

Lewisham Independent Custody Visitors Report to Lewisham Safer Neighbourhood Board 2018

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 several areas such as shower facilities and food storage. Lewisham has just one custody suite located at the police station on Lewisham High Street.

Many held in police custody, though arrested, have in the main not been charged or convicted of any offence. 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

This last year has been challenging. We have lost a number of experienced visitors which has meant that those remaining have been under pressure to visit more often than is expected. Therefore some weeks a visit has not been possible. We have balanced the responsibility to conduct regular weekly visits with the needs of visitors – not wanting to put them under undue pressure of time: we are all volunteers after all.

MOPAC, based out of City Hall and part of the organisation managed by the London Mayor are responsible for the ICV scheme across London. Changes at MOPAC over the past year have meant that Lewisham's point of contact has changed several times. This has not helped the recruitment process specifically, and has not been ideal in developing a consistent and ongoing relationship with the scheme's managers.

However I am pleased to report that three new visitors are undergoing vetting and it is hoped that before the Summer ends they will become accredited and valued visitors and performance will start to improve. We will still be below full strength though.

The importance of having a full complement of visitors is that the custody suite is observed from the point of view of as broad a cross section of Lewisham residents as possible. Each visitor's background and life experience inform how they see the operation of the custody suite – diversity brings many benefits.

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. Availability of appropriate adults out of hours can also add to the time vulnerable detainees are held.

Lewisham custody suite also is expected to take detainees from other suites that have had to close temporarily due to shortage of staff. Just recently in May the neighbouring suites in Bromley, Plumstead and Walworth Road were all closed for this reason resulting in more detainees than normal at Lewisham. This puts additional pressure on Lewisham custody suite staff.

Custody suite resourcing

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

The move in late 2018 to a new police model whereby the three boroughs of Lewisham, Greenwich and Bexley will come together under a single command unit is being monitored for possible impact on detainees and the custody suites. There will only be two across the new unit (Bexley and Lewisham). Concern has been raised as to the impact on detainees, their families, and other professionals if those detained are taken further from their home location. ICVs will monitor this as the change happens.

Do you think being an ICV is for you?

As mentioned earlier Lewisham Independent Custody Visitors is still 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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