

# The cuffs are off

Will civilianisation of custody officers improve service or is it a money saving exercise which could end up costing lives?

Helen Gilbert reports on a pilot project in Thames Valley Police

As custodians of justice, the role of custody sergeant requires extensive policing skills, legal knowledge and experience. They are in a position where they are accountable for the welfare of detainees, but the work environment often means long unsociable hours under pressure and there is a quick turnover of officers.

Thames Valley Police is in the process of expanding its custody suites and many will soon house between 20 and 30 cells. Not surprisingly, questions are being asked about how this expansion will be staffed, particularly as Thames Valley Police has a shortage of 70 sergeants. So how do you staff them?

Under the Serious and Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 chief officers are now allowed to employ civilians in the custody suite. The Home Office has yet to issue a statutory instrument on this, but once it does forces will be able to advertise for civilians who can be trained up as staff custody officers (SCO).

Over the next year, the Home Office will work with nine forces on pilot schemes that will cover the training and development of SCOs and monitor their progress. A spokesperson from the Home Office could not confirm the names of the forces taking part, but *Police* understands Thames Valley Police is kicking off the pilots.

According to Inspector Colin Paine, project manager for the introduction of staff custody officers in Thames Valley, the force will recruit 15 SCOs, nine in the first round and six later on in the year, although a date has not yet been confirmed. The officers will undergo three



months structured training aligned with national occupational standards and have all the powers of a sergeant except the power of arrest.

The aim, Insp Paine says, is to support custody sergeants in larger suites. “The project is not about replacing custody sergeants. It’s about investing in custody and supporting the capital growth in facilities with the right people and resources,” he adds.

Yet, the cost-saving is mentioned frequently in the *Staff Custody Officers Project Initiation Document*, drawn up to outline the project.

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Thames Valley figures put custody sergeants on a salary of approximately £48,000 per year, compared to the £35,000 SCOs will earn.

There is also the question of training. Calculating the training of a custody sergeant as including the majority of their service, such as their probation, costs of OSPRE, their initial sergeants course and a custody sergeants course which totals around three weeks. This adds up to far more than a SCO who would be likely to undergo around two to three months training.

### Concerns

Thames Valley Police Federation has raised concerns that custody sergeants will, in time, be entirely replaced by lower paid civilians, particularly as the Home Office claims the move will eventually ‘allow experienced officers to be redeployed’. If this happens, Kevin Huish, chairman of the sergeants’ branch board at the federation and force custody lead, says vital experience could be lost and more money will need to be spent on training extra staff to cover for absences such as annual leave, sickness and potentially strike action.

Mr Huish, based at Milton Keynes, says three of the eight custody sergeants have already been moved elsewhere due to shortages and there are now plans to replace them with three civilians.

Ian Rennie, general secretary of the Police Federation’s sergeants’ central committee, says. “Sergeants have the experience of the law, arresting people and bringing them into custody. They develop their supervisory skills and have to lead constables. People underestimate the responsibility – lawful detention and taking someone’s liberty. People who haven’t got the experience would have difficulty being trained up to that level of knowledge and expertise. That responsibility [for civilians] is a recipe for

disaster. We hope it doesn’t end up as a death in custody.”

Mr Huish agrees. “There are a lot of things you must do to ensure a person and their rights are protected in custody. You can’t get that knowledge in two to three months and the chance of breaching their rights is very high. Will cases be lost at court through breaches of law and procedure? How will this be monitored and who will oversee civilian custody managers? This has not been carefully considered. If we lose cases at court who will be accountable?”

### Vulnerable

The federation chairman also points out that custody sergeants act as an initial point of quality assurance, ensuring that some inexperienced police officers have used their powers lawfully and correctly. He says decisions are made quickly, as required by the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) and questions whether civilians will have the confidence to challenge an unlawful arrest, and even if they would be able to recognise it.

Gareth Crossman, director of policy at human rights campaign group Liberty, also warns that civilians might be vulnerable to the pressures that police officers would not be. He says the rules governing the treatment of prisoners are well established, with detention subject to strict time limits. However, he says a civilian might feel pressurised by an investigating officer and subsequently not give someone as much rest. “An experienced officer will be aware every aspect of PACE should be adhered to. The detention of prisoners is an extremely important task because the person in charge is responsible for their care.”

But, as Insp Paine points out, experienced custody sergeants are often snapped up elsewhere. “Custody sergeants are frequently experienced. That makes them valued commodities and they don’t spend as long in custody as we would like them to. Some custody sergeants take a month to train but can spend less than six months in custody. As the SCO is a chosen career path, staff custody officers may stay in the role for longer.”

He added financial savings would be made, but the ‘key benefit’ would be ‘providing additional resources at times of peak demand.’

“We’re trying to work with the police federations and engage them through the project board. The key to the success of this project is recruiting the right people from the start. It is the individuals selected who will make this work.”

However, Alan Gordon, vice chairman of the Police Federation and a former custody sergeant in his operational days, is angered by some reports likening the role of a custody sergeant to that of a hotel manager or receptionist. “It isn’t just about making sure the people in custody are looked after. It’s a legal obligation to make sure PACE is complied with. It should be a fully accredited police sergeant that carries out the role.”