



# POA SCOTLAND

The Professional Trade Union for Prison Correctional,  
Public and Private Mental Health Trust Services Providers  
and Immigration Services



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REF/GEN/12/25

5<sup>th</sup> June 2025

Richard Leonard MSP  
Public Audit Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

Dear Convener

## **RE: Update on the Scottish Courts Custody Prisoner Escorting Services (SCCPES) and Associated Penal Reform Measures**

The Prison Officers Association Scotland (POAS), representing operational prison staff across the Scottish Prison Service (SPS), welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Public Audit Committee in relation to the recent update on the SCCPES contract and wider penal system reforms.

As a union we recognise the improvements made in escorting service performance following contract recalibration in October 2023, however we remain concerned about the operational impact these services continue to have on SPS establishments and staff.

### **Operational Impact of SCCPES Performance Failures**

The failures under the SCCPES contract, particularly in 2022 and 2023, placed considerable pressure on the SPS and its staff. These included:

Prisoner backlog and overcrowding in custody areas due to missed or delayed court transfers.

Increased demand for internal staff deployment to cover hospital escorts and bed watches when GEOAmey could not meet obligations.

Disruptions to healthcare access and rescheduling of appointments, resulting in increased prisoner frustration and tension within establishments.

Although performance has improved in 2024, the knock-on effects of contract failures have been covered by SPS officers, who have been asked repeatedly to absorb additional responsibilities outside their core remit. This ultimately leads to our members carrying out roles to which the SPS are not funded for meaning prisons are left short of officers and prisoners are not getting the proper support from those officers.

With the amount of prison officers having to carry out these roles due to GEO Amey being unable to fully deliver their contract it leads to a heightened risk towards our members as prisoners becoming

increasingly frustrated at not getting their full entitlements, which leads to risks of violence towards our members.

Within the response you received it mentions the recalibrated SCCPES contract included a welcome increase in staff pay, and revised payment mechanisms to stabilise GEOAmeys' staffing position. However, prison officers continue to experience last-minute operational changes, particularly around hospital escorts and late-night hospital bed watches, which impacts on their finish times and puts massive pressure on already stretched staff complements, which in turn impacts on the care being offered to prisoners.

The unpredictability in escort and court activity is adding further strain to internal prison operations and daily planning, in short, the POAS remains deeply concerned that the wider prison workforce bears the indirect cost of escorting service instability, despite having no control over the external contract.

We acknowledge the aims of the Prison Healthcare Surveillance Programme and its efforts to improve data and policy on prisoner health. However, until transport reliability is fully restored and sustained, the healthcare burden continues to fall on internal SPS staff.

Frontline prison officers regularly manage prisoners experiencing acute mental distress, particularly those whose external appointments or treatment have been delayed. This not only affects prisoner welfare but increases the emotional and professional pressure on our members. The POAS is clear that prisoners with such complex mental health needs should not be in prison, they should be in a facility that is properly equipped to support and treat their needs, prison is not that place.

Finally the response mentions overcrowding and penal reform and that this will be reviewed through the "Sentencing and Penal Policy Commission" the POAS will look to have valuable input into this group, as we are best placed to advise on the impacts of overcrowding on our membership, in fact on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2025 we launch our report "Braking Point" which outlines the pressures being felt by our membership working in those conditions.

Whilst we welcome the construction of modern, trauma-informed prisons such as HMP Glasgow and HMP Highland and acknowledge the Scottish Government's steps to manage the prison population, including the Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Act 2025 and expansion of community-based alternatives, we will continue to push for further improvements to support a buckling sector and an overstretched and burnt-out group of staff.

We need to see long-term investment in the SPS workforce, including, more support for staff who are working in the conditions they currently are, we need long term penal reform to help reduce current prison numbers but to also future proof the reduced numbers coupled with extra investment to ensure more prisoners have access to HDC, to support the availability of electronically monitored bail as the current staffing profile is too stretched to achieve this.

### **Recommendations to the Public Audit Committee for consideration**

Establish formal engagement mechanisms with POAS in the oversight and development of future SCCPES contracts.

Recognition of the complex role played by prison officers in delivering safe, secure, and humane custody to prisoners ensuring that prison officer workload and operational resilience are explicitly considered in any contractual changes to prisoner escorting.

Mandate contingency and escalation plans within the SCCPES contract to minimise disruption to SPS establishments during periods of contractor underperformance.

Include SPS staff wellbeing and safety as a core metric of success in any future prisoner transport model.

To conclude whilst we acknowledge the recent improvements in prisoner escorting services, the experience of our members makes it clear that systemic issues remain unresolved. Future contracts must not only focus on service delivery metrics but must also safeguard the operational stability of our prisons and the welfare of the staff working within them.

The POAS remains committed to constructive dialogue with government, SPS, and justice partners to ensure a safer, more resilient prison system, delivered with fairness to staff and integrity in service provision.

Yours faithfully

On behalf of the POA Scotland

**JOHN CAIRNEY**

Scottish National Committee Chair