

KEY OBSERVATIONS

PRIORITY TOPICS

■ Prison

CONDITIONS OF DETENTION – To address the root causes of overcrowding in prison establishments for men, a coherent strategy, covering both admission to and release from prison is required.

SEGREGATION AND ISOLATION MEASURES – Improve the regime offered to prisoners in the Separation and Reintegration Units (SRUs), primarily through increased meaningful human contact to avoid persons being held in solitary confinement.

CHILDREN – The system of secure childcare should be reinforced by addressing the concerns set out in the report in relation to legislation, safeguards, resources, unequal standards across centres, restraint frequency and child-protection risks.

CHRONIC ISSUES

■ Prison

SEGREGATION AND ISOLATION MEASURES – Long-term segregation: develop strategies to break the cycle of “carousel” or “yo-yo” segregation for certain prisoners including the development of more step-down facilities between the SRU and the mainstream environment.

GOOD PRACTICES

■ Prison

LAW AND POLICIES / WOMEN

- Significant reform of the women’s prison estate, guided by a reconceptualised policy, strategy and ethos for women in custody that prioritises trauma informed and gender specific approaches.
- Small Community Custody Units provide community-style living in or near city centres with, structured therapeutic environments and trauma-informed practices that together offer a more humane alternative to traditional prisons. The CPT welcomes these as vanguard facilities.

LAW AND POLICIES / CHILDREN – Positive change in legislation, and the move to end custody of children in prisons and the use of smaller, child-centric and specialised secure units.

THE CPT AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

The United Kingdom ratified the ECPT in 1988, and the Committee's first visit took place in 1990.

Since ratification, the CPT has carried out 29 country visits to the United Kingdom – 10 periodic and 19 ad hoc – including 91 visits to police establishments, 86 to prisons, 20 to psychiatric institutions, 16 social welfare and educational-correctional establishments, 2 to military detention facilities, and 13 to border and immigration detention facilities.

All the visit reports have been published. The United Kingdom did not accept the automatic publication of the visit reports.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the 2025 visit to Scotland was to examine the treatment of persons held in police and prison establishments and to assess the progress made since the CPT's previous visits in 2018 and 2019. More specifically, the CPT once again paid particular attention to the problem of overcrowding in prisons, to prisoners placed in segregation and to the reforms aimed at improving the situation of women in prison and children in detention, as well as to overall health care provision. The delegation also examined the treatment of persons in police custody. The co-operation received from the authorities and from the staff at the establishments visited was excellent.

Prison establishments for men

In the past, the CPT had noted the steady increase of the prison population in Scotland, despite various measures pursued by the Scottish Government to address this phenomenon. It had recommended urgent measures to tackle overcrowding in prisons, as well as greater investment in countering the different factors playing into the steady increase in prison population, including addressing the increase in the use of remand, assessing short-term sentencing policies, and increasing the use of alternatives to imprisonment.¹

At the time of the 2025 visit, overcrowding remained a worrying feature of the Scottish prison system and to address the root causes of overcrowding, a coherent strategy, covering both admission to and release from prison is required. The emergency measures taken to date are insufficient. The CPT visited Barlinnie, Low Moss and Perth Prisons.

Positively, at the prison establishments visited, the vast majority of prisoners stated that they were treated correctly by prison officers, and the delegation did not receive any credible allegations of deliberate ill-treatment of prisoners by staff. However, it did receive two allegations of excessive use of force during control and restraint operations. Further, in the three establishments visited, prisoners complained to the CPT of verbal abuse by some custodial officers. The Scottish authorities should take effective action, via the prison management, to ensure that custodial staff receive the clear message that verbal abuse, as well as other forms of disrespectful or provocative behaviour vis-à-vis prisoners, is not acceptable and will be sanctioned accordingly. Incidents of inter-prisoner violence occurred regularly in the prisons visited but were, as a general rule, subject to rapid intervention by prison staff.

The conditions of detention in the prisons visited were, in several cases, adversely impacted by overcrowding. This was particularly notable at Barlinnie Prison. At Low Moss Prison, some single-occupancy cells measuring some 7 m², were transformed into double-occupancy cells and at Perth prison, some cells measuring approximately 6 m² were accommodating two prisoners. Such occupancy rates are not acceptable and should be reviewed. In all cases, the minimum standard of 6 m² of living space per prisoner in single-occupancy cells and 4 m² in multiple-occupancy cells (in both cases excluding the sanitary annexe) must be duly respected. In addition, the Scottish authorities should install a shelter against inclement weather and a means of rest in the outdoor exercise yards in all prisons. Positively, the reception area at Barlinnie Prison has been refurbished and the very small waiting cubicles, consistently criticised by the CPT, have been replaced.

The CPT found that the regime was restricted primarily due to overcrowding and staff shortages, which resulted in many prisoners being locked up in their cell for extended periods of the day. The number of purposeful activities on offer to prisoners should be developed and the daily out-of-cell programme for all prisoners improved.

¹ CPT/Inf (2020) 28, paragraph 7.

In Separation and Reintegration Units (SRUs), the relationships between prisoners and staff were generally positive, and the CPT found that prisoners were overall segregated for shorter periods than those found during the 2018 visit. However, “carousel” or “yo-yo” situations for certain prisoners remained a real challenge, and step-down facilities were mostly not available. The regime offered to prisoners in the SRUs was overall poor, and prisoners were mostly confined to their cells for either 22 or 23 hours a day, without any meaningful human contact.

At the end of the visit, the CPT delegation made an immediate observation under Article 8, paragraph 5, of the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (“the Convention”) and requested that the Scottish authorities ensure that all categories of segregated prisoner are offered at least one hour of outdoor exercise every day, at a reasonable time of the day.

In all three prisons visited, nursing staff levels were generally adequate, and, during the day, prisoners could have access to a nurse swiftly. However, waiting times were at times long, notably for a general practitioner, a psychiatrist and a dentist. As a rule, the initial health assessments for new admissions were performed within the first 24 hours of arrival. Substance use and its effects on the prison population remained an area of concern.

Women’s prisons

Scotland has made substantial investments in reforming its women’s prison estate, guided by a reconceptualised policy, strategy and ethos for women in custody that prioritises trauma informed, gender specific approaches. Central to this reform has been the closure of the long-criticised Cornton Vale Prison in 2022, and the opening of a modern replacement establishment, Stirling Prison, in June 2023. Stirling was designed with a new operational culture and staffing profile tailored to the needs of women prisoners, and the Committee views this as a significant improvement.

Alongside Stirling, two small Community Custody Units (CCUs), Bella and Lillas, opened in 2023. These units reflect the CPT’s previous recommendation for smaller custodial settings that support progression and reintegration. They provide community-style living, structured therapeutic environments and trauma-informed practices that together offer a more humane alternative to traditional prisons. The CPT welcomes these facilities as aligned with Scotland’s revised approach and considers them vanguard facilities.

That said, at the time of the delegation’s June 2025 visit, three different custodial models were operating concurrently across the women’s prison estate. The older, mixed-gender prisons of Grampian, Greenock and Polmont still house most of Scotland’s women prisoners in designated units. Stirling holds about 100 women in its new women-only facility, and the CCUs accommodate small groups nearing the end of their sentences and together they comprise only one-third of the women in prison. This dual reality means that a modern, individualized, therapeutic model exists alongside a more traditional, less tailored model, which was particularly evident at Polmont.

During this visit, the delegation received no allegations of physical ill-treatment by staff in any of the women’s prisons visited. Women interviewed generally spoke positively about staff behaviour and interactions, especially at Bella CCU and Stirling, although this positive culture was less evident at Polmont. Reports of inter-prisoner violence were very low at Bella CCU and at Stirling. In contrast, at Polmont there were numerous incidents of inter-prisoner violence, some resulting in restraint. The data on such incidents at Polmont has not been sufficiently disaggregated or analysed to inform targeted responses and ensure sufficient prevention measures.

A new mandatory policy of C&R2 (the use of non-painful compliance and trauma-informed practices) was in operation at all the women’s prisons visited. This policy focuses on the use of de-escalation techniques first and foremost and, if necessary, the use of soft Velcro cuffs, which represented a positive development. Nevertheless, force and means of restraint were still used relatively frequently on a few women with the most complex needs at Stirling. Further measures are needed to divert from prison the few women who are on a continuous cycle of frequent reoffending due to mental illness, and to transfer them to more specialised support settings where they can receive the appropriate treatment and support required.

The regime afforded to women in Stirling's Separation Unit (SRU) was extremely limited. The women held there receive one hour of outdoor exercise alone, with no purposeful activities provided and no association with others allowed. Most contact takes place through the door and is typically brief. Due to these constraints, the CPT found that women prisoners held there spent about 23 hours a day locked in these cells, rarely moving outside of their cells. A psycho-social support system is needed for all prisoners held for longer than two weeks in Stirling's SRU and they should be provided with greater opportunities for association and engagement in purposeful activities. Further, formal step-down facilities at Stirling should be expanded, in the form of small, genuinely therapeutic units to provide a meaningful alternative to prolonged segregation in SRUs, and to help segregated women prisoners transition back to the mainstream population.

Overall, conditions of detention were good and regimes of activities were reasonable at Stirling and the CCUs respectively, although improvements remain necessary at Polmont. Stirling's new Mother-and-Baby Unit, while physically available, has never been used due to administrative and operational barriers. These require prompt correction to make the unit accessible to eligible women.

At Stirling, staff reported having repeatedly requested training on management of prisoners with special or complex needs without ever having received it. Staff's own concerns included perceived understaffing, workload and limited management response. Assaults on staff occurred frequently, and staff reported that there was no clear debrief/supervision protocol after violent incidents. The Committee recommends an in-depth review of staff concerns and the implementation of structured training programs to support well-being and effective practice for those working with high-risk or vulnerable prisoners.

Children in detention

The delegation visited two of the four children's centres, namely St Mary's Kenmure (St Mary's) and Rossie Secure Accommodation Services (Rossie House). This was the first time the Committee visited these children's establishments.

Secure accommodation in a locked, residential care setting is designed to provide intensive trauma-informed support, care, and education to children aged 10 to 17 years old, who may be a significant risk to themselves or others in the community. From mid-2024, all children previously held in Young Offender Institutions (YOI) had been transferred to secure care. Four children's centres were designated "secure accommodation" with a combined capacity of 67 sentenced places, operated by independent charities under service-level agreements and overseen by the Care Inspectorate.

The CPT welcomes the change in legislation, and the move to end imprisonment of children and the use smaller, therapeutic, trauma-informed units, which it considers a step forward.

Nonetheless, the CPT considers that the system of secure child care needs reinforcing in relation to legislation, safeguards, resources, unequal standards across centres, restraint frequency and child-protection risks.

Consistent standards, equal progression opportunities and similar resources should be offered at all four secure centres in Scotland. This is not the case currently: some centres offered a safer, better environment and less risky environment than others. Centres with fewer resources, such as St Mary's, offered less safe and supportive environments than better-resourced counterparts like Rossie House. While the Government allocated funding ahead of the Children Act, it has proven insufficient to fully prepare all centres. A comprehensive should be undertaken to review both resources and funding to ensure equal opportunities, standards and protective safeguards for all children deprived of liberty.

The CPT delegation received no allegations from the children of physical ill-treatment by staff at either St Mary's or Rossie House, and interactions between staff and the children were generally positive, particularly at Rossie House. Yet, the CPT is aware of recent staff misconduct cases towards children at both St Mary's and Rossie House, and notably within the past year and a half at St Mary's. In four of the five cases, there were findings of inappropriate use of force or gross misconduct and staff were dismissed. This has been part of an increased vigilance strategy by St Mary's after the Care Inspectorate found failings in child protection and restraint oversight measures 2024. These, and other, cases indicate a need for constant supervision by the management and external bodies. The managements of both centres should ensure regular training of staff on the prohibition of ill-treatment and proportionate use of restraints.

As regards the use of force and means of restraint on children the CPT notes that current legislation lacks a holistic approach. Protections vary by location and setting and do not explicitly cover educational spaces within secure accommodation, creating a gap in oversight. Use of force and restraint was evident at both centres visited, including instances where children were held face-down, pinned prone on the floor. The CPT deemed this practice dangerous, particularly given children's vulnerability and a detailed independent review should be undertaken of restraints across all secure accommodation centres embedding stronger legal and operational safeguards to ensure restraint is used only as a last resort, for the minimal necessary duration, and, where possible, a shift toward non-physical interventions. Operational protocols and legislation should explicitly prohibit the practice of face-down prone holds. Overall, a comprehensive framework regulating all use of restraint on children is needed to provide more consistent and better protection.

Living conditions and the regime of education and activities varied significantly between the two centres. Rossie House demonstrated generally good conditions and a reasonable regime, while St Mary's offered poorer living conditions and more limited activities. Immediate investment is required to modernise St Mary's and ensure that all children in secure care have equal access to purposeful and vocational activities, organised sport and opportunities for being out of their accommodation units for the majority of the day. These improvements are essential to meet the new national policy of tailored, individualised care for children in custody and to uphold the positive duty of care that accompanies licensing independent charities as secure accommodation providers for children deprived of liberty by Scottish courts or the welfare system.

Police

In the course of the 2025 visit, the delegation visited five police custody facilities in Scotland. The police stations visited all had very good registration systems. Given the absence of outdoor exercise yards in police stations, the CPT considers that the Scottish authorities should continue their efforts to reduce the numbers of persons held in police custody facilities for longer than 24 hours (i.e. especially between Friday and Monday mornings), notably through the opening of some Saturday courts.

All persons met by the delegation stated that they had been treated correctly by staff during their time in the custody facilities visited. The delegation received a few complaints about excessively tight handcuffing upon apprehension. It also met with one detained person who complained of excessive use of force upon apprehension. The delegation noted the plans to increase the use of body-worn video cameras by police officers, which could represent an additional safeguard against abuse as well as a protection against unfounded allegations of ill-treatment.

The CPT found that the safeguards against ill-treatment generally operated reasonably well. However, as had also been the case during the 2018 visit, detained persons were not necessarily informed that notification of custody to a third party had taken place. Further, feedback to the detained person on whether a lawyer has been contacted is not registered, as there is no such entry available in the electronic system. Regrettably, under Section 44 of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2016, it is still possible to delay a detained person's access to a lawyer, or the exercise of that person's right to meet a lawyer in private. The CPT considers when access to a particular lawyer is delayed then the authorities should offer the possibility for the detainee to have access to another lawyer and that this should be properly regulated in law.

As was the case in the past, there is still no formal requirement guaranteeing the right of access to a doctor under the law, despite recent revisions of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2016. The right of detained persons to have access to a healthcare professional from the very outset of their deprivation of liberty should be expressly provided for in law and in the administrative guidance regulating the deprivation of liberty by the police.

Medical consultations in police stations took place in a confidential manner and the CPT noted that custodial officers made efforts to continue any methadone maintenance treatment which was already underway. However, the process of identification and recording of injuries upon admission to the police stations visited was in need of improvement, as the onus remained on the detained person to say whether they were injured, and the custody officers did not refer cases of persons with evident injuries to the competent investigative body unless the detained person expressed such a wish.

The material conditions in all police custody facilities visited were in general terms of a reasonable standard for short stays of up to 24 hours.