

Criminal Justice Committee  
Wednesday 19 November 2025  
31st Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

## Scottish Prison Service: Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2026/27

### Note by the Clerk

#### Introduction

1. Each year, subject committees in the Parliament carry out pre-budget scrutiny in advance of the publication of the Scottish Government's budget for the forthcoming financial year.
2. The aim is for the committees to collect evidence on spending priorities and make recommendations to the relevant Cabinet Secretary before the Scottish Government finalises its budget.
3. The Committee held its first 2026/27 Pre-Budget Scrutiny oral evidence session on 5 November when it took evidence from Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority.
4. At its evidence session on 12 November it took evidence from the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service, and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.
5. At this evidence session the Committee will hear from:
  - **Teresa Medhurst**, Chief Executive, Scottish Prison Service;
  - **Linda Pollock**, Deputy Chief Executive, Scottish Prison Service;
  - **Amy McDonald**, Director of Finance, Scottish Prison Service.
6. At its meeting on 26 November, the Committee plans to conclude its oral evidence by hearing from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs. Thereafter, the Committee will produce a short report with its recommendations.
7. The written submissions that have been submitted from the above organisation is set out in **Annex A** to this paper.
8. Other relevant written submissions received by the Committee that may be of interest include:
  - [HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland](#).

## **Focus of the Pre-budget Scrutiny**

9. As with last year, the focus of the Criminal Justice Committee is a general one on the financial pressures on organisations in the criminal justice sector.
10. Of particular interest to the Committee is the pressure on capital budgets and investment in policing, the fire and rescue services, prisons, courts, community justice, criminal social work and the third sector.

## **Action**

11. Members are invited to discuss budget matters with the witnesses at today's meeting.

**Clerks to the Committee**  
**November 2025**

## **ANNEX A: SUBMISSIONS RECEIVED**

### **SUBMISSION FROM THE SCOTTISH PRISON SERVICE**

I write to provide a written response in advance of the Committee's deliberations on Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2026-27 for the Scottish Prison Service (SPS).

#### **Background**

SPS's key objective is to protect the public by caring for those sentenced by the Courts safely and securely and delivering rehabilitative services. This is achieved through positive relationships and providing services to address offending behaviour, in preparation for people returning to their communities.

For our staff, we strive to create supportive and positive work environments that reflect our organisational values. SPS operates 14 public prisons across Scotland, 2 Women's Community Custody Units (CCUs) in Dundee and Glasgow, and a further establishment (HMP Addiewell) is operated by a private sector contractor.

We employ approximately 5,030 staff and support around 8,400 individuals in our care. SPS also manages the contract for the Scottish Court Custody and Prisoner Escorting Service (SCCPES) on behalf of multi-agency justice partners, ensuring the safe and secure transport of those in custody to courts, other establishments, and healthcare appointments, as well as overseeing the contract for the remaining private sector prison in Scotland.

The context in which SPS operates is demand-led and highly complex. Each of the 14 prisons and 2 CCUs function as communities operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. A cell serves as 'home' for those in our establishments, while prisons are also the working environment for our staff. There are significant regulatory and ECHR requirements that must be adhered to, to accommodate individuals living in prisons.

SPS also remains subject to external scrutiny from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (Scotland) (HMIPS) on a regular and ongoing basis.

The current economic climate is highly challenging for SPS, as it is for the wider public sector and Scotland overall. Whilst we acknowledge these challenges, our commitment remains to maintaining a safe, secure, and stable prison environment for staff and those in our care, whilst providing regimes and a safe environment that supports rehabilitation.

#### **Operational Challenges during 2025-26**

The Committee will be aware of the population pressures over the past year, which have significantly impacted SPS operations. Budgetary pressures are largely influenced by the number of people in custody. The prison estate is currently operating at 107% of total design capacity, with 9 prisons over their assessed operational tolerance for several months.

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SPS has experienced a significant increase in prisoner numbers again this year, with a rise of approximately 200 since June 2025, and projections suggest this trend will continue. There is currently no contingency prisoner space available across the estate, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for establishments to provide mutual aid should this support be necessary. This is further compounded by the growing complexity within the population, which results in staff spending more time on transactional work to keep populations separate and safe, thereby limiting the ability for staff to build relationships and support rehabilitation opportunities, all of which add to the increasing operational costs.

Additionally, SPS is experiencing an increase in the complexity of individuals' needs, including more Serious and Organised Crime Group associations, those convicted of sexual offences, Orders of Life Long Restriction and long-term prisoners. Demand for social care provision, higher levels of remand, increased mental health needs and an ageing population requiring greater health and mobility support, are also rising. On 14 October 2025, the prison population stood at 8,406, and we have been managing some of the highest prisoner levels seen since 2012, when the population peaked at 8,420.

While overall population numbers indicate the pressures faced, they do not reflect the challenges brought by the changing complexity of the population, which has had a major impact on operational and staffing pressures. This has also driven up the core operating costs of running the prison estate. Rehabilitative work becomes increasingly difficult when prisons are overcrowded, as we are often forced to divert resources away from activities that support people's rehabilitative journeys to prioritise the basic needs of those living in prison.

It will not surprise anyone that additional inflationary cost pressures, increased costs for providing food, clothing, bedding and social care for a larger, more complex population, alongside higher expenses for staff pay, utilities, rates, and private sector contracts, add further fiscal pressures to the operational environment. The requirement for maintenance for an estate being used over its maximum space is also challenging and an increasing cost.

Despite these challenges, we remain committed to delivering a range of work, including progressing capital projects such as HMP Highland and HMP Glasgow to replace ageing infrastructure as well as supporting the best use of our current estate.

### **2025-26 Budget Position**

The Scottish Government (SG) Budget 2025-26 was published on 04/12/2024, and the SPS allocation is detailed in Table 1 below:

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Table 1:

	2024-25 SG Budget Bill	2025-26 SG Budget Bill	Increase/ (Decrease)
	£m	£m	£m
Resource DEL	436.5	481.5	45.0
Non-cash (Depreciation and IFRS16)	44.7	44.6	-0.1
ODEL (PFI balance sheet adjustments)	-1.0	0.0	1.0
Capital DEL	167.0	355.0	188.0
<b>Net Position</b>	<b>647.2</b>	<b>881.1</b>	<b>233.9</b>

The SPS resource budget bill increased by £45 million, a rise of 10%, representing a real terms increase of 4.9% after cost pressures in 2024-25, with higher utility costs, pay awards above public sector pay policy and other inflationary pressures. An in-year resource funding increase of £22.5 million was provided to cover to address these pressures.

The capital budget for 2025-26 is £355 million (2024-25: £167 million). The current capital programme includes replacing HMP Inverness and HMP Barlinnie, and maintaining the ageing estate (HMPs Dumfries, Greenock & Perth).

Alongside the population increases during 2025-26, SPS also continues to manage cost pressures related to the implementation of recommendation from recent Fatal Accident Inquiries and re-categorisation of Scotland's Redress Scheme from resource funding to capital funding.

### Challenges for 2026-27

The growing costs associated with the rising prison population are our most critical operational and strategic challenge. Increased complexity and numbers make it more difficult for staff to provide quality rehabilitative services and support, which our justice system relies on to help individuals reduce their risk of reoffending and contribute to safer Scottish communities when they return.

The complexity of our population, such as the increasing number of sex offenders and serious organised crime gangs, means we are finding it extremely challenging to place individuals in suitable prisoner spaces due to the increase numbers of the different population types. Consistently high numbers of individuals held on remand, often for extended periods, add further population management challenges.

Across the estate, growing health, mental health and social care needs have impacted our operations and our partners in NHS, Social Work and the Third Sector. The impact of Serious Organised Crime has resulted in increasing attempts to introduce illicit substances and weapons into the prison estate. We have invested in body scanners which are now in place across establishments. The heightened threat from drones, whose technology and availability have advanced rapidly in recent years, presents an increasingly challenging security issue and poses a high risk to

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the safe and secure operation of SPS establishments. We are piloting window grilles at various sites and have piloted a technological response to drone detection.

Whilst recognising significant ongoing fiscal pressures across public sector funding, SPS continues to engage positively with Scottish Government officials and Ministers regarding the budget for 2026-27 and strategies to address persistent pressures and new challenges across the prison system.

SPS initial high-level projections for 2026-27 indicate a provisional resource increase to address several pressures, including:

- **Prison Population Pressures** – Increased funding is required to meet the additional operational running costs of an increasing population, including additional staffing and costs driven by prisoner numbers (e.g. food, clothing, bedding, utilities, cleaning, estates maintenance and third-party costs such as Social Care, Social Work, Health etc).
- **Pay Award** – Additional funding is required for year 2 of an agreed pay settlement for SPS staff.
- **PFI & SCCPES Contracts** – Increased funding for the private prison operator and the prisoner escort service due to contractual inflationary increases, demand for additional prisoner places, and the impact of higher volumes.
- **Fatal Accident Inquiry** – Additional costs to support the implementation of the FAI Taskforce recommendations.
- **Operational Investment** – Funding is needed for development and roll-out of 'in-cell' technology to allow improved technology for those in our care, improved drone detection technology, and the roll-out of the pilot programme for Body Worn cameras to maintain operational safety and respond to increased drugs activity from Serious Organised Crime.
- **Control and Restraint 2 (CR2)** the recently developed training for control and restraint, currently operational in HMP & YOI Stirling, Polmont and HMP Low Moss will continue to be rolled out across the estate.

### Conclusion

Despite these challenges, I am proud that we continue to have safe, orderly and secure prisons in Scotland, focused on supporting those in our care with their rehabilitation. I am grateful for the commitment and hard work of our staff who work across our estate every day with some of the most challenging people in our communities.

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I trust the information provided in this submission is helpful and would be happy to discuss matters in more detail with Members during the evidence session on 19 November.

Yours sincerely

**TERESA MEDHURST**  
Chief Executive, SPS