

Arresting officers providing custody with risk assessments

Implementing a risk assessment document to share detainee medical history and concerns from family and friends with custody.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Adults at risk Custody
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Region	South East
Partners	Police
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	October 2023
Scale of initiative	Local

Key details

Target group	Offenders
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Aim

The aims of the risk assessment are to:

- ensure there is a record of the arresting officers risk assessment as per Authorised Professional Practice (APP)
- identify and mitigate risks to ensure safer detention within custody suites

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes are to:

- reduce serious instances custody and prevent any further deaths in custody
- reduce the number of detainees being presented to custody who are medically unfit for detention

Description

Thames Valley Police (TVP) identified several critical incidents where essential information known to arresting officers was not communicated to custody staff. This information included details about:

- medications or drugs taken
- medical history
- concerns raised by family or friends
- disclosures made by the arrested individual

While risks in custody cannot be eliminated entirely, sharing crucial information allows custody officers to mitigate these risks effectively as part of their care plans.

Risk assessment

To address this issue, and in line with [detention and custody risk assessment APP](#), a concise risk assessment document was developed for arresting officers. This document enables them to record

any potential risks.

In May 2022, an initial paper-based version of the risk assessment was piloted at Maidenhead custody for four months. This trial, supported by the local police area (LPA) commander, required minimal resources. It focused on creating the form and communicating its use to the LPA, arresting officers, and custody staff. After a successful trial, the paper version was extended to the rest of the force for an additional three months. Feedback from this period indicated that the paper form was not efficient, leading to a preference for a digital version.

Digital form

An officer at London Valley volunteered to create a Microsoft Teams form, which was trialled in their area from 12 June 2023, for one month. The trial was successful, resulting in the full rollout of the digital version from 30 October 2023.

Both the paper and online versions of the form are available. The risk assessment should be conducted at the earliest opportunity, if safe to do so. It must be completed before the officer leaves custody. Any relevant information must be brought to the attention of the custody sergeant.

The paper forms are printed and available in holding rooms, as well as in officers' paperwork folders. The preferred digital form is sent directly to the custody suite. It is accessible via the force intranet and through a QR code that officers can scan with their mobile phones. QR codes are also located in the holding rooms and on the intranet page. If the online form is unavailable for any reason, officers should revert to the paper form until the digital version is operational again.

The initiative was approved by the head of criminal justice, the chief constable's management team, and the assistant chief constable.

All information, whether from the paper document or the digital form, is attached to the custody record. The digital form is saved as a PDF.

Resources

The resource impact has been minimal, as staff had the necessary skills to set up the Microsoft Forms and QR codes. If required, IT support is available to assist in setting up the form.

No formal training was required; however, there are planned visits to incident crime response shifts to discuss the booking-in process. This process will soon become standard practice.

The first question on the form asks whether the detained person (DP) requires hospital treatment before attending custody. This allows TVP to be aware if a DP is in hospital and will be arriving at their custody suite, enabling them to monitor potential issues and involve healthcare professionals as needed for ongoing care or treatment.

Evaluation

While no formal evaluation report has been written, an informal review of the digital process and feedback from the trial periods was conducted in 2023. Key themes emerged from this review.

- Email routing – officers requested separate email addresses for the forms, rather than having them sent to the general custody inbox for review.
- Use of force – the question regarding the use of force required additional response options.
- Arrival time – the form needed to include the arrival time at the police station, particularly in cases where a detainee was taken to the hospital first. This was added at the end of the form to ensure it could be completed accurately.
- Additional investigation information – there was a request to include information about further investigations. However, this was denied, as adding such details could expand the form beyond its intended focus on risk, potentially making it too lengthy and complex.
- Digital form preference – a review confirmed that sticking with the digital form was worthwhile.

Other review findings

The review also highlighted that the form should not be perceived as a booking-in form but should focus solely on outlining any risks associated with the DP.

Initially, details about the circumstances of arrest were excluded. However, after further consultation with officers, it became clear that this information was relevant to assessing risks in custody. For example, arrests for grievous bodily harm or possession of weapons indicate higher risks in custody. Consequently, the circumstances of the arrest were later incorporated back into the form.

Overall impact

The custody risk assessment initiative has been in place at TVP for over 18 months, showing notable improvements in detainee care and custody processes.

In May 2022, TVP recorded 80 transfers to the hospital, with 64% occurring within 30 minutes of the detainee's arrival at custody, a figure that raised concerns. By April 2024, the number of detainees requiring hospital treatment had increased to 133, with only 32% of these transfers occurring within the first 30 minutes. Additionally, 15 detainees were taken directly to the hospital before being brought into custody. This shift reflects a positive trend, as it indicates that medical needs are being identified earlier, allowing urgent medical care to be provided promptly.

Reducing risks

Addressing medical concerns before arriving at custody reduces risks to detainees by ensuring they are fit for detention and minimises delays that could arise if medical needs are identified only after arrival at custody. This approach also reduces operational risks for the police, as unnecessary transfers from custody to hospital are avoided.

The decrease in hospital transfers occurring within 30 minutes of arrival at custody further supports this improvement, demonstrating that detainees' medical needs are being addressed earlier, ensuring their safety and reducing the potential for delays in providing urgent care.

Care plans

TVP has involved their healthcare provider, Mountain Health Care, in the consultation process, leading to significant improvements in care plans within custody. There has also been an increase in detainees receiving hospital care before arriving in custody, although specific figures are unavailable. While this can impact resourcing, it is crucial to ensure that suspects are fit to be detained. Notably, there has been a significant improvement in suspects being brought to custody with the appropriate medication, assisting healthcare professionals in addressing medical needs in custody and reducing requests to collect medications from home addresses.

Accountability

The initiative has also enhanced accountability. In cases of adverse incidents, the arresting officer's risk assessment provides a clear audit trail, confirming whether sufficient information was disclosed to custody officers. This protects the detainee by ensuring that medical and welfare issues are addressed and safeguards the officers and the organisation by documenting the information

shared.

Due to a critical incident, the following warning was added to the form.

- This form should be completed prior to entering custody, ensuring it is safe to do so and the detainee is secure. If, in exceptional circumstances, this is not possible, this form must be completed in full and given to custody staff before you leave custody.

The form complies with the APP, which has led to strong support from LPA and department colleagues. The process is under continuous evaluation, and TVP will participate in a national working group on pre-custody risk assessments, where they will present this document.

Learning

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- use of force – the question regarding the use of force required additional response options
- arrival time – the form needed to include the arrival time at the police station, particularly in cases where a detainee was taken to the hospital first (this was added at the end of the form to ensure it could be completed accurately)
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Tags

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