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Commissioner
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ICV Report – April 2020/March 2021

Introduction

In early 2020, it became increasingly clear that Covid-19 would cause significant problems for the UK. Warwickshire Police started business continuity planning and Custody was no different. There were a wide range of concerns with regards to what a pandemic could mean for policing, and at the most extreme there was the distinct possibility that both custody staff and detainees may suffer fatalities. Custody blocks might have to close and an unprecedented regional working model established.

Custody had to face a variety of new challenges such as supporting HMCTS with Virtual Remand Hearings and transforming some custody spaces into makeshift courtrooms.

Restriction of movement quickly emerged as a critical dampener to the spread of the virus and who was allowed into custody was limited. Even the Custody Chief Inspector did not attend, conscious that his work could largely be done elsewhere. The decision was made that from the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020, Independent Custody Visitors would not be allowed to attend custody for in-person visits.

A Virtual World

Due to concerns around staff numbers and team resilience Covid19 presented a very real risk to the continued operation of Warwickshire's two custody blocks. An outbreak of Covid amongst the sergeants could have significantly impacted the ability of custody to remain operating, and Detention Officers were sensitive to being required to self-isolate due to contract conditions with their employer.

These factors combined with the general age and risk factors for many of our Independent Custody Visitors led to the decision being taken to cease in-person Custody Visits.

Warwickshire was far from alone in this decision. A majority of custody suites across the country closed to ICVs for similar reasons and many remained closed until very recently.

Custody Visiting is a statutory function, however, and Warwickshire OPCC and Warwickshire Police worked together to find an alternative solution. A virtual visits protocol was established to allow facilitation by Detention Officers using Whatsapp video calling. Warwickshire was the first force area in the region and one of the first in the country to enabling this system.

This method of visiting is less authentic than the usual in-person visits as they do not allow spontaneity, requiring pre-arrangement with Detention Officers. As a result of this, after a few unsatisfactory attempts, the north panel of ICVs declined to take part. The south panel agreed to participate and completed many virtual visits; towards the end of the year they also agreed to undertake some in the north on behalf of the north panel. However the process was not without its problems. Detention Officers sometimes did not make the calls to designated ICVs when asked which led to frustration amongst both the volunteers and custody staff. There were also connectivity problems with the smartphone device in custody which could make communication between detainees and ICVs difficult.

Regardless of the challenges the virtual visiting protocol was a valiant effort to ensure statutory requirements were met despite the pandemic and the unprecedented restrictions resulting. We offer our sincere thanks to the Custody Team for working hard to make this work in the context of many other pressures and challenges, in particular Chief Inspector Adrian Davis, previous Custody Inspector Lucy Sewell, and current Custody Inspector Stuart Barnes.

In total, more than 30 virtual visits took place between April 2020 and March 2021.

Return to Custody

Once the Government announced its roadmap out of lockdown in February 2021 it became clear that bringing ICVs back into custody would not only be possible but prudent. Almost a year had passed without any in-person visits, and it was anticipated that if lockdown did begin to lift then there would be a corresponding increase in detainee numbers as business as usual returned.

The Panel Chairs were consulted extensively about proposed dates and ultimately the 17th May 2021 was agreed with the north panel, as this would coincide with indoor gatherings of limited numbers being allowed. The data around Covid19 continued to be scrutinised but with some adjustments to PPE requirements for ICVs – such as face visors being provided to enable better communication than masks when engaging detainees – it was agreed that ICVs could return. Following a re-introduction evening hosted by Warwickshire Police and Warwickshire OPCC at the custody block, the north panel has been conducting weekly visits to Nuneaton Custody ever since.

The south panel decided that they wished to wait for 3 weeks after the 17th May lockdown easing to ensure that Covid19 figures did not rise dangerously high in the meantime. Following a discussion after this time period they too have returned to custody as of week commencing 14th June.

Recruitment

As a result of retirements, health concerns and mortality, Warwickshire's ICV numbers have dwindled to around 60% of pre-pandemic. As a result we have decided to launch a recruitment campaign. We aim over the next six months to recruit up to eight additional ICVs, although this will need to be staggered due to the training burden this puts on our remaining ICVs. We have done some work with the force's Equality and Diversity Team to try and reach as many individuals from

different backgrounds as possible and we will share the results of our recruitment campaign in due course.

Police Dog Welfare Visiting Scheme

What is it?

Recommended and endorsed by the Dog Trust for police forces seeking to take on rehomed dogs for training, the Police Dog Welfare Scheme is run by many OPCCs using their Independent Custody Visitors. Volunteers are trained to check that dogs are being treated appropriately and are not in any mental or physical distress.

How does it work?

The Dog Trust deliver free training for any volunteers who are interested. Those volunteers attend both the Leek Wootton training grounds and the Balsall Common police kennels to conduct welfare checks. Providing that a) visits are conducted at least quarterly and b) every police dog trainer and dog are engaged with at least once over a 12 month period then the Trust will allow Warwickshire Police to adopt dogs for training.

Why should we do it?

Warwickshire Police Dog Unit have explicitly requested that we initiate such a scheme to enable them to rehome dogs from the Dog Trust rather than only purchase those bred for purpose. This services both economical and ethical functions. The Dog Trust will not allow adoption of animals by Warwickshire Police unless this scheme is in place.

What are the resource implications for the OPCC?

The OPCC will need to provide governance for the scheme in the same way as we do for the ICV Scheme. Expenses will also need to be covered for volunteers, and any new volunteers will need to be recruited, vetted and trained. However, existing ICVs have volunteered for the role so it is hoped that bespoke recruitment for this scheme would not be needed. This also means that there is no additional vetting burden upon us or the force. Additionally the visits are only quarterly, only 2-3 individuals are required for the role, and the training is provided for free by an external organisation. As a result the human and financial resource demand upon the organisation will be very low.

When will it happen?

We are hoping to book training from the Dog Trust in September and launch the scheme thereafter.