

Rt Hon John Swinney MSP
An Fhìor Urr John Swinney BPA
First Minister of Scotland
Am Prìomh Mhinistear



St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
Taigh Naomh Anndrais, Rathad Regent, Dùn Èideann
EH1 3DG

David Linden MSP

Convenor
Criminal Justice Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

2 October 2026

Dear David,

During the Convenors' Group on 30 September, you raised the matter of local custody provision, citing a particular case of a detainee from Arbroath being transferred to Oban.

I recognise and share the concerns that have been expressed about detainees being transported over significant distances when local custody facilities are unavailable, and the impact this has on the availability of local policing resources and, indeed on the individuals being detained. I am clear that effective and visible deployment of police across communities is essential to achieve my Government's ambition to prevent crime, support victims and build safer communities.

As you will be aware, decisions regarding the operation of custody facilities, including capacity, locations and deployment, are operational matters for Police Scotland under the direction of the Chief Constable. These decisions are subject to oversight by the Scottish Police Authority, rather than Scottish Ministers.

The current custody estate is largely based on arrangements inherited from predecessor police forces prior to the establishment of Police Scotland. In recent years a number of custody centres have closed as Police Scotland has sought to make more efficient use of its estate and resources. At the same time, concerns have been raised about the impact that longer transport times can have on officer availability, operational resilience and the experience of those detained, which is why the Cabinet Secretary for Justice has recently discussed these matters with both the Chair of the Scottish Police Authority and the Chief Constable. These discussions also focused on the findings from the recent joint review of police custody recommendations undertaken by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland and Healthcare Improvement Scotland.

Scottish Ministers, special advisers and the Permanent Secretary are covered by the terms of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016. See www.lobbying.scot

Tha Ministearan na h-Alba, an luchd-comhairleachaidh sònraichte agus an Rùnaire Maireannach fo chumhachan Achd Coiteachaidh (Alba) 2016. Faicibh www.lobbying.scot

I have been advised that Police Scotland is progressing a programme of reform through its "Custody 2030" transformation programme. This programme will define a new operating model that takes account of legislative, operational and technological changes to move to fewer large custody hubs in high population areas. Police Scotland's recently updated Estate Strategy (September 2026) confirms that these will be co-located, digitally enabled hubs that facilitate collaborative, real time working with partner organisations.

Police Scotland believes that this transformation will deliver modern, digitally-enabled and optimally-located custody hubs which will reduce risk, journey times and waiting times for officers transporting individuals to custody.

This strategy will also ensure that the hubs can be effectively staffed and resourced and will improve the quality of custody facilities ensuring that they are fit for purpose and suitable for supervising vulnerable prisoners.

While it would not be appropriate for Scottish Ministers to intervene in specific operational decisions concerning individual custody facilities, I expect Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority to continue to assess the impact of estate changes carefully and to ensure that custody arrangements are safe, effective and capable of supporting frontline policing across all parts of Scotland. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice will also continue to raise these matters in his regular engagement with policing leaders.

I hope this is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

JOHN SWINNEY MSP