



NORFOLK POLICE AUTHORITY

Ensuring an Efficient and Effective Police Service

Through the eyes of an Independent Custody Visitor

Trudie, how did you get involved in the Independent Custody Visiting Scheme?

I actually saw the role advertised on the back of a bus and thought it sounded really interesting. I then applied to join the Scheme without really knowing what to expect!

What happened next?

Once my application had been vetted, I had an informal interview with the Scheme's Administrator and the Chairman of Norfolk Police Authority's Custody Visitors Committee.

Having been successful with this element of the recruitment process, I was then invited to attend a Training & Information Day at Jubilee House in Wymondham, the Constabulary's HQ.

What training should an Independent Custody Visitor expect to receive?

The initial training day is really interactive and involves completion of a DVD based workbook. At the session, those in attendance participate in discussions such as; the generic needs of people detained in custody, qualities that we ourselves should and should not display when carrying out a visit and the procedures and processes involved in the arrest and visit process.

Further to this, during my 6 month probationary period, I was always 'paired' with an experienced custody visitor who acted as a 'mentor' whilst I found my feet; and my Panel Co-ordinator provided additional support as did my fellow visitors; particularly at the quarterly meetings.

The Police Authority has also provided other ad hoc training throughout my time as a custody visitor including observance of training delivered to Police Officers regarding the use of CS spray and restraint techniques. This has been very useful to ensure that we, as custody visitors, are aware of varying processes whilst in the custody environment.

Can you tell us what the average 'visit' is like?

I will attend the police station unannounced, with one of my fellow panel members, and having shown my identity card to the public enquiry office, will be granted immediate access to the custody suite.

Once we are in the facility, we are able to observe what is happening during that time. As soon as the Custody Sergeant is available, we will ask him/her to inform us of pertinent issues (for example, how many detainees are being held at that time/whether any are being interviewed) and we are then escorted around the facility.

The escorting officer (not necessarily the custody sergeant) will 'introduce' us to a detainee and seek their permission before the visit process can go ahead. It is important for the detainee to be advised that we are independent, impartial and not informed of the reason for their detention or their name.

Should permission be granted, we will speak to the detainee to ensure their rights and entitlements are upheld in accordance with the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE), that the conditions within which they are held are satisfactory, and check on their treatment and well being.

We will also ask permission to review the 'detention log' element of a detainee's custody record. This document catalogues the circumstances relating to that person since they were detained. Again, this will not contain information regarding the reason for their arrest or personal information, but will allow us to check what we have been told by the detainee.

In the event that any queries are raised as a result of the visit, we will liaise with the custody sergeant/escorting officer in order to resolve them. Most of the time queries are as straightforward as allowing the person another drink, or obtaining a blanket.

Once we have spoken to all the detainees available to be visited (assuming they consent to a visit), we will inspect the custody suite, ensuring that issues such as call buttons are working, washing and toilet facilities are clean and that stock levels are adequate.

It is at this point that we can then complete our report form. The report captures information raised during our discussions with the detainees and how issues are resolved, as well as reasons that a visit may not have gone ahead (a detainee may have been with the doctor or having fingerprints taken etc). A copy of this report is sent to the Police Authority, a copy is held by the Inspector responsible for the custody suite, a copy is held by the Panel Co-ordinator and a copy is retained in the custody area.

Trudie, you are a Panel Co-ordinator, what does this involve?

A Panel Co-ordinator is mainly responsible for organising the 'rota' of visits during each quarter. We attend our custody suite once a week, and therefore I will ensure that visits are undertaken on a range of days of the week and at varied times of the day.

I will also liaise closely with the Scheme Administrator to report on concerns or issues that may arise as a result of any visit conducted by our team and await details as to the resolution.

We also hold a quarterly Panel meeting, which I will chair, and at these meetings we can discuss issues highlighted during the quarter; receive an update from the Scheme Administrator regarding, for example, future training events or recruitment/publicity information. The local Inspector also provides input.

I also collate a quarterly statistical return for the Police Authority to enable them to scrutinise how we, and indeed, the Norfolk Constabulary are operating.

What do you like best about this role?

I enjoy working as part of a team and it is reassuring to know that there are individuals, such as myself, attending custody facilities to check on the well being of detained persons.

What would you say to people who might comment “why do prisoners get these types of privileges’? – what about the victim?”

Firstly, I would say that individuals held within police cells under the rules of PACE have not been convicted of any crime. These are individuals who have been detained so that the Constabulary can obtain additional evidence prior to deciding the next course of action. It is important to make this distinction; I would like to think that, should a member of my family be detained, every effort was made to ensure they were being treated properly and fairly.

What benefits do you believe this role provides?

I believe the benefits are immense and, in fact, quite wide ranging.

Firstly, for myself, I find I am learning new skills that I can apply in my professional life. The experience also provides me with an opportunity to do something for my local community; and I am able to speak to detainees, who can often be intimidated by their surroundings, and seek to resolve any queries that may arise.

Secondly, the role provides greater public understanding and confidence of the statutory and non-statutory rules governing a detained person’s welfare. It offers an extra level of mutual protection to detained persons and police officers by providing independent scrutiny of the treatment of detained persons and the conditions in which they are held.

Finally, what advice would you give to anyone thinking about applying to become an Independent Custody Visitor?

If you are aged between 18 – 85, a community minded person, who is open minded, non-judgemental and can maintain confidence then, go for it.

There are some restrictions to people applying and this includes individuals already involved in the Criminal Justice System and members who already act as Appropriate Adults or Lay Observers (so as not to compromise the 'independence' of the Scheme).

Visits are conducted at any time of the day or night and will vary across days of the week; therefore interested applicants will need to be flexible in the time they are able to commit to the role. I would also suggest that being a team player is vital as well as showing a sense of empathy.

It is important to remember that the 'independent' element of the role relates to independence from the Norfolk Constabulary and the detainee – ICVs are not there to represent either of these parties. Our role is to look, listen and report.

Editors Note:

Thank you for your comments Trudie. If you are interested in this role or would like to speak to either the Scheme Administrator or one of the Independent Custody Visitors to find out more, please contact Norfolk Police Authority on 01953 424455 or email: policeauthority@norfolk.pnn.police.uk More information regarding the role profile, personal specification and application process is also detailed on this website.