

Custody 'queue-busting' policy raises concerns

The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) says it is concerned about potential risks caused by a 'queue busting' policy used at some custody suites, after an investigation into the death of a Grimsby man. Twenty-year old Michael Forward was found hanged after being released from Humberside Police custody on 18 August, 2007. The IPCC says that warning markers showing Mr Forward might harm himself were missed because he did not go through the full custody process outlined by the Police and Criminal Evidence Act. In common with a number of forces, Humberside operates a policy where people can be issued with fixed penalty notices in certain instances to alleviate queuing in custody suites during busy periods. Mr Forward, who was arrested for a public order offence, was issued with fixed penalty notices in the rear yard of Grimsby Police Station. The following morning he was found hanging from an external staircase at the National Fishing Heritage Centre. While the IPCC said officers acted in accordance with the guidelines and Mr Forward gave no indication he might take his own life, the investigation said 'queue-busting' could put others at risk. Nicholas Long, IPCC Commissioner for Yorkshire and Humberside, said: "I do understand the legitimate and entirely proper reasons behind the implementation of a so-called 'queue-busting' policy. But... the policy does not give the opportunity for a full risk assessment of a prisoner to be undertaken and I know that a large number of our investigations into people who become ill or die in custody or after release revolve around the failure to conduct an adequate risk assessment. "My concerns are about the risks such a policy could cause and the potential for key information being missed that may avert future tragedies."

Health check: The IPCC fears custody 'queue-busting' policies could leave suspects with mental health issues at risk



Photography: Markus Leiminger/iStockphoto

Police officers go to the polls

A national poll to find out if rank and file officers want their representative body, the Police Federation of England and Wales, to lobby for industrial rights is now open.

An online poll went live on Tuesday, 24 March, and can be accessed by visiting www.polfed.org. Alternatively, for those who are unable to vote online, thousands of paper copies of the poll, including freepost return envelopes, have been delivered to JBB offices across England and Wales.

The poll paper itself is self-contained and has background detail about arbitration and industrial rights to help members and allow them to make an informed decision.

However, the Federation has also produced a separate *Poll Newsletter*, which has been distributed to the members through the usual Federation channels, and is also available to download at www.polfed.org.

Jan Berry, chairman of the Police Federation said: "We would encourage everyone to vote on this. It is important that we know what officers' views are. This is a historic moment in policing."

The result of the poll will be announced at the Police Federation's annual conference in Bournemouth in May. A Judicial Review of the Home Secretary's decision will take place at the High Court this month.



Poll: In the wake of the London march, police officers will give their views on industrial rights through a national poll



Photography: PA Photos

News in focus!

Custody areas ‘not fit for purpose’

Many custody areas are out of date and not equipped to hold the numbers of persons they have, according to Steve Smith, Secretary of the Federation’s Professional Standards Sub-Committee.

He said outdated custody offices meant ‘near misses’ and deaths in custody were more likely. “A lot of custody suites are antiquated and not fit for the number of persons they hold; this will also lead to near misses and in the end deaths in custody.”

Mr Smith was responding to an Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) report which estimates there are around a thousand ‘near misses’ in police custody in England and Wales every year. Of these 400 are likely to lead to death without prompt intervention by custody and medical staff. IPCC Commissioner Nick Hardwick said the evidence showed that adhering to custody policies and procedures did save lives.

Mr Smith said he welcomed the report as it highlighted the exceptional work of custody staff that has saved the lives of at least 50 members of the public. “This further reinforces the need for professional, trained police sergeants as custody officers aided by trained custody assistants, either police constables or police staff, to deal with the plethora of people who come into stations with drug, alcohol, medical or mental health problems.”

However, he said the report fell short in terms of calling for sufficient staffing. “Recommendation 9 touches on resilience although it doesn’t actually mention staffing. It mentions managing the custody suite to plan that PACE can be adhered too. Why not just state if custody suites were staffed appropriately and with correct supervision the likelihood of incidents reduces significantly?”

“If there were sufficient staff then most of the recommendations could be adhered too. They hint at planning rather than criticising ACPO for not staffing correctly. But we all know when the public holidays are and would you believe Friday and Saturday nights fall on the same days every week. It’s not rocket science.”

Judges too lenient on gun crime

The Federation has backed Merseyside Chief Constable Bernard Hogan Howe’s comments that judges are failing to impose the mandatory five year sentence for possessing a firearm.

Jan Berry, chairman of the Police Federation of England and Wales said Mr Hogan Howe was right to highlight the issue, and went further by saying judges were “playing with the safety of the public”.

“Some of the ludicrous sentences are hugely demoralising for frontline officers doing their very best to protect the communities they serve.

“Understandably there are a few exceptions when circumstances dictate it is not suitable to hand out the mandatory five year sentences; but they should be the exception, not the rule.”

Less than half of those convicted of possessing a gun do not receive the full five year jail term.

“Whatever the reason might be, a lack of prison places should not be a determining factor when it comes to public safety and justice. Lenient decisions by the courts are failing to protect society from the menace of firearms,” added Mrs Berry.

According to Home Office figures, the number of offences involving firearms fell by 13% in 2006/07 compared to the previous year. Firearms were involved in 566 serious or fatal injuries in 2006/07, compared to 645 the previous year – a drop of 12%.

Custody concerns: Outdated custody offices mean ‘near misses’ and deaths in custody are more likely



Photography: PA Photos

Firearms: Federation chairman Jan Berry backs mandatory sentences for gun crime



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