

IMPROVING CUSTODY VISITING IN LONDON

Introduction:

There are some 500 independent custody visitors in London who make some 3,000 visits each year to police stations across the capital. Visiting police cells is not the most glamorous of voluntary activities, nor is it one which receives publicity or much thanks. However, we are a dedicated bunch; many of us have considerable experience both as custody visitors and in a wide range of areas from our day jobs; together with a wide range of professional qualifications.

It gives us no pleasure to take issue with the MPA on its current proposals. We have been waiting for change for six years and the fact that we have had none is not to be placed at our door. We feel it is more than fair to say that over the last six years ICVs have undertaken their work, for the most part, in spite of the MPA. We want to improve the services we provide to individual detainees but are of the strong view that the proposals will not make this happen, quite the reverse.

Our comments in this paper can only relate to the proposals sent out to ICVs in mid May as we have not seen any further work or modifications to them.

Moving Forward:

We believe that there are two main principles which should underpin the new arrangements for the MPA's ICV scheme:

- It should be fit for purpose
- It should have the broad support of those involved in delivering it.

As the elected representatives of the 32 ICV panels we believe the proposals do not yet meet either in their present form.

We also have major concerns about the way in which the consultation was undertaken.

The Consultation Process:

The MPA has had responsibility for custody visiting for 6 years (since 2000) yet has only allowed 6 weeks for consultation on proposals which will have a radical effect on the future of the service.

We asked the MPA to circulate papers on detailed costings and related matters which we had produced to individual ICVs since the MPA had circulated its paper. This was refused.

We are not convinced that all custody visitors actually received a copy of the MPA proposals as there seems to be a problem with the MPA mailing list

When we met in April with MPA officers to discuss our paper on administrative tasks central to ICV panels and costings this was virtually ignored and no notes were taken of the meeting. At no stage were these costings challenged.

It was suggested to us that we did not represent our constituency but in a secret ballot of the panels we received a unanimous positive vote.

Why we do not think the proposals are fit for purpose:

The fundamental basis of policing in London is borough based, yet the proposals fly in the face of this. It is unclear how the new administrators can, or will operate at the borough level, or indeed gain the requisite knowledge and experience to do so. We were belatedly told by the MPA that there “*will be brigading of all our staff who will be borough facing*”, but it is far from clear what this means.

Our detailed costings, based on the MPA’s own job description indicated that there needed to be 14 administrators, but the proposals suggest 8 only. This will result in increased and unacceptable workloads for chairs of panels.

Suggestions that at some time in the future there might be additional (to the 8) coordinators will not address the problem as if there are insufficient resources at the outset the new arrangements will not work from the beginning. Indeed, more resources will be needed at the start of the change process than will be the case when it is up and running.

Central to the role of the MPA, and thus the costs of the scheme, is a model of governance, i.e. how the MPA can assure itself (as it must) that panels are meeting the requirements of the legislation. The paper fails to address this issue.

It would appear that the way in which the MPA sees itself as controlling the scheme is by direct involvement of the administrators in such matters, for example, as recruitment. Given that we calculate we need around 120 – 150 new ICVs each year 8 coordinators could not possibly do this even if it was desirable.

We suggest that the MPA produces a set of criteria (many panels have had to develop these in the absence of any from the MPA) related to areas of compliance with the legislation and a process to ensure that panels meet these criteria. We, as representatives of the panels, have contributed considerably to a number of draft papers but as yet only one written by us has been published.

The MPA paper in places uses speculative information and costings on non-salary items. For example, a figure of £15,000 is put forward as the cost of room hire. We understand that this figure was a “best guess”. We calculate the actual cost to be nearer £50,000. We also looked at the current “benefits in kind” room hire, telephones, IT, etc, from those schemes which have a close relationship with local authorities. We calculate these to be in the region

of around £10,000 per panel - a total of £320,000 yet the proposals do not even mention this. We were startled to find that the MPA does not have any written contracts/service level agreements with local authorities for the provision of support to panels over the past six years. It is, thus, perhaps not surprising that the inequalities in funding have continued.

Comparisons are made with other police authorities which are very different from London, particularly that in Leicestershire.

The proposals make no reference to the impact of these changes on Consultative Groups, many of which have financial relationships with panels.

Views of Independent Custody Visitors

A further paper, we understand, summarises the views of the MPA consultation, but we have not seen this. We believe that many panels just want to get on with what they became an ICV for. But for them to continue they must have adequate administrative support.

Many ICVs have written to MPA members which is an indication of their commitment to their work.

For change to be effective it needs the support of those whom it affects. At this point we do not believe the MPA has this support

Confidence in the MPA

It must be said that there has been a widespread lack of confidence amongst many ICVs in the competence of the MPA administration over the past six years. We want to move on. Past experience has shown that when central administration was provided by the MPA for a group of panels, it proved totally unsatisfactory to the extent that the work of all the panels concerned was dramatically impeded and in one case the panel collapsed. Its refusal to send out papers produced by its ICV representatives, including a description of the experience of one panel with a centralized administrator, suggests a continuing heavy handed approach.

The majority of panels have adequate administrative systems and are performing well. We have seen no evidence from the MPA to the contrary. Indeed, where one panel was demonstrably not performing appropriately we urged the MPA to take radical steps and its work was taken over by a neighbouring panel. For the last six years we have been seeking advice and guidance from the MPA on how to improve our service but have received little. The MPA must, of course, be in compliance with the requirements of the Police Reform Act (2002). However, we are of the view that the MPA proposals in their present form, nor the way in which the MPA are trying to force change through, will achieve this objective. It certainly will not enhance the MPA's standing amongst panels.

What we think should happen in order to ensure a high quality of custody visiting continues:

1. *Further work should be done on the following:*

- Develop a governance model for the scheme since this will affect costs
- Detailed proposals as to how the current borough based scheme can be continued.
- A delineation of the tasks which need to be undertaken by the MPA and those by panels, including the role of chairs. For example the MPA should be providing panels with information about changes in legislation, ACPO protocols etc. in synopsis form.
- An impact analysis of the proposals not only on CPCGs but on panels
- A more rigorous costing analysis to determine the numbers of administrators required
- Detailed plans on how the expertise of the existing administrators can be maintained
- A change management plan, monitoring structure and process together with a detailed risk analysis.
- An analysis of the costs and consequences of any redundancy of existing panel administrators.

2, *Confidence building measures between the MPA and Panels. This includes:*

- publication of a range of much-needed policies,
- a communication system, website and newsletters,
- a clear commitment of the MPA to listen to the views of custody visitors and acknowledge and use their expertise and commitment.

The clearest way this could be done is to delay a final decision on the scheme until the above work has been completed. We (as the panels' representatives) have already offered to work with the MPA on this to develop a set of proposals which are more fit for purpose and which will gain the support of panels. We believe this can be done in a relatively short space of time and can be ready for the November meeting of the Committee.

ICV PB representatives 20.6.06