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Audrey Nicoll
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Dear Ms Nicoll

CRIMINAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE FOLLOW UP ITEMS FROM SCOTTISH PRISON SERVICE BUDGET EVIDENCE SESSION 19 NOVEMBER

Thank you for your email dated 11 February following up on the points SPS agreed to provide to the Committee after our evidence session on the same day.

Please see below the question and response as requested.

1. *The additional cost to the SPS from the full year increase in National Insurance contributions for FY 2026/27.*

The additional cost of the increase in Employer's National Insurance is £5.4m in 2026/27 as a result of changes implemented in 2025/26. The impact in 2025/26 was reduced through 60% funding by Scottish Government and this forms part of SPS base budget in future years.

2. *More data around SPS staff attrition rates, problems with staff sick absences (on issues musculoskeletal and mental health issues), the current level of staff turnover and recruitment requirements over the Spending Review period (including but not just for HMP Glasgow and HMP Highland) etc.*

Sick Absence
As a civil service department, SPS is required to report on sick absence in accordance with UK Cabinet Office requirements. This requires SPS to report the number of average working days lost per employee within the preceding 12-month period (AWDL).

At 31 January 2025, SPS's AWDL figure was 15.9 working days lost per employee. Throughout calendar year 2025, the AWDL figure has fluctuated between 15.5 and 16.1 days per employee throughout the year. Sick absence amongst operational staff (prison officer grades and operational managers) is greater than that across the overall SPS workforce, with 17.3 days lost to sick absence per operational employee during 2025.

In year, the most significant causations of sick absence have been stress, absences related to mental health conditions such as anxiety, and musculoskeletal issues such as back pain and physical injury.

Whilst absence rates in SPS remain stubbornly high and consistently above the civil service average, SPS's 2025 absence data does evidence a slight reduction in absence when compared to 2024 absence data. Of most significant note is a 9% reduction in the overall number of days lost to mental health and stress related absence in 2025, when compared to data from the previous calendar year.

Whilst we already have a number of health and wellbeing supports in place for our staff, more can be done. In recent months, we have introduced a bespoke package of wellbeing support for our senior operational leaders, and we continue to work with our recognised trade union partners to introduce new approaches to supporting staff who have experienced trauma. These new approaches will support staff and help them to identify signs of trauma as well as provide enhanced support, with a view to helping them maintain their health, their resilience, and to sustain their attendance at work.

In a financial context, the cost of sick absence is very difficult to ascertain. By way of indication, the cost of a days' sick absence for a Residential prison officer is circa: £230. That estimate only accounts for the direct loss of working time for the employee and doesn't account for any additional costs, such as the cost of managing sick absence, or the cost of other provisions that require to be put in place to cover critical shortages generated by sick absence.

Attrition Rates

For 2024/25, SPS turnover rate across all staff groups was 8.7%, which was a slight reduction on the figure quoted the previous year. For financial year 2025/26 to date (to 31 January 2026), SPS's turnover rate is 6.5%.

SPS's Approach to Workforce Planning across Prison Officer Grades

For prison officer recruitment, SPS aims to maintain a staffing position that is within 1% of agreed prison officer complements.

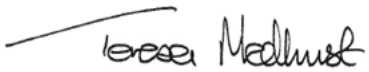
During the recent evidence session, I highlighted that SPS is currently operating at 0.6% below agreed prison officer complements across the SPS estate (which equates to circa: 20 Full Time Employees (FTE) across the prison estate). Since then, that position has improved to 0.7% above complement as a consequence of new Operations and Residential Officer intakes during January 2026.

To manage prison officer recruitment, SPS produces an annual recruitment delivery plan which is agreed by SPS's Executive Management Group prior to the commencement of each financial year. The plan takes account of known recruitment needs in any given financial year, as well as factors such as turnover trends, internal promotion requirements, and known increases in operational staffing requirements to support the introduction of new build prisons. In the coming years, prison officer requirements for HMP Highland and Glasgow will be incorporated in to and managed through our annual recruitment delivery plan approach.

The plan has served as an effective means of managing prison officer staffing levels, and in recent years has serviced significant prison officer recruitment needs. For example, SPS recruited 558 new prison officers during 2024/25, and to date during 2025/26, the plan has delivered 355 new prison officers to support operational service delivery across the prison estate. The plan for 2026/27 seeks to deliver 684 new prison officers in year to maximise service delivery across the existing SPS estate, and in preparation for the opening of HMP Highland.

I hope the committee find the above information helpful.

Yours sincerely



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