Automation of defence solicitors' initial contact with custody

Automating defence solicitors initial contact with police custody through an online portal that transfers their contact details and comments directly onto the custody record.

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Key details

Does it work?	Promising
Focus	Organisational
Topic	Criminal justice
Organisation	[West Midlands Police](#)
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Region	West Midlands
Partners	Police Private sector
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	April 2024

Key details

Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Offenders

Aim

To utilise automation technology to streamline the initial contact between custody and defence solicitors.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes are to:

- provide faster access to a defence solicitor
- improve the experience for defence solicitors trying to get through to custody staff by phone
- provide a more efficient process for custody staff, enabling staff to focus on the care and treatment of detainees whilst providing a better service to defence solicitors

Description

West Midlands Police criminal justice services have changed the way in which defence solicitors make initial contact with custody, following the acceptance of a case from the defence solicitor call centre (DSCC).

There were issues with the initial contact between custody suites and defence solicitors. West Midlands Police have two large custody sites, and all cars are routed to a central hub. The hub controls access to the building, manages custody resources around new arrivals and departures, manages all enquiries from the public front office, and manages all calls from the officers.

Police custody suites are incredibly busy, with one custody suite in West Midlands taking over 35,000 incoming calls in the first four months of 2023. The consequence of a high volume of calls is that some calls go unanswered, or there is a delay in answering which can delay access to legal representation for detainees. Furthermore, when calls were answered, the staff member was often

not in the position to provide the information required, as other tasks, such as the safety of detainees was being prioritised.

Custody Staff had a responsibility to facilitate these calls, which increased pressure to an already very busy role. Because of this, a new automation system was put in place to make this process more efficient.

The new process

- Defence solicitors complete a short Microsoft Form instead of calling the custody suite. The form was created by a sergeant and the system is intuitive, making it easy for anyone to create.
- The information the defence solicitors provide populates a Microsoft List, where automatic data quality checks take place. Microsoft Power Automate transfers the information from the form into a list and checks the information recorded. Where the information is recorded incorrectly, it will mark it for custody staff to review manually. Where solicitors have provided the information but not in the correct format, for instance missed forward slashes, dots or misses some information which is always the same (for example the force code), it will add the formatting to ensure that it can progress through automation. This power automate was created by the force's internal IT team.
- The software searches the custody system to validate the information. If validation fails, automation isn't achieved. If this occurs, a manual review is completed before any information is shared to ensure the security of data.

Validation checks

Validation checks are required to ensure that it is safe and appropriate to share information. They also prevent inaccurate information being populated onto the custody record.

- solicitors must get the five station code and five middle digits of the custody record correct – If not, it will fail automation
- the system will then check the detainees name against what has been provided by the solicitor. If it matches then automation is achieved, without further validation
- where the name does not match due to a misspell for instance, it will check the DSCC reference number. If the DSCC reference number matches the custody record number, automation will be achieved

- final validation check, where the system will check that a secure CJSM.NET email address has been provided by the solicitor and that the detainee is currently in detention – If this is missing, or the person is not in detention (for example released) then no information will be sent out to the solicitor

Once validated, the solicitor's contact details, and any comments are automatically populated into the custody record. Custody record front sheets and the detainee vulnerability document are then generated by the automation and are automatically emailed back to the solicitor. All of this is done automatically; the submission of the form to email automation is often completed within 3 minutes. Custody staff will then facilitate a phone call with the solicitor and detainee at an arranged time.

Where automation isn't achieved, the data is communicated to custody staff through a filtered list in MS Teams, they update the custody record manually and generate the document email directly from the custody record.

Monitoring

Custody staff monitor their dashboard for failed automations and act on them promptly. A monthly report is generated, which includes failed automations and the reasons for them, so feedback can be provided to solicitors where necessary. System operation is monitored by the automation team within the IT and Digital department.

Cost

There were no external costs associated with the system, the only cost was the time it took the force's internal IT engineers to build.

Overall impact

West Midlands Police are evaluating the impact of the new automation system. They are doing this by tracking:

- a monthly report from IT colleagues, which includes the time saved for custody staff
- feedback requests from local defence solicitors

Data from the first month of implementation shows that automation is achieved on average 80% of the time. This has saved 77 hours of custody staff time in 1 month.

Feedback from solicitors has also been positive in respect of how quickly they get access to information, and that they do not need to wait for call to be answered.

Since launching there has been an increase in Solicitors using the online form, with time savings increasing month on month.

Over the last 12 months, from initial contact alone we have saved 1362 hours.

The force have now also launched outcomes. When solicitors choose to use the online form, they will now get an email reply once the detainee has been dealt with, detailing what the outcome was, any court dates, bail conditions, conditional caution conditions. This negates them having to contact the officer in charge (OIC) or custody after the detainees release for an update, and doubles the time savings for custody staff by reducing the number of email requests for updates and phone calls.

During October 2025:

- total successful transactions: 1725
- total solicitors to be contacted: 32
- total instances of invalid custody numbers: 55
- total hours saved: 142.42
- total cost saving: 4517.46

Automated outcomes:

- total successful transactions: 1725
- total hours saved: 143.75
- total cost saving: 4558.31

Totals:

- total hours saved: 286.16
- total cost saving: 9075.77

Learning

Information inputted by defence solicitors has not been as accurate as West Midlands Police expected, therefore they built slight discrepancies into the automation.

Roll out

It was important that the local defence solicitor committee were involved in the development and roll out. The force information management department and local IT and Digital were also involved in the design of the service. The local defence committee were in favour of the system as a way of improving the timeliness of contact with custody, as some were reporting issues with being able to get through to custody over the phone.

The force provided a letter to the local committee which was sent to all solicitors in the West Midlands, and printed QR codes on business cards for the portal which were handed out to solicitors in the week before the system went live. This was vital in ensuring a smooth roll out of the process.

Post roll out

Following the roll out, the force became aware that the DSCC send a text to solicitors which does not include the custody reference number. Solicitors must log onto the DSCC portal to retrieve all the detainee's details along with custody reference numbers. Some solicitors reported that this was putting them off using the new system, as they are logging onto to two systems.

There is still an issue with timeliness of telephone consultations between detainees and solicitors that the force are working through. This issue existed prior to implementation of this new procedure.

The force adapted the online form to improve formatting of custody record numbers, effectively almost removing failures that are as a result of defence solicitors not recording the custody record number in the correct format.

Future

The force currently has an upgrade in development. For successful automations, the robotics will check the custody record at certain time stamps to establish if there is an outcome recorded for the arrest. Where an outcome is recorded, the plan is for the system to generate an automatic email to the solicitor with details of the outcome, along with information such as bail conditions and court dates.

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Tags

Criminal justice