



INDEPENDENT ADVISORY PANEL AND DEATHS IN CUSTODY AND THE NATIONAL POLICE CHIEFS' COUNCIL

Digest of roundtable event on preventing suicide following police custody

The number of suicides following police custody is consistently high, with the latest annual statistics showing that 52 people died by suicide within 48 hours of release.

In January 2024, the IAPDC and NPCC held a roundtable on preventing suicide following police custody. The aim of the event was to bring cross-sector stakeholders together to explore options for support available on release and the partnership working that is needed to safeguard the lives of individuals identified as at risk of suicide.

The roundtable explored data and themes emerging from post-custody suicides, the importance of lived experience in informing suicide prevention initiatives, and effective police and voluntary sector partnership. Issues including the robustness and consistency of pre-release risk assessments, joining up support, and support challenges were also discussed. Further, Northumbria Police shared examples and learning from notable practice within its force and with partners.

Speakers at the event included: the IOPC; David Breakspear, Lived Experience Influencer; the Samaritans; Northumbria Police; the Local Government Association; Lucy Faithfull Foundation; and NHS England. Also attending the roundtable was a range of stakeholders representing the voluntary sector, policing and scrutiny bodies, government officials, and academics.

This document provides a thematic digest of the discussion and views expressed by participants during the roundtable.

Data and themes

1. Numbers of post-custody suicides were lower in the early 2000s. There was a significant increase in 2012 and numbers have stayed relatively stable since. Changes in the detection of indecent images of children are likely to explain the increase in post-custody suicides.
2. Veterans or people at risk of homelessness are at an increased risk of suicide. People arrested for sexual offences are at particularly high risk and require tailored support. They represented 50% of all suicides in the latest annual statistics. A significant proportion of the Lucy Faithfull Stop it Now service users are people under investigation. A lot of the organisation's work is supporting those individuals experiencing suicidal ideation.
3. The IOPC's latest annual publication shows that 75% of those who died were known to have mental health concerns and just under half were reported to be intoxicated with

drugs and/or alcohol at the time of their arrest. The IOPC sees cases where there have been failures in risk assessment processes, communication methods, and completion of Person Escort Records. However, it is important to note that not all individuals who are at risk of suicide have a long history of mental ill-health.

4. Around 650,000 people are arrested each year and these individuals are often at the most challenging time in their lives. The relatively low number of deaths in police custody is a testament to the work of police forces to safeguard lives in custody.

Safeguarding to prevent custody

5. Upstream investment in health and social care services is needed to reduce the number of people going into police custody in the first place. The threshold for adults to receive social care support is high. Some individuals who are very vulnerable are stuck in a cycle of referral and assessment but do not meet the threshold for social care. They then encounter the criminal justice system, at which point it is too late to provide effective intervention. A multiagency approach with long-term involvement from a social worker is vital. However, every aspect of the system appears to be at breaking point.
6. The NHS only sees around 20 to 30% of those with severe mental illness due to capacity issues, and only a fraction of those will receive psychological therapy. The resources to keep people well are limited, but investment is being made in this area. There is also work underway by Integrated Care Boards to bring partners together at local level, with community health teams working more closely with voluntary sector organisations.

Safeguarding in custody

7. Police officers will primarily focus on the victim and their case. The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime sets out the minimum standards that forces must provide. There is no such equivalent for suspects – there is only the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) codes of practice. Police officers are neither equipped nor have the capacity to support and safeguard suspects when they leave custody. For example, compiling an admin file for an allegation of rape takes around 140 hours.
8. PACE does not describe the relationship the police should have with suspects. It is more of a 'hygiene' list which governs the treatment of suspects in detention – for example, their right to a phone call. In contrast, the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime is about the needs of the individual. The Ministry of Justice is working on a Youth Justice Charter to set out the standards and expectations for children in contact with the youth justice system. There is potential to create something similar for adults in contact with the criminal justice system.
9. There is no standardised risk assessment across the 43 police forces in England and Wales. The NPCC is leading on a review of risk assessments, with several working groups looking to standardise and improve the process. It is important to note that the Data Protection Act allows data sharing when required to safeguard individuals.
10. Independent Custody Visitors make unannounced visits and can spot vulnerability in some instances. However, their interactions are usually quick and random, and they do

not necessarily monitor pre-release risk assessments – although this is something the ICVA hopes to do in the future.

11. There can be an overreliance on formal risk assessment tools to identify vulnerabilities. A holistic approach is needed to look at, for example, the nature of the alleged crime and the impact it may have on the individual. Suspects of indecent image offences may experience overwhelming shame and perceived loss. Oftentimes they do not have prior history of mental ill-health, suicide attempts, or drug and/or alcohol misuse. As such, their risks may not be picked up by formal tools. Police officers may not have the skills or training needed to recognise vulnerabilities. More research is needed in this area.
12. There are health professionals embedded in most police forces across the country. All arrests for indecent image offences should be referred to Liaison and Diversion (L&D) teams. As a practical step, detainees should be taken to a room where they can contact the Lucy Faithfull Foundation and have a private conversation. Similarly, it is important to ensure there is dedicated space for L&D teams to carry out assessments in magistrates' courts and police custody. Linked to this, Peer Support Workers (part of the L&D service offer) can help to save lives and it is important that they are brought into custody to provide the necessary support.
13. Where an individual has been arrested for an alleged sexual offence, their phone might be withheld for evidence. This risks further isolating the detainee. Forces should consider exploring the availability of pay-as-you-go phones to distribute to individuals identified at risk upon release, ensuring such opportunities are utilised if deemed necessary.
14. Only 9% of adults in custody are given an appropriate adult despite the high prevalence of mental ill health. The provision of the appropriate adults service is a postcode lottery. When the role of the appropriate adults was established in the 1970s, it was initially to be undertaken by a social worker who had pre-existing relationships and could walk detainees through the custody journey. This is not the reality today.
15. Forces Employment Charity, Op Nova, works with the police to identify veterans going through custody and make proactive contact with those individuals. However, IT systems do not always flag when someone is a veteran. There are processes in place to improve national procurement of IT systems, but current landscape is patchy.
16. Maintaining detainee dignity in custody is vital. They must be viewed as a human being and of equal value, irrespective of the reason for their arrest. It is important to think about the 'pains' of detention – for example, uncertainty – and how these experiences may contribute to deaths.
17. The Samaritans visit detainees and provide support in a pilot programme in Bournemouth Police custody suite. Where safeguarding concerns have been identified, the Samaritans will share these appropriately. Follow-up support is also provided to detainees once they leave custody. The programme has received positive feedback from former detainees and has resulted in calmer custody suites and helped to save lives. The programme received the Dorset Criminal Justice Award in 2020.

18. The APCC is developing guidance for PCCs on the prevention of deaths in custody and the different scrutiny processes available to ensure Chief Constables are held to account.

Safeguarding following custody

19. Police officers are not best placed to safeguard detainees following release. This is not a role that police forces are resourced and trained to deliver and Chief Constables can be persuaded to endorse. However, officers have responsibility to connect detainees with support services to make sure intervention, where needed, takes place upon release.

20. When a detainee leaves custody, they will usually be given a leaflet with contact information of support organisations should they need them. However, detainees, particularly those who have been arrested for a sexual offence, may be in a dark place. It is therefore unlikely that they will proactively reach out for support. What is needed is trained professionals to proactively make contact with detainees upon their release. This is another time when Peer Supporters Workers can be asked to engage and is a relationship that can be strengthened if they have also engaged with the individual in custody.

21. The risk of suicide for individuals arrested for sexual offences is temporary. There is an elevated risk within 48 hours of release. The risk then peaks around the time of the trial and drops significantly after conviction.

22. Cross-pollination is needed across agencies to ensure vulnerable individuals and groups are segmented, prioritised, and followed up at the appropriate times. Currently, there is not enough sharing taking place across agencies. Individuals identified as vulnerable need to be fast-tracked for support at the point of release from custody, rather than be placed on a waiting list and risk getting lost in the system. More focus is needed on getting individuals out of custody and into receiving clinical care, where appropriate.

23. There are many different services available in local police force areas. The issue is bringing awareness to these services so that police can make referrals to the appropriate service. A localised model is needed to facilitate partnership working. One way to achieve this is for police to engage with voluntary sector forum meetings. There is also a need to ensure that services are commissioned in a way to promote multiagency working. It is a difficult task to identify and keep an up-to-date record of all local and regional services available.

24. It is important to build effective working relationships between police and local organisations and agencies as a first step. Subsequent to this, the expectations of each sector must be set out and agreed to. Lessons should be learned from the Crisis Care Concordat whereby voluntary sector involvement was needed to sign off the national agreement. This contrasts with the National Partnership Agreement: Right Care, Right Person whereby the voluntary sector had less meaningful inclusion.

Case study – Northumbria Police

25. The custody model was restructured to introduce healthcare practitioners and L&D teams. Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne, and Wear NHS Foundation Trust (CNTW)

provides an embedded L&D between 0700 and 1900 all year round. There are two healthcare professionals within each suite and a senior healthcare professional across them all. Outside of L&D hours, officers can refer individuals to CNTW via secure email. Any juvenile who is released outside of L&D hours will be contacted within 72 hours.

26. CNTW has access to the force's electronic custody record team and a range of support organisations. There is an enhanced risk assessment which is mandatory for sexual offences and sexual offences involving children.
27. Regular meetings are held between the Custody Senior Management Team and the L&D team to monitor performance, review incidents of note, and share learning. Any learning identified is cascaded via team briefings, bi-monthly newsletter, and training and development days.

Lived experience

28. It is important to embed lived experience in suicide prevention strategies to help increase understanding and empathy. This should be ongoing engagement rather than a tokenistic interaction.

Learning from deaths

29. The IOPC publishes its recommendations and responses to them and will follow up on them where they are of particular significance. It may also carry out a thematic follow-up of its recommendations. Recommendations are shared with HMICFRS and Police and Crime Commissioners. Where there is both an IOPC investigation and an inquest into the same case, it shares any recommendations and learning from the case with the coroner and monitors Prevention of Future Death (PFD) reports.
30. The ICVA will distribute relevant PFD reports in its newsletter to highlight learning and asks members to monitor issues raised accordingly. It also shares IOPC data and analysis of deaths during or following police contact.

Cross-custody learning

31. RECONNECT is in place to support individuals leaving prison, but there is nothing in place for people leaving police custody. Further, in prisons almost 50% of self-inflicted deaths are among individuals who were on an ACCT prior to their death. It is therefore important to ensure that risk assessment processes are managed effectively.

Next steps

32. The IAPDC and NPCC will work with the College of Policing to establish a cross-sector working group with a view to producing 'good practice' guidance. As part of this, the working group will consider how force areas can work with partners to agree localised plans to deliver multiagency arrangements for supporting vulnerable individuals leaving police custody.