

# Lewisham Independent Custody Visitors

## Report to Lewisham Safer Neighbourhood Board 2019

### 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.

Focus areas in 2019 include treatment of vulnerable detainees such as children and those with poor mental health, as well as ensuring that female detainees have appropriate and comfortable access to sanitary products. It is recognised that custody is not an appropriate place for many of these groups but despite being in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the custody suite is often the only safe place for them, and perhaps the least worst place: local secure accommodation for children, for example, is virtually non-existent, as is access to secure mental health beds.

Lewisham has just one custody suite located at the police station on Lewisham High Street.

Most held in police custody, though arrested, have 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 again been challenging as the panel is under strength and so the few visitors in place have been under pressure to make more visits than would normally be expected. Therefore some weeks a visit has not been possible. We have balanced the responsibility to conduct regular weekly visits with the needs of our visitors – not wanting to impose too much of a burden on them: 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. Administrative weakness at MOPAC have not helped the recruitment process, but the last few months have brought a welcome and consistent point of contact to Lewisham and there is evidence of a more focussed approach from MOPAC in supporting the Lewisham panel, and taking concerns identified at local London Borough level to senior police officers.

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 in the main 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.

As in 2018 we find the staff work hard to deal properly with detainees including 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.

The reduction in numbers of custody suites across the Metropolitan Police area means that there is greater pressure on those, including Lewisham, that remain open. We are for the first time observing times when Lewisham is full and has no more capacity for detainees. Running at such high levels of occupancy puts additional pressure on Lewisham custody suite staff.

## Custody suite resourcing

Continuing 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.

## For the future

In the 2018 report we identified possible implications for detainees with the move to the new police model whereby the three boroughs of Lewisham, Greenwich and Bexley will come together under a single command unit. Early anecdotal evidence in 2019 is that this reorganisation is having a negative impact: certain groups of detainees are being held in custody longer than they would otherwise have been. This will continue to be monitored as it could also be linked with the reduction in police numbers, and changes to how police follow through with those arrested.

Later this year (2019) Bexley custody suite will open and Plumstead will be 'mothballed' – to be held in readiness for emergency situations. The impact of this on Lewisham custody suite will be monitored.

## Do you think being an ICV is for you?

As mentioned earlier Lewisham Independent Custody Visitors are 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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June 4<sup>th</sup> 2019