

Driving continuous improvement for neurodivergent needs in West Midlands Police custody

West Midlands Police (WMP) have established a panel of volunteers with lived experience of autism to improve how the force interacts with and supports those with neurodivergent needs. This practice example focuses on the implementation of the intervention in police custody.

First published

5 September 2025

Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Adults at risk Custody Diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI)
Organisation	West Midlands Police
Contact	Simon Edwards
Email address	simon.edwards@westmidlands.police.uk
Region	West Midlands
Partners	Police Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation

Key details

Stage of implementation	The practice is at a pilot stage.
Start date	September 2024
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Children and young people Disability Offenders

Aim

This intervention was developed in partnership with the City of Wolverhampton Council as part of the broader autism strategy, driven by the national strategy for autistic children, young people, and adults: 2021 to 2026.

The overarching aim of the intervention is to ensure that the West Midlands Police (WMP) custody environment and interactions that take place are responsive to the needs of people with a neurodiversity. This is achieved through drawing on the lived experiences of a volunteer panel, reflecting on their feedback, implementing changes, and new activities to ensure services are inclusive, responsive and fit for purpose.

Previously, the processes and neurodiversity provision available reflected what was thought to be most effective at the time. This intervention has since provided new insights and evidence that allows for refinement and to strengthen processes moving forward. Previously, there were limited provisions available for detainees. Therefore, the need for specific provisions for people with a neurodiversity was identified to strengthen the force’s approach to keeping both detainees and officers safe by reducing the chance of self-harm and violence towards staff.

The partnership with Wolverhampton Council was formed in response to improving support within the criminal and youth justice system. Following a multi-agency meeting, it was felt that the best way to progress from a policing perspective was to create an internal panel of people with lived

experience to review current practices and provide suitable suggestions to meet the national objective.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of the intervention are:

- increased opportunities for improvements in the custody environment and interactions with people with a neurodiversity
- tailored recommendations and practical guidance informed by the volunteer panel of those with lived experiences of autism
- ensure that practices, for example information gathering, are fit for purpose
- update force guidance for officers if it is known or suspected that a person in custody is neurodivergent
- reduction in self-harm of detainees and in violence towards custody staff

These outcomes will ultimately lead to:

- enhanced service delivery
- a more inclusive environment within custody
- an improved experience for people with a neurodiversity

Description

A core part of the intervention has been drawing on lived experiences of the volunteer panel. The volunteer panel visited operational custody suites, where they reviewed the physical environment, the charge area, and interview rooms. They reviewed literature and distraction and welfare materials provided to detainees. They also had the opportunity to conduct observations of the custody processes, and risk assessment questions asked to detainees, specific to neurodiversity.

Based on these activities, the panel worked with WMP contacts to develop a set of targeted recommendations.

1. Treat people as neurodiverse based on traits rather than diagnosis.
2. Review the provision of materials available for neurodiverse detainees.
3. Make changes to the custody environment to make it more neurodiverse-friendly.

As a result of the review and recommendations, changes were made in three main areas.

1. Risk assessment and a revised questions set.
2. Provision of materials.
3. Changes to the custody environment.

Changes to the risk assessment

As part of the risk assessment, when brought to custody officers would previously have asked individuals directly if they have autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or Aspergers. Feedback from the panel raised concerns that this was not a broad enough set of options and that there may be some reluctance for individuals to disclose their neurodiversity because of negative associations or stigmas. Alongside that, individuals may not have been diagnosed or know they are neurodiverse. Based on this feedback, the question set used when carrying out the risk assessment was updated to identify where individuals may have traits of a neurodiversity. Furthermore, custody staff were provided with guidance on how to treat individuals as neurodiverse if they have the identifiable traits.

Revised questions set:

- To help us provide you with the best possible support in custody do you recognise any of the following traits in yourself:
 1. Struggle to read or write
 2. Clumsy
 3. Find it hard to cope with things like large crowds, bright lights, loud or sudden noises or other social situations
 4. Find it difficult to keep still?
- As you have stated yes to this question what could I do to support you today?
- The questions I have asked you are common characteristics of someone with a neurodiversity. Have you ever been diagnosed with a neurodivergent condition or do you suspect yourself to be neurodivergent?
- What condition have you been diagnosed with or believe yourself to have?

These questions then trigger a prompt to custody staff that reads: 'Custody staff - consider appropriate cell location, distraction materials, ear plugs, literature. Please refer to a health care practitioner (HCP) for assessment and make sure the officer in charge (OIC) is aware for interview'. There is also a hyperlink embedded within this statement to take custody staff to a SharePoint with downloadable support materials.

The revised questions were reviewed by the panel before being added to the custody system and have recently been revised following further consultation with the panel to help further identify ADHD.

Provisions of materials

WMP have commissioned a supplier to develop a neurodiversity pack to be provided to any detainee who has traits of a neurodiversity. The packs contain an eye mask, ear plugs, a stress ball, with a QR code link to StaySafe and Autism West Midlands, and neurodivergent-friendly literature. The packs are single use and can be kept by the detainee on release. They are produced by SceneSafe and cost £4.89 per pack. The packs are provided in addition to other distraction materials available in custody such as fidget spinners, bouncy balls, puzzles, colouring books, and reading materials.

StaySafe is a website which provides vital 'Safety Plan' guidance tools. Jointly funded by NHS England, they provide easy to print online templates and guidance video tutorials, purposefully designed to help people through the process of writing their own Safety Plan. The aim is for individuals to build hope, identify actions and strategies to resist suicidal thoughts, and develop positive ways to cope with stress and emotional distress.

Changes to the environment

The WMP custody environment includes features such as murals which have been digitally printed onto cell walls, with some cells having digital clocks. The panel advised that colour used in custody suites could have an impact on people with a neurodiversity, sometimes quite negatively, and that no one single colour is suitable for all. The force have opted for a light-coloured cell wall colour, with the ability to change the colour of the lighting. The 'sensory lighting' has been installed at four of the seven custody locations, with plans for it to be rolled out force-wide.

Training

Approximately 90 places have been secured for training on multi-agency neurodiversity within the criminal justice system for custody staff. The custody staff attending the training vary, including detention officers, sergeants, and inspectors. Once staff have attended the training, they will then act as a single point of contact (SPOC) or ambassador for managing neurodiversity within WMP custody suites.

Overall impact

The implementation of these changes is still at an early stage; therefore, it is not possible to assess the impact of the intervention. However, initial feedback from the volunteer panel of those with lived experiences of autism has been extremely positive so far. The panel are regularly updated on progress and provide inputs on an ongoing basis. Additionally, there is a custody staff forum made up of sergeants and detention officers who meet regularly to provide feedback to the senior leadership team.

Once the intervention has been fully embedded into the custody environment, an impact assessment will be developed. This will include gathering feedback from individuals identified as having traits of a neurodiverse condition in WMP custody.

Learning

The intervention is at an early stage, therefore capturing and sharing learning is not feasible yet. However, there is an ongoing dialogue with custody staff and with the volunteer panel, to capture learning and feedback during implementation.

For example, changes were made to the introduction question based on feedback from custody staff, as well as user experience once the intervention went live.

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.