

Northern Ireland Independent Custody Visiting Scheme

Information on Independent Custody Visiting

Who are Independent Custody Visitors?

Independent Custody Visitors are members of the local community who, as part of team called a custody visiting team, make unannounced visits to police custody suites, where people who have been arrested are held. The purpose of their visits is to tell the Policing Board how people held in custody are being looked after by the police.

Independent Custody Visitors must be over 18 years old and have no direct involvement in the criminal justice system. For example, you cannot be an Independent Custody Visitor if you are (or have been) employed by the police, are involved in some areas of the criminal justice system, or you are a member or staff of the Policing Board. This helps to keep the scheme independent.

The role of Custody Visitors is set out in full in section 73 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000.

1. What happens when Independent Custody Visitors make a visit?

Custody Visitors make unannounced visits to police stations to check on the conditions and treatment of detainees. Custody Visitors must be independent and impartial when they visit. They look, listen and tell the Policing Board what they have found in the custody area. When they arrive at a police station, Custody Visitors

go straight to the custody area. There, if someone is being held in custody, the Custody Visitors must get the detainee's permission to talk to them or to see their custody record. If the detainee gives permission, Custody Visitors talk to them to find out how they have been treated and whether they have been able to access their rights and entitlements (such as the right to legal advice).

After each visit, Custody Visitors write a report which tells the Policing Board how the police are running the custody area at the time of the visit. The Custody Visitors give copies of the report to the Policing Board and the police, and they also keep a copy for themselves. The Policing Board uses the information in the report to decide what action needs to be taken. Each year the Policing Board publishes a report on Custody Visitors' work.

Independent Custody Visitors must keep what they see and hear on their visits confidential.

2. What skills and qualities do I need to become an Independent Custody Visitor?

You need to:

- be concerned about other people's welfare;
- be able to work as a member of a team;
- be impartial;
- keep things confidential;
- have effective communication skills;
- have the time to carry out visits and go to team meetings; and
- have access to a form of transport to meet the requirements of the post in full.

You cannot apply to be an Independent Custody Visitor if you:

- are a police officer;
- have ever been a police officer;
- are employed by the police;
- are involved in some areas of the criminal justice system; or
- work for the Policing Board or are a member of the Board.

3. How much time do I need to give?

Independent Custody Visitors usually carry out two or three visits a month. However, the amount of time you need to give depends on the area your team covers and travel times. As well as the visits, there are regular team meetings and training events. Team meetings are usually held once a month and training events normally take place every three months.

4. Will I get paid?

Custody Visitors are volunteers so they do not get paid (or get compensation for earnings they lose while volunteering) but the Board will pay their travel costs.

5. How do I apply?

When recruiting new Custody Visitors, the Policing Board advertises in the national papers and provides information in local centres, such as libraries and community centres.

If you want to become a Custody Visitor, you must fill in an application form and go to an interview. If the Policing Board receives a high number of applications, we will not be able to interview everybody so we will interview people who seem to

be most suitable from the information they have given in their application form. So if you are filling in an application form, you should make sure that you provide as much relevant information as possible.

After we have interviewed you, we will draw up a reserve list of suitable volunteers to fill any vacancies which may come up over the next three years. So even if you are successful at the interview, we may not be able to offer you a place on the scheme straight away.

The Policing Board is committed to equal opportunities in managing the Custody Visiting Scheme and welcomes applications from all suitably qualified candidates irrespective of their religious belief, political opinion, gender, disability, age, race, marital status, sexuality or whether they have dependants or not. As young people and people from minority ethnic communities are currently under-represented in our custody visiting teams, we particularly welcome applications from these groups. However, candidates will be selected on merit.

If your application is successful, the Policing Board will decide which Custody Visiting team you will join. As the Board's aim is to have, as far as possible, custody visiting teams that represent the whole community, we will consider your gender, community background and age when we decide which team to place you in.

When we choose which team to place you in, we try to make sure that the teams reflect as wide a range of people, ages and backgrounds as possible. So we may give some people priority to create a balance between men and women, social backgrounds and ages.

6. Will you give me any training?

Independent Custody Visitors need to know and understand the responsibilities of the police and the rights of the people in custody. The Policing Board provides a one-day training course for new volunteers.

The training programme is made up of exercises covering everything about custody visiting and tells you the basic principles of the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order (PACE) 1989. It also includes guidelines on custody visiting. Some Custody Visitors may be involved in extra visits to the Serious Crime Suite in Antrim or Grosvenor Road. We will provide specific training for these visitors.

When the Policing Board has placed you in a team, we will put you with an experienced Custody Visitor who will go on visits with you and guide you through your first visits. We arrange more training sessions locally to tell you about new developments and share experiences.

We will give you an identity card that you must use when visiting.

When you first become a Custody Visitor, you will have a six-month probationary period. After that you can usually volunteer for three years. At the end of the three years, we may extend this by another three years.

7. Custody visiting teams

Custody Visitors do not work on their own. They always visit in pairs and they are part of a custody visiting team which covers the area they live in.

There are four custody visiting teams in Northern Ireland. They are:

- Belfast/Antrim;
- Down/Armagh;
- North West; and
- Tyrone/Fermanagh

The teams visit each designated police station in their area which has a custody suite to the standard set by the codes of practice for the detention, treatment and questioning of people by the police. The codes of practice are linked to the Police and Criminal Evidence (NI) Order (PACE) 1989.

Each custody visiting team has a team co-ordinator who:

- makes sure that a programme of visits is drawn up;
- puts Custody Visitors in pairs; and
- gives each pair stations to visit.

It is then the responsibility of each pair to arrange when they will carry out their visits.

The custody visiting teams meet regularly (usually once a month) to consider reports on visits and any problems that come up. The teams of Custody Visitors support each other, provide guidance and discuss problems.

8. Security

Because of the sensitive nature of custody visiting, the Policing Board will check your background. We will not appoint you unless you meet all the conditions of our selection process, which includes a relevant security check and satisfactory references.

9. Application forms

Please ask us if you would like an application form.
Our contact details are below.

Custody Visiting Scheme Administrator
Northern Ireland Policing Board
Waterside Tower
31 Clarendon Road
Clarendon Dock
Belfast BT1 3BG
Phone: 028 9040 8526 or 028 9040 8563
E-mail: custodyvisiting@nipolicingboard.org.uk

10. MoRE INformation

The Policing Board runs and manages the Independent Custody Visiting Scheme in Northern Ireland. There are similar Independent Custody Visiting Schemes throughout England, Scotland and Wales. Custody visiting has its own support organisation, the Independent Custody Visiting Association (ICVA) and you can get more information on their website at www.icva.org.uk.

If you would like more information about what being a Custody Visitor involves, please contact the Custody Visiting Scheme Administrator at the address shown above.