



HMIPS
HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland
INSPECTING AND MONITORING

NEWS RELEASE
INSPECTION OF HMP & YOI STIRLING
AND THE LILIAS AND BELLA COMMUNITY CUSTODY UNITS

HMP & YOI Stirling: In my Annual Report 2022-23, I wrote that “Scandinavian prisons are often cited as the model for best practice, but I envisage Scotland leading the way when it comes to managing women in custody.” The inspection of HMP & YOI Stirling occurred within a very short period after it became operational, in June 2023, and already I see that statement coming to fruition.

The modern accommodation, the campus design and therapeutic environment were highly impressive and fully in keeping with the trauma-informed ethos set out in the [SPS Strategy for Women in Custody](#). Inspectors witnessed some outstanding examples of caring, compassionate staff, particularly in Wintergreen which houses women with the most complex support needs. We were encouraged to see that the new technique for restraint, which does not induce pain, was successfully in use and we look forward to it being rolled out across Scotland.

It was still early in the lifecycle of the prison and inevitably inspectors identified a number of issues that had either only recently been resolved or were still to be fully addressed. Many of the design flaws noted on occupation had been resolved but others had not, and some required urgent resolution. Inspectors had concerns over a number of potential security issues, including staff line of sight being compromised in the residential units. However, the major design flaw was clearly the Separation and Reintegration Unit (SRU) and high dependency units being located within sight and sound of the neighbouring community. We strongly recommend repurposing some elements of the establishment and utilising the purpose-built SRU facilities in other central belt prison establishments that accommodate women, until the issues with the SRU can be fully resolved.

There is a need to prioritise the development and implementation of programmes and interventions to ensure that risks and needs are addressed for all categories and ages of prisoner, and that women are appropriately supported to prepare for release.

In all of our inspections, we are deeply concerned by the risks posed when people arrive late at establishments and HMP & YOI Stirling was no exception. New admissions arriving after clinical staff had finished for the day were placed on observations, with 15-minute maximum contact intervals, by operational staff with no clinical expertise, until they could be assessed by a health professional the next day. This poses a number of risks.

I have made repeated calls for the cessation of routine body searching in the women’s estate, making specific recommendations to review and discontinue this practice in the published inspections of HMP & YOI Polmont as far back as 2018, and of HMP Edinburgh in 2019. I accept that there can be a legitimate role for degrading body searching when it is based on robust intelligence or reasonable grounds for suspicion, but I do not regard it as justifiable when it is based purely on routine random searching of a set percentage of prisoners. I consider this to be disproportionate and unnecessary whilst undermining the trauma-informed approach outlined in the [SPS Strategy for Women in Custody](#).

The SPS should consider whether the current arrangement of using HMP & YOI Stirling as an assessment centre for new admissions, with women often only staying there for short periods of time before being transferred to much older prisons, often with much poorer

accommodation, represents the best use of an excellent therapeutic resource in the current climate. The buildings and culture are developing into an excellent therapeutic model, and it is unfortunate that population pressures and the resultant churn prevent many women from benefitting fully from such a resource.

Despite these issues, the overarching impression formed by all inspectors was of an establishment with enormous potential heading in the right direction.

Bella and Liliac Community Custody Units (CCUs)

The Liliac and Bella Centre's opened following the [Commission on Women Offenders](#) report published in 2012. Compiled by the former Lord Advocate, Dame Eilish Angiolini, the report reviewed the experiences of women prisoners in Scotland and proposed practical measures to improve outcomes. The replacement of Scotland's only women's prison, HMP YOI Cornton Vale, and the development of two CCUs holding small numbers of women, addressed some of the concerns raised in the report.

The CCUs provide a distinct alternative to traditional prisons, with a structured therapeutic environment grounded in a trauma-informed and gender specific approach. Strong collaboration with community services also provides specialised support and community access to help women build independent living skills and confidence to lead lives free from crime.

Both Centres' design had accommodation in houses with modern kitchens, quiet rooms and accessible rooms. The central hubs provided a bright relaxed setting for activities and visits, and the central atriums outside were an attractive area to maximise access to fresh air.

Although both reports were largely very positive, there were a few areas that gave concern. Routine body searching, which is potentially retraumatising and degrading, continued with little recognition that it contravened the trauma-informed approach in the [SPS Strategy for Women in Custody](#), and seemed out of place in such a relaxed environment with few of the security measures common in prisons. Women should not be body searched unless it is intelligence-led, and this should be addressed immediately.

Given the newness of the facilities, inspectors were surprised to see that technology had not been invested in, ranging from in-cell technology through to computer access to support educational activities. HMIPS wish to see this and an increased range of community access, therapeutic and employment opportunities, addressed in the near future.

We recognise that implementing change is an ongoing process, and the SPS continues to evaluate and refine its approach, based on evidence and best practice. Their goal remains to create a prison system that supports rehabilitation, reduces reoffending, and addresses the unique needs of women offenders.

In Liliac CCU, the inspection took place within a short time of the unit being opened and it is testimony to the staff and prisoners that it had strong signs of success. The inspection team were impressed with the management, staff and prisoners in developing what will be seen as an example of good practice in penology. We welcomed the ambience that was calm, relaxed and good humoured.

There were numerous examples of good practice. The International Women's Day event showcased some of the excellent community services and in particular the work on developing women's entrepreneurial skills. The SPS are to be commended for their evident successful beginning.

The pre-inspection survey indicated that women felt safe, respected and supported by their personal officers. There were also many examples of good practice, both in the unit generally as well as in the provision of healthcare.

There is no doubt that the development of the Liliac Centre and its sister centre Bella provides a powerful demonstration of intent by the SPS to deliver on that aspiration. There is much to admire about the modern, relaxed ambience created by the building, and the ethos of a trauma-informed approach, which is testament to the vision and values of the [SPS Strategy for Women in Custody](#)

In Bella CCU, the pre-inspection survey was also positive, with women feeling safe, respected and supported by their personal officers. There were numerous examples of good practice, and in most situations observed, the inspection team were impressed with the staff and prisoner relationships that had developed. It is testimony to the staff and prisoners that it was showing strong signs of success. We would still like to see greater autonomy and responsibility being evidenced, reducing the dependency on staff.

There were concerns about inconsistent staff approaches, where the women felt that some things were allowed by some members of staff one day and then prohibited by other members of staff the next day. Routine body searching, which is potentially both retraumatising and degrading, continued, with little recognition that it contravened the trauma-informed approach at the heart of the women's strategy.

There is a need to evaluate whether the current security and risk processes are fully aligned to the overarching ethos. Notwithstanding our concern that some of the security and risk protocols could be inhibiting the women's successful reintegration into the community, the development of the Bella Centre represents another significant milestone on the SPS's journey towards excellence. As with its sister facility in Glasgow, there is much to welcome about the modern, relaxed ambience in Bella, and the underlying principles of a trauma-informed approach, which is clearly heading toward fruition.

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland, Wendy Sinclair-Gieben was appointed in July 2018.
2. On publication the report can be found at www.prisoninspectorscotland.gov.uk
3. For further information please contact Kerry Love, at Kerry.Love@gov.scot or on 07939 980452.

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