

NORTHERN IRELAND POLICING BOARD  
INDEPENDENT CUSTODY VISITING SCHEME

# Report on the Independent Custody Visiting Scheme for Northern Ireland during 2002/2003



Where volunteers attend police stations to check on the treatment of detainees and the conditions in which they are held.

## Introduction ● ● ● ●

This leaflet is about the Independent Custody Visiting Scheme for Northern Ireland and, in particular, about the work carried out by custody visitors during 2002/2003.

## Background ● ● ● ●

Custody visitors are volunteers from the community who make unannounced visits to police custody suites to check on the welfare of people being held in custody. They look, listen and report on what they find. In this way custody visiting means that people unconnected with the police or the criminal justice system can inspect and report on how arrested people are dealt with by the police and the conditions in which they are held.

There are five custody-visiting teams throughout Northern Ireland.

The teams are:

- Belfast;
- Antrim;
- Tyrone/Fermanagh;

- North/West, and;
- Down/Armagh.

Custody visiting has been taking place in Northern Ireland since 1991, and was made statutory by the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000.

## **The Policing Board's Role** ●●●●

The Northern Ireland Policing Board supports and administers the Custody Visiting Scheme. This includes recruiting volunteers for the scheme through open advertising and competency based interviews.

The key skills we look for in volunteers are:

- concern for the welfare of others;
- the ability to work as a member of a team;
- impartiality and confidentiality;
- effective communication skills, and;
- time to carry out visits and attend team meetings.

Police officers, police support staff, people involved in the criminal justice system and members and staff of the Policing Board cannot become custody visitors. We make sure that the custody visiting teams are as representative as possible in terms of community background, gender, age and so on.

The Policing Board's Community Involvement Committee carefully monitors the custody visitors' reports on a month-by-month basis. This includes looking at the treatment of detainees in terms of Code C of the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (PACE), human rights provisions, and the new Code of Ethics for the PSNI.

The following paragraphs summarise the reports over the past year.

## **The work of the custody visitors during 2002/2003** ● ● ● ●

During 2002/2003 custody visitors made 912 visits to custody suites throughout Northern Ireland. There were 654 detainees in custody during these visits and visitors saw and spoke to 314 detainees. Custody visiting is based on the consent of the detainee to see the visitors. Some 137 detainees did not want to see

**(continued overleaf)**

## The work of the custody visitors (continued) ● ● ● ●

the custody visitors and the remaining 203 detainees were not seen for some other reason, for example because they were being interviewed or were asleep.

The custody visitors found that 766 of the 912 visits (84%) were entirely satisfactory and raised no issues about the treatment of detainees or the conditions in which they were being held. Most of visits they found unsatisfactory were to do with the conditions of detention, such as cleanliness of cells or repairs being needed. Such matters are referred to the Board for attention and we make sure they are addressed as soon as possible.

In relation to the treatment of detainees, custody visitors reported that 12 detainees had made complaints in connection with their arrest, mainly alleging injuries to their wrists caused by handcuffs. Custody visitors do not investigate complaints, but their role is to make sure that such complaints have been referred to the Police Ombudsman for attention.

Also during their visits, two detainees asked to contact their solicitors, and visitors were able to see that these requests were dealt with

immediately by custody staff. They met two detainees who could not speak any English and found that in both cases the police had already made arrangements for interpreters. Similarly, in the case of a detainee with learning difficulties, the custody staff had arranged for a social worker to attend. Four detainees asked custody visitors to see a doctor or about access to medication and these issues were referred to custody staff for immediate attention.

During their visits, custody visitors encountered six detainees who had been assessed by custody staff as being at risk of self-harm. In these circumstances custody visitors were able to check that custody staff were carrying out very regular checks on the detainees' well-being. Some were under constant supervision.

## **Visiting detained terrorist suspects** ●●●●

In August 2002 the Policing Board extended the role of the custody visitors to visit people detained in custody under the Terrorism Act 2000. This development was new for custody visiting in Northern Ireland, as previously custody visitors had visited only detainees held in custody under the Police and Criminal Evidence (NI) Order 1989 (PACE). The role of custody visitors in visiting detained terrorist

suspects is the same as their role when visiting PACE detainees. In short, visitors are concerned with, and reporting on, the conditions in which people are held, how they are treated, and the adequacy of facilities.

During the period of this report, detained terrorist suspects were held in Lisburn custody suite, although with effect from April 2003, a new custody suite in Antrim has opened and is in use. Visitors made a total of 18 visits to Lisburn since the Scheme was extended in August.

During these visits some 39 detainees were being held in custody and 22 detainees were seen by the custody visitors.

Issues raised were:

- a complaint of injury on arrest and a complaint in connection with interviewing, both of which had been referred to the Police Ombudsman;
- a complaint about food, which the visitors took up with custody staff, and;
- a request to see a solicitor, which was arranged by the custody staff.

## More information ●●●●

If you would like more information about custody visiting or you are interested in volunteering for this role, you can contact the Custody Visiting Scheme Administrator as shown below. Also, please note that this leaflet is available free on request in a range of alternative formats. Please contact:

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