

Streamlining custody allocation and departure processes

West Midlands Police (WMP) have streamlined custody operations by centralising allocation decisions and automating booking workflows, enabling staff to focus on safeguarding detainees.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Organisational
Topic	Criminal justice Custody Productivity
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Region	West Midlands
Partners	Police Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services)
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	March 2025

Key details

Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Offenders Workforce

Aim

The aims of the initiative are to:

- centralise allocation decisions through the force contact centre (FCC)
- streamline departures by replacing physical investigator queues inside the custody suite with a digital, prioritised ticketing system
- eliminate administrative bottlenecks within custody suites by implementing automated online booking workflows
- allow officers in charge (OICs) to work on case files and alternative tasks remotely while awaiting automated departure alerts
- divert custody staff away from volume-driven administrative to enable them to focus on core safeguarding duties
- ensure the timely completion of multi-agency referral form (MARF) and supervisor alerts when a child enters the custody

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of the initiative are to:

- reduce the time taken to process booking requests
- reduce the end-to-end travel, waiting and booking-in times
- lower the physical congestion to improve the safety of custody suites
- improve how custody staff prioritise and manage demand

Description

West Midlands Police (WMP) conducted a review into how the force manages detainee demand entering and leaving police custody. The review found that demand for cell space has risen over the previous four years, with approximately 2,000 additional detainees per month entering custody. In addition, the review identified the following areas of inefficiency:

- inefficient demand distribution – demand was unevenly spread across custody suites, with some consistently overwhelmed while others had capacity
- “Custody tennis” – officers would often spend a considerable amount of time calling multiple suites to find a space
- operational delays – the average wait times reached 35 minutes per person in custody, equating to approximately 64,000 lost officer hours, or around 8,000 shifts per year
- lack of oversight – there was no strategic, force-wide view of cell availability or detainee risk
- updates to records – although investigators updated custody records when ready to dispose, there was no automatic notification to custody staff, resulting in detainees being held longer than necessary
- safety risks – when suites became overcrowded and footfall was unmanaged; custody officers were diverted from safeguarding duties to triage detainees

In response, WMP implemented a detainee arrival and departure procedure across all custody suites

Arrivals

The arrivals process positions the FCC as the primary decision-maker for custody allocations, supported by digital tools that manage detainee flow and enhance officer safety.

Digital resource toolkit

WMP’s criminal justice service improvement team has provided the FCC with four tools to maintain operational oversight:

- QlikSense dashboard – provides real-time data on waiting times, red, amber, green (RAG) status, and cell availability across all custody suites
- live waiting lists – uses Microsoft Lists to track detainees who are enroute, waiting, or in the process of being booked in, along with any identified vulnerabilities

- departure board – displays detainees pending disposal or release and informs custody staff of upcoming cell availability
- resource and guidance hub – provides access to national and force policy and procedural documents

To support the implementation of the digital resource toolkit, the criminal justice service improvement team has delivered in-person training to the FCC on how to use each tool.

For resilience, ownership of the automations, forms and lists has been shared across three members of the service improvement team.

Decision-making criteria

Prior to directing a detainee to a suite, the FCC dispatcher assesses three key areas:

- capacity – reviewing each custody suite's RAG status, available empty cells, and any specific cell type requirements, such as access to a health care practitioner
- workflow – considering the average wait times, pending arrivals, and scheduled departures for each custody suite
- risk – assessing the staff impact, manual custody messages, and THRIVE (threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement) assessments

Booking and notification workflow

Once a suite is selected, the FCC dispatcher completes an online booking form, which includes the following information:

- personal and incident details – the detainee's personal information such as name, age, and address, and the details of the alleged offence
- arrest details – the time, location and reason for arrest, along with the grounds for detaining the individual
- risk assessment – to assess mental well-being, drug and alcohol use and any history of self-harm or suicide risk

The completion of the form triggers the following automated actions:

- custody staff will receive a prompt card using the: herbal and alternatives remedies, over the counter medication, street drugs, prescribed medication, inhalers and injections and time of last dose (HOSPITAL) mnemonic (a clinical memory aid for identifying drug use) to support safety and medical obligations
- the arresting officer will receive an email reminder to complete post-booking administrative actions
- if the detainee is under 18, the system mandates a completion of a MARF and notifies the officer's supervisor

Departures

Once a decision is made to charge or bail the detainee, the OIC updates the disposals entry in the custody detention log which generates a digital departure ticket. The ticket is sent to the departure board which sets the detainee queue position for the custody sergeant.

The OIC is no longer required to wait in the custody suite; they receive an email or text notification when the custody sergeant is ready to release the person in custody. Additionally, the OIC receives an email alert outlining the mandatory actions that must be completed before the detainee can be released.

The criminal justice service improvement team has developed force-wide briefs and internal communications to upskill OICs on the actions required to create digital tickets for the departures function.

Overall impact

The intervention has had a positive impact on distributing demand more evenly across all custody suites. For detainees who are under 18 years, the initiative has supported safeguarding compliance. The system triggers a mandatory MARF requirement and immediately notifies supervisors, ensuring legal and policy obligations are met without the need for manual oversight.

Since March 2025 the force has observed the following outcomes:

- reduced wait times – the average wait times have fallen from 32 minutes to 20 minutes, exceeding the initial 15% efficiency target.
- faster cell space booking – the time required to book cell spaces has reduced from approximately 15 minutes to four minutes

- significant officer?hour savings - the intervention has saved approximately 27,400 annual officer hours for arrivals, with a projected 30,400 hours saved for departures

Learning

- Although most of the process is automated, FCC dispatchers can still be influenced by arresting officers when selecting the most efficient and suitable custody facility.
- The digital resource toolkit has experienced two short periods of downtime, including the national Microsoft 365 outage. While the force has adequate contingency measures in place, these incidents highlight ongoing risks to the process.
- The force has plans to fully automate the process, develop an app that enables officers to book cell space, and use rule?based algorithms to direct detainees to the most appropriate suite. By benchmarking current dispatcher decisions against the proposed algorithmic rules, the force has identified that while humans often make the correct choice, an automated system would eliminate the remaining human bias. This data?driven comparison indicates that by moving to a fully automated model, would encourage further efficiency gains currently lost to manual influence.

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