

News release

For immediate release, 12 December 2023

Scottish prison system facing considerable risks

Scotland's prison system is facing considerable risks, including the poor performance of the company that transports prisoners to and from custody.

The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) contracted GEOAmeY in 2018 to transfer prisoners in Scotland between prisons, courts, police custody units and healthcare facilities. But in recent years GEOAmeY has been unable to recruit the staff needed to deliver the contract. This has resulted in significant delays and inefficiencies across the justice system.

SPS manages the custody and escorting contract on behalf of its justice partners. It issued improvement notices to GEOAmeY, and fined the company about £4 million, but these have had limited impact. SPS is now taking more direct action, including offering financial support to GEOAmeY to aid staff recruitment. These actions are expected to take around six months to take effect.

In the meantime, Scotland's prison population is rising and becoming more complex. The average prison population was around 7,500 in 2022/23. It is forecast to increase to over 8,150 by March 2024. This will put more pressure on Scotland's ageing prison estate, which needs significant investment to make it fit-for-purpose.

Stephen Boyle, Auditor General for Scotland, said:

"The issues facing Scotland's justice sector are of significant concern and cannot be resolved by the Scottish Prison Service alone.

"It is essential that there is close collaboration between the prison service, the Scottish Government and their justice partners to ensure prison services can be maintained in a safe and secure environment."

For further information contact Patrick McFall. Tel: 0131 625 1663 / 07786660171
pmcfall@audit-scotland.gov.uk or media@audit-scotland.gov.uk

Notes to Editor:

1. The Auditor General has prepared the report on the Scottish Prison Service's audited accounts for 2022/23 under Section 22 of the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. This allows the Auditor General to bring to the Parliament's and the public's attention matters of public interest related to the financial statements of public bodies.

2. Section 22 reports are submitted to Scottish Ministers for laying in the Parliament along with the accounts of the relevant body. While there are statutory deadlines for these reports, the actual timing of publication is determined by when the report is laid in the Scottish Parliament by Scottish Ministers.

- 3.** Between April 2022 and October 2023, staffing levels at GEOAmev decreased from around 660 to around 520 full-time equivalents, around 25 per cent less than the estimated 670 to 700 needed to deliver the required levels of service.
- 4.** Between July and September 2023, only 62 per cent of prisoners due in court arrived back on time. Similarly, only 65 per cent of non-court escort services such as transfers to hospitals, police identification parades or special escorted leave, took place on time.
- 5.** Greater proportions of prisoners are required to be accommodated separately in Scotland's prisons due to a wide range of issues, including their legal status (remand or convicted), sex, age or offending history.
- 6.** The Scottish Prison Service has said that the maximum the current prison estate can accommodate is approximately 8,300. However, this includes the use of double cell occupancy.
- 7.** In March 2023, an average of 2,368 prisoners (31.5 per cent) occupied double cells across the prison estate in Scotland. Double cells are used across establishments, including at HMP Perth where HMIPS reported in their May 2023 full inspection report that some shared cells were 'well below the minimum standard of space' as prescribed by the Council of Europe Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT). Similar criticisms have been raised by HMIPS about shared cells at HMP Barlinnie.
- 8.** The replacement for HMP Barlinnie is expected to be significantly higher than the £387.6 million originally estimated in October 2019.
- 9.** Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
 - The Auditor General for Scotland appoints auditors to Scotland's central government and NHS bodies; examines how public bodies spend public money; helps them to manage their finances to the highest standards; and checks whether they achieve value for money. The Auditor General for Scotland is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Government or the Scottish Parliament
 - Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission for Scotland.