

Lewisham Independent Custody Visitors

Report to Lewisham Safer Neighbourhood Board 2017

ICV Background

Lewisham continues to maintain its panel of Independent Custody Visitors who are all community volunteers. We check on the conditions and treatment detainees experience whilst in police custody by conducting weekly random visits. During these visits we both speak to detainees and check a number of areas such as shower facilities and food storage. Lewisham has just one custody suite located at the police station on Lewisham High Street.

Those held in police custody have in the main not been charged or convicted of any offence. Though arrested they will often be released without charge following proper investigation. They might also be held for their own safety until alternative accommodation can be found. The role of the Independent Custody Visitor is to provide visible reassurance to the community that those held in custody by the Police are treated fairly and properly even whilst their liberty is denied them.

ICV Performance

For most of the year Lewisham has had a full complement of visitors though due to recent resignations (including our Chair) recruitment is now underway. The introduction of an online (non paper) system that requires recording of visits to be undertaken from home has caused some disquiet and has not been universally accepted. Our visit rate of around 50% reflects this position (and is one of the lowest rates in London). Work is underway with MOPAC (who administer the ICV scheme in London) to improve this position.

The introduction of the online system also means that our visit findings are no longer accessible immediately to Custody Suite Inspectors. MOPAC are investigating giving access to the police so they can view reports directly.

MOPAC continue to arrange training for ICVs both for new visitors and as refresher courses. The recent IPCC (Independent Police Complaints Commission) bulletin focussed on custody matters and was sent to all visitors as it highlighted the challenging and complex nature of managing a custody suite.

Custody Suite findings

We find that the overall treatment of detainees is as it should be with the team of custody staff behaving professionally, and with compassion, even when faced with extremely complex and sometimes dangerous circumstances. It is reassuring that a medical professional is almost always present in the custody suite though their workload is often such that it takes longer than ideal to respond to requests from individual detainees.

The staff work hard to deal properly with both young people and those with poor mental health. It is acknowledged that these two groups are often held longer than is desirable and necessary in custody suites due to a shortage of more appropriate accommodation. It is disappointing that resolving these

shortages is taking such a long time when all with responsibility recognise that it is not an acceptable position to be in. Lewisham is not unique in this.

It is also unfortunate that some detainees are held for longer than is necessary in the suite due to the difficulty in arranging timely transport to prison once a detainee has been remanded in custody by the magistrates. The current system (via a third party outside the Met's control) appears inflexible. It does not reflect the increasing use of a virtual court which often means that detainee's once remanded have to wait overnight in police custody before being transported to prison.

This presence of detainees who should no longer be in police custody (as they should be in prison) means that less custody staff time is available to deal with the other detainees such as supervising showers and access to fresh air. It must be remembered that custody suites and associated police processes are not designed for stays of many days – in fact the assumption is that detainees will go before the magistrates within 24 hours. The standard of food, washing facilities and fresh air is based on this premise.

Custody suite under resourced

Staff shortages mean that the custody suite is often running at its minimum complement of detention officers. This shortage adds to the difficulty staff experience in responding properly and comprehensively to the needs and entitlements of all detainees. The requirement to dedicate time to those detainees at risk of harm means that other detainees do not receive the entitlements they might normally expect. Whilst the recruitment process is now underway the impact of the recent bar on detention officer recruitment, and other changes linked with entry into the Metropolitan Police has created unnecessary additional strain on those left working at Lewisham and is a continuing issue.

For the future

Elsewhere in London a trial of the use of Spit Guards is underway in 5 custody suites and expected to continue until at least the end of June 2017. Custody visitors will be updated on the trial's findings once they are known but if deemed successful it can be expected they will be deployed in Lewisham.

Do you think being an ICV is for you?

As mentioned earlier Lewisham Independent Custody Visitors are recruiting – we are looking for new visitors to join the panel. If you are interested, and we welcome applications from all those who have a connection with Lewisham – whether working, living or studying in the Borough – please make contact with me via the Safer Neighbourhood Board, or look at the MOPAC web site where there is further detail and an application form (<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/mayors-office-policing-and-crime-mopac/community-safety/independent-custody-visitors>).

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