

Follow-up Report

Police holding cells on Hverfisgata Follow-up

2025

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

Summary

Recommendations and suggestions which were responded to

- Authorisation for the use of force
- Use of mechanical restraints in police holding cells
- Carrying out body searches
- Video surveillance
- Individual assessment in intervention
- Access to common area in the detention facility
- Improvements to the facilities with regard to safety
- Waiting time for interview rooms and interpreter services
- Composition of personnel
- Detention of children in police holding cells
- Provision of information
- Recording of time of arrest and time of release

Partially responded to

- Information on video surveillance
- Possibility of monitoring the passage of time
- Access to police holding cells
- Staff of police holding cells
- Assessment of detainees' condition
- Notification of detention of children
- Interpreting services

Work in progress

- Information sheet on video surveillance, rights and complaint- and appeal-channels
- Information sheet for children

Forum established for co-operation

- Guidelines on decision-making and detention arrangements
- Information about complaint and appeal channels

Not responded to

- Location of alarm buttons
- Signals connected to alarm buttons in cells
- Control of lighting in cells
- Individual assessment of the need for video surveillance
- Nutrition

Special concerns

The Althingi Ombudsman wishes to point out specifically the following points, regarding which the office has serious concerns and which it recommends be addressed promptly. More details of these issues will be discussed in the expected report of the Althingi Ombudsman concerning a visit to the holding cells of the police station on Hverfisgata on 10 and 11 October 2025.

Possibility of detainees to use the toilet

According to procedure, the duty supervisor may now request the assistance of other police officers if a detained individual needs attention requiring additional personnel, for example, when using the toilet. At a meeting with management on 11 April 2024 it was learned that it is not always possible to respond to requests to use the toilet without delay. This was due in particular to staffing problems, and an ongoing discussion with the Ministry of Justice was underway on staffing. The waiting time for toilet visits was generally not long, however. To judge by the detention reports and video recordings which the Ombudsman received in follow-up, together with the visit to the police holding cells of last October, it can be concluded that there may be some discrepancy in following the procedure provided for in the procedural guidelines. From the video recordings it is only possible to conclude that there could be considerable problems with response time when assistance is requested, for instance, to use the toilet, with the result that detainees could be forced to relieve themselves in their cell.

In almost one hundred detention reports examined, there was no mention in over half of the instances of toilet visits or whether the detainee had been offered to visit the toilet. There was, for instance, an example of an individual who had been detained in a police holding cell for almost 24 hours, with no mention that the person concerned had used the toilet or been offered an opportunity to do so. However, it should be noted that in some instances the detained persons may have fallen asleep in their cell. Nonetheless the above does give rise to questions as to whether detainees are informed of access to the toilet and whether record-keeping is satisfactory.

Active monitoring of detainees

According to standard operating procedures, an assessment should be made of how often checks are needed for an individual and of their need for care and health services. The conclusion of the assessment and the frequency of monitoring is to be recorded in a journal and with electronic monitoring at the cell entrance. From the custody log and detention records which the Ombudsman received, it can be concluded that there are considerable flaws in the recording of regular monitoring. There are also, according to the video recordings which the Ombudsman requested in connection with follow-up, certain indications that actual monitoring of detainees was not in all instances carried out satisfactorily. For instance, it appeared that it might be common practice for staff of the police holding cells, who were to carry out such monitoring, to have it suffice to have their cards scanned by the card reader at the cell entrance without actually looking into the cell. There were also indications in specific cases of a considerable lack of attention in this regard being provided to individuals in especially vulnerable condition while they were detained in police cells, even though their condition should have called for more frequent checks than otherwise. Details of such an instance will be provided in Chapter 4 of the report.

Detention of unclothed individuals in cells

The Ombudsman recommended that actions be taken to prevent arrested individuals struggling with self-injurious behaviour or who are suicidal from being stripped of their clothing and

remaining unclothed in police holding cells. At a meeting with management on 11 April 2024 it was learned that it was only in very exceptional circumstances that individuals in this condition were stripped, and then generally for a short time. It could, however, happen that persons were for a brief period naked in pictures and on the screen in the monitoring room, if they were not considered to be in a condition to have clothing or a blanket due to the risk of self-injury. This was, in the estimation of management, very regrettable but it was extremely costly to purchase security clothing, and in addition it was even possible to use such clothing to inflict self-harm. The involvement of the healthcare system regarding this issue was requested. As has previously been mentioned, in preparing the report the Ombudsman requested video recordings concerning the detention of two individuals in police holding cells. In one instance, the individual had their clothing removed, in part by having this cut up to do so, and was detained without clothing in a cell for almost the entire time of their stay, or for around seven hours. The record in the detention report was defective in this instance, making it impossible to determine whether this practice was due to the fact that the person concerned was assessed as at risk of self-injury or suicide or for other reasons. It is evident that the practice in this case conformed neither to procedures nor the information on detention practices in instances such as this, which the employees of the Ombudsman were provided with at a meeting with management as described above. During the visit by the Ombudsman and office staff to the police holding cells last October there were also indications that instances where individuals were placed in holding cells without clothing could be more frequent than the Ombudsman had previously been informed of.

Closing remarks

With reference to the detailed information in the report, the visit by the Althingi Ombudsman to the police station on Hverfisgata on 15-17 April 2019 and follow-up on the visit has concluded. From the follow-up it is clear that action in response to the Ombudsman's recommendations and suggestions was positive, although there remains considerable scope for further improvement in accordance with the Ombudsman's comments.

Contents

- 1 The follow-up and report
- 2 Response to recommendations and suggestions
 - In general
 - Recommendations and suggestions which were responded to
 - Partially responded to
 - Work in progress
 - Forum established for co-operation
 - Not responded to
 - Special concerns
- 3 Recommendations and suggestions reiterated
- 4 Information which gives cause for a new visit
- 5 Closing remarks