



**HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland**  
Improving Policing across Scotland

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**PRESS RELEASE**

## **Police Scotland praised for response to missing persons**

A review of Police Scotland's response when someone is reported missing has praised the service's work as 'robust and effective'.

A new report by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) states more than 16,000 missing person investigations were carried out by Police Scotland last year.

Data for the last four years showed that of those who went missing - of which more than half were aged under 18 - over 99 per cent were traced alive.

It found 58 per cent of missing person incidents were resolved within the first eight hours, and 94 per cent within 48 hours.

While some of these people returned by themselves, figures from the UK Missing Persons Unit showed Police Scotland officers found 60 per cent of the people reported missing in the cases it investigated.

HMICS inspectors said the competence and professionalism of Police Scotland in its approach to missing person investigations was seen as so effective that police forces from across the world had approached Scotland's national police service with a view to adopting similar practices.

But the review found while overall the policing response was 'very good', there were areas where improvements could be made.

It said missing person investigations placed a significant demand on policing in Scotland, with the equivalent of 900 full-time officers dedicated to such inquiries each year.

And HM Assistant Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland, Mr Mark Hargreaves, said despite the vast majority of missing people being traced, the heartbreak experienced by those whose loved ones were not found safe and well must never be forgotten.

Mr Hargreaves said: "Police Scotland has demonstrated consistent success in resolving missing person incidents and locating people as swiftly as possible.

"However, the impact on families in the relatively small number of situations where a person is not found, or tragically is found dead, can be devastating.

"We have highlighted where improvements can be made in the operational response when someone is reported missing.

"More too needs to be done to ensure that clear leadership and strategic direction is in place."

The HMICS report 'Thematic inspection of police response to missing persons in Scotland' notes there are many complex reasons why a person may go missing - including suffering from mental health issues, or dementia.

Children and young people account for 60 per cent of all missing person investigations carried out by Police Scotland - with the majority reported missing from their own home, though many are reported missing from residential childcare.

The report states the purpose of Police Scotland when someone has been reported missing is not to act as a tracing agency, but to find people where an element of risk to their safety has been identified.

Inspectors praised the “very high standard” of response given by staff who initially receive missing person calls.

They said the operational response from local policing divisions was also “very good” with officers “highly committed to locate and return people who have been reported missing, as quickly as possible.”

The report praised too the work of Police Scotland’s National Missing Persons Unit, which provides investigative advice, oversight and support.

But inspectors noted this dedicated unit had limited staffing and resources, and they found “gaps at a national level” when it came to leadership, governance and oversight of missing person investigations.

The HMICS inspectors also expressed concern in relation to a computer programme used by Police Scotland for missing people.

They said the National Missing Persons Application, while a welcome introduction, did not work effectively on hand-held mobile devices used by police, meaning some officers had to travel to and from police stations to record information - an inefficient use of their time.

The expertise given by Police Scotland’s Operational Support Division - who provide a range of specialist resources including search dogs, drones and helicopters - was highly praised by divisional commanders who were interviewed by HMICS, although it was noted it could take time to get such assistance to the most remote parts of the country.

The report also praised guidelines developed by Police Scotland with the Scottish Government which set out expectations and commitments for a multi-agency response when someone goes missing in Scotland.

Inspectors said the principles of the National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland are supported by research and evidence of what works; that it is a particular strength in Scotland - and that no similar framework is in place in other parts of the UK.

But despite its value, inspectors found too few officers and staff within Police Scotland knew of its existence, and more needed to be done to promote the framework's aims and commitments, and to emphasise that it "underpins its strategic direction".

The report stated that while 16,236 missing person investigations were carried out by Police Scotland in the financial year 2023/24, they related to just over 9,000 individual people - as almost a quarter of those reported missing once, would go missing again - sometimes on multiple occasions.

Mr Hargreaves said: "The issue of some people being reported missing repeatedly presents a considerable challenge to police and partners - as the response to missing persons is not solely a police matter.

"The contribution of partner organisations, including local authorities, health services and third sector partners is critical to achieving positive outcomes for missing people.

"We have found that while some areas can demonstrate effective partnership working that has resulted in better preventative approaches and a reduction in missing person incidents, this needs to be more consistent across the country."

The HMICS report makes 11 recommendations for improvement, including better ongoing training for operational officers and supervisors, and that all guidance relating to missing people be brought together on the Police Scotland intranet.

It also lists a further six areas for development.

Mr Hargreaves said: "Missing person investigations can be complex in nature and are, without doubt, a high-risk area of policing.

"We have outlined recommendations intended to support Police Scotland to drive improvement."

**Ends**

## **Notes**

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) was established under the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 and has wide ranging powers to look into the 'state, effectiveness and efficiency' of both the Police Service of Scotland (Police Scotland) and the Scottish Police Authority (SPA).

HMICS has a statutory duty to inquire into the arrangements made by the Chief Constable and the SPA to meet their obligations in terms of best value and continuous improvement.

This thematic inspection involved engaging widely across Police Scotland police divisions and included speaking to police officers and staff through interviews and focus groups.

Tasks undertaken as part of this inspection included a comprehensive review of calls made to police service centres and an audit of the national missing persons application used by police to record incidents and guide investigations.

HMICS inspectors also undertook on-site visits to meet with partners from health, local authority and third sector services - including the charity [Missing People](#) - to examine how well partners work together to address this important issue.

Early intervention and prevention protocols adopted by Police Scotland to assist in missing people investigations include the [Herbert protocol](#) for those living with Alzheimers and dementia, and the [Philomena](#), and Not at Home protocols for children and young people.

## **Ends notes**

## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

The 'HMICS Thematic Inspection of police response to missing persons in Scotland' will be available to download at the [HMICS website](#) from 00.01hrs, 3 October 2024.

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**Ends**