



Independent Custody Visiting Scheme for Cheshire

Annual Report 2023/24

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This Annual Report captures details of the work of the Independent Custody Visiting Scheme within Cheshire from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 and includes information in relation to volunteers, custody facilities and outcomes from the visits undertaken throughout the year.

Background

In 1981, Lord Scarman commissioned an inquiry into the Brixton and Toxteth riots and recommended that, in order to promote public confidence in policing, a system should be developed whereby policing activity should be made more publicly accessible, easily scrutinised and subject to greater questioning and comment. As a result, the concept of Custody Visiting (or Lay Visiting as it was then known) was recommended. Home Office Ministers approved the provision of custody visiting on a voluntary basis on the part of Police Authorities, which subsequently became a statutory requirement when the Police Reform Act 2002 came into effect. In 2012, the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act transferred the responsibility to Police and Crime Commissioners.



Independent Custody Visiting is therefore a statutory requirement of Police and Crime Commissioners of which the purpose is to provide independent oversight of the detention of people in police custody. The aim of this is to provide the public with confidence that the police treat people lawfully and with respect whilst in custody.

Police and Crime Commissioners are responsible for maintaining and administering an Independent Custody Visiting Scheme in their area, although the Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner (OPCC) monitors the operation of the Scheme on behalf of the Commissioner. Independent Custody Visitors (ICVs) are members of the local community who volunteer to check on the welfare of people detained in police custody.

ICVs visit custody suites unannounced and will report directly to the OPCC detailing any issues that arise from a visit or requiring further action. Recommendations made by ICVs lead to improvements for the welfare and dignity of detainees. Any issues requiring immediate action are escalated to the Custody Sergeant at the time of the visit. Consequently, ICVs play a valuable role in maintaining public confidence in policing.

Introduction to Police Custody in Cheshire

Cheshire Constabulary has three operational custody suites:

- Eastern Area - Middlewich
- Northern Area - Runcorn
- Western Area - Blacon.

All three custody suites operate 24/7. Each custody suite has its own team of Custody Sergeants and Detention Officers and all suites are well equipped with provision of food and drink, blankets, clothing, religious and reading materials. On average there are 1,900

detainees per month across all three suites however, due to its central locality Middlewich custody suite is the busiest.

Overall numbers – 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024	
Custody Suite	Annual throughput
Middlewich	8,860
Runcorn	8,827
Blacon	5,409
Total	23,096

Cheshire ICV Scheme

As of 31 March 2024, there were 17 active ICVs participating in the scheme across the county. Members of the ICV scheme are split into three panel groups, each one serving one of the custody suites. ICVs visit custody suites unannounced and at any time or day of the week and are completely independent from the Cheshire Constabulary.

Every year Cheshire's volunteers are offered opportunities to be involved in activities addressing their learning & development needs and they can gain new knowledge and skills that would support them in fulfilment of their role. All ICVs were invited to participate in annual training which took place in May 2023 and explored such topics as:

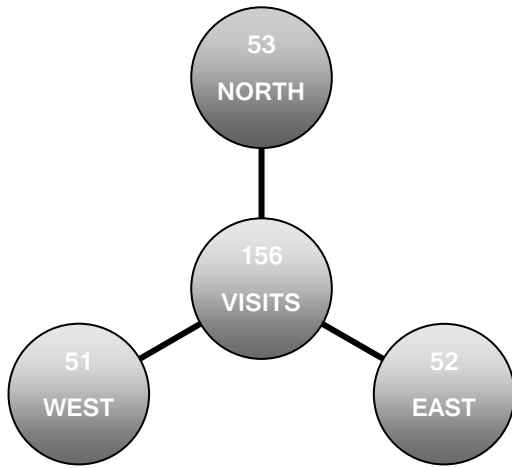
- Custody Performance & Management
- Substance misuse in the custody context
- Neurodiversity
- PERMA – Positive Psychology Training.

Furthermore, ICVs attended panel meetings on a quarterly basis. At each panel meeting the Chief Inspector responsible for Custody was present to provide updates and to address any issues brought to their attention by ICVs.

ICV Visiting Data

The below data captures details of the work of the ICV scheme within Cheshire from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 and includes information in relation to volunteers, custody facilities and outcomes from the visits undertaken throughout the year.





Comparison of the number of custody visits conducted last year with number of custody visits in the previous years (2022/23 = 155 visits; 2021/22 = 155 visits; 2019/20 = 145 visits¹).

This indicates that a similar number of visits are conducted each year demonstrating consistency and reassurance, and that each custody suite is visited at least once per week (as per rota and Scheme Guidance).

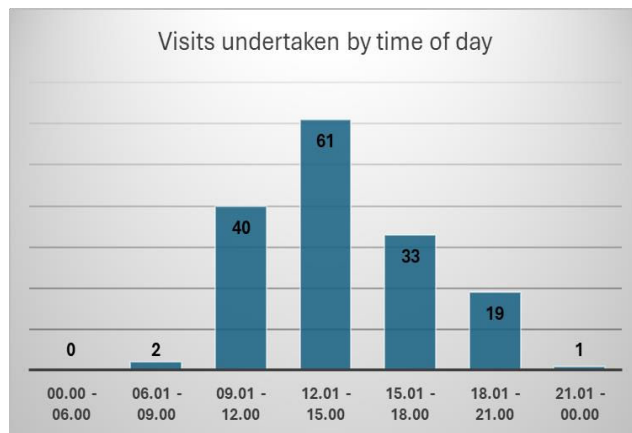
DPs* through Custody 2023/24	Total ICV visits	Total DPs at ICV visits	Total no DPs visited
Apr-Jun: 5,995	38	482	336
Jul-Sep: 5,871	40	491	309
Oct-Dec: 5,625	40	460	352
Jan-Mar: 5,605	38	413	250
Totals: 23,096	156	1,846	1,247

**Detained Persons*

Detainees may not receive a visit due to being interviewed, asleep, intoxicated or on advice given by custody staff due to safety reasons. In addition, detainees may also decline a visit and 40 detainees exercised this right throughout 2023/24 which is 22% less in comparison to the previous year (2022/23 = 51).

¹ No data available for the period 2020/21 during which visits were impacted by Covid-19 restrictions and any statistical information would not be comparable with past and future years.

The OPCC analyses data from visits to ensure that the ICV Scheme remains effective and that visits are completed throughout the week as well as at various times of the day. The graphs below indicate at what day of the week and time of the day visits were completed throughout 2023/2024.



ICV Scheme Findings

ICVs are independent to the Constabulary and during their visits, through proactive engagement with detainees, custody staff and custody facility will aim to establish whether detainees' welfare needs are met and whether those detained in custody are treated appropriately. They also ensure that PACE and the Codes of Practice are being complied with. Each ICV custody visit results in production of a report form and findings from the visit are fed back to the OPCC. Cheshire Constabulary is being informed of any findings that would be concerning but also, which is just as important, of any positive feedback and observations.

In most cases issues brought to the attention of ICVs are resolved during the custody visit, directly with the custody staff, or immediately afterwards. Such issues will range from requests for additional drink or/and food, additional blankets to detainee needing medication, wishing to contact family members and/or solicitor. It is vital to note that ICVs in their reports and verbal feedback provide PCC with reassurance that Cheshire Constabulary provides detainees with high standards of care, and they are treated with respect and dignity. Moreover, ICVs have a professional, cooperative relationship with their police colleagues, and the scheme works well because custody staff value the role and the insight and transparency it provides.

Throughout 2023/24 on 32 occasions ICVs reported issues with custody facilities and equipment such as:

- Shortage of blankets (DPs stated being cold).
- CCTV not working properly.
- Fire alarm showing faults on the panel (Blacon & Middlewich Custody).
- Cleanliness/tidiness of exercise yard (noted three times) and cells (noted twice at Middlewich Custody).
- Air conditioning not working (reported on two occasions).

These observations that are not resolved immediately, are monitored by the OPCC and ICVs. Estate issues listed above have been resolved and currently the OPCC is monitoring progress on any outstanding actions reported in the last quarter.

Also, a recurring theme is low staffing levels in all three custody suites that has been reported on 16 occasions. On one occasion there was a report of delay; on one occasion ICVs had to abandon visit due to staff shortages and also on one occasion ICVs aborted visit due to same reason. In majority of cases, despite the low staffing levels ICVs stated that suite operated in an efficient manner, and welfare of detainees were upheld.

Cheshire Constabulary across the year has implemented various steps and actions to remedy this issue. The force set out a minimum staffing levels, with an agreed process in case if, this number would drop down then custody staff roles (detention officers and Sergeants) would be backfilled through Resource Management Unit. Moreover, additional staffing resources have been secured to fill in the vacant positions (applicable to current and forecasted leavers). Also, the Constabulary introduced several initiatives aiming to reduce levels of long-term sickness such as: new leave policy allowing staff more time off, closer working with HR and monitoring absence management weekly, ensuring right support is in place to get people back to work, regular staff engagement by Custody Management Team (monthly drop-in sessions, daily visits to suites).

Example of where ICVs have effected change

ICVs have found telephone connector on the windowsill in the exercise yard. ICVs promptly informed custody staff about this and the item which could potentially cause serious risk within the custody environment has been removed. Also, negative observations reported by ICVs in relation to untidiness of the exercise yard led to positive outcome where this area of custody suite had been tidied up. (Middlewich Custody Suite, July 2023).

It is important to note that majority of ICV reports contain only positive observations regarding treatment of detainees, custody staff's attitudes and custody environment. On several occasions ICVs identified notable practice by custody staff which has always been brought to the attention of Custody Chief Inspector.

ICVs noted on the report form the excellent way in which the duty Sergeants dealt with a male with obvious learning difficulties who had been brought into custody. They were impressed at the patience, the empathetic manner in which the conversations were handled, and the tone used. It was respectful and carried out with the individual's best interest at heart. Additionally, the follow up discussion with the PC's & wider custody team was also managed in the same vein. In the ICVs opinion it was an excellent example of superb communication. (Blacon Custody Suite, November 2023).

ICVs were asked to adjourn visit due to genuine fears for their safety as booking in a very difficult DP. ICVs contacted ICV Scheme Coordinator directly to pass on very positive feedback in relation to Detention Officers/custody staff and putting ICVs safety and welfare first. Experienced Detention Officer spotted that something may be risk to ICVs and advised new Detention Officer to remove them quickly to safe place within custody. Afterwards same Detention Officer approached ICVs and provided with a detailed rationale why it's been done. (Middlewich Custody Suite, October 2023)

Looking Forward to 2023/24

Plans for the forthcoming year will include:

- Finalisation of the work on the implementation of e-report forms.
- Arrange and host the ICV Regional Conference which brings together all ICV schemes from North-West and North Wales.
- Recruit and train eight new ICVs.

The Independent Custody Visiting Association (ICVA)

Cheshire PCC is a member of the Independent Custody Visiting Association (ICVA). ICVA is a Home Office funded organisation that operates to promote and support the effective provision of custody visiting nationally. As a national resource for custody visiting, ICVA works closely with government and criminal justice organisations to:

- raise public awareness on the rights, entitlements, health and wellbeing of people held in police custody;
- advise on best practice for independent custody visiting schemes nationally; and
- provide training, publicity and support to PCCs, their offices and ICVs.

For additional information in relation to custody visiting nationally, please visit the Independent Custody Visiting Association website www.icva.org.uk

If You Would Like to Know More...

For further information in relation to the Independent Custody Visiting Scheme or if you are interested in becoming ICV please contact:

Karolina Kardas (ICV Scheme Coordinator)
Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner,
Police Headquarters, Clemonds Hey, Oakmere Road,
Winsford, Cheshire, CW7 2UA

Telephone: 01606 364000 E-mail: pcc@cheshire.police.uk

Cheshire Constabulary Management Response:

As the Chief Inspector of custody, part of my leadership role is to be open to effective external scrutiny. The Police and Crime Commissioner's independent custody visitors, are an integral part of that commitment.

By visiting over 5% of the annual number of detainees in custody, this group provides valuable insight to the lived experience of a detained person who is under our care. Key areas that the ICVs can report on are vulnerability, mental health and wellbeing.

As the sole Chief Inspector and with only 8 Inspectors to support me in my role, we cannot be in every suite all of the time over a 24/7, 365 day period.

The extra eyes and ears of the ICVs are fabulous, offering me a further insight into how my team are doing a great job, and if we are found to be falling short of what is expected this can then be rectified in real time. Great news for all concerned.

The main issues raised by the report have been staffing and estates issues. Staffing has been a challenge, but has never fallen below what is required to provide a safe environment for the DPs and all those who work in and visit the custody suite, including external visitors. By the end of October, I will have only three vacancies in a team of 126. This has been made possible thanks to great internal partnership working between HR talent acquisition, and the learning and development team to bring new talent into the organisation, and HR employee relations for retaining our current team and ensuring they are fit and healthy for work. The absenteeism in custody is well below the Force average, at less than 3%.

The custody buildings themselves are well over 20 years old, which has brought a unique set of demands. But, working with the organisation's estates team and external contractors means that any faults are not left broken for long. The end of this financial year is an exciting time for the estates of custody, as we are having a refit across all of the suites, giving the booking in desks the ability to provide more dignity for DPs as they inform the custody sergeants of their personal details, and brings an opportunity to freshen up the environment for my team. I look forward to welcoming the ICVs to these new look venues.

Lindsay Dixon
T/Chief Inspector