

John (not his real name) tells us below about his experiences being an ICV:

From being an active person of the community, whether as a school governor or educational support volunteer, I have always been invested with playing a part in the community.

My interest in how people held in custody are treated by the authorities was developed by media reports and complaints by members of the public about the treatment their families endure, along with deaths and allegations of mistreatment that occur in custody. This provided a trigger for me in applying to be an Independent Custody Visitor. I was interested in how the role played a vital part in ensuring that people who have contact with police custody are not mistreated and that standards were upheld.

The Independent Custody Visiting Scheme has been in existence for a number of years, since the aftermath of the 1981 Toxteth Riots. There was a report by Lord Scarman in the 80's which was thorough in explaining the reasons for the disorder and gave recommendations which were adopted by the police service. One of which was to provide a mechanism for public accountability. It is a statutory duty for all Police and Crime Commissioners to run an Independent Custody Visiting Scheme.

When I started the scheme, the guidance was very different to now in 2019. You could visit custody suites in police stations on your own of which there were numerous. Some of the buildings were rudimentary Victorian with tiled walls and little in the way of lighting or CCTV. Arrested people that were detained with medical needs or conditions had to be taken to other professional establishments for care. The stations now have a modern suites, purpose built for processing detainees. We now visit in pairs and the scheme has evolved to better understand and meet the needs of those detained. The provision of health professionals embedded in the station and continuous recording in the suites helps maintain transparency. The camera cell provision in the newer cells serves to keep the detainees monitored and provides evidential footage. We can observe this in the CCTV room when we check to see if all the monitors are operational.

As an ICV, I provide detainees with an impartial view, information about their rights and entitlements, and what support may be allowed whilst the process of detention runs its course. We form a picture from what we hear and observe, then record that on the ICV report form. We can help in pointing out issues that need the attention of support staff; noting stock levels, cleanliness, broken equipment and anything which can impede the smooth running of the custody suite can be of help. If there are any actions or queries, officers at the station will rectify them if they can. If further action is needed, the scheme administrators are called upon to resolve it.

It is important to point out that the Custody Visiting process provides evidence of good practice and is a statutory role. We do use common sense if, by chance, a visit had just been conducted and there has been no change in activity. We would then abort the visit and record the reasons for this. But our role is to assess the suite practices and file a short report.

Whilst some detainees are well read with the custody procedure, others are not. I've visited cells where very young children have been held. In those situations, vulnerable adults and children seeing a friendly face explaining what was going on around them has visibly brought comfort and reassurance which is an aim of the scheme. I feel that this is one of the many

benefits of the scheme. However, the growth of vulnerable people held with clearly visible needs provokes concern and makes you wonder if other solutions can be found to balance the need for custody and care.

For detainees who do not speak English, ICVs now have access to a range of developed questions which are available printed in numerous languages. The simple use of the translated forms assist in reassuring even the most anxious detainee. I can also use a telephone translation service if preferred.

By having ICVs with a range of experiences, and from various walks of life we are able to connect with detained people in different ways and we are able to share our learning and experiences and bounce off each other for support.

For anyone who has an interest in becoming an Independent Custody Visitor, with an independent mind, the role provides a good opportunity for personal development and provides transparency and public reassurance with what is going on in custody suites.