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Via email

Eric McQueen
Chief Executive, SCTS

Jim Munro,
GEOAmey

25 May 2021

Dear Colleague,

Aberdeen Court Custody Unit (CCU)
Unannounced Visit by HMIPS - Monday, 22 March 2021

In these challenging times, as HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland (HMCIPS), I acknowledge that there will be a need for amendments to the daily routines and regimes in Scotland's CCUs in order to keep people safe. I have made it clear, however, that "protective measures must never result in inhuman or degrading treatment of persons deprived of their liberty", and I will continue to report to the Cabinet Secretary for Justice on the treatment and conditions in which custodies are held.

During the completion of COVID-19 Pandemic Emergency CCU Liaison Visits (May-October 2020), contact was maintained with the GEOAmey Team Managers at every CCU on a weekly basis. This confirmed numbers attending, with a focus on understanding the CCU response to COVID-19. A log of these calls was maintained and where the combined intelligence suggested it, HMIPS conducted a one-day Liaison Visit, announced or unannounced, to any of the CCUs. The first round of Liaison Visits is now complete but we continue to gather intelligence on the number of custodies arriving at CCUs each day.

On 22 March 2021, HMIPS Inspectors carried out an unannounced visit to Aberdeen CCU in response to a report of high numbers of custodies during the second week of March 2021.

It was noted that it had been agreed that the CCU at Aberdeen was capable of accommodating:

- 16 custodies across 12 cells, four of which were contained in an Annex;
- Cells 1, 3, 5 and 7 could hold one custody;
- Cells 2, 4, 6 and 8 were large enough to hold two custodies, physically distanced; and
- the four Annex cells could each hold one custody.

The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) acknowledged this number in their daily court moves document. If necessary two interview rooms could also be utilised taking the maximum capacity to 18.

During the evidence gathering process, on 8 and 9 March 2021, it was evident that there were more custodies scheduled to appear than the cell capacity allowed. Therefore, the main purpose of this unannounced visit was to check that GEOAmey were managing their cell allocation in line with COVID-19 guidelines.

On arrival at the CCU, there were 13 custodies present in the CCU and a further six at Kittybrewster Police Station who were going to appear virtually at Dundee Sheriff Court. The Annex was not being used.

- one cell was empty;
- Cells 2, 4, 6 and 8 held two custodies;
- Cells 3, 5 and 7 held one custody; and
- interview rooms 2 and 3 each held one custody under constant observation.

Around midday, three custodies arrived from court that had been remanded and were not expected. The empty cell and two of the Annex cells were used to accommodate them. No custodies held in the CCU came from an SPS establishment, but Inspectors were pleased to hear that all arrivals from prison would be allocated a single cell to support them being held within a household bubble in the prison environment. Inspectors were therefore satisfied the CCU Manager had allocated the cells in line with COVID-19 guidelines.

During a full inspection in December 2018 and the June COVID-19 Liaison Visit, Inspectors noted that there were no toilet seats on the stainless steel bowls in the custody toilets. This was still the case and HMIPS encourage the SCTS to address this as a priority. HMIPS are pleased that the other recommendations from the [June visit](#) had been addressed.

As recommended in the December 2018 full inspection report, Inspectors continue to recommend that the SCTS consider cell doors being reconstructed to open outwards, preventing the potential for prisoners to barricade themselves in the cells.



During the visit, Inspectors were informed of plans to move the observation door from one of the Annex cells to Cell 1, which was situated opposite the bar officer desk in the main CCU. This would allow CCU staff to easily view occupants under constant observation. HMIPS will always support plans to improve the safety and care of custodies and would encourage the SCTS to go one step further and replace the door in Cell 1 without the removal of the observation door in the Annex. This would improve the ability to observe more people in a more effective manner.

Inspectors asked for an update on the proposed roll-out of all custodies being held at Kittybrewster Police Station to appear via video link to Aberdeen Sheriff Court, rather than attend the CCU. A response from SCTS and Police Scotland advised that both are committed to progressing virtual custodies and are currently piloting these courts in Falkirk Sheriff Court. Once this pilot is evaluated, it is anticipated that further roll out will occur. Virtual custody courts within Aberdeen utilising Kitty Brewster will be considered at that stage. HMIPS will continue to monitor progress over the coming months.

In summary, Inspector's found that Aberdeen CCU was well managed, with a good staff team. There were many examples of good practice found during the June visit, particularly with communication, processes in place to prioritise the marking of papers and the management of custodies. HMIPS are happy to report that this was still the case, and we continue to commend the way Aberdeen CCU has been managed. We would however encourage the SCTS to fully address the issue of the cell doors and the toilet seats as set out above.

Yours sincerely,

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