

Norfolk Evaluation Report: Findings and Recommendations

Early Intervention in Police Custody Suites

YJB County Lines Pathfinder



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Contents



Introduction	4
Background	5
Methodology	6
Key findings	7
Findings from practitioner focus group	8
Findings from Custody Workers interview	12
Findings from child interview	16
Recommendations	18

Introduction



Background



Aims and objectives

- The Early Intervention in Police Custody Suites pilot aims to strengthen the design and delivery of support plans for arrested children in Norfolk by engaging directly with children and coordinating with relevant statutory services in the immediate aftermath of their arrest. The pilot is delivered by two Custody Workers stationed at Wymondham Police Investigation Centre (PIC), who attempt to engage with all arrested children between the ages of 10 and 17. Engagement is entirely voluntary, and the Custody Workers do not conduct formal assessments; rather, their role is to support children through the arrest and detention process and ensure that they are appropriately safeguarded during their time in police custody.
- The pilot seeks to use children's time in police custody as a "reachable moment", at which children may be more likely to engage with available support services. This support is guided by the child and is based on their specific needs, with the Custody Workers acting as a go-between for the child, their family and any relevant agencies. This approach is intended to reduce timeframes between the identification of risk and the implementation of appropriate interventions.
- Traverse's evaluation of the Early Intervention in Police Custody Suites pilot is part of its wider evaluation of the County Lines Pathfinder, which aims to understand the efficacy of training and intervention pilots across Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex. With regard to this specific initiative, Traverse sought to identify the extent to which the pilot had met its stated targets, as well as any notable barriers to, and enablers of, success, and to make recommendations as to how learning from the Early Intervention in Police Custody Suites pilot might be applied to similar intervention models both in Norfolk and elsewhere.

Methodology



Traverse's evaluation of the Early Intervention in Police Custody Suites pilot comprised three distinct fieldwork activities. The research process was cumulative, with each activity designed to build on the findings from the previous one.

Each activity was directed towards a different group with direct experience of designing, delivering, or undergoing the Early Intervention in Police Custody Suites pilot. These three groups were:

- Practitioners from Children's Services, Youth Justice Services, and law enforcement;
- Custody Workers tasked with the day-to-day delivery of the pilot; and
- Children who had received support through the pilot while in custody.

The fieldwork timeline for this evaluation was as follows:

15th December 2021 – remote focus group with staff from police, Youth Offending Team (YOT), Children's Advice and Duty Service (CADS) and the Targeted Youth Service who had directly engaged with the pilot.

17th December 2021 – remote group interview with the two Custody Workers tasked with delivering the pilot in Wymondham PIC.

11th January 2022 – telephone interview with a child who had engaged with the pilot while in custody and following release.

Key findings

Findings from practitioner focus group (1)



Supporting children and caregivers

Successes and enablers

- Practitioners were strongly supportive of the Early Intervention in Police Custody Suites model. They agreed that police custody represents a key “reachable moment” for children who may otherwise not be inclined to engage with the support available to them, as they are unable to leave and have no options for social interaction beyond the Custody Workers. The choice of staff to deliver the pilot was therefore seen as significant, as they are given a limited timeframe within which to build a rapport with children who professionals may struggle to engage. The two Custody Workers' success in this regard was seen as an endorsement of the recruitment process used for this pilot.
- The Custody Worker role itself was seen to have contributed to improved safeguarding of children in police custody. Due to their independence from law enforcement, the Custody Workers act as an effective go-between for both arrested children and police. This was thought by practitioners to have led to improved buy-in to the process from both parties.
 - In the child's case, Custody Workers can make their experience of police custody less hostile by clearly explaining the process and communicating the child's needs to police and other professionals. Children may therefore be more likely to engage with Custody Workers and to speak openly about their welfare and safeguarding needs. Engaging with children in custody allows Custody Workers to build relationships with them at a particularly vulnerable moment, and practitioners observed that this can make it easier to obtain consent for continued engagement after their release.
 - In the case of law enforcement, the presence of Custody Workers in police custody suites was thought to have contributed to a culture shift away from a punitive approach in which arrested children are seen solely as criminals, towards a child-first, trauma-informed approach with an emphasis on safeguarding rather than criminalisation. This, in turn, has led to more consistent use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), to the extent that practitioners feel empowered to challenge police in cases where the NRM is not used.

Findings from practitioner focus group (2)



Supporting children and caregivers

Successes and enablers (cont.)

- Practitioners pointed to the availability of safer release options for arrested children as a significant success of the pilot. Several participants noted that the need for improvement in this area had been highlighted at the outset of the pilot, given the tendency for released children to be provided with funds for a train ticket and expected to make their own way home. Under the pilot, Custody Workers liaise with children's families, statutory services and voluntary organisations to arrange safe transport home upon release.

"A specific example of improved planning is with children who appear in court on Saturdays. It used to be that the only option they had to get home was a travel warrant – it was an awful feeling leaving that child at the station, not knowing what would happen to them. Now we can give them better, safer options [for getting home]."

- Multiple practitioners reported receiving positive feedback first-hand from caregivers whose children had engaged with the Custody Workers while in police custody. It was noted that it is now standard practice to obtain feedback directly from children and caregivers as to the effectiveness of the pilot, as part of the internal post-release debrief process.

Challenges and barriers

- The unwillingness of some children to engage with the pilot represents a barrier to effective intervention. However, focus group participants felt that this was unavoidable, and that engagement rates had been higher than originally anticipated. Furthermore, they expressed hope that such children may be more inclined to engage with the pilot following a future arrest, with the Custody Workers representing a friendly, familiar face.

Findings from practitioner focus group (3)



Multi-agency working

Successes and enablers

- Practitioners felt that the pilot had been particularly successful in establishing strong information-sharing processes between the police and custody workers. Police have proved willing to share available information on arrested children with the Custody Workers, while Custody Workers may share insights from their conversations with children with custody suite staff and investigating officers where appropriate, enabling police to ensure that they are treated appropriately and that their needs are met.
- The Custody Workers are able to act as a focal point for multi-agency planning conversations while the child is in custody. By liaising directly with Children's Services, CADS and YOT, Custody Workers can notify them as soon as a child is brought into the PIC so that support planning can begin at an early stage, rather than waiting for the next multi-agency meeting as would have been the case previously. Some practitioners felt that this contributed both to the design and delivery of more effective interventions and to the smooth running of the wider youth justice system in Norfolk.

"Previously, we would only have found out at short notice that a child from out-of-county was due in court, and we wouldn't have had time to prepare. Now, if they're in the PIC, the Custody Workers will have already started the intervention – that gives us more time for planning, it allows for bail interventions, and it avoids holding the court up."

- Similarly, insights from the Custody Workers' conversations with the arrested children can inform the design of support plans aimed at meeting the child's individual needs, help to create a better understanding among practitioners of wider exploitation trends in Norfolk, and aid with the identification of perpetrators of CCE. To this end, Targeted Youth Services have implemented regular Monday morning meetings to discuss recent arrests and identify patterns and hotspots of exploitation. Multiple practitioners therefore suggested that the Early Intervention in Police Custody suites pilot represented a significant contribution to the resources available for designing and delivering interventions with at-risk children.

Findings from practitioner focus group (4)



Multi-agency working

Challenges and barriers

- Representatives of Norfolk Constabulary reported some initial frustration at the lack of input from practitioners at the design stage of the pilot. The pilot was coordinated through Project ADDER at a senior level within Norfolk Constabulary, and police custody staff were not made aware of these conversations until shortly before the launch, leading to a need to develop operational procedures at short notice. This is likely a result of the short lead-in time of the pilot, due to its rapid implementation upon the initial lifting of COVID-19 restrictions in June 2020.

"We learned about the project the day before [the Custody Workers] came into the custody suite. [...] It was a matter of going through their needs and working out how it was going to work operationally – these were two YOT workers who had never been in that environment, so it was about making them comfortable and giving them a point of contact."

- A further frustration for many practitioners was the inability of children in other custody suites to benefit from the support provided by the pilot. Some reported that the lack of such support in other custody suites had led to children being diverted to Wymondham PIC specifically to make use of the Custody Worker service – this was possible due to relatively low numbers of under-18 arrests over the lifetime of the pilot.
- Similarly, some practitioners noted that Government guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic had stipulated that custody numbers should be kept to a minimum. As such, some children who it was thought would have benefited from Custody Worker intervention were not taken into custody, and therefore were unable to engage with the pilot. While having fewer children in police custody should be seen as a positive, these practitioners argued that, in some cases, this may have led to interventions with criminally exploited children being delayed and reachable moments being missed.
- Several practitioners felt that the pilot had not met their initial expectations in terms of driving engagement with out-of-area agencies and services. It was hoped that the Custody Workers would be able to coordinate and build relationships with Children's and Youth Justice services outside Norfolk through the planning of release strategies and interventions; however, such services have proved unwilling to engage in the process. This is particularly true of London boroughs which, despite being the primary export hub for exploited children in Norfolk, have rejected calls to engage in multi-agency planning conversations as part of the pilot.

Findings from Custody Workers interview (1)



Supporting children and caregivers

Successes and enablers

- The two Custody Workers reported a very high level of engagement with the pilot among arrested children, with over 96% of eligible children choosing to engage while in custody. They felt that this was due to police custody representing a good opportunity to engage with at-risk children given the intensity of the situation. Their expectation that children in custody would want to have someone to support them through the process is borne out by the high levels of engagement. Feedback received first-hand from children and caregivers with experience of the pilot was also said to have been overwhelmingly positive.
- The interviewees emphasised the importance of colocation within the PIC, as engagement with children has proved to be significantly more effective when done face-to-face. One Custody Worker had previously attempted to engage with an arrested child over the phone, but this approach had proved unproductive. Furthermore, engagement was found to be more successful in cases where the child is brought out of their cell to speak to the Custody Workers in a more neutral environment such as a consultation room or an outdoor exercise area. By engaging with arrested children in these environments, the Custody Workers found it easier to build a rapport and encourage children to open up to them. The aim of these conversations is to learn about the child's life (i.e. their family, peer group, hobbies, etc.) and to ascertain the extent of their risk of exploitation. The Custody Workers also use these interactions to emphasise that their arrest does not need to define them, with a view to reducing their chances of reoffending.

"You can see how these kids would be at risk of reoffending coming out of custody without that support around them. They can think 'that's it now' – it's about showing them that they still have opportunities and options. It's our job to reinforce that it's just a blip, not the end of the world."

- Custody Workers do not speak to children about the reasons for their arrest and do not attend interviews – instead, their role is more about guiding children through the detention process and ensuring that their needs are met. To this end, access to Children's Services and YOT information can be invaluable in identifying mental and physical health issues and Special Educational Needs that should inform the police's approach to risk assessment and observation while the child is in custody.

Findings from Custody Workers interview (2)



Supporting children and caregivers

Successes and enablers (cont.)

- The Custody Workers play a central role in coordinating release strategies for arrested children leaving custody. While they do not transport children themselves, they liaise with families, children's services and voluntary organisations to arrange safe transportation. This has led to a broader shift in police practice around release strategies, which previously would have seen children transported by police or, in the case of out-of-area children, given funds for a train ticket and expected to make their own way home. Given the dangers to children arising from both of these practices, this change is seen as a significant success of the pilot.
- A significant enabler of success highlighted by both custody workers is the high degree of autonomy that they enjoy, which allows them to take the initiative and make changes to their practice to improve the efficacy of the pilot. This has led to some of the more successful changes to practice outlined in this report, such as engaging with children outside their cells.

Challenges and barriers

- Arrested children from Norfolk but are not open to services within the locality are eligible for the pilot's Community Intervention offer. However, interviewees reported that the take-up of this offer has been lower than anticipated, as the majority of arrested children (63%) are open to services in Norfolk and therefore ineligible for this offer, while a further 17% reside out-of-area. At time of interview, just seven children had made use of the community intervention offer – Custody Workers therefore suggested exploring whether the offer could be extended to children already known to services, to allow them to build on the steps taken to build relationships while in custody.
- The Custody Workers reported a degree of frustration at the logistical limitations of the pilot. The limited geographical scope led to Custody Workers becoming aware of children in other police custody suites in Norfolk who were unable to benefit from their intervention, while the small number of staff means that they cannot offer 24-hour coverage and therefore cannot always be present for the entirety of a child's time in custody.

"Ideally, you'd be there from the moment they first arrive in the PIC until the moment they leave. Sometimes, though, you come into it halfway through, which means you've got less time to do all the things you need to do before they're released."

Findings from Custody Workers interview (3)



Multi-agency working

Successes and enablers

- The interviewees felt that the main success of the pilot in terms of its effect on multi-agency working in Norfolk is the ability to start planning post-custody support strategies at a much earlier stage. The Custody Workers can liaise with relevant services while the child is in custody, and plays a central role in coordinating release strategies and contributing to the design of post-custody interventions. Furthermore, the interviewees felt that communication across services had improved as a result of the pilot, with police, children's services and other agencies proactively working together to develop release and support plans and to appropriately safeguard at-risk children.

"While the child is in custody, we go back and forth between them, the police and other services. We always notify Children's Services if a child is here, regardless of the offence or whether they're already involved with Children's Services. We start trying to coordinate plans between those services and the child's carers – as soon as a child arrives, we're thinking about what happens when they're released."

"I'm super proud of the improvements in communication in Norfolk. There are still gaps, but they're much fewer and smaller in terms of communication between professionals to drive safeguarding efforts."

- A further success of the pilot has been a broader cultural shift within the police away from criminalisation of arrested children to a more safeguarding-focused approach. One Custody Work reported that a volunteer Appropriate Adult with extensive exposure to police environments had noticed a change in the language used by police at Wymondham PIC to describe arrested children. This reflects the interviewees' observation that their presence in the PIC has generated buy-in to the aims of the pilot from custody staff, and that some custody sergeants have begun to proactively approach the Custody Workers to discuss children's needs and safeguarding strategies.
- The Custody Workers felt that the support they received from leadership both within the police and at the Pathfinder level had contributed to the success of the pilot. The interviewees reported feeling empowered to raise concerns and challenges with managers, who would act as a support network for the Custody Workers and help them to overcome challenges wherever possible. This support was felt to be particularly important during the early stages of the pilot and had been integral to generating buy-in from police custody staff.

Findings from Custody Workers interview (4)



Multi-agency working

Challenges and barriers

- The Custody Workers reported that they had experienced some difficulties in the early stages of the pilot – as YOT workers working in a police context, they felt that they had to put significant time and effort into familiarising themselves with police procedures and building relationships with custody staff in order to generate buy-in to the pilot. The interviewees felt that the lack of communication between police and children's services prior to the pilot had been more pronounced than they had anticipated, and therefore that the lack of established communication channels had presented a challenge to coordinating multi-agency approaches to intervention, although significant progress had been made in this area over the lifetime of the pilot.
- The interviewees expressed some frustration at their inability to build relationships with out-of-area services to the extent that they would have liked. It had been anticipated at the outset of the pilot that the Custody Workers would liaise with services from other local authorities and work with them to design release and support plans. In practice, however, out-of-area services have been largely unwilling to engage in this process, either due to their workload or an inadequate understanding of the risks to children experiencing CCE.

“Norfolk seems quite far ahead in terms of that understanding of children's vulnerability to exploitation. I've been surprised at how many professionals from other areas have suggested just giving a child a train ticket to return home, as I know that's a real risk.”

- This lack of understanding of risk is not solely limited to out-of-area services. The Custody Workers reported that it was sometimes difficult to get services within Norfolk to recognise the risks faced by children upon their release, and that on occasion it had taken the child being the victim of violence to bring other services to the table to discuss safeguarding strategies.

“We recognise the risks, but sometimes it's hard to put that across. I was coming up against a brick wall in one case where the child had lost a lot of money and drugs, which obviously weren't his! It took that kid being shot at to even have that meeting.”

Findings from child interview (1)



Successes and enablers

- The interviewee spoke positively of their experience engaging with one of the Custody Workers as part of the Early Intervention in Police Custody Suites pilot. They reported that the Custody Worker in question had made them feel more comfortable in the immediate aftermath of their arrest, by providing a friendly face and clearly explaining the arrest and detention process.

“It was 100% a different interaction to with anyone else – I was shocked and scared and she was a real mood brightener. She had a positive attitude, and talked to me no different knowing why I’d been arrested.”

- The Custody Worker also clearly explained their role and emphasised that they were there to safeguard the arrested child while in custody. The interviewee felt that the lack of a uniform had helped to make the Custody Worker visually distinct from police, while the interactions that they observed between the Custody Worker and police custody staff seemed less formal than they had expected would be the case in that environment, which they found reassuring.

“Before we went into the interview room, she and the two arresting officers were joking around about something completely separate to me – it showed she had a sense of humour. That made it less intimidating, and helped me to trust her.”

- The interviewee appreciated that they had control over the extent to which they engaged with the Custody Worker while in custody. They were provided with a “ringer” in their cell that they could use to call the Custody Worker if they wanted to. The Custody Worker would occasionally come to the cell to see if the child needed anything, but these interactions were brief and the interviewee did not feel pestered or pressured to engage.
- The interviewee voluntarily gave their consent for further engagement with the Custody Worker after their release. They expressed an interest in talking to someone who already knew their story in order to avoid repeating themselves, which indicates the success of the Custody Worker’s attempts at relationship-building during the child’s stay in custody.

Findings from child interview (2)



Challenges and barriers

- The interviewee reported some initial misgivings about the Custody Worker's role, due to a sense that they were unable to speak freely about the reasons for their arrest. While arrested children are able to guide the conversation with the Custody Workers as they see fit, they are informed that any information they disclose about the offence itself may be reported to the police. This led the child to feel less confident in opening up during their initial conversation, although they reported that they warmed to the Custody Worker over the course of their interactions.

"She made herself seem like someone you can talk to, but if I spoke to her I'd be incriminating myself. It sort of defeats the point of being able to talk to her, at least freely, even though she wasn't asking about my case."

- In contrast to reports from the Custody Workers themselves, the interviewee reported that they were not taken out of the cell for the majority of their interactions with the Custody Worker, with all but two conversations taking place through the cell door. This discrepancy may be due to this child's arrest having taken place prior to the decision to consistently take children out of their cells to interact with the Custody Workers, a lack of available detention officers, and/or additional risk factors specific to the child in question.
- The interviewee had some concerns about his interactions with the Custody Worker following his release. In the first instance, they did not feel comfortable with the decision to speak to their mother with them in the room, and would have preferred for this to be done separately. Similarly, they reported that the Custody Worker's line of questioning in their second post-release meeting touched on topics that they did not feel ready to discuss. While they appreciated knowing that there was someone they could speak to, they emphasised that this needed to be on their terms.

"The most uncomfortable situation was the first home meeting where my mum was there too. I guess it could have triggered an issue if I'd wanted to make it one – I didn't really like some of the things my mum was saying. I'd rather they did that without me there."

"At that second meeting it felt like she was trying to push me to talk about things I didn't want to. I realise we need to meet half-way – if I was guiding the conversation we'd just talk about random stuff – but I didn't like being pushed."

Recommendations



Recommendations



Changes to Custody Worker practice

- Custody Workers will need to guide conversations with arrested children undergoing community interventions to allow for the identification of risk. However, children feeling pushed to talk about certain subjects, or to provide more information than they are comfortable with, can present a barrier to meaningful relationship-building. There is therefore a need to Custody Workers to meet the child halfway with regards to conversation content, to allow children to feel that they are imparting information willingly and thus buy into the intervention process.
- Custody Workers should ensure that children and caregivers understand, and buy into, the format of post-custody engagement. Joint conversations with children and caregivers, while valuable, may be uncomfortable for those involved – it is therefore important that both parties are made aware of the importance of these conversations and provided with the necessary support to navigate these interactions.

Enabling multi-agency working

- Pilot leads and senior law enforcement should take steps to improve communication with police custody suite staff on the ground, and support them to design and implement operational procedures well in advance of any changes to the design or delivery of the pilot being put into practice. Decisions taken with the knowledge of high-ranking custody staff during the design phase of the pilot were not consistently communicated to those practitioners who would ultimately be tasked with their implementation, leading some police staff to feel unprepared for the Custody Workers' arrival at Wymondham PIC.

Suggestions for future iterations of the pilot

- The Early Intervention in Police Custody Suites pilot should be extended to all custody suites in Norfolk, to ensure that arrested children across the county have access to Custody Worker-led support and interventions. This will necessitate taking on additional staff, rather than expanding the geographic reach of the existing team, to avoid any increase in workload.
- Pilot leads and senior law enforcement in Norfolk should explore options for providing specialist mental health support services to children in police custody. This would ensure that children's mental health needs are consistently identified and met while in custody, and would allow for the provision of post-release mental health support plans where appropriate.

Thank you



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