

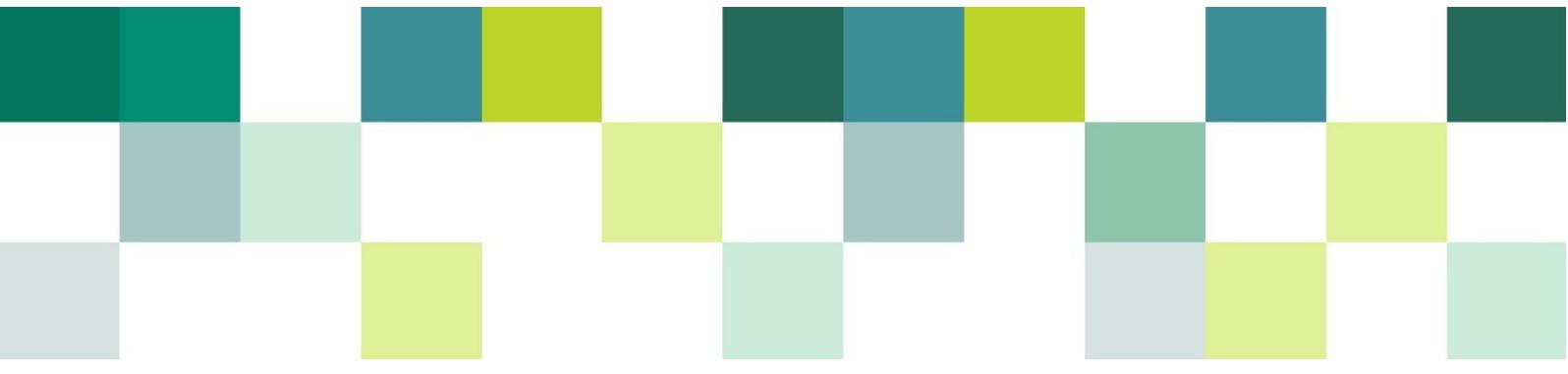


MPA

Metropolitan Police Authority

Lewisham Independent Custody Visiting panel

Annual Report 2008



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Introduction

Welcome to the annual report of the Lewisham Independent Custody Visiting Panel.

This report covers the period from 1st January 2008 to 31st December 2008. The purpose of the report is to give a general overview of the panel's work and:

- Provide the local community and the MPA with information about the visits made, including the treatment of those held in custody.
- Evaluate the panel's performance over the period.
- Present any issues and concerns that have arisen
- Set out objectives for 2009

Independent Custody Visitors are volunteers from the local community who visit police stations to check on the treatment and conditions of people held in police custody. The MPA is responsible for recruiting, selecting and appointing all custody visitors and tries to ensure that the panel is as diverse as the community it represents. Successful applicants to the scheme are given training in all aspects of a custody visitor's role and responsibilities. Custody visiting is governed by a range of legislation and guidance including the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) 1984 as well as Home Office Codes of Practice and National Standards.

The MPA has a legal obligation under the Police Reform Act 2002 to ensure that a custody visiting scheme operates in its area. The scheme has the full support and cooperation of the Commissioner and the Borough Commander for Lewisham, but is independent of the police. The MPA holds overall responsibility for the scheme's management and administration and a member of MPA staff is responsible for supporting the panel.

The Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) is an independent statutory body which exists to make sure that London's police are accountable for the services they provide to people in the capital. The MPA has 23 Members who scrutinise and support the work of the police. The MPA promotes equality and diversity within the police service and is working in partnership to ensure all those who live and work in the capital are treated fairly and with respect.

Achievements

The panel's primary aim is to make unannounced visits to police stations in the borough in order to check and report on the treatment of detainees in police cells. The panel's remit is to check that the rights and entitlements of the detainees are being observed.

The panel's target is to visit the borough's only 24/7 operational custody suite (Lewisham Police Station) weekly. The panel visited Lewisham police station 33 times during 2008, thereby completing 63% of their scheduled visits. During those 33 visits they spoke to 318 detainees about their treatment and conditions. Though this has proved to be a considerable amount of work for the volunteer panel, there is clearly room for improvement during 2009. The panel hopes to undertake recruitment in early 2009 as a measure to improve increase the number of visits actually taking place.

Lewisham station is a large and busy station. It has 28 cells in total and custody visitors often arrive to find most of them occupied. In 2008 over 11,700 detainees passed through the custody suite. Visitors aim to speak to all those in custody who want to see them but inevitably have to prioritise the most vulnerable detainees at very busy times.

In May the panel welcomed a guest speaker from Operation Trident who informed them of police activities to curb gun crime in the local community. In the autumn several members of the panel attended refresher training, held at the MPA's offices, in order to keep their knowledge up to date. It is hoped that during 2009 all members will be able to undertake refresher training modules as part of the regular panel meetings.

Chair's report

We have gone through a number of changes as a panel during 2008. We have been developing and growing and this will serve us well to deliver to our community the reassurance that independent checks on the welfare of those in police custody are being carried out.

We always aim to visit the custody suite once a week and over the past year our visiting record has improved significantly.

As the data in this report shows, many panel members visit in the evenings and weekends. Only a small number of visits have been made between 08.00 and 12.00 and none between 04.00 and 08.00 in the morning. Visitors try to visit the station in an unpredictable pattern, though in practice many of us have jobs that make carrying out this voluntary work during office hours difficult. We have also found it more beneficial to visit when the station is busy and detainees are awake, rather than in the middle of the night, as we do not wake detainees up to speak to them.

We were particularly grateful to have had guest speakers at our meetings over the past year. We welcomed a speaker from Operation Trident, the area of the MPS that tackles gun and drug related crime, often dealing with incidents where both the victims and suspects are from black communities. In addition, early in 2008 Guy Beattie from the MPA's Engagement and Partnership Unit came to talk to the panel about the work the MPA and MPS do to make sure local people are consulted on policing in their area.

As a result of interviewing a number of people on the panel's waiting list we recruited two new members at the end of 2008. The more experienced members of the panel will all be involved in supporting and training them over the coming months.

Police attendance at meetings has been patchy during 2008 and this is something I will be working with our MPA coordinator, Laura del Nevo, to improve during 2009.

I would like to finish by thanking the panel members for all the work they do. This is a vital role that sees our knowledge, skills and experience used to improve the treatment of Lewisham's police detainees.

Recruitment and membership

Since April 2007, panels have been asked to adhere to recruitment and interviewing guidance provided by the MPA. The MPA expects all panels to adhere to the MPA's equal opportunities policy, recruit new panel members from all sections of the community and actively foster good relations between people of different races, genders, sexualities, abilities and age on the panel.

In 2008 the panel had the following 10 members:

Valerie Antoine
The Bean
Trilok Bhalla (Vice-chair)
Rachael Briggs-Canegan
Michael Canegan
Rose Davidson
Allison Davies
Dionne Lewis (Chair)
Leigh Scott
Alan Till
Andy Lawrence (retired from the panel May 2008)

The MPA conducted an optional diversity monitoring exercise during 2008 which has enabled the panel to consider how well it reflects the community it represents. The panel membership is made up of 4 men and 6 women.

According to data from the London Development Agency 61% of the borough is of a white background, 29% is of a black background and 7 % is of an Asian background. 6 of the 10 members disclosed their ethnic background in the diversity monitoring exercise. Of those 6, 3 have described themselves as being of a black background, suggesting that this ethnic group is represented by the panel. The borough's 7% Asian population is represented by one member of the panel.

The panel have a mix of people who describe themselves as Christian and people who do not state a religion but, of those who disclosed their religion, none described themselves as Muslim.

To be eligible to become an Independent Custody Visitor, volunteers must be between the ages of 18 and 85.

Station Visit Issues

The borough has one 24/7 operational custody suite (Lewisham Police Station). In line with the scheme in the rest of London, this station is visited once a week.

Lewisham is a large modern police station with 28 cells and during 2008 12,505 detainees passed through the station, making it one of the busiest stations in London. In general, custody staff at Lewisham station are courteous and helpful to those carrying out visits. The custody visitors are grateful for the cooperation that police officers and staff have extended to them on their visits during the year.

The panel meets every 8 weeks to discuss issues of concern that have arisen from their visits. Police attendance at these meetings is vital if the scheme is to fulfil its purpose of making sure that the welfare of detainees is maintained and that community confidence in this area of policing is also maintained. During 2008 the police attendance at meetings was patchy which has had an impact on the panel's ability to be consistently effective. However, early in 2009 the panel has received assurances that more consistent police representation at the meetings will be provided in future and the panel has high hopes that this will be the case.

The panel has had relatively few concerns about the welfare of detainees held at Lewisham station. In general they have found that basic needs have been met and that detainees are held in a safe and sanitary environment.

They have raised concerns about detainee access to showers or other wash facilities. Many detainees seem unaware that they can ask for a shower and those that do ask are often told that staff are too busy to facilitate it. Visitors do understand that it is a very busy station, facilitating a shower does take-up a significant amount of a gaoler's time and that other tasks, such as checking on those thought to be at risk of self-harm, have to take high priority. Nevertheless, custody visitors are adamant that resources must be made available so that detainees who spend several days in the cells (as is often the case with immigration detainees) are offered a shower.

Other issues that detainees put to custody visitors, such as requests for food, drink, blankets, medical attention or legal advice are usually already in hand when visitors raise them with custody staff on duty, or addressed promptly afterwards.

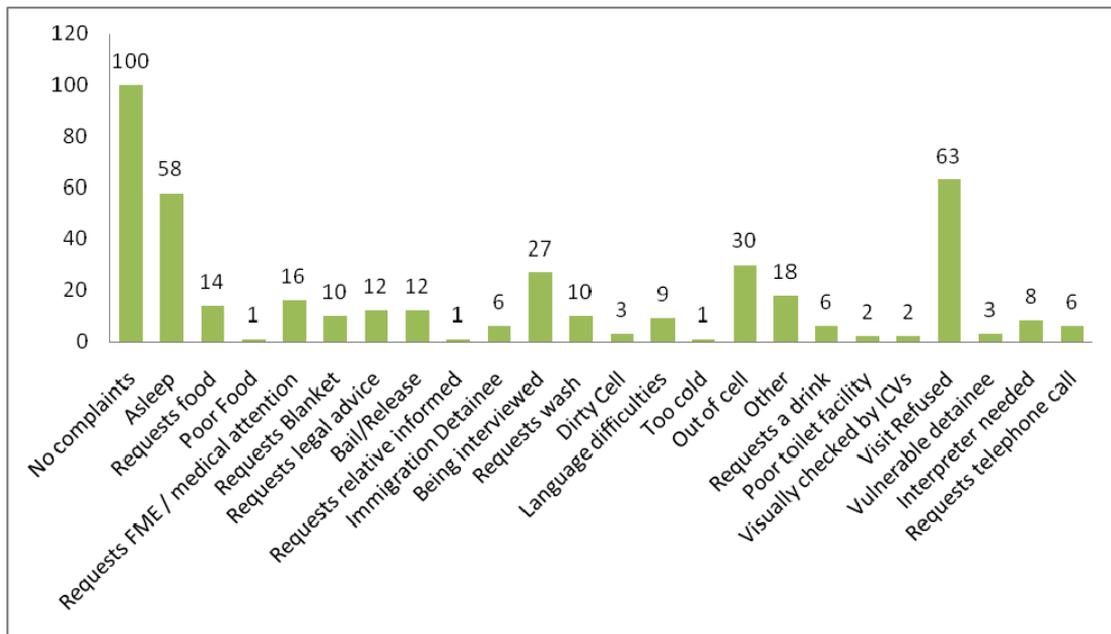
Data from station visits

Visit Concerns

When visitors speak to detainees they record any concerns that detainees raise with them.

Visitors do not wake detainees if they are asleep, but they will usually check through the wicket in the door that all looks well in the cell. Visitors check concerns raised by detainees against their custody record (where the detainees give permission for them to do so), and will bring the matter to the attention of the police if they remain concerned about any aspect of the detainee's treatment or welfare. Most minor concerns can be resolved during the course of the visit and only more major concerns or more complicated issues will be discussed at a meeting of the whole panel.

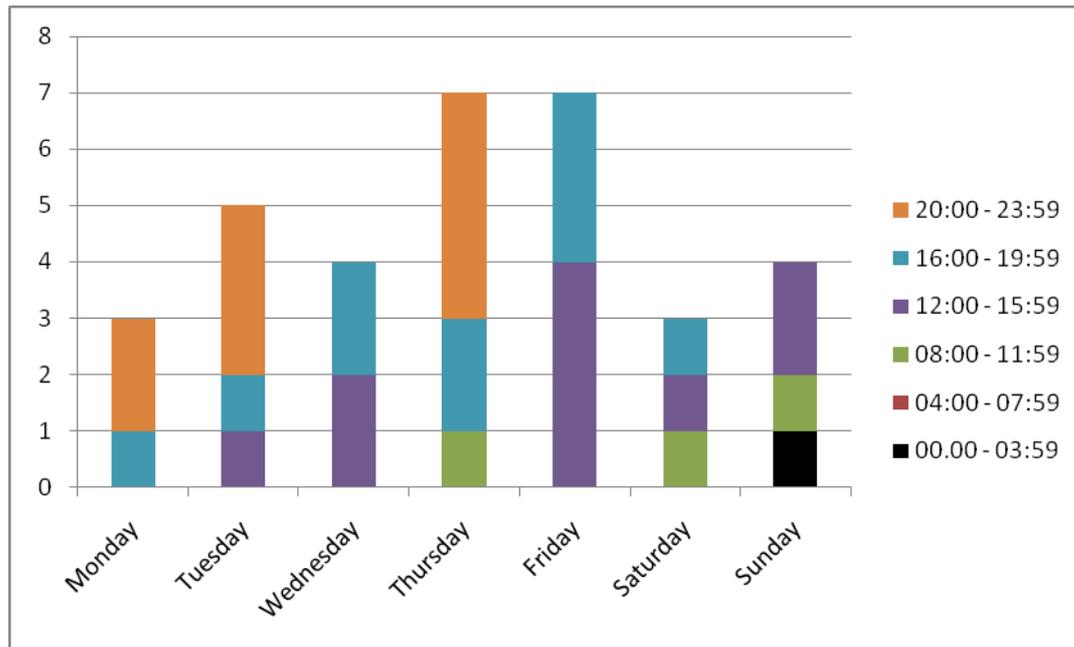
The chart below shows a summary of all concerns raised by detainees during visits made to Lewisham station in 2008.



Visits by Day and Time

Independent Custody Visits are unannounced and the panel's intention is to avoid visiting in a predictable pattern.

The chart below displays the number of visits carried out at Lewisham in 2008, by time period and day of the week. As the chart shows, across the year the panel have achieved a good spread of visits across the days of the week and periods of the day.



Objectives for the coming year

The panel's priority for 2009 is to improve their visiting record. It is hoped that they will be able to increase their 2008 record of completing 63% of scheduled visits to at least 80%.

The MPA has developed a number of refresher training modules to enable experienced visitors to keep up to date with their knowledge and skills. These can be delivered as part of the panel's regular meetings. The panel hopes to undertake several of these during the year and to further broaden their understanding of the criminal justice system by inviting guest speakers from other agencies to speak at their meetings.

The panel hopes to improve on the effectiveness of their meetings. This will be done by ensuring that their own regular attendance of the meetings and by working with their MPA coordinator to ensure reliable and consistent attendance from the police.

The panel hopes to increase awareness and understanding of the scheme amongst the local community. This will be done in part through representation on the Community Police Engagement Group but also through attendance of other community events and meetings, where necessary or relevant.