

Independent Custody Visitor Scheme

2025-26 annual report



Dan Price
Cheshire
Police & Crime
Commissioner

Foreword from the Cheshire Police and Crime Commissioner

I am pleased to introduce this year's annual report for the Independent Custody Visiting scheme in Cheshire.

This scheme represents a powerful example of community involvement in policing and is one I am particularly proud to support.

Police custody can, by its very nature, be a largely unseen part of the criminal justice system. It is therefore vital that there is robust, independent scrutiny to ensure transparency, accountability and the protection of the rights and welfare of those detained.

Independent Custody Visitors (ICVs) provide this essential safeguard, acting on behalf of the public to ensure that detainees are treated with dignity, fairness and respect.

Throughout the year, our ICVs have continued to demonstrate exceptional commitment and professionalism, volunteering their time week after week to visit custody suites across Cheshire. Their work not only helps to maintain high standards of care but also strengthens public confidence, offering reassurance that custody facilities are operating to the highest possible standards.

Custody remains a challenging and dynamic environment, often involving some of the most vulnerable individuals in our communities. The public rightly expect that detainees are treated with integrity, professionalism and in accordance with their individual needs. I am encouraged to see from this report that the feedback and observations provided by our ICVs continue to drive improvements, with issues identified being addressed promptly and constructively. This ongoing learning helps to ensure that standards are continually enhanced.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all of Cheshire's ICVs for their dedication, commitment and invaluable contribution. Their role is not always easy, but it is essential. I look forward to seeing the continued development of the scheme over the coming year and to working collaboratively to maintain and strengthen public trust and confidence in Cheshire Constabulary.



Dan Price

Cheshire Police and Crime Commissioner



Introduction

This report summarises Independent Custody Visitor (ICV) activity across 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2026, combining findings from all four quarters.

ICVs continue to play a vital role in providing independent oversight of police custody, ensuring that detainees are treated with dignity, respect and fairness.

Throughout 2025-26, ICVs have demonstrated continued commitment to unannounced visits, offering scrutiny, reassurance to the public and valuable feedback to improve custody services.

Background

In 1981, Lord Scarman led an inquiry into the disturbances in Brixton and Toxteth, highlighting the need to strengthen public confidence in policing. One of his key recommendations was to make policing practices more transparent, open to scrutiny and accessible to the public. This led to the introduction of Custody Visiting - originally referred to as Lay Visiting. Initially adopted on a voluntary basis by Police Authorities with approval from the Home Office, the scheme later became a statutory requirement under the Police Reform Act 2002. Responsibility for overseeing custody visiting was subsequently transferred to Police and Crime Commissioners following the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2012.

Today, Independent Custody Visiting is a legal duty of Police and Crime Commissioners. The scheme exists to provide independent oversight of individuals held in police custody and to ensure that they are treated lawfully, fairly and with respect. It also plays an important role in reassuring the public that appropriate standards are maintained within custody environments.

While Police and Crime Commissioners hold overall responsibility for the scheme, its day-to-day operation is managed by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC).

ICVs are volunteers drawn from the local community who carry out visits to monitor the welfare and treatment of detainees.

These visits take place without prior notice, at any time of day or night, throughout the week. Following each visit, ICVs report their findings directly to the OPCC, highlighting any concerns of areas requiring attention.

Issues that need immediate action are raised with the Custody Sergeant during the visit. Feedback and recommendations from ICVs contribute to ongoing improvements in detainee care and conditions, reinforcing the important role they play in enhancing transparency and maintaining public trust in policing.

Police custody in Cheshire

Cheshire Constabulary operates three purpose-built custody suites across the county:

- Eastern area - Middlewich
- Northern area - Runcorn
- Western area - Blacon

All three suites operate continuously, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, ensuring that custody provision is available whenever required.

Each facility is staffed by trained Custody Sergeants and Detention Officers who are responsible for the safe and respectful care of detainees. Custody suites are well equipped to meet essential needs, including the provision of food and drink, bedding and clothing, as well as access to religious materials where appropriate.

In recent years, Cheshire Constabulary has implemented a number of improvements and reforms to custody provision, following national inspection findings and local scrutiny. These reforms have focused on enhancing detainee welfare, dignity and safety. Importantly, enhancements within custody environments sit alongside a broader shift towards more person-centred and trauma informed approaches in custody, recognising that many individuals entering custody may be vulnerable or in crisis. Nationally and locally there is a growing emphasis on creating environments and practices that support emotional regulation, improve engagement and ensure detainees are treated with dignity throughout their time in custody.



ICVs in Cheshire

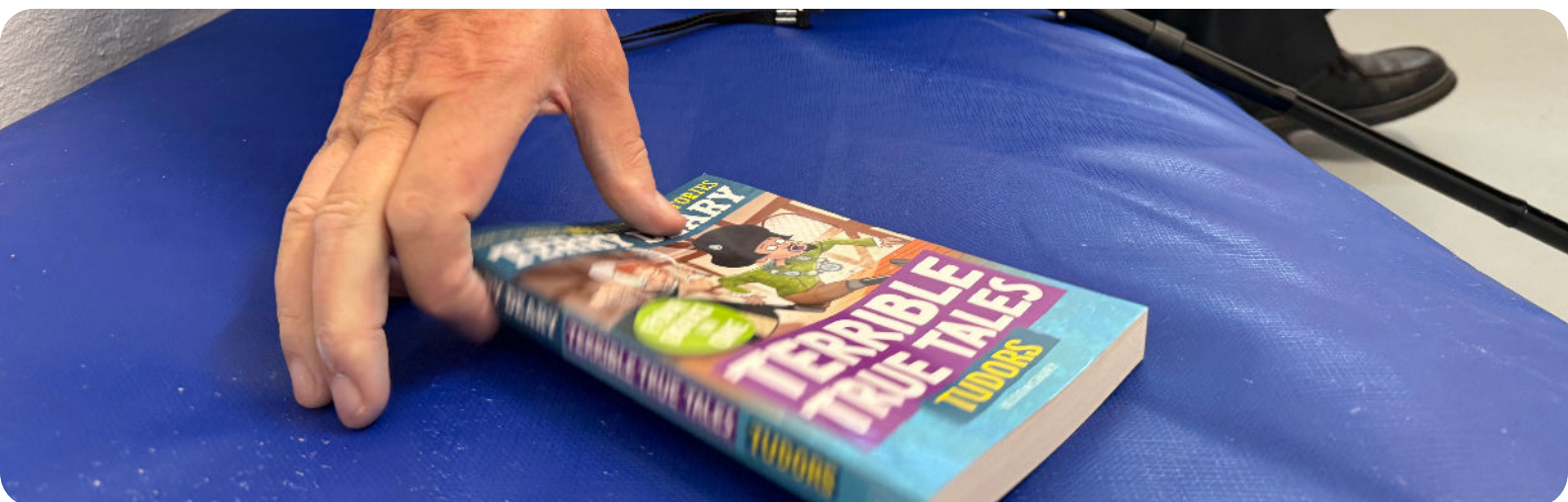
As of 31st March 2026, the Independent Custody Visiting Scheme in Cheshire was supported by a dedicated group of 17 volunteers, comprising 9 men and 8 women ICVs, aged between 51 and 75. These volunteers are organised into three local panel groups, each aligned to one of Cheshire's custody suites. Each panel carries out unannounced visits, ensuring that custody inspections can take place at any time of day or night while maintaining the independence and integrity of the scheme.

In January 2026, a successful recruitment campaign attracted new candidates for the ICV role. Existing ICVs were involved in this process, contributing to the selection and interview process demonstrating the collaborative and supportive nature of the scheme.

Throughout the year, ICVs received learning and development opportunities to support them in their role effectively. The annual training event in June 2025 covered:

- Use of force in custody
- Appropriate adults - role and service
- Distraction items in custody
- Booking in process
- HMICFRS inspection

ICVs meet regularly at panel groups, providing valuable opportunities to share experiences, discuss findings and identify emerging issues. These meetings are attended by the Chief Inspector to offer operational updates and respond directly to any concerns raised. This collaborative approach ensures that feedback from ICVs is heard and acted upon in a timely manner, contributing to continuous improvement.



ICV activity summary

Number of visits carried out across the year: 154

Detainees in custody during visits: 1,827
Detainees unavailable*: 285
1,542

Detainees spoken to: 929
Percentage: 60%

Activity by custody suite

Custody suite	Visits	Detained persons (DPs) in custody	Unavailable	Asleep	Spoken to
Blacon	52	520	74	11	306
Middlewich	53	763	44	21	370
Runcorn	49	544	167	69	253
Total	154	1,827	285	101	929



ICVs summary of findings

Positive practice

Staff conduct

- ICVs consistently described staff as attentive, professional, courteous, welcoming and efficient across all suites.
- Multiple reports highlighted positive interactions between staff and detainees.

Treatment and care of detainees

- Detainees reported being treated well and looked after in a caring manner.
- Several detainees explicitly complimented their treatment.
- Evidence of religious consideration, e.g. provision of a prayer mat.

Suite and cell maintenance

- Custody suites described as clean and tidy on multiple occasions. Prompt cleaning of cells after detainee release observed.

Areas of concern

Facilities and estates

- Ongoing minor infrastructure issues reported across the year ranging from: sinks being blocked (noted on two occasions), toilet in cell being out of action (noted on one occasion), gates being stuck open (noted on one occasion) to a long-standing intercome issue (reported on numerous occasions through Q1 of 2025-26, issue resolved in Q2).

Supply of items / stock

- Throughout Q1 2025-26 shortage of blankets reported by ICVs. To remedy this issue extra blankets were purchased by the force and a new system of cleaning schedule implemented. No further issues regarding blanket supply were reported by ICVs since Q1.
- On one occasion ICVs mentioned no decaffeinated alternative hot beverage being available for detainees. Shortly after decaffeinated hot beverages became items of stock regularly available in custody.

ICVs continue to provide high and consistent visit coverage across the year with strong detainee engagement. It is reassuring to see that, through their visits, ICVs observe positive staff-detainee interactions across all custody suites and report that detainees are treated with dignity and respect.

There is a consistent positive feedback demonstrating a strong culture of care and professionalism and stable workforce performance. Also, custody suites are generally reported as clean and well maintained. Whilst there is evidence of responsive issue resolution, issues relating to the custody estate vary in their complexity and handling.

Overall, 2025-26 reporting period reflects a stable and well-functioning custody system, underpinned by professional staff and effective independent scrutiny.

While operational pressures remain, the continued commitment of ICVs and responsiveness of custody staff ensure that detainee welfare remains a clear priority.



Cheshire Constabulary Management Response

Thank you for your continued commitment and the comprehensive overview provided for the 2025-26 reporting period. The consistent visitation and strong engagement demonstrated by Independent Custody Visitors (ICVs) throughout the year is greatly valued and provides an essential layer of independent scrutiny across our custody suites.

It is particularly reassuring to note the positive observations regarding staff-detainee interactions. The recognition that detainees are treated with dignity and respect reflects the professionalism, care and dedication of our custody teams. The consistent positive feedback evidencing a strong culture of care, alongside a stable workforce, is welcomed and reflects the standards we strive to maintain.

We are also pleased that ICVs have acknowledged the improvements made within the custody estate. These enhancements are contributing to a better working environment for staff and a safer, more appropriate space for detainees, ultimately supporting improved service delivery. However, it is recognised that our buildings are over 20 years old and accommodate in excess of 20,000 detainees per year. As such, they remain heavily utilised environments, and ongoing estate challenges are addressed promptly and effectively, particularly where complexity arises.

We continue to embrace innovation and the introduction of new technology to improve detainee welfare and operational efficiency. This year has seen improvements in distraction items and the introduction of portable drug loos, which reduce the need for detainee movement and help maintain dignity when accessing this facility.

In addition, we are actively progressing further improvements for neurodiverse detainees, including changes to lighting and a review of refreshment options, the latter area was highlighted through ICV feedback. These developments demonstrate our ongoing commitment to learning and continuous improvement.

Overall, we appreciate the constructive feedback provided and the recognition of the progress made. We remain committed to working collaboratively to ensure that detainee welfare continues to be prioritised, despite ongoing operational pressures.

Chief Inspector Lindsay Dixon

Custodial Operations, Cheshire Constabulary

Get involved

For more information or to express an interest in becoming an Independent Custody Visitor please contact Karolina Kardas, ICV Scheme Coordinator.

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