

Distraction items in custody

Introducing distraction items for those detained in custody and risk assessed as suitable.

First published
25 June 2024

Updated
8 September 2025

Key details

Does it work?	Promising
Focus	Diversion Reoffending
Topic	Offender management Vulnerability and safeguarding
Organisation	Devon and Cornwall Police
Contact	Becky Davies
Email address	16371@devonandcornwall.pnn.police.uk
Region	South West
Partners	Police Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services) Health services
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Scale of initiative	Regional

Key details

Target group	Adults Children and young people Offenders
---------------------	--

Aim

The aim of the initiative is to provide distraction items to support detainees regulate their behaviour while in custody, and reduce feelings of stress, anxiety and anger.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of having distraction items in custody are to:

- reduce detainee anxiety
- reduce detainee self-harm
- reduce the number of violence incidents against custody staff
- enhance detainee engagement with support services
- prevent future offending

Description

Context

A custody sergeant noticed that force mental health practitioners had a stretch ball which they would occasionally ask for approval to give to a detainee. These stretch balls seemed to be effective at helping reduce panic attacks and self-harm, and also at improving communication.

The custody sergeant gained support from senior management to introduce risk-assessed distraction items. Each item was robustly assessed by custody staff and then further assessed on an individual detainee basis when given out. Distraction items included stress balls, mindful colouring and footballs.

Training

Learning events were carried out with staff before the launch of the distraction items. These events were organised by a custody sergeant with the support of their management team. The custody sergeant also collaborated with G4S global security healthcare professionals, mental health practitioners who sit within custody and approved mental health practitioners who sit outside the police. All custody staff including custody officers and detention officers attended these events from across Devon and Cornwall Police.

One of the objectives of the learning events was to initiate discussions about emotional dysregulation such as an emotional response that is poorly regulated and does not fall within the accepted range of emotional reactions. The learning events also sought to gain buy-in from staff who would be giving out the distraction items. Six sessions ran to cover all the custody staff. The events ran during predefined training days and took up half a day.

Delivery

The distraction items were initially trialled in Exeter custody centre before being rolled out across the force. The intervention was low cost, with each item costing a couple of pounds each. Some items were also donated at no cost by a local community charity and by staff.

The distraction item used varied depending on detainee preferences and the level of risk presented. Certain items would not be provided if the detainee was known to be at risk of self-harm, or had a propensity towards violence. Throughout the delivery of the initiative very few distraction items were destroyed or damaged.

Overall impact

Feedback was sought from staff and detainees via surveys left in the custody office. Surveys included questions such as whether staff thought the use of distraction items was effective and whether they presented any issues or problems.

Detainees also had an opportunity to provide qualitative feedback around the availability and use of the items. To obtain this data, detention officers filled in sheets based on detainee responses to predefined questions such as:

- what did you think of the distraction item?
- which item did you find most helpful?

All responses were kept anonymous and there was no pressure for detainees to provide any feedback.

An interim review indicated that the distraction items were effective and were well received by staff and detainees. Detainees reported reduced anxiety levels, which helped them to distract and engage better with the custody process. Other benefits included reductions in self-harm, use of force and other high-demand behaviours.

The force have now introduced items to support neurodiverse detainees, such as earplugs to block out noise. The evidence collected to date suggests that distraction items have reduced incidents of violence and self-harm, as well as making it easier for mental health professionals and others embedded in custody to interact with detainees. Qualitative feedback from staff and detainees has been overwhelmingly positive.

A number of other forces and prisons have taken on the initiative following its publication in the College of Policing's [Going Equipped](#).

Learning

- Early engagement within and across the force custody environment is key to mitigate any concerns around risk by senior management and staff.
- It is crucial to conduct a risk assessment of the items. Risk assessments start by giving an item to a member of staff and asking them to 'do their worst' with it. The next step is to risk assess giving the item to a detainee each time and update custody records with the outcome.
- Getting staff to support the risk assessment of items at the beginning of the process helps with staff engagement as well as overcoming health and safety concerns.
- Ensure purchasing the same item when obtaining replacements as opposed to purchasing a different version of the same item which has not been risk assessed.
- The force feel they were quite conservative in their offering of distraction items and potentially could have offered more items.

Copyright

The copyright in this shared practice example is not owned or managed by the College of Policing and is therefore not available for re-use under the terms of the Non-Commercial College Licence.

You will need to seek permission from the copyright owner to reproduce their works.

Legal disclaimer

Disclaimer: The views, information or opinions expressed in this shared practice example are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or views of the College of Policing or the organisations involved.

Tags

Detention and custody