SCOTTISH POLICE AUTHORITY
ÙGHDARRAS POILIS NA H-ALBA

Policing Performance Committee
10 June 2026

Item 3.2: Assurance Update: Outstanding Warrants
Presenter: ACC Mark Sutherland, CJSD & C3
Appendix: N/A

Purpose

To provide the SPA Policing Performance Committee with an overview of the management and governance of warrants within Police Scotland.

Recommendation

For Discussion

Strategic Alignment

Strategic outcome(s)	Strategic Outcome 1: Communities are safer and more secure, with less crime and improved wellbeing. Vision 2030: Safer Communities / Supported Victims
Risk alignment	N/A
Prior governance	Police Scotland Performance Board
Stakeholder engagement	Crown Office & Procurator Fiscal Service Scottish Courts & Tribunal Service

Implications

Community	✓	Data & Privacy		Environmental	
Equalities & Human Rights		Financial		Health, Safety & Wellbeing	
Legal		Workforce			

1 Report Detail

1.1 Background

A paper was submitted to the SPA Policing Performance Committee on 9 December 2025 providing an overview of outstanding warrants across Police Scotland. This paper is intended to provide an update to the committee on action being taken across Police Scotland and partners to better manage, respond and mitigate the volume, threat and risk from warrants.

Warrants are an integral part of the criminal justice system and are issued to facilitate a person accused of an offence being brought before a court, returned to prison or required to pay outstanding court penalties or fines.

Police Scotland are responsible for executing warrants to apprehend people wanted on warrant and ensure they are brought before the court to allow proceedings to commence or be continued.

Further Information

1.2 Current Data & Demand

Between the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026, 37,077 warrants have been issued and a total of 31,113 have been executed or disposed of.

This means 5,964 warrants issued during this period remain live and provides an execution / disposal rate of 84%.

	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	3Yr Mean	2025/26
TOTAL	28,285	31,901	35,398	31,861.3	37,077

There has been a 16.4% increase in total warrants issued in 2025/2026 compared to the 3 year mean average and a 31% increase when comparing 2025/2026 to 2022/2023.

Non-appearance warrants have increased by 15% in 2025/2026 compared to the 3 year mean average and 17% compared to 2022/2023. They account for 64% of warrants issued in 2025/2026.

The number of live warrants fluctuate significantly daily, however since the last report in December 2025 the number of live warrants have been largely static, with 11,059 live warrants currently compared to 10,906 in December 2025. This demonstrates that despite the increasing

volume of warrants being issued, Police Scotland are effectively responding to this.

It is important to note that 11,059 relates to the number of warrants and not the number of people wanted on warrant. There are several instances where an individual has more than one outstanding warrant issued for them. The total number of individuals wanted on warrant is 7613.

1.3 Demand / Impact

The policing role in executing warrants is a longstanding and important part of the criminal justice system and supports our public safety duties.

The continued demand through warrants does however impact on the capacity and capability of police and partners. There is also an associated risk to public safety.

It places direct demand on frontline officers who are required to trace accused persons wanted on warrant and apprehend them. This can involve extensive enquiries to locate individuals especially those individuals who are intent on evading arrest or simply because of the lifestyle and individual leads. The persistent high volume disproportionately abstracts officers from other policing duties within local communities.

There is increased demand on our people working within custody centres as a direct result of more warrants being issued. If arrested on a warrant, an individual needs to be brought into police custody, apart from exceptional circumstances such as someone needing to go to hospital due to a medical issue. Similarly, apart from a few very limited set of circumstances, when in police custody the only real disposal option is to be held in police custody to appear at court.

An increase in warrants being issued places greater demand on support functions who need to update records, create warrant entries on police systems and allocate warrants to officers for enquiry.

The issuing of a warrant will often result in a hearing being adjourned, witnesses dismissed to be recited, and a general duplication of effort to reconvene court proceedings. This increases the number of citations to be served on members of the public, as well as an increase in the time spent in court for police officers.

1.4 Causes

It is generally accepted that less people are attending court than pre-pandemic, resulting in increases in fail to appear warrants across trials and other court business.

The reasons for less people attending court and the subsequent increase in warrants, in particular failure to appear warrants, is likely due to a range of factors including social instability, vulnerabilities of individuals, misunderstanding of court dates or indeed deliberate avoidance.

Factors contributing to this will include a lack of secure and stable housing, poverty, mental health issues and addiction issues. The complex needs and challenges faced by many people who commit criminality all contributes to less people attending court and indeed people breaching bail. Support services and interventions to address this require proper resources and funding if long term change and positive outcomes are to be achieved.

This increase in warrants should also be considered against the greater use of alternatives to remand and prison sentences, for example, a more robust test in legislation for a person to be remanded and greater use of electronic bail monitoring. This will lead to more reporting of offences for example breach of bail and other criminality, which means more cases entering the criminal justice system through summons and thereafter more warrants being issued.

Another key factor for the failure to appear is assessed to relate to the fact that individuals are not provided with a consistent form of reminder to attend court as is seen in health and other public sector areas.

In addition to these factors, Police Scotland's workforce has reduced since 2013. At a very basic level, this means there are fewer police officers available to execute warrants, whilst the number of warrants issued is increasing. This needs to be considered alongside increasing, more complex demands and threats that Policing faces.

1.5 Responding to the Demand

Police Scotland

Since the last report Police Scotland has conducted an internal audit on the management and governance of warrants which has recently concluded and provided internal recommendations which are under consideration.

This review highlighted the need for enhanced performance management data and information to be available for divisions along with enhanced monitoring and governance at both a local and national level.

Recognising that the internal review would likely highlight the need for enhanced performance management data and tools, this piece of work had already been instigated, and a new enhanced performance management tool went live on 1 May 2026.

This not only includes live warrants per division, but includes data on type of warrants, execution / disposal rate, the number of individuals wanted on warrant etc. This will provide divisions with greater data and information, allowing divisional senior leadership teams to ensure robust governance and resource tasking and allocation.

As the 'Policing Our Communities' model rolls out across the organisation, this will ensure the organisation is better structured and resourced to prioritise prevention and thus reduce offending and demand within the criminal justice system, which would include demand created by warrants.

Partnerships

Through a collaborative approach Police Scotland and partners are undertaking work to consider different approaches to reducing the demand from warrants. This includes development of electronic reminders to persons to remind them of a court date and other criminal justice process which may prevent the future need for a warrant being issued.

Wider strategic work is on-going by partners in relation to greater support and intervention for people released on bail, in an effort to reduce offending and breaches of bail, which would have a direct impact on the number of warrants being issued.

In addition to this, Police Scotland is leading discussions at a tactical level on how the Police Custody Arrest Referral Scheme could be significantly enhanced, to ensure effective intervention and engagement when persons are in police custody. There are several case studies that demonstrate the benefit of this type of model and evidence how it can prevent re-offending. The intention is to use the proposals developed at the tactical level to instigate strategic discussion and considerations on what is proposed.

However, given the complex reasons outlined earlier as to why less people are attending court, this goes further than policing and policing alone both from an enforcement and prevention perspective will not

resolve the increasing number of people wanted on warrants. It requires strategic commitment, resource and finance investment in support services and a range of agencies to address the causes of offending and criminality.

The strategic engagement and work on-going in relation to this does not consider warrants in isolation, and considers more effective support for repeat offenders who breach bail, fail to appear at court and how they get access to the services they need.

1.6 Threat & Risk

Whilst there is a high number of warrants outstanding and the number issued continues to rise, Police Scotland will continue to locate, trace and apprehend people wanted on warrant and resources will be prioritised on the basis of threat, risk and harm.

This can be evidenced by the fact that of the 11,059 outstanding warrants, only 1642 relate to Category A warrants.

It is also important to note that the total number of warrants alone is not an indication of threat and risk to communities. Warrants are issued for a variety of reasons and do not always indicate a threat to the public.

Police Scotland also needs to assess and respond to threat, risk and harm in relation to a range of policing matters, this includes for example protecting victims from domestic abuse and taking action to tackle the harm caused by drug dealing in a community.

It may be the case that the threat from these issues is greater than the threat from some outstanding warrants, and resources need to be allocated and deployed according to this. The assessment of threat and risk in relation to warrants is not and cannot be a binary approach given the increasing, complex demand facing policing.

2 Strategic alignment detail

2.1 Strategic alignment to strategic police plan and other key enabling strategies

Strategic outcome(s)	Strategic Outcome 1: Communities are safer and more secure, with less crime and improved wellbeing. Vision 2030: Safer Communities / Supported Victims

2.2 The issuing of warrants and execution of warrants are a critical part of the criminal justice system, ensuring those accused of or who have committed a crime(s) are brought before the courts. This has direct strategic alignment to public confidence in the justice system, ensuring safer communities and supporting victims and witnesses.

2.3 Alignment to risk register and risk appetite

Risk alignment	N/A

2.4 Prior governance

Prior governance	Police Scotland Performance Board

2.5 The content of the paper has been reviewed and approved for submission by the Police Scotland Performance Board.

2.6 Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement	Crown Officer & Procurator Fiscal Service Scottish Courts & Tribunal Service

2.7 Specific consultation has not taken place in respect of this paper, however engagement has been on-going with key partners in relation to the increasing demand from warrants and how this can be addressed. More detail in relation to this is provided further in the report.

3 Implications detail

Community	✓	Data & Privacy		Environmental	
Equalities & Human Rights		Financial		Health, Safety & Wellbeing	
Legal		Workforce			

3.1 Community - The issuing of a warrant will often result in a hearing being adjourned, witnesses dismissed to be recited, and a general duplication of effort to reconvene court proceedings. This impacts on victims and witnesses, their confidence in policing and the overall effectiveness of the criminal justice system.