

A Short Summary of Secure Care in Scotland

Secure care in Scotland delivers trauma informed residential care for children deprived of their liberty, designed for the very small number of children who present a significant risk of harm to themselves or others and when their needs and risks can only be met and managed within a contained secure setting (Scottish Government, 2024). An average of 58 children were accommodated within secure care during 2024/25, 53 of whom were from Scotland and 58% of whom were aged 16 years or over (Scottish Government, 2026). Whilst secure care has often been viewed through a justice lens resulting in a perception of a punitive rather than therapeutic ethos (Wilson, 2022), the Promise (2020, p.80) concluded that “there must be absolute clarity that the underlying principle of Secure Care is the provision of therapeutic, trauma informed support”. The manner in which this is delivered is likely to change in the coming years. Following the Reimagining Secure Care project in 2024, Scottish Government published their response in June 2025 which set out a phased delivery; Phase 1: 2025/26 - 2027/28, Capacity restoration and reinforcement and delivering secure care contingency planning, restoring capacity and building resilience. Phase 2: 2028/29 - 2029/30 - and beyond, Road testing / readiness for re-imagining and applying learning from piloting, testing and evaluating (Scottish Government, 2025).

In February 2026 the Scottish Government undertook a consultation on the future of secure care and the single point of contact (SPOC) for victims in the Children's Hearings System. This closed in April 2026 and it is anticipated that the analysis of this will be shared in the autumn time. Currently CYCJ is supporting some local authorities to explore RSC within their services.

Routes into Secure Care

Once fully commenced, the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 will enable all those under 18 to access secure care when necessary, including as a result of acute child protection concerns. Roles and responsibilities vary depending on whether the child is placed through the Children's Hearing System, police powers, CSWO authorisation or the courts (Nolan, 2024), and following changes stemming from the 2024 Act, children accommodated within secure care under Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995 provisions must be treated as “looked after” both during and after their time within that setting. Irrespective of the route into secure care (Nolan, 2025), children are likely to have experienced significant childhood adversities (Gibson, 2020; 2021; Whitelaw and Gibson, 2023) and often face communication difficulties (Care Inspectorate, 2023).

Rigorous checks and balances are in place to ensure that a child is not deprived of their liberty arbitrarily, including the Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act (2011) and Secure Accommodation (Scotland) Regulations (2013). Moreover, the incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots' law mandates that deprivation of liberty should be a last resort and for the briefest appropriate period of time. To achieve this, and to implement care plans that meet the presenting risk, needs and vulnerabilities, the newly published ‘Alternatives to depriving children of their liberty’ guidance highlights practice considerations and provides case examples that could prove useful for practitioners.

Regulation and Scrutiny

Secure care in Scotland is delivered by four independent charities, with SAN Scotland providing further details and a summary of current capacity. This provision operates under the authority of Scottish Ministers and under a commissioning contract managed by Scotland Excel. It is regulated and scrutinised by the Care Inspectorate using a Quality Framework including a week long inspection every year, and by Education Scotland. Guidance has been published relating to the matching process for admissions, aiming to ensure that children are placed in the most appropriate setting and that their needs, and the needs of other children cared for within the setting, are effectively met. In addition, co-produced Secure Care Pathway and Standards launched in 2020 apply to all agencies and practitioners working with children in or on the edges of secure care and sets out what children can expect before, during and after their time within secure.

Therapeutic Trauma Informed Secure Care

Scotland's National Trauma Transformation Programme influences the care delivered within this setting, calling for care that recognises trauma and adversity, and which prevents further harm, aids recovery, addresses inequalities enhances the lives of this in receipt of care. Those working within secure care are therefore expected to have 'trauma enhanced' knowledge and skills in line with this programme.

A Care Inspectorate investigation into the application of the Secure Care Pathway and Standards found that secure care delivers a wider variety of support, including "psychological assessments and interventions, cognitive behavioural therapy, forensic psychology and groupwork programme ... provided by specialist intervention teams" (2023, p.13). The report also highlighted improvements to the health and wellbeing of children, and the role that relational practice where a key staff member spent time with the child. Secure care also provides bespoke educational opportunities for children who may have experienced gaps in learning, by providing individual or small group learning opportunities (Care Inspectorate, 2023). More comprehensive details of the approaches adopted by each secure care provider can be found on their respective websites.

Moving on from Secure Care

Scottish Government data for 2024/25 highlights that of the 136 children moving on from secure care during that year 30% moved on to the parental home/friend or relative, 12% to foster care/children's home, 32% to a residential school, 4% to secure care, 12% to a Young Offenders Institution (YOI) and 11% to another setting which could include supported accommodation, independent living, assessment centre, close support or hospital. The Children (Care and Justice) Act has resulted in an increase in children placed within secure care by court following conviction, thus leading to a greater proportion moving to a YOI upon their 18th birthday, and when the Act is fully implemented there will be the opportunity for young people through justice routes to remain in secure care up to their 19th birthday. Secure care centres report that up to half of new admission are through court; a significant increase than was the case in previous years. The reintegration and transition process for a child to move to a YOI is well established, and may provide useful in facilitating the move from locked residential care to the custodial environment.

A recent Care Inspectorate review highlighted good practice examples of supporting children to make successful transitions out of secure, with the involvement of the child and their family alongside residential staff and the lead professional shown to improve outcomes. Transitional support should be grounded in a holistic assessment of the child's needs and reflect Standards 40 - 44 of the Secure Care Pathways and Standards. All children who are within secure care on or after their 16th birthday are now eligible to aftercare supports as a 'care leaver' as set out in legislation, and guidance sets out the application of this in practice. Additional protocols are also in place for corporate parents that support housing options for care leavers

For further info/support contact CYCJ on 0141 444 8622 or cycj@strath.ac.uk