first to be published under Sara Snell, who became HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland in February 2025. The findings reflect work undertaken during the tenure of her predecessor, Wendy Sinclair-Gieben, and the HMIPS team across the reporting year.

### **Prison system under “intense and unsustainable pressure”**

The Chief Inspector warns that Scotland’s prisons are operating under conditions “as hard as they have been in recent decades,” driven by:

- **Severe overcrowding**, with the population reaching almost **8,200** by March 2025, more than **400 above design capacity**, and with **10 prisons overcrowded**.
- **HMP Barlinnie** operating at more than **30% over capacity**, with examples of prisoners unable to shower daily and limited access to basic entitlements.
- Cases where prisoners were required to **sleep on mattresses on the floor** due to pressures on accommodation and failures in prisoner transport.

Overcrowding is described as having a “**paralysing effect**,” restricting access to education, work, healthcare, addiction services and offender programmes, while placing significant strain on prison staff and increasing the risk to prisoner safety and mental health.

### **Record high deaths in custody**

The report highlights **64 deaths in custody during 2024**, the **highest ever recorded** in Scotland and a **60% increase** on the previous year. This includes **17 suicides**, also the highest yet recorded. The mortality rate in custody now stands at **790 deaths per 100,000 people in prison**, among the highest in Europe.

In response, HMIPS has been asked by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs to review the Scottish Prison Service’s actions following the Fatal Accident Inquiry into the deaths of Katie Allan and William Brown, with this work forming a priority for 2025–26.

### **Increasingly complex prison population**

Prisons continue to manage:

- Growing numbers of people with **complex mental health needs**, addictions and neurodivergence.
- Rising numbers of **older prisoners**, often in accommodation unsuitable for wheelchairs, hospital beds or mobility support.
- More individuals requiring **separation for safety**, often being managed in mainstream areas due to limited specialist accommodation.

These pressures, combined with staffing shortages and high sickness levels, have compromised access to time out of cell, purposeful activity and progression opportunities.

## Transport failures and cancelled healthcare

The HMIPS thematic review '[Planned Failure](#)' identified widespread problems in prisoner transport, with failures contributing to:

- Cancellation of vital **secondary care appointments**
- Delays or disruptions to visits
- Barriers to accessing rehabilitative programmes
- Instances of prisoners being held in unsuitable locations or arriving late for legal processes

## HMIPS priorities for 2025–26

To drive accountability and improvement, HMIPS will:

- Move to **outcome-focused recommendations**, requiring SPS action plans to be published as well as inspection reports
- Focus scrutiny on overcrowding, staff, access to health and mental health, and progression
- Review the experience of prisoners held on remand
- Monitor progress on new prisons in **Glasgow** and **Highland**
- Support UK-wide human rights scrutiny through the National Preventive Mechanism
- Begin a **full revision** of inspection and monitoring standards to align with international standards and norms

## Quote from the Chief Inspector

### **Sara Snell, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland, said:**

“Scotland has invested significantly in its prison estate, but the longstanding issue of overcrowding continues to undermine safety, dignity and access to the activities that help people make positive changes in their lives.

“The record number of deaths in custody is deeply troubling and must be a catalyst for urgent change. Prisons cannot be expected to function effectively when operating far beyond capacity and under relentless pressure.

“Our duty is to prevent ill treatment by reporting publicly on the treatment of and conditions for people held in prison and court custody in Scotland, protect human rights and ensure the voices of people in custody and staff are heard. We will continue to hold the Scottish Prison Service and other partners to account for delivering meaningful and sustained improvement.”

## Notes for editors

- The full HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland Annual Report 2024–25 is available at: [www.prisoninspectorescotland.gov.uk](http://www.prisoninspectorescotland.gov.uk)
- HMIPS is an independent scrutiny body with a statutory duty to inspect and monitor the treatment and conditions of people in Scotland’s prisons.
- Independent Prison Monitors visit every prison weekly and contribute directly to HMIPS inspections.
- The report was laid before the Scottish Parliament in March 2026.
- For further information please contact Kerry Love at [Kerry.Love@gov.scot](mailto:Kerry.Love@gov.scot) or on 07939 980452.

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