

# **What is an Independent Custody Visitor?**

## **Who are independent custody visitors?**

Independent custody visitors are members of the local community who visit police stations unannounced to check on the welfare of people in police custody.

They come from a variety of backgrounds and sections of the community. They must be over 18 and have no direct involvement in the criminal justice system, for example, serving police officers or special constables.

Other people such as solicitors or probation officers may be excluded, to prevent possible conflict of interests for the individual. This maintains the independence of the scheme as a whole.

## **When and where are visits made?**

Independent custody visitors visit police stations in pairs once a week. The actual timing of visits is entirely a matter for independent custody visitors, but should be random and unannounced. Independent custody visitors will normally only visit those police stations within their local area.

## **What happens when independent custody visitors make a visit?**

Independent custody visitors must maintain their independence and impartiality. They do not take sides but look, listen and report on what they find in the custody unit. On arrival at the police station, independent custody visitors will be escorted to the custody area. The detainees will be identified by their custody numbers and strict rules of confidentiality will apply.

Independent custody visitors may occasionally be denied immediate access to the custody unit for safety reasons and asked to wait. Interviews with detainees are, for independent custody visitors' protection, normally carried out within sight, but out of hearing of the escorting officer.

## **Reporting procedures**

A report is completed after each visit. It provides an insight into the running of the custody area at the time of the visit. Copies of the reports are provided for the police, police authorities, independent custody visitors and the Home Office.

They provide a vital source of information on the environmental and welfare conditions in which detainees are held. The information is analysed and the areas for action are highlighted.

## **Other duties**

Independent custody visitors must treat as confidential the details of what they see and hear on their visit. They are expected to report in general terms to their police authority at an appropriate time of the year (e.g. the annual meeting).

## **How are independent custody visitors selected and trained?**

Volunteers wishing to become independent custody visitors will need to complete an application form. Then they will be asked to attend an interview. Independent custody visitors need to have a sound knowledge and thorough understanding of detainee rights and police responsibilities. Successful applicants attend a one day information / training day organised by their local police authority, usually in partnership with the Independent Custody Visiting Association (ICVA). The training programme is made up of practical and theoretical exercises covering all aspects of custody visiting and is complemented by a set of guidelines and the basic principles of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE). All volunteers are issued with an official identity card which they must use when visiting. Further training sessions are arranged locally to keep independent custody visitors informed on new developments and to share experiences.

Newly appointed independent custody visitors complete a probationary period, and then appointments are made for a set period of three years. This is renewable subject to further appraisal and mutual agreement.