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## The 2022/23 audit of the Scottish Prison Service – Progress Report to Public Audit Committee

31 March 2025

Dear Convener

Thank you for your letter of 23 September 2024 requesting, by 31 March 2025, an update on progress on specific recommendations from the Committee's 2022/23 audit of the Scottish Prison Service (SPS). I remain grateful for the work of Audit Scotland on this report and the Committee's continuing consideration of the issues raised. My answers to your requests for progress updates are provided below.

I trust that the information provided here will be of value to the Committee, but please don't hesitate to contact me should you wish any clarification or further updates.

Yours sincerely

**NEIL RENNICK**

Director-General Education and Justice,  
Scottish Government



## Scottish Courts Custody Prisoner Escorting Services (SCCPES)

Management and delivery of the SCCPES contract has presented a range of challenges highlighted by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland (HMIPS) in their 2024 [Thematic Review of Prisoner Transport in Scotland](#). In particular, delays to prisoner transfers or failure to provide escort services at all. These issues have been caused and compounded by difficulties experienced by the contractor in recruitment and retention of staff, however there have been improvements in the service over the last 18 months.

### Performance of the current Scottish Courts Custody Prisoner Escorting Services contract (recommendations 44, 73, 76, 77, 78, 102)

The contract was reviewed by the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) and recalibrated with effect from 1 October 2023. This allowed for the stabilisation of the service delivery model, supporting GEOAmev during a period of significant resource challenges, which saw staffing levels fall by around 150 between May 2022 and September 2023.

Changes to the contract as part of this recalibration included:

- Increase in funding of SCCPES contract in excess of £2m per year until expiry in January 2027.
- Reduced financial impact of service failure, with reduced Service Credits applicable during the period of agreed staffing increases to the level of circa 670 FTE Prison Custody Officers (PCO).
- Implementation of 17% increase in hourly rate of PCO salary to £12.50 per hour with further 6% increase provided for 2024 pay award.
- Change to the payment mechanism from volume-based payments to partial fixed payment to stabilise income and expenditure levels for SPS and GEOAmev.
- Agreed timescales for increased staff levels, linked to improvements in service delivery and performance.

The recalibration resulted in an increase and stabilisation of staff numbers from a low of around 510 in September 2023 to around 640 by January 2025<sup>1</sup>, and improved service delivery and performance across all elements of the contract from the low position reported in September 2023. This improvement continued throughout 2024, with Q4 reporting showing improved performance across performance indicators. Please see **Annex A** for detail on the performance since the start of 2023. Performance updates on each of the areas identified by the Committee are outlined below.

#### *Prisoner access to healthcare*

In their Thematic Review of Prisoner Transport in Scotland, HMIPS raised particular concerns about the cancellation of appointments to receive secondary healthcare in the community resulting from failures in the SCCPES contract.

There has been incremental performance improvement in this area, and medical appointment completions have risen from ~69% in Q3 2023 to ~89% by January 2025. There has also been a reduction in the level of 'planned failures' (as highlighted in the

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<sup>1</sup> 2024 Q3 and Q4 figures subject to contractual performance verification

HMIPS thematic review) from ~10-14% in the first part of 2024 to 3-4% in the first 6 weeks of 2025.

The National Prison Care Network continue to monitor late arrivals and missed secondary care appointments and escalate issues as they arise. The NHS Chief Operating Officer wrote to all NHS Board Chief Executives in February 2025 instructing them to ensure patients are not re-prioritised on waiting lists when appointments are missed due to GEOAmeY cancellations

### *Bed watch activity*

In their letter to the Public Audit Committee<sup>2</sup> in March 2024 – responding to criticism of delivery of the SCCPES contract in the 2022/23 audit of the SPS – GEOAmeY highlighted a significant and unprecedented resource pressure posed by bed watch activity during that period.

Bed watch (where those in custody are continuously accompanied by PCOs while they receive medical treatment) is recognised as resource-intensive. As part of the recalibration of the current SCCPES contract with GEOAmeY, a limit of 14 concurrent bed watches was imposed to protect other areas of service delivery when there are spikes in numbers detained in hospital.

Following a dip to 75% of bed watches covered by GEOAmeY in Q3 of 2023, performance has improved to ~99.5% of the 14 concurrent, with the only failures registered in take over times, and during the late evenings, when night shifts are deployed.

### *VIPER appointments*

Video Identification Parade Electronic Recording (ViPER) appointment attendance completion has improved from the low position of ~70% at the end of 2023, to 99.5% in the final quarter of 2024.

### *The recruitment and retention of staff*

Staffing has been an ongoing challenge for GEOAmeY, and this has had a significant impact on their ability to meet contractual obligations. For this reason, and as outlined above, the recalibration of the SCCPES contract included an increase in funding for its remaining lifetime – in large part to address recruitment and retention of staff through an increased hourly rate for PCOs.

As a result, recruitment and retention of staff improved in the first half of 2024, reaching ~645 PCO FTE. Following this recovery, recruitment stalled with a slight increase in attrition and a reduced staffing complement of ~610 by the end of 2024. Importantly, this was still an improvement of 100 staff compared to October 2023.

Despite this slight dip in staffing levels, recruitment has continued to increase with recruitment courses starting every fortnight. Furthermore, attrition has dropped to fewer than 10 staff per month, and the Service provider is projecting staffing levels to reach the agreed ideal target operating staff of 670 by Q2 of 2025. This staffing position is reported every month, with a further 6 month forward position for recruitment included.

## **The development of the new prisoner transport contract (recommendations 140, 154 and 155).**

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/committees/public-audit-committee/correspondence/2024/sps-geoamey-statement-of-key-points-to-pac-20-march-2024.pdf>

The existing SCCPES contract concludes in January 2027, and a Prior Information Notice (PIN) was published on the Public Contracts Scotland website at the end of July 2024 to alert interested parties to the potential future requirement. With a timescale of an estimated 24-30 months for retendering and implementing a new contract, this is a customary step in public sector procurement.

Work is in progress to procure the next SCCPES contract in Scotland, with a retender team created by SPS in September 2024 to develop a specification which meets the requirement of Justice partners, those in the justice system and third sector partners to improve the efficiency, care and welfare of custodies and prisoners.

The retendering process is now underway, with an average of 12 months to procure a complex service contract of this nature, and an additional 12 months mobilisation by the successful bidder, to ensure vehicles, processes, hardware and logistical software is in place ahead of commencement of service.

The new contract will be a strategic partnership with the service provider, with regular contract and non-contract meetings to improve service, care and welfare. The retender will also introduce a new commercial model which shifts the balance from remuneration based on volumes of service delivery, toward a fixed price element with incentives for continuous improvement across all reporting metrics.

In response to recommendations made by HMIPS, a new strategic Multi-Agency Liaison Group, to be chaired by the Scottish Government with relevant governance processes, is being developed and will be approved and implemented in due course. This new governance arrangement will support improved oversight of the contract, as part of formal reporting processes.

*Ensuring Scotland specific financial information will be available to help inform any future funding decisions and that pay and conditions will reflect the demands and requirements of the role.*

If the successful bidder for delivery of the new contract has a single annual set of UK accounts, part of the specification will be a request for a more detailed report to SPS and Scottish Government on the income and expenditure associated with running the new Scottish contract.

We are not able to set the rate of pay of the new contract, but minimum payment levels will be set to reflect the current Scottish Living Wage. We will ensure through the negotiation part of the procurement process that this will be monitored as well as the contractual increases built into the indexation.

*That the findings of the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland's thematic review of prisoner transport, once published, will be used to inform options for the new contract.*

The new contract specification will reflect the outcome of the HMIPS Thematic review and the recommendations made - including the impact of Human rights issues. The strategic objectives of the new contract will focus primarily on care and welfare of prisoners and custodies, enhanced levels of care for those who are identified and vulnerable, with a clear focus on women and young people transitioning through the justice system.

## **Separate financial reports for the SCCPES contract (recommendation 139)**

*Status of the negotiations that are due to take place between the Scottish Prison Service and GEOAmeY to provide separate financial reports for the SCCPES contract.*

GEOAmeY have confirmed that as a single company, they report their Annual Accounts in line with legislative requirements and Companies House for UK Government. They are currently carrying out their financial year end processes for their reporting year 2024. This is usually published in autumn of each calendar year.

Once this has been concluded, SPS will discuss and agreed with GEOAmeY for a Scotland specific income and expenditure statement, which details full transparent costs of the SCCPES contract.

### **Lessons learned review (recommendation 151).**

*Request for update on the outcome of the 'lessons learned' review, and how it will inform the tender for the next prisoner transport contract.*

A lessons learned review has been carried out. This has considered all the issues in the current specification, as well as challenges relating to service delivery in a post-Covid-19 context. Work to develop a specification for the new contract will include a further full review of existing contract specification and consider any amendments as required to enhance Care and welfare and improve service delivery and performance.

The lessons learned review details a number of areas where improvements to the current SCCPES contract could be made to better support care and welfare particularly for vulnerable people in custody. Performance with the current contract was in part due to the need for GEOAmeY to make enough movements to meet contract targets to stop Performance Measures being applied. In addition, too much time was spent counting movements and/or mitigating failures to stop service credits. Such efforts from the supplier to make efficiency savings ultimately came at the expense of improvement through innovation.

A key learning point from this review has been that any future contract must be sustainable, with a commercial model which rewards good levels of service, care, and welfare; prioritisation of prisoner's human rights; and investment and innovation in the prisoner transport fleet.

There are scheduled weekly meetings with Justice partners to review the specification for each element of the contract, for court operations, secure escorting, non-court appointments, including Hospital appointments, Funerals, SELS, Children's Hearings, ViPERS, hospital detains (bed watches).

### **Impact of overcrowding and double cell occupancy (recommendation 192).**

*Committee requests an update on the Prison Healthcare Surveillance Programme, including whether it is providing a better understanding of the mental health of prisoners.*

The Prison Healthcare Surveillance Programme provides health related data to improve the way in which we understand and respond to the health needs of people who are, or have been, in prison. To date, it has successfully linked prison population data with various health records and produced several outputs. These include vaccine uptake rates for Covid19 and Influenza, uptake rates of blood borne virus opt-out testing and Opioid-related deaths within four and twelve weeks after release from prison.

In relation to mental ill-health, a first draft of data has been produced which looks at community based prescribing rates for drugs typically used in treating mental health

conditions. This can be used as a means of estimating mental ill-health burden in the Scottish prison population on admission to and liberation from prison. This is an ongoing piece of work with a final paper currently underway.

Next steps for the Programme are anticipated to include the development of a dashboard of key metrics of disease prevalence and outcomes in the Scottish prison population and developing work in response to the data as it emerges to affect positive change.

### **Prison population (linked to recommendations 190 and 193).**

*Update on the status of the independent review of sentencing and penal policy, which it notes is expected to report to Parliament by May 2026 at the latest.*

The formal establishment of the Sentencing and Penal Policy Commission was announced on 20 February 2025 and the Commission's terms of reference are available here: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/sentencing-and-penal-policy-commission-terms-of-reference/>.

The Commission is chaired by Martyn Evans and will consider how imprisonment and community based interventions are currently used and how changes to this might contribute to Scotland having a sustainable prison population. The review is expected to make recommendations by the end of the year.

*Update on the assessment and where appropriate consultation on the “wide range of medium and long term measures, including specialist secure health and social care provision, and alternative bail and remand accommodation” suggested by “academics, civil society and parliamentarians”.*

SPS has put in place continual monitoring via a centralised model to ‘rationalise’ the estate through bringing together cohorts to reduce complexity and respond to the rapid dynamics of population capacity.

Accommodation at HMPs Edinburgh and Polmont has been repurposed for use by short term sentenced male population. Space has also been achieved by opening of part of Cruden Hall at HMP Grampian, identifying additional capacity at Low Moss and purchasing additional spaces at HMP Addiewell.

There is also progress underway to replace parts of the existing estate to provide additional capacity that is better aligned with current needs. The new HMP Highland will provide additional capacity of 107 additional places from late 2026 and construction of HMP Glasgow is progressing with the construction contract signed in January 2025. HMP Glasgow will have a design capacity of 1344, which will add another 357 designed places to the overall prison estate. Furthermore, HMP Glasgow's design is modern and trauma-informed, making use of technology to free up staff time to allow for more positive engagement time with those in custody.

Regarding alternative bail and remand accommodation, work is underway to explore the current provision of accommodation for those on bail, including through consultation with partners where appropriate.

We continue to assess a range of options to support a sustainable reduction in the prison population, whilst maintaining a focus on protection. Several actions have been progressed in the short-term, including:

The Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Act came into force on 11 February 2025. It changes the automatic release point for most short-term prisoners from 50% to 40% with those who have served 40% of their sentence at the time of commencement, around 320 people, being released in 3 tranches over 6 weeks. The change to the short-term release point will not apply to prisoners who are serving all or part of their sentence for domestic abuse or sexual offences as defined within the Act.

It is expected that this change to the release point will bring about a 5% reduction in the sentenced prison population compared to the situation where no change was made.

The aim of the staggered approach to release is to manage any increase in demand for community-based services as a result of this change, including any increase in demand for support from Victim Support Organisations.

Included in the Act are regulation-making powers to make changes to the point of release for both short-term and long-term sentences; this power allows flexibility in keeping the changes under review and managing the prison population over the longer term. While there is no current intention to make any immediate changes to the release point for those serving long-term sentences, the inclusion of such a power allows more in-depth consideration to be given to the issues raised during the public consultation last year and, if a suitable approach can be found, a change may potentially be proposed at a later date.

To support the SPS, the Scottish Government are committing an additional £45 million of resource funding - an additional 10% - bringing the 2025-26 budget to £481.5 million. Community justice funding has also been increased by £14m this year to a total of £148m to further strengthen alternatives to custody. The Scottish Government wants to see a sustained increase, where appropriate, in the use of community sentences as well as other interventions such as diversion from prosecution, structured deferred sentences, and bail supervision.

The use of electronically monitored bail which is now available in every local authority has increased, and there is continued optimisation of the appropriate use of Home Detention Curfew (HDC) which allows certain prisoners who have met the requirements of a risk assessment to spend up to 180 days in the community.

Regulations have been approved by Parliament, that enable GPS technology to be used from 31 January to monitor individuals being released on HDC. Options for expanding the time that prisoners who have passed the necessary risk assessments can be granted HDC are also being considered.

We will continue to engage constructively with partners to assess further options and, where appropriate, consult on longer-term reforms. This includes further steps which can be taken towards shifting the balance between the use of custody and justice and address the underlying causes of offending.

SCCPES Contract - Supplementary Data

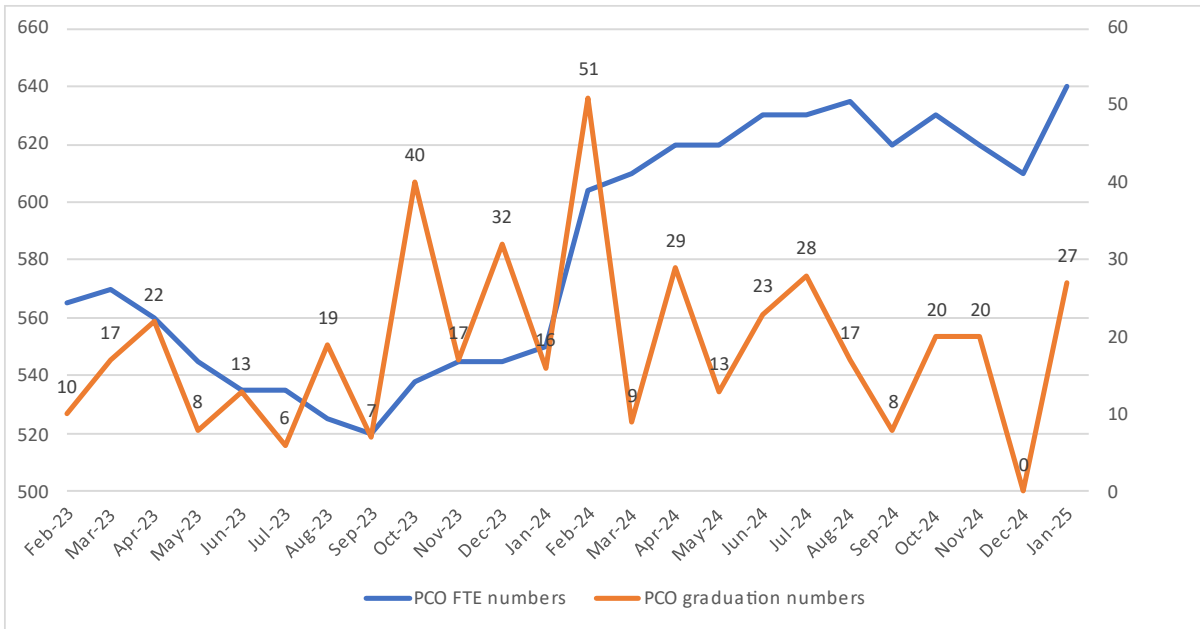


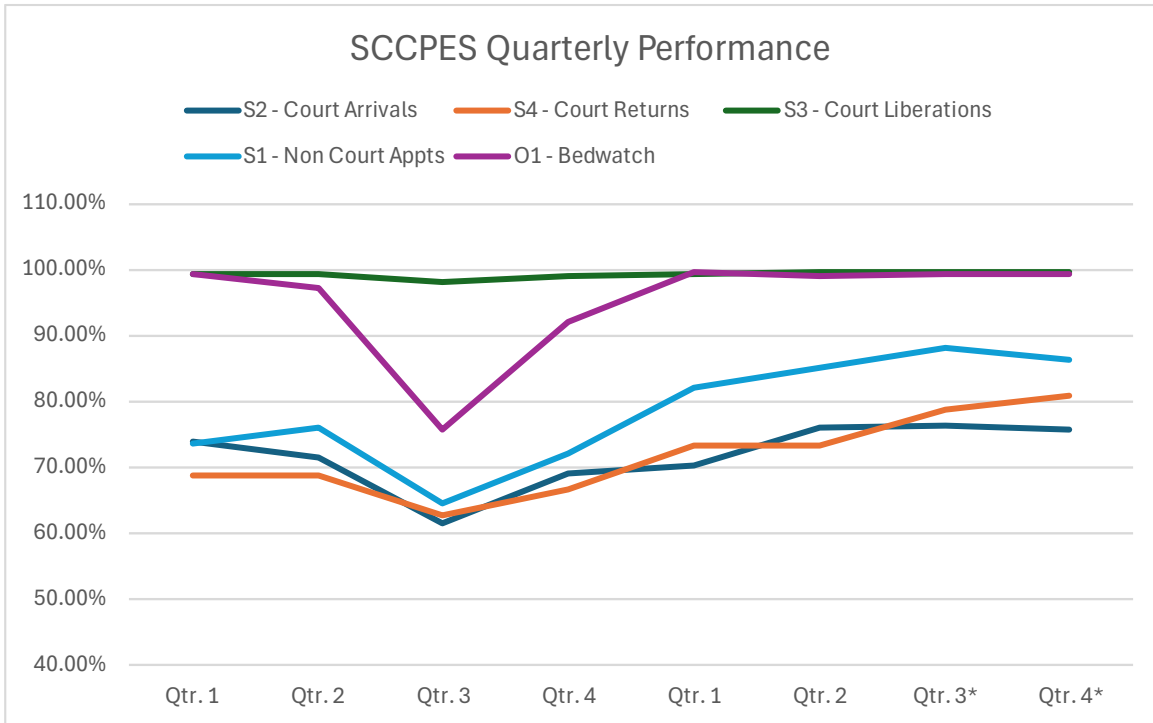
Fig 1. SCCPES Staff numbers, 2023-2025

Contractual Performance measures					
Qtr of 2023 and 2024	S2 - Court Arrivals	S4 - Court Returns	S3 - Court Liberations	S1 - Non Court Appts	O1 - Bedwatch
Qtr. 1	74.00%	68.80%	99.25%	73.50%	99.50%
Qtr. 2	71.40%	68.80%	99.50%	75.90%	97.20%
Qtr. 3	61.60%	62.70%	98.15%	64.60%	75.80%
Qtr. 4	69.10%	66.60%	99.00%	72.20%	92.00%
Qtr. 1	70.40%	73.40%	99.50%	82.10%	99.70%
Qtr. 2	76.10%	73.20%	99.70%	85.10%	99.00%
Qtr. 3*	76.20%	78.70%	99.80%	88.20%	99.30%
Qtr. 4*	75.70%	80.80%	99.70%	86.30%	99.25%

\* - subject to contractual verification, estimated levels of service delivery

Table 1. SCCPES Contractual Performance measures





**Fig 2. SCCPES Quarterly Performance Measures**

	Medical		VIPER	
	Q3 2023	69.00%	Q3 2023	66.80%
	Q4 2023	76.10%	Q4 2023	71.70%
	Q1 2024	82.80%	Q1 2024	90.85%
	Q2 2024	86.60%	Q2 2024	98.70%
	Q3 2024	82.58%	Q3 2024	99.12%
Forecast	Nov-24	85.00%	Nov-24	99.50%
	Dec-24	88.00%	Dec-24	99.50%
	Jan-25	89.00%	Jan-25	99.50%

- Incremental improvement in performance throughout period
- Strong level of performance within bed watch, liberations, VIPER and court arrivals
- Service performance steady despite headcount reduction
- Support from Police Scotland on demand forecasting and scheduling has been crucial to our success
- Significant delays continue to be experienced within SPS sites; both underlying and contractual service performance being impacted for court arrivals and non-court.
- Request to remove VIPER improvement plan

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**Geoamey**

**Fig 3. SCCPES Quarterly Performance – Medical and VIPER Appointments**