

Visit Report

**The Western Iceland Comissioner of Police
Police cells**

November 2025

**OPCAT monitoring of the conditions of
persons deprived of their liberty**

Summary

The Visit

The Althingi Ombudsman visited the holding cells of the West Iceland Commissioner of Police in Borgarnes and Akranes on 8-9 July 2024, as part of the office's OPCAT monitoring. The Ombudsman's examination focused on the detention of individuals in police holding cells, the facilities there and the general procedure, as well as police practices in relation to the detention.

Individuals arrested in the West Iceland police district are generally held at the Akranes police station, while the Borgarnes police holding cells are only used for short-term detention. During the one-year period prior to the visit, 43 detentions were recorded in the holding cells at the two locations.

Facilities

In the report various recommendations are made regarding facilities in the police holding cells, such as concerning the possibilities of detainees to monitor the passage of time, the lighting control, lack of daylight in the cells and the location of alarm buttons.

Attention is drawn to the fact that the police holding cells in Borgarnes are below the size standards set out in international standards for longer stays and are therefore less suitable for detentions lasting longer than a few hours. It was also pointed out that a cover inside the hatch openings on the walls of the cells in Akranes may restrict the view into the cells. The Commissioner of Police is therefore directed to consider whether this is the case and, if so, whether other methods of in-person check-ups are needed.

The report directs the Commissioner of Police to improve the safety of sanitary facilities in Borgarnes and Akranes, which include external pipes and breakable sanitary equipment, due to the risk of inmates harming themselves. Regarding the facility in Borgarnes, where the top of the door does not reach the door frame, the Commissioner of Police is directed to consider whether further privacy could be ensured, if the view is that the detainee does not need to be in sight.

Search and preservation of items

During the Ombudsman's visit, it was noted that circumstances could arise where no police officer of the same gender as the detainee was available to conduct a security search of the person concerned, although this was an exception. For this reason, a suggestion was made to the Commissioner of Police that ways be sought to ensure that the police officer who conducts a security search at a police station is always of the same gender as the person being searched.

The Ombudsman has emphasized the possibility of an individual assessment of the necessity of onerous decisions. In this context, the report refers, among other things, to the preservation of items taken from persons detained in police holding cells. It was discovered during the visit that an assessment is generally made as to whether items need to be removed from their possession

before individuals are transferred to a cell. Such a procedure is positive, in the opinion of the Ombudsman. It was noted, however, that the Commissioner's written procedures require that all items be removed before an individual enters a cell. The report points out that the procedure does not reflect actual practice and the Commissioner of Police is directed to review the written procedure with the aim of aligning it with practice. Furthermore, the Commissioner of Police is also directed to consider whether a different arrangement is needed for the storage of items, which are currently kept in baskets outside the cells, for example by installing locked storage compartments.

Video surveillance and in-person monitoring of detainees

During the visit, it was learned that continuous video surveillance is maintained of all prison cells. It is pointed out that, although video surveillance can reduce the likelihood of inhuman or degrading treatment, prevent suicide, self-harm and violent incidents, and may be a milder measure than constant in-person monitoring, for instance, when an individual is attempting to rest, it nevertheless constitutes a restriction on privacy. In light of the fundamental right to privacy and rules on personal data protection, the Ombudsman has pointed out that the need for continuous video surveillance must be assessed on an individual basis. Having regard to how complex it can be for the police to assess these circumstances, in part due to the short period individuals are typically held in detention, the Ombudsman has recommended that the National Commissioner of Police assess whether there is reason to propose general procedures for video surveillance.

It is fundamental, for the police to be able to ensure the safety of persons held in police cells, that there is adequate monitoring of those held there. The operating procedures of the West Iceland Commissioner of Police do not contain instructions on the frequency of in-person check-ups. During the visit, it was noted that it varied whether employees conducted checks every quarter, half-hourly, or hourly. Although video surveillance is continuous, the Ombudsman pointed out that such surveillance should not be used to replace direct communication with detained individuals.

For this reason, the recommendation is addressed to the Commissioner of Police to ensure that regular in-person check-ups of detainees is carried out, as well as to consider whether there is reason to have written procedures for its implementation.

With a view to the safety of personnel and persons detained in police holding cells, the Ombudsman recommends that the Commissioner of Police seek to ensure that staff responsible for monitoring detainees are not alone at the police station while individuals are being held. Similarly, suggestions were made regarding the low sound level of alarm buttons in the holding cells in Akranes and the need to ensure that staff can hear the signal from the alarm buttons in cells was highlighted.

Recording of information

Proper registration is important and serves the purpose of increasing the legal certainty of persons detained in police holding cells. The Regulation on the Legal Status of Arrested Persons, Police

Interrogations etc. imposes certain obligations on the police in connection with recording information on detentions in police holding cells. In this context, the Ombudsman recommends to the Commissioner of Police that information on the monitoring of detainees is always recorded in the detention report, that recording of items is carried out, and that the detainee signs the report of items returned after detention.

Notifications to relatives

During the visit, there were indications suggesting that there may be reason to reiterate the right of detained persons to notify close relatives of their detention in police holding cells. It also appeared that requests for such notifications were not being recorded appropriately. In addition, there appeared to be a failure to follow appropriate procedures when deciding to postpone notification to relatives. Since the standard report form does not provide for recording such, the suggestion has been made to the National Commissioner of Police to consider whether there is reason to add the possibility of registering these to the report form.

Education and training of staff

Police officers on duty monitor detainees in police holding cells. The Commissioner of Police has adopted a target of having 90% of police officers in their district with appropriate education. In this regard, the Commissioner has introduced incentives in the salary system for police officers who undertake police studies.

Taking into account the duties that police officers perform when detaining arrested persons, the Ombudsman believes that there is a need to ensure adequate training, education, and continuing education programmes focused adequately on the responsibilities incumbent on police officers when detaining arrested persons in police holding cells. The Ombudsman directs the Commissioner of Police in West Iceland, as appropriate in collaboration with the National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police and the Minister of Justice, to consider the above-mentioned issues.

Incidents in police holding cells

There were no recorded cases of self-harm or suicide attempts in holding cells of the West Iceland Commissioner of Police, but the visit did reveal that there may be reason to improve the recording of incidents in police holding cells. In view thereof, the Ombudsman directed the Commissioner of Police to ensure that the recording of incidents, particularly in relation to self-harm incidents, was handled in an adequate manner.

Channels for complaints and grievance procedures

The visit revealed that individuals were not systematically provided with instructions on possible avenues for complaints and grievances, but only if they expressed a desire to express comments on their detention. In this regard, the Ombudsman recommended that the Commissioner of Police ensure that information on possible channels for complaints and grievances is presented

systematically and that employees are instructed on how to safeguard these rights of persons held in police cells.

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