

Child First Effective Partnership Practice

Developments in the Custody Suite

*Additional Information from Avon and Somerset- including **impact reporting***



We are grateful to Bill Hillier, Custody Logistics Officer for Avon and Somerset Police, for additional information regarding their custody suite developments.

Impact: Assaults on staff

The custody suite can be an emotional, highly charged environment, leading to aggressive conflicts at the point of arrest.

Bill Hillier reported these post-COVID statistics, despite year on year increase in detainees at between 8.6-10.3%, with more complex mental health detainees coming in since COVID and lack of community care.

2021-2022 (cells painted) **41 Assaults**

2022-2023 **17 Assaults**

2023-2024 **15 Assaults**

The genesis of the project

Reproduced below is the submission made in 2019 at the genesis of the Avon and Somerset Custody Suite project. It is interesting to reflect on the key points made at the project's inception, and may help other Local Area Partnerships make a case for change.

Autism Detainees in Custody Project 05.07.2019

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this report is to reduce the detainee self-harming, assaulting members of the constabulary and colleague agencies, reducing the criminal damage to PFI's, addressing the individual's needs and requirements of the detainee in order to provide a safe environment whilst obtaining best evidence. Improving the knowledge of staff when dealing with people with Autism.

The arrest of an individual for even the most minor offence can be a significant life changing event. The custody journey can be lengthy and for the detainee involved it can be a lonely journey. The process can be stressful and cause significant anxiety, resulting in a number of unfavourable outcomes, this can be exacerbated when the detainee has further mental health concerns and needs.

When an individual is arrested one of the options available to the arresting officer is to take the detainee into police custody. The officer has to justify the grounds for arrest to the Custody Sergeant who in turn has to justify the grounds for detention at a police station. In every case it is the interest of victims of crime, the police and the detainee for the journey through the criminal justice system to be as smooth, safe, efficient and effective as possible.

In Avon and Somerset Police we are working to develop a culture which works towards ensuring we get a detainee to leave custody in a better position than when they arrived.

The challenges of operating in the physical environment of the custody suites (sterile rooms, white painted walls, high ceilings, no furniture / fixed benches, noisy unfamiliar sounds / silence, feeling of isolation, the smell of cleaning products) can lead to a number of undesirable outcomes for all detainees; they include...

- Adverse physical ill health
- Adverse mental ill health
- Self-harm / suicide
- Aggression towards, or assaults on police employees
- Formal complaints through the complaints procedure
- Noise and behavioural disruption within the custody environment

2. OUTCOME / FINDINGS

Whilst undesirable outcomes can occur amongst the whole custody population; they are magnified amongst those with autism and mental health. It is estimated that autistic individuals may be overrepresented in the criminal justice system being seven times more likely to come into contact with police officers. This may be due to a risk of miscommunication, misinterpretation and how they react to high stress situations. Given the potentially increased likelihood of autistic individuals being detained in police custody, it is important to ensure that they are supported appropriately. Otherwise, they may be at risk of particularly adverse personal and legal outcomes. This is due to potential difficulties i) understanding their arrest and detention ii) coping with the sensory demands of the custody environment and iii) participating in the custody process as a result of an increased desire to escape police custody.

The hypothesis of this project is that specific action to improve the experiences of detainees through i) improved Autism training for custody staff and/or ii) alterations to the physical environment in which detainees are held will reduce the following

- Incidents of self-harm.
- Incidents of damage.
- Formal complaints being made.
- Assaults on custody staff.

Using results obtained through academic research undertaken by Dr Chloe Holloway of the University of Nottingham (working through CAAR) a number of agreed measures will be introduced at Keynsham Police Custody Centre. These will target specific aspects of the custody environment which may create difficulties in terms of impact on the wellbeing of detainees and their ability to engage in the custody process. These are prioritised as followed:

- Light
- Lack of visual/controlled sensory stimulation
- Not knowing what is happening (i.e. time)
- Boredom
- Noise

Any such alterations will not only benefit those detainees with Autism but will have a beneficial outcome for all individuals passing through our custody facilities.

In the 24 months between April 2017 and April 2019 the following occurred across Avon and Somerset Custody suites -

- 92 assaults on custody staff or officers within custody.
- 21 adverse incidents involving a detainee self-harming.
- 123 times we've charged a detainee with criminal damage after damaging their cell or custody.
- 84 complaints linked to custody

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve these aspects of the custody setting, the following changes are proposed:

- Light – changing the exposure and type of lighting in the cell by i) changing fluorescent lighting used in detention cells to softer LED lighting (with the option to adjust colour and brightness, if possible) and ii) exploring possibility of controlling exposure to natural lighting in the cell through external coverings or internal shades (if risk permitting)
- Lack of visual/controlled sensory stimulation – improving the visual aesthetics of the police cell through i) changes to paint colour from white to muted tones consistent with preferences of autistic individuals and/or ii) painted murals in the cells and corridors to provide controlled visual stimulation and/or iii) creation of sensory areas in the cells through use of textures (i.e. textured tiling, soft fabrics) and risk approved sensory tools (i.e. fidget spinners) *and* creation of a sensory garden for use on exercise breaks
- Boredom – introducing either i) radio/music input into cells through teletronic system which can be turned on/off and volume controlled to avoid noise disturbance for other detainees ii) white noise/ambient sounds system into cells which can be turned on/off and volume controlled to avoid noise disturbance for other detainees and/or iii) screens in teletronic system or in clear panelling above cell door to provide controlled showing of videos *and* creation of a sensory garden for use on exercise breaks
- Noise – creating a designated quieter area of the station for those with specific sensory needs through i) controlled allocation of detainees and/or ii) use of acoustic tiling in cells/corridors to control noise in these areas *and/or* introduction of risk approved ear defenders to individually control noise

- Improving the knowledge and skills of staff dealing with autistic persons.

A programme of Autism training will be delivered to custody staff in stations. This training has been developed by Dr Katie Maras and Dr Jade Norris at the University of Bath with input from PS Adam O'Loughlin from Avon & Somerset Police Force. This training focuses specifically on improving awareness of Autism among custody staff and their knowledge of the needs of autistic detainees in police custody. The module for custody staff also draws on findings from research by Dr Chloe Holloway to emphasise the specific adjustments custody staff can make to help improve the experiences of autistic detainees in police custody.

- **FINANCE FOR OPTIONS**

Working with Engie, PFI owner to reduce costs.

- **EQUALITY ANALYSIS**

There are no equality issues to be aware of.

- **SUSTAINABILITY**

Once the changes have been completed if agreed, apart from general standard maintenance, there are no sustainability issues to be aware of.