

# Criminal Justice Committee

**19th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday, 21 June 2023**

## **Policing and mental health**

### **Introduction**

1. As part of its current workload, the Committee has been scrutinising efforts to assist Police Scotland with the policing of those in the community with mental health needs.
2. Often this role involves police officers being called out to incidents as first responders and then, depending on circumstances, being required to remain involved for long periods of time if other services (e.g. health, social work etc.) are busy or not available. This places significant strain on resources and on the officers involved, often affecting their own mental health.
3. The Committee has been advocating for improvements in this situation since the start of this parliamentary session. A [variety of initiatives](#) have been taken forward by the Committee, including one-off evidence sessions, informal meetings with police officers and correspondence with key bodies.
4. This matter was raised by the Convener on behalf of the Committee at a recent session of the Conveners' Group with the First Minister. Subsequently, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs provided an update on activities in the justice and policing sector designed to improve the situation (see **Annex**).

### **Action/recommendation**

5. **Members are invited to discuss the correspondence received.**

**Clerks to the Committee  
June 2023**

# Annex

## Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (dated 12 June)

Dear Convener

Thank you for raising the increasingly topical issue of how Police Scotland are working with our health service to address the pressure on officers from mental health-related callouts with the First Minister at the recent Convenor's Group.

The First Minister has asked me to write to you on his behalf with details of the various interventions available for individuals presenting to police in mental health distress. I am therefore very happy to highlight a number of ongoing actions across the health and justice sectors which aim to both ensure that individuals are getting an appropriate level of care, but also ease the pressure on our hard working police officers.

The Scottish Government recognises the significant pressures facing mental health services and the impact that this has on other services, which absolutely includes policing. It should also be said that Police Scotland differs from other police services because the law gives equal status to its mission of improving the safety and wellbeing of people, places and communities, alongside the more traditional aspects of policing – protection and safety. This is a point that Police Scotland has reinforced in recent weeks following suggestions from the Metropolitan Police that their officers should only attend mental health incidents where there is an immediate threat to life.

Our Vision for Justice in Scotland sets out that justice services must be person-centred and trauma-informed. From a human rights and wellbeing perspective, we are working to better direct vulnerable people to the appropriate services and to alleviate the amount of time spent by frontline policing and those in police custody centres supporting people in distress.

The Scottish Government is fully committed to understanding and addressing the potential impact of mental health demand on Police Scotland resources. This includes the time officers may need to spend with patients in mental health distress at A&E departments and how those patients can be safely handed over to clinicians. We are therefore working with partners to both improve the service for patients and ensure that resources are deployed appropriately. A Cross-Portfolio Ministerial Working Group has been established to explore solutions to issues surrounding mental health (and substance use) for those in the criminal justice system, including in police custody.

This summer HMICS will publish its thematic inspection of Policing Mental Health in Scotland. This is a vital piece of work, which we expect to explore how well-prepared Police Scotland are to meet the needs of people who are suffering from poor mental health, how demand impacts on the service and the effectiveness of Police Scotland's partnership working. There will undoubtedly be learning stemming from

this work, and we stand ready to work alongside partners in justice and health to take this forward.

The Scottish Police Authority and Police Scotland are very much focused on this issue, and SPA held a conference with key stakeholders in December 2022 to discuss the societal-wide impact of poor mental health in the community. A number of initiatives are already underway across the country. For example, since 2020, the Scottish Government have provided £721,303 to Police Scotland to support the development of an Enhanced Mental Health (EMH) Pathway for those in distress or in need of mental health support who come into contact with Police Scotland. This pathway enables emergency calls received by Police Scotland where callers are identified as requiring mental health advice to be directed to a dedicated Mental Health Hub within the NHS 24 111 service, which is staffed by Mental Health Practitioners on a 24/7 basis.

Police Scotland have been key national partners in the development and implementation of the Scottish Government Distress Brief Intervention (DBI) programme. This provides up to two weeks of personalised, compassionate support to people who present to Police and other frontline services in emotional distress but who do not require emergency clinical intervention. The programme has worked with the Scottish Ambulance Service (SAS) and Police Scotland to ensure call handling staff can make referrals to DBI instead of sending officers out in response to calls, thus helping callers and saving key police resources. As of April 2023, DBI is live locally in 20 of the 31 Health and Social Care partnership areas, with six more expected to go live across Summer 2023 and a commitment to roll the programme out to all NHS Board areas by March 2024 is in place. As of January 2023, over 37,500 people have benefitted from referrals to DBI.

Significant progress is being made to provide alternatives to Emergency Departments. Through the Redesign of Urgent Care Programme, the Scottish Government is working with partners, including Health Boards, Police Scotland, and the Scottish Ambulance Service, on improving unplanned access to urgent mental health assessments. The key objective is to ensure a person does not have to present or be conveyed to Emergency Departments, to get the support they need unless that is the most appropriate place for the individual to be cared for. Each Health Board is providing access to a mental health clinician, accessible to police officers, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for those who require urgent mental health assessment or urgent referral to local mental health services. The aim is to support Scotland's Community Police Officers and Police Custody Officers with presentations where a person is experiencing distress or a mental health crisis and may need specialist intervention.

Under this Government, mental health spending in the NHS has doubled in cash terms [£651 million in 2006/07 to £1.3 billion in 2021/22 – up 99%]. With substantial investment, we have record numbers of staff providing more varied support and services to a larger number of people than ever before. We will continue to invest in wellbeing and prevention alongside early intervention and improving mental health services with priorities being set out in a new Mental Health Strategy to be published later this year.

**CJ/S6/23/19/4**

It should also be highlighted that policing as a whole remains a priority for the Scottish Government. As set out in the Scottish Budget, the Scottish Police Authority will receive £1.45 billion in 2023-24, despite ongoing austerity from the UK government.

I fully appreciate that this is a challenging area of work. However, I hope the information provided provides assurance that it is a challenge that the Scottish Government is committed to tackling.

Kind regards

**Angela Constance MSP**