



**MPA**

**Metropolitan Police Authority**

# Bexley Independent Custody Visiting Panel

## Annual Report 2008



# Contents page

1. Introduction
2. Achievements
3. Chair's report
4. Recruitment and Membership
5. Station Visit Issues
6. Data from station visits
7. Objectives for the coming year

# Introduction

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

This report covers the period from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2008 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2008. The purpose of this 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 the 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 Bexley, 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.

The borough has one 24/7 operational custody suite (Bexleyheath Police Station), which the panel visits once a week.

# Achievements

## **Achievements in 2008**

The primary objective of the panel is to make unannounced visits to police stations in the borough to check and report on the treatment of detainees in police cells to ensure their rights and entitlements are being observed.

The panel is asked to visit Bexleyheath Station once a week, every week of the year. Despite the vacancies on the panel, 48 visits were completed in 2008, meaning that just over 92% of the target was achieved. This is an excellent visiting record which the panel hopes to maintain during 2009.

The panel has been pleased to welcome the new members of the panel, 3 of whom have already completed their initial training and probation period. Over the coming year they will be involved in training further new members of the panel.

The chair has represented the panel at the local Community Police Engagement Group which is an important forum to raise awareness of the panel's work amongst the local community. It is through this meeting that the panel is able to reassure members of the community that regular and independent checks on the treatment of detainees do take place.

# Chair's report

The year started with only three members on the panel. This report shows that in spite of the lack of members we managed to carry out a visit to Bexleyheath Police Station every week. In March one of our members returned to Trinidad and, while recruiting for new members, we were assisted by members of the Bromley and Lewisham panels. Recruiting new members is a lengthy process but we managed to get four very good new members. We welcomed Barbara Rosam, Phil Munro and Joseph Sheridan to the panel early in the year and Alan Bone towards the end of the year. We hope to recruit around 4 new members in 2009.

The panel's work is coordinated by an employee of the MPA and during 2008 we had three coordinators. Our current coordinator, Laura del Nevo, joined us in September.

As chair of the Bexley Independent Custody Visiting Panel I have participated in various police-community engagement activities. As an independent member of the community with an understanding of police custody I was invited to see the preparations for the refurbishment of the terrorist cells at Paddington Green police station. I will be returning once the work has been completed. In addition, I represent the panel at meetings of the Bexley Police Consultative Engagement Group. If members of the community were to raise concerns about police custody at this group I would be present to reassure them that an independent visiting scheme is in operation in the borough.

Together with the panel's vice-chair I have attended meetings of panel chairs from across London, as well as meetings of the chairs of the South East Cluster. I have found these meetings interesting and informative, and a useful place to share common concerns we may have.

As a panel we are keen to increase the number of detainees we speak to. We are very interested in the self-introduction pilot which involves ICVs introducing themselves to detainees, instead of the escorting custody officer explaining to the detainee who we are. While this was being trialled in Bromley I shadowed a visit there and found it interesting to see how detainees reacted to custody visitors introducing themselves. We hope to be able to trial introducing ourselves soon too.

I would like to thank my vice chair Phil Munro and the other members of the panel (Joe, Barbara, Phil and Alan) for their support and continued commitment to visiting. I am also grateful to Trilok Bhalla from the Lewisham panel and Margaret Gubbins and Brenda Rayson from the Bromley panel for visiting in Bexley when we were low on numbers. I would like to give special thanks to Laura del Nevo for the difficult task she has of coordinating us. As a panel we have a good working relationship with the custody staff at Bexleyheath Police Station and we would like to thank them and our liaison officers for being helpful and courteous during the year.

Carol Fletcher

# 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 members:

Carol Fletcher (Chair)  
Barbara Rosam (recruited 2008)  
Phil Munro (recruited 2008)  
Joseph Sheridan (recruited 2008)  
Alan Bone (recruited 2008)

Vivien Johnson (resigned in 2008)  
Erin John-Seow (resigned in 2008)  
Bernard Hanks (retired in 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. According to data from the London Development Agency the borough of Bexley is one of the least ethnically diverse in London. Approximately 88% of the population is of a White background, 6% are of a Black background, 5% are of an Asian background and 1% declared themselves as being of an 'other' ethnic background. All panel members at the end of 2008 declared themselves as being of a British or English White background.

The panel is currently made up of 2 women and 3 men, achieving as balanced a gender mix as possible with a small group and an odd number of people.

In the borough as a whole just under 10% of the population is aged between 18 and 25. The panel has no members from this age group. This age group is under represented in the scheme across London and as a result the MPA will be working to raise awareness of the scheme amongst this group. 30% of the borough's population is aged between 26 and 45, represented by 1 member of the panel. 24% of the borough is aged between 46 and 65, represented by 3 people on the panel. Nearly 15% of the borough is over 65, represented by 1 member of the panel.

The ideal size for a panel that visits one station once a week would be around 9 people, so that as people visit in pairs, each person has a visit around once a week and allowing for holidays and illness. The panel will therefore be recruiting early in 2009 to fill the 4 vacancies on the panel.

# Station Visit Issues

The borough of Bexley has one 24/7 operational custody suite which is at Bexleyheath Police Station. There are 20 cells at Bexleyheath station and 6303 people were held in custody there in 2008. The panel made 48 visits to the station during 2008. They offered 69 people in custody a visit, 33 of whom accepted the visit.

The panel is pleased to report that they have had no serious concerns about the treatment or conditions of people held in police custody at Bexleyheath Police Station.

Panel members consistently find that detainees are held in safe and sanitary conditions. The panel finds that custody staff are generally courteous and helpful to them. On occasions when the panel has found problems – such as a dirty cell or a detainee requesting medical attention, blankets or food the visitors have raised the issue with the officers on duty and the issue is invariably resolved promptly. Their ongoing concerns mainly relate to the lengthy delays in detainees receiving medical attention from a Forensic Medical Examiner.

The panel's monthly meetings are attended by the Custody Sergeant who responds to the panel's concerns and observations and takes action to resolve any issues that were not sorted out at the time of the visit. The Custody Inspector and Borough Commander have made it clear to the panel that they are also available should the panel need to bring any concerns to their attention, though this has not been necessary.

Sadly, in March 2008 there was a death in police custody at Bexleyheath Police Station. Very shortly after the death occurred the chair of the panel was telephoned and invited to come to the station to learn more about what had taken place. She was also invited to sit in on the Gold response group. The panel appreciated the transparent and open way in which the police have acted over the incident.

The death is being investigated by the IPCC and their report will be made public after the coroner's inquest has been held. Though the panel does not have concerns about custody procedures at Bexleyheath, they feel strongly that the long delays in investigating deaths in custody and holding inquests (which are entirely out of the hands of the police locally) can damage community confidence in the police and lead to delays in lessons being learned, should that be necessary.

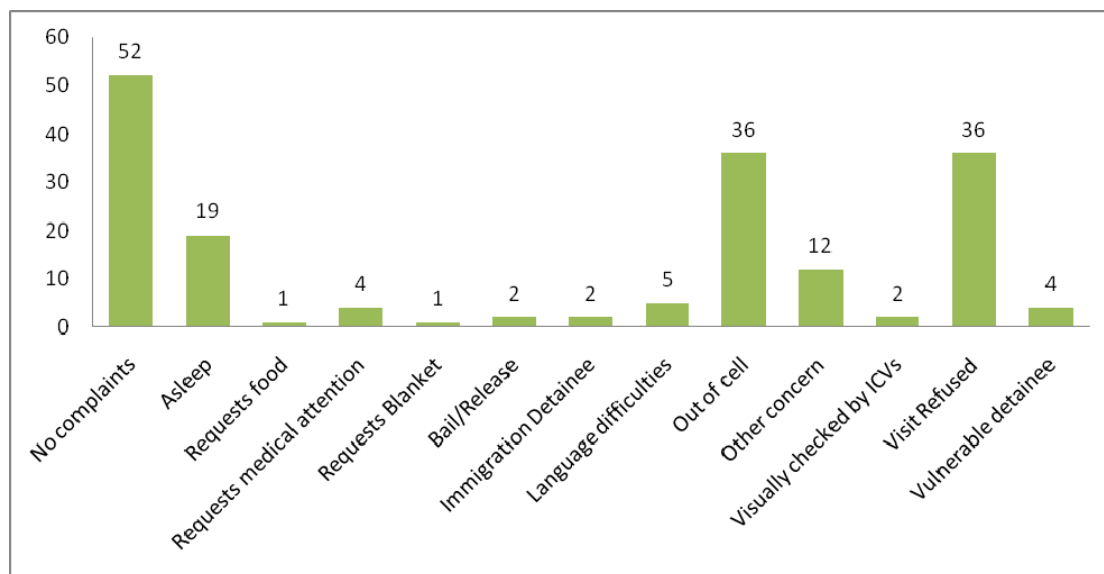
# Data from station visits

## 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 Bexleyheath station in 2008.

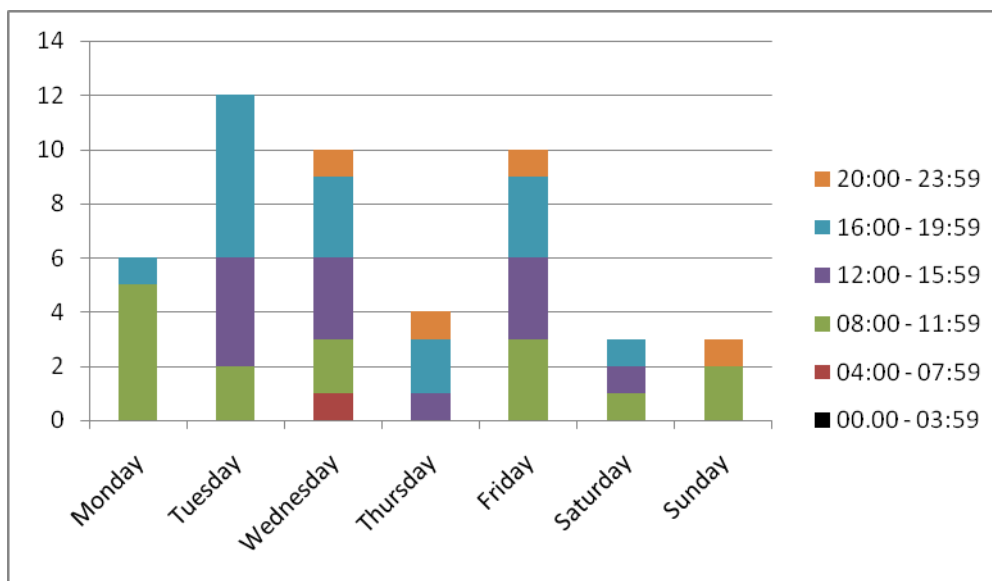




## Visits by Day and Time

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

The following chart displays the number of visits carried out at Bexleyheath in 2008, by time period and day of the week. As the chart shows, the panel's visits covered the days of the week fairly evenly and visits were made at different times of the day and night. The only time period the station was not visited was midnight to 4.00a.m. Nevertheless, the good spread of visits means that the panel's visits could not have been predicted by the police.



## Police Figures

6303 people were held in custody at Bexleyheath Police Station in 2008.

# Objectives for the coming year

## **Visits**

In 2009 we hope to maintain or improve upon our excellent visiting record. We will try to achieve a good spread of visits across all days of the week and times of the day and night. Our 2008 figures suggest we could improve by visiting more at weekends and late at night. We would like to speak to more detainees and hope to do this by implementing self-introduction in the borough, if possible.

## **Recruitment**

We received a number of applications to join the scheme at the very end of 2008 (following an advert in the local press). We hope to appoint around 4 new members to the panel. If further recruitment is necessary in 2009 we will consider targeting recruitment at age and ethnic groups that are not represented on the panel.

## **Training**

By working with our coordinator we will identify our ongoing training needs and participate in refresher training which can be delivered by the coordinator during our regular monthly meetings.

New members of the panel will be invited to attend an initial training session by the MPA, which they will need to attend before they can pass their probation period. In addition the more experienced members of the panel will ensure they feel supported and confident in their custody visiting by accompanying them on their visits and sharing their knowledge and skills.

## **Community Engagement**

The chair of the panel will continue to represent the panel at meetings of the local Community Police Engagement Group (CPEG). This Annual Report will be presented and circulated to members of the CPEG to ensure that they are aware of the work we do. In addition, the chair or other members of the panel will raise awareness of the scheme amongst the local community they represent at any relevant meetings or events that arise.