

By Jennifer Brown

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Police powers: detention and custody



Summary

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Summary

The police have powers, set out in [Part IV](#) and [Part V](#) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE), to detain those they have arrested on suspicion of committing a crime. The police have separate powers to detain those suspected of terrorism offences under [Part V](#) and [Schedule 8](#) of the Terrorism Act 2000.¹ The detention of a suspect is often crucial to a police investigation. It allows officers to question them and collect their biometric details. This information helps the police decide whether they have grounds to charge a suspect with a crime.

The police also have powers to detain adults for their own (or other's) safety under [section 136](#) of the Mental Health Act 1983. Adults detained under section 136 of the 1983 Act can only be held in a police station in exceptional circumstances.

The police detain people in custody suites which are normally situated within large police stations. There are around 200 custody suites across England & Wales. Individual police forces are responsible for deciding how many custody suites to operate and where to situate them.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) jointly inspect police custody. They measure forces against their [expectations for police custody](#). They also monitor compliance with statutory guidance on detention powers ([PACE Code C](#)) and College of Policing (the body responsible for professional standards in policing) has also published guidance on [detention and custody](#).

Vulnerable people in custody

There were longstanding concerns with the delivery of police custody and particularly the treatment of vulnerable people in custody. In 2015 HMICFRS (then HMIC) published a thematic inspection of the welfare of vulnerable people in police custody, which was followed in 2017 by Dame Elish Angiolini independent review into deaths and serious incidents in police custody. Both Dame Elish and HMICFRS recommended major changes to the police's approach to vulnerable people and suggested that other public services should play a greater role in caring for vulnerable people who come into contact with the police.

Since Dame Eilish's Review the Government have legislated to minimise the use of police custody for those with severe mental health needs. It has asked the College of Policing to revise its guidance on detention and custody and

¹ **Note:** This research briefing does not discuss police powers to detain those suspected of terrorism offences.

are working to ensure that every custody suite has access to ‘liaison and diversion services’ for those with mental health needs or substance addiction. Despite significant political scrutiny on custody since Dame Elish’s Review, concerns have persisted. HMICFRS and HMIP have said that “most forces...continue to improve their custody services” but that they “weren’t seeing much improvement in outcomes for detainees”. The Inspectorates said the “capacity of other agencies to help forces meet the needs of detainees, and meet their own statutory responsibilities, remained a difficult problem.”

1 Powers

The police have powers, set out in [Part IV](#) and [Part V](#) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE), to detain those they have arrested on suspicion of a crime. The detention of a suspect is often crucial to a police investigation. Once detained the police have powers to question suspects and collect their biometric information. The information collected during detention helps the police determine whether a suspect should be charged with a criminal offence.

The Home Office maintains statutory guidance on police detention powers in [PACE Code C](#). Police forces are required to detain people held under PACE in accordance with the code.²

The College of Policing (the body responsible for professional standards in policing) has published further guidance to forces on police detention powers in their Authorised Professional Practice (APP)³ on [detention and custody](#).

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) have published [expectations for police custody](#). They measure forces against these expectations during their regular inspections of police custody suites.

1.1 Duration

Persons being detained under PACE should be dealt with as quickly as possible. Officers are required to review detention of a suspect periodically and release them "as soon as the need for detention no longer applies".⁴

Individuals who have been arrested can normally only be detained for up to 24 hours without being charged.⁵ However, if the offence they are suspected of is serious, a senior police officer (of the rank of superintendent or above) can authorise a suspect's continued detention for a further 12 hours.⁶ Any detention beyond 36 hours requires authorisation from the courts.⁷ In

² s39(1), Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984

³ APP is official police guidance. Police officers are expected to have regard to APP when on duty. However, there may be circumstances in which it would be legitimate for them to deviate from it. Further information about APP can be found in section 1.2 of the Library's Research Briefing [Introduction to police powers](#).

⁴ Home Office, [PACE Code C](#), paragraph 1.1.

⁵ s41, Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984

⁶ s42, Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984

⁷ s43, Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984

exceptional circumstances the courts can warrant the detention of a suspect without charge for up to four days.⁸ The time period within which the police can legally detain a suspect is sometimes known as the ‘PACE clock’.

1.2

Treatment

[PACE Code C](#), the [detention and custody APP](#) and the [expectations for police custody](#) all make clear that those detained in police custody should be treated with dignity and respect. The custody environment is expected to be clean and safe. Those in custody must have access to appropriate legal and medical advice. Any use of force against those in custody must be necessary, proportionate and legal.

Detainee rights

Under [PACE Code C](#) the police must:

- Tell the suspect why they have been arrested and detained.
- Allow the suspect to speak to a solicitor at any time.
- Provide them with a [written summary of their rights](#) in a language they can understand.
- Provide them with medical care they require.
- Provide them with food and water. People who are detained must be offered at least three meals a day with water.
- Allow them to have regular breaks from questioning (including, if possible, access to fresh air).

Treatment of female detainees

In August 2019 a revised version of [PACE Code C](#) was introduced which requires forces to provide basic menstrual care to detainees.⁹

[PACE Code C](#) now requires custody staff to ask all detainees if they wish to speak to a member of staff in private about their health or hygiene. Detainees can request that they speak to a member of staff of their sex.¹⁰ Every female detainee must now be asked if they require menstrual products. Forces must

⁸ s43 and s4, Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984

⁹ Home Office, [PACE codes C and H: guide to the changes in the 2019 revised codes](#), 20 August 2019

¹⁰ Annex L to [PACE Code C](#) sets out the approach for “establishing whether the person concerned should be treated as being male or female for the purposes of these searches, procedures and requirements.”

provide menstrual products to those who need them. In some cases, subject to a risk assessment, detainees may be able to keep their own menstrual products.¹¹

Changes were also made which requires forces to consider detainees privacy and dignity in the placement of CCTV around toilet and washing facilities and during strip searches.¹²

These changes were the result of campaign lead by the [Independent Custody Visiting Association](#).¹³ Its Chief Executive, Katie Kempen, said they should ensure that no detainee is left to bleed “for want of a difficult conversation or a cheap tampon”.¹⁴ In October 2020 HMIP reported “an improving picture with a generally sufficient range of menstrual products, although these were not always offered routinely”.¹⁵

1.3 Investigation

The detention of a suspect is often crucial to the police investigation into a crime. Once a suspect is detained the police have powers to interview them and collect their biometric details. This evidence can help the police determine whether a suspect should be charged.

If the police do not have enough evidence to issue a charge before the ‘PACE clock’ expires they must release the suspect. [Section 1.4](#) of this briefing describes the possible outcomes once a suspect has been detained in police custody.

Interviews

Interviews with suspects are conducted ‘under caution’ and must be recorded.¹⁶ Before conducting an interview, the police must inform the suspect what they are suspected of and allow them to access legal advice. Suspects have the right to request legal advice at any time during their police detention.¹⁷ Officers must delay an interview in order to facilitate a suspect’s access to legal advice if requested.

The police do not require a suspect’s consent to conduct an interview.¹⁸ Suspects may choose to answer questions with “no comment”. Following the

¹¹ Home Office, [PACE Code C](#), paragraph 9.3A and 9.3B, see also [HCWS1796, Revision of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 \(‘PACE’\) Codes of Practice C and H:Written statement](#), 23 July 2019

¹² Ibid, Note 8D and paragraph 11(d)

¹³ Home Office, [Dignity of women in custody ensured by planned law change](#), 24 April 2019

¹⁴ BBC News, [Police must offer women detainees period products under new rules](#), 23 July 2019

¹⁵ HMIP, [Annual Report 2019–20](#), October 2020, p87

¹⁶ Home Office, [PACE Code C](#), paragraph 11.1A and 11.7

¹⁷ [s58](#), Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984

¹⁸ Home Office, [PACE Code C](#), paragraph 12.5

interview suspects have the right to review a record of what was said to confirm it is accurate.¹⁹

Part 11 and 12 of [PACE Code C](#) provide statutory guidance on conducting formal interviews with suspects. [PACE codes E & F](#) provide guidance on how these interviews should be recorded. The College of Policing has provided further guidance [investigative interviewing](#) as part of their APP on [investigation](#).

Biometric information

The police have the power to take an image, the fingerprint information and a DNA sample of almost every suspect they detain.²⁰ In most cases the police can take this biometric information without a suspect's consent and without explicit authorisation from a senior officer. However, they do require the consent and authorisation to take DNA samples in certain circumstances.²¹

The police can then use this information to aid their investigation associated with the suspect's arrest. If the police can legally retain the information, it can be used to aid future investigations.

Retention of DNA and fingerprint information

The DNA and fingerprint information of adults convicted of a crime are held indefinitely. Those who have not been convicted of a crime may have their fingerprint and DNA information held for up to five years depending on the circumstances. Some people who have not been convicted can apply to have their records deleted early.²²

[ACRO Criminal Records Office](#) is the national police unit which manages information on police records. They have published a summary of the [retention schedule](#) of fingerprint and DNA information collected by the police. The Library has published a separate briefing on the [retention of fingerprint and DNA data](#).

Retention of custody images

In 2012 the High Court ruled that the Metropolitan Police's guidelines for retaining the images of those who had not been convicted of a crime were unlawful.²³ Following the judgment the Government issued a [review of the use and retention of custody images](#). The review proposed that all un-convicted individuals should be able to apply to have their photographs removed from police records.²⁴

¹⁹ Home Office, [PACE Code C](#), paragraph 11.11

²⁰ s61- 64A, Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984

²¹ s62, Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984

²² ACRO Criminal Records Office, [Retention Schedule](#), [last accessed 6 March 2020]

²³ [\[2012\] EWHC 1681 \(Admin\)](#), RMC and FJ v Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis and Secretary of State for the Home Department

²⁴ Home Office, [Review of the Use and Retention of Custody Image](#), February 2017, recommendation 1

To support the implementation of the review across all English & Welsh police forces, the College of Policing updated its guidance on [the retention, review and disposal of custody images](#) (this guidance forms part of the APP on [information management](#)).

The Government has committed to support forces in implementing the new guidance. They have pledged to provide police forces with technology which will automatically prompt the review of custody images of un-convicted individuals.²⁵

1.4

Outcomes

There are four possible outcomes once a person has been arrested and detained by the police:

1. Charged or issued an ‘out of court disposal’.²⁶
2. Released on pre-charge bail.
3. Released under investigation (RUI).
4. Released with no further action. The police should give written notice to the person confirming that they are no longer suspected of a crime.²⁷

Officers **should** finalise their investigation within the ‘PACE Clock’ and decide whether to charge a suspect whilst they are in detention. When officers are not able to issue a charge within the ‘PACE Clock’ and want to continue their investigation there is currently a presumption against using pre-charge bail.²⁸

The Library has discussed custody outcomes in its briefing [police powers: pre-charge bail](#).

1.5

Detention of those with mental health needs

People with mental health needs may be detained in police custody under PACE because they are a suspect in a criminal investigation or for their own safety (or that of others) under mental health legislation.

²⁵ Home Office, [Biometrics Strategy: Better public services maintaining public trust](#), June 2018, paragraphs 28-37

²⁶ See section 4 of the Library’s briefing [police powers: an introduction](#) for information on charging and out of court disposals

²⁷ [s34\(5C\)](#), *Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984*

²⁸ [s30A\(1\)](#), *Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984* and College of Policing, APP Detention and custody: [Response, arrest and detention](#), section 8 ([pre-charge bail management](#)), [last accessed]

Detention under PACE

The health needs of all people detained under PACE should be assessed when they arrive in police custody. If a person is identified as having health needs, either physical or mental, the police should ensure that they receive appropriate medical attention.²⁹

Section 9 of [PACE code C](#) provides the police with statutory guidance on their duty of care to people with health needs in custody. The College of Policing have also published guidance on [detainee care](#) as part of their APP on [detention and custody](#).

Liaison and diversion

The police should alert their local [NHS liaison and diversion service](#) if they suspect an individual in custody has a mental health problem, including a learning need or substance addiction.

Liaison and diversion services seek to either support those with mental health needs through the criminal justice system or divert them into treatment, social care service or other relevant intervention or support service.

The College of Policing has issued guidance on [diversion and referral](#) which provides police officers with further information on when and how to refer people with mental health needs to local healthcare provision.

Detention under the Mental Health Act 1983

[Section 136](#) of the Mental Health Act 1983 allows the police to detain people with mental health needs who appear to be in “immediate need of care or control” in a “place of safety”. If possible, police officers should consult with a suitably qualified medical professional before detaining a person under the Mental Health Act 1983.³⁰

Section 136 of the 1983 Act was recently amended. [Part 4, Chapter 4](#) of the Police and Crime Act 2017 limits the use of police custody as a “place of safety” for those in a mental health crisis. There is now a presumption that people detained under the 1983 Act are held in specialist provision (i.e. a hospital or care home).³¹ However, there are still some limited circumstances in which a police station can be considered a ‘place of safety’.

A police station can only be regarded as an appropriate ‘place of safety’ when:

²⁹ Home Office, [PACE code C](#), paragraph 9.5

³⁰ [s136\(1C\)](#), *Mental Health Act 1983*

³¹ Home Office & Department of Health, [Guidance for the implementation of changes to police powers and places of safety provisions in the mental health act 1983](#), October 2017, paragraph 3.1

- the behaviour of the person being detained “poses an immediate risk of serious injury or death” such as no other place than a police station can reasonably be expected to detain the person; **and**
- an officer of at least the rank of Inspector has authorised the use of a police station as a ‘place of safety’.³²

People who are detained at a police station under the Mental Health Act 1983 must be checked at least once an hour (unless they are sleeping and an assessment has been made not to wake them more than once every three hours) to ensure that they are safe and that their behaviour continues to require their detention at a police station.³³ As soon as there is no longer a need for them to be detained at a police station they should be transferred to another place of safety.³⁴

Section 4.17 of government guidance on [the implementation of changes to police powers and places of safety provisions in the Mental Health Act 1983](#) provides advice on how to manage the safety and welfare of people detained under mental health legislation at a police station.

³² [13](#), Mental Health Act 1983 (Places of Safety) Regulations 2017

³³ [15\(a\)](#) and [16](#), Mental Health Act 1983 (Places of Safety) Regulations 2017

³⁴ [15\(b\)](#), Mental Health Act 1983 (Places of Safety) Regulations 2017

2

The custody estate

The police detain people in ‘custody suites’. Most custody suites are situated within large police stations, but some are in dedicated purpose-built buildings. A typical custody suite will consist of several individual cells, separate interview rooms and facilities to ‘book in’ suspects and log relevant information about their arrest and detention.

Individual police forces decide how many custody suites they need and where they should be located. There is no central record of the number and size of police custody suites. However, using information from official inspection reports and freedom of information releases we can build a rough picture of the custody estate in England and Wales.

There are around **210** custody suites in England and Wales containing around **5,000** custody cells.³⁵ The average police force has around five custody suites.³⁶ Custody suites vary in size. Some suites have as little as 10 cells whilst others have more than 50.³⁷

Large metropolitan police forces tend to have larger custody estates (and therefore more cells) than the average force. The Metropolitan Police Service has the largest custody estate. As at Summer 2020, the force had 24 suites containing 607 cells.³⁸

There are roughly thirteen forces that have fewer than four custody suites.³⁹ Two forces, Gloucester Constabulary and the City of London Police, have only one.⁴⁰ The fact that the City of London Police has one suite is unsurprising given the small area it polices. Gloucester Constabulary’s custody estate is more unique. In 2015 the force closed its three existing suites and replaced

³⁵ House of Commons Library analysis of HMICFRS, [Police custody facilities- joint inspections](#) [last accessed 3 August 2021] and private correspondents with the Metropolitan Police Service.

³⁶ Ibid, see also HMIP, [About our inspections: police custody](#), [last accessed 11 September 2019]

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Information provided through private correspondents with the Metropolitan Police Service. **Note:** the MPS has an additional six ‘contingency suites’ with three more scheduled to open in the summer of 2020.

³⁹ House of Commons Library analysis of HMICFRS, [Police custody facilities- joint inspections](#) [last accessed 11 September 2019] supplemented with information from Devon & Cornwall Police, [Disclosure list: Buildings and estates](#): Request no 2654/19 [last accessed 11 September 2019] and Northumbria Police, [Stations and custody suites 263/19](#) [last accessed 11 September 2019]

⁴⁰ HMICFRS & HMIP, [Report on an unannounced inspection visit to police custody suites in City of London: 5 - 15 November](#), p5 and HMIP & HMICFRS, [Report on an unannounced inspection visit to police custody suites in Gloucestershire: 27 April – 2 May 2015](#), p5

them with one purpose built 50-cell custody suite. It now supports its delivery of custody with contingency arrangements with nearby forces.⁴¹

Many forces have arrangements with their neighbours to help them deliver custody. Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicester have a formal collaboration agreement which supports their delivery of custody.⁴² Norfolk and Suffolk Constabularies have completely integrated their custody estate.⁴³

2.1

The custody environment

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) [expectations for police custody](#) include an expectation that "detainees are held in a custody suite that is clean, safe and in a good state of repair". HMIP and HMICFRS expect:

- All cells to be equipped with a bell system so that detainees can get the attention of officers if necessary.
- Good maintenance arrangements to be in place.
- Cells to be designed in a way that minimises the risk of attempted suicide or self-harm.
- Practices to be in place when cells have restricted natural light and facilities.
- Custody suite staff to be able to safely evacuate detainees in the event of an emergency.⁴⁴

[PACE Code C](#) sets statutory requirements on police forces for the conditions of detention. This requires custody cells to be

adequately heated, cleaned and ventilated. They must be adequately lit, subject to such dimming as is compatible with safety and security to allow people detained overnight to sleep... Blankets, mattresses, pillows and other bedding supplied shall be of a reasonable standard and in a clean and sanitary condition... Access

⁴¹ HMIP & HMICFRS, [Report on an unannounced inspection visit to police custody suites in Gloucestershire: 27 April – 2 May 2015](#), p5

⁴² HMICFRS & HMIP, [Report on an unannounced inspection visit to police custody suites in Nottinghamshire Police, 1 – 12 October 2018](#), paragraph 1.1, p15

⁴³ HMICFRS & HMIP, [Report on an unannounced inspection visit to police custody suites in Norfolk and Suffolk, 14 – 25 May 2018](#)

⁴⁴ HMICFRS & HMIP, [Expectations for police custody](#), 2012, expectation 6

to toilet and washing facilities must be provided. This must take account of the dignity of the detainee.⁴⁵

In its 2019/20 Annual Report HMIP reported that “custody facilities were generally clean and well maintained.” However, the inspectorate found ligature points in many cells that could be used to self-harm. They also raised concerns that “not enough attention” was being paid to the dignity of detainees particularly with CCTV arrangements.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Home Office, [PACE Code C](#), Note 8.2-8.4

⁴⁶ HMIP, [Annual Report 2019-20](#), October 2020, p86-87

3 Vulnerable people

Under the Conservative Government 2015-2017, major reforms were made to police detention powers and the way the police manage custody. These reforms were designed to improve outcomes for vulnerable people detained by the police. Police guidance and training was reformed to emphasise the welfare of vulnerable detainees and legislative reforms were brought forward to restrict the use of police custody against the severely mentally ill.

3.1 Concerns about the detention of vulnerable people

The (then) Home Secretary Theresa May was concerned that too often vulnerable people were being detained in police custody when they should be diverted away from the criminal justice system.⁴⁷

She commissioned two major reports to explore the problem. She asked Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS, then HMIC) to conduct a thematic inspection of the welfare of vulnerable people in police custody.⁴⁸ She also asked Dame Elish Angiolini to conduct a review into deaths and serious incidents in police custody.⁴⁹

HMICFRS thematic inspection

HMICFRS (then HMIC) identified room for improvement in several aspects of police practice involving vulnerable people in detention.

The provision of liaison and diversion and joint working with other public services

HMICFRS found “clear evidence that custody could have been avoided for a number of vulnerable adults and children”.⁵⁰ They identified a “tension” whereby police custody, designed to meet the requirements of the criminal justice system, was playing a “significant role as a function of the health and social care system”.⁵¹ HMICFRS argued that the “the lack of sufficient

⁴⁷ Home Office, [Speech: Home Secretary announces review of deaths in police custody](#), July 2015

⁴⁸ HMICFRS, [The welfare of vulnerable people in police custody](#), March 2015, p16

⁴⁹ Home Office, [Independent report: Deaths and serious incidents in police custody](#), October 2017

⁵⁰ HMIC, [The welfare of vulnerable people in police custody](#), March 2015, p18

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p23

provision from health and social services” meant that many of hours of police time was being taken up with welfare-related activities.

They said that the interaction and cooperation between police services and wider public and protective services “need[ed] to be improved”.⁵² They said that some public services partnerships were “hindered by the range and number of agencies involved”.⁵³ They made a series of recommendations relating to a number of existing partnership working arrangements.⁵⁴

Governance and accountability

Despite finding evidence of leadership teams emphasizing the importance of protecting vulnerable people, HMICFRS said that the police service had not been “effective in bringing about a shared and consistent understanding of vulnerability”. They said that “training that would support frontline police officers and custody staff to identify and respond appropriately to the needs of vulnerable people was limited”. HMICFRS recommended that the College of Policing (the body responsible for professional standards in policing) review its guidance and training in relation to vulnerable people to help officers de-escalate difficult incidents.⁵⁵

They also raised serious concerns with the way forces were recording information about who came into custody and their time spent there, particularly about the use of force against detainees. They found

no evidence ... of any analysis of trends that might enable police forces to understand how far the use of force was proportionate and safe for the detainees in their custody. Nor was there evidence that forces were monitoring the use of force against BAME or other vulnerable groups.⁵⁶

HMICFRS recommended that the Home Office work with forces to improve data collection about custody.⁵⁷

Releasing vulnerable detainees from custody

HMICFRS found evidence of some proactive work on behalf of forces to prevent vulnerable people from returning to custody. However, they were concerned that the number of vulnerable people repeatedly being detained was high. They recommended that the College of Policing, in collaboration with health and social partners, develop a joint multi-agency approach to working with vulnerable people.⁵⁸

⁵² HMIC, [The welfare of vulnerable people in police custody](#), March 2015, p121

⁵³ HMIC, [The welfare of vulnerable people in police custody](#), March 2015, p22

⁵⁴ HMIC, [The welfare of vulnerable people in police custody](#), March 2015, recommendations 11-15

⁵⁵ Ibid, recommendation 6 and 7

⁵⁶ Ibid, p22

⁵⁷ Ibid, recommendation 2

⁵⁸ Ibid, recommendation 8

Dame Elish's Independent report

Dame Elish's report was wide ranging and made a total of 110 recommendations to Government, the police, the wider criminal justice system and health care services.

Much of Dame Elish's report focused on the process following a death or serious incident in custody. Many of her recommendations pertained to the investigation of deaths and the support for bereaved families whilst those investigations are ongoing.

However, Dame Elish did make a series of recommendations concerning police practice. She raised concerns with:

- **The use of force.** Particularly the use of restraint against those in mental health crisis. Dame Elish found “no consistency” in police practice across England & Wales and advised that police guidance and training be updated to reflect that the use of restraint against those in mental health crisis poses a life-threatening risk.⁵⁹
- **The treatment of people intoxicated with drugs/ alcohol in police custody.** Dame Elish found that drugs and alcohol are a “significant factor in deaths in police custody”.⁶⁰ She recommended that the Government consider the viability and cost-effectiveness of introducing ‘drying out centres’ where those under the influence of drugs and alcohol can receive specialist supervision.⁶¹
- **The use of police stations to detain people for their own (or others) safety under mental health legislation.** Dame Elish said the practice should be “completely phased out”.⁶² She argued that health-based provision (including A&E) is much more suitable to meet the needs of those in severe mental health crises. HMICFRS had already recommended in 2013 that the law be amended to ensure police custody was only used as a place of safety in “exceptional circumstances”.⁶³
- **The provision of liaison and diversion services and joint working between police and other public services.** Dame Elish said that those with mental health problems should be diverted away from the Criminal Justice System when the seriousness of their offence does not warrant prosecution in the public interest.⁶⁴ She concluded that there should be “proper resourcing” of national healthcare facilities to

⁵⁹ HMIC, [The welfare of vulnerable people in police custody](#), March 2015, Executive Summary, paragraph 12 & 13

⁶⁰ Ibid, paragraph 3.4

⁶¹ Ibid, Summary of Recommendations, recommendation 22

⁶² Ibid, Summary of Recommendations, recommendation 25

⁶³ HMIC, [A Criminal Use of Police Cells? The use of police custody as a place of safety for people with mental health needs](#), 2013, p54

⁶⁴ Ibid, paragraph 4.53

support vulnerable and mentally unwell people who come into contact with the police.⁶⁵

The Government published a progress update on Dame Elish's recommendations in July 2021. It said "significant progress had been made" and reported that 65 of the 110 recommendations had been fully delivered with a further 20 recommendations delivered in part. The remaining recommendations were either rejected (12) or rejected in part.⁶⁶

3.2

Reforms

There were three key areas of reform:

- **Police powers:** The [Policing and Crime Act 2017](#) amended police detention powers to limit their use against those with mental ill health. Provisions in the [Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015](#) and the 2017 Act amended police powers to ensure that 17-year-olds are treated as children whilst in police custody.
- **Police practice:** The APP on [detention and custody](#) was updated, and new training rolled out to officers working in custody. Both emphasised the police role in identifying, protecting and (where appropriate) diverting vulnerable people away from custody. HMICFRS & HMIP are now inspecting police forces against these new standards.
- **Police complaints:** The Police and Crime Act 2017 also made major reforms to the police complaints system and the way investigations of serious incidents involving the police are carried out. These reforms are discussed in the briefing [police complains and discipline](#).

Police powers

Those with mental health needs

[Part 4, Chapter 4](#) of the 2017 Act amended powers in the Mental Health Act 1983 which allowed the police to detain mentally ill people for their own safety. The reforms restrict the use of a police station as a 'place of safety' for the purposes of detaining a mentally ill person. Subsequent secondary legislation ([The Mental Health Act 1983 \(Places of Safety\) Regulations 2017](#)) provided for rules about how those detained at a police station for their own (or others) safety should be monitored.

The Government's January 2021 White Paper on [Reforming the Mental Health Act](#) contains wide-ranging proposals to reform the Mental Health Act 1983. The White Paper sets out the Government's commitment to removing police

⁶⁵ Ibid, Box on p79-80

⁶⁶ Home Office, [Deaths in police custody: Government Update – 2021](#), July 2021

stations as “places of safety” by 2023/24, so individuals are instead taken to health-based places of safety:

To help ensure that in future all people in a mental health crisis are taken to a clinical environment, where they can receive the care and support they urgently need, we have committed to update sections 135 and 136 to remove police stations as a designated place of safety by 2023 to 2024. However, before we can do this, we will have to make sure that the system is ready. This may require new capital funding to be available to provide the estate needed, including health-based places of safety, in those areas that need them.

The police accept that protecting people in mental health crises is part of their core business, but transfers to health services need to happen more quickly, so that patients receive care and support when they need it, and police officers can safely support patients to gain access to health services and return to their duties.

We will establish a national agreement between mental health services, social care and the police to ensure that people detained under section 136 are safely and effectively transferred into health services in a timely way, while ensuring the ongoing safety of all concerned.

Further information on places of safety is available in the Library briefing on [Mental health policy in England](#).

17-year-olds in custody

[Section 73](#) of the Policing and Crime Act 2017 completed reform of the legal framework surrounding custody to ensure that 17-year-olds are treated as children. The Government had already, through [section 42](#) of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 and changes to PACE Code C, changed the definition of ‘juvenile’ for the purposes of custody to those under the age of 18 (as opposed to 17). These reforms followed a High Court judgment that found the treatment of 17-year-olds as adults in police custody breached the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁶⁷

17-year-olds, like all children in custody, must now have an appropriate adult with them to help them understand various elements of the custody process (for example, during police interviews and understanding their rights and entitlements).⁶⁸

17-year-olds must now also be treated as a child when bail is refused. This ensures that 17-year-olds are taken into the care of a local authority if they

⁶⁷ HM Government, [Explanatory Notes: Policing and Crime Act: Chapter Three](#), Paragraph 113

⁶⁸ Youth Justice Board for England & Wales and HMPPS, [Appropriate adults: guide for youth justice professionals](#), December 2014

are to be held on remand to await trial (unless specific conditions are met to remand a child in a youth prison or police station).⁶⁹

Police practice

Major changes were made to both national police guidance and the national inspection regime to ensure that care for vulnerable detainees is at the centre of police custody practices.

New APP guidance

In July 2015 the College of Policing issued new Authorised Professional Practice on [Detention and custody](#). The new guidance emphasises the importance of maintaining the wellbeing and dignity of those who come into police custody.

The APP included new guidance on the use of force against detainees. The College said it

...makes it clear that while the use of force and restraint is sometimes necessary to keep everyone in the custody office safe, including detainees, all use of force must be properly recorded. It builds on guidance issued by the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody on the risks around restraint and positional asphyxia.⁷⁰

New inspection regime

HMICFRS (then HMIC) and HMIP reviewed their expectations for police custody, consulted on a new draft of these expectations and revised them as a result. The new expectations:

- extended the scope of the custody inspections to the first point of contact i.e. pre-arrest
- included expectations of diversion from custody for children and vulnerable adults wherever possible
- strengthened the focus on vulnerability and risk throughout
- incorporated expectations flowing from the public sector equality duty under the Equality Act 2010.⁷¹

The new inspection regime focuses much more on issues raised by HMICFRS and Dame Elish in their reports. For example, HMIP and HMICFRS have revised their methodology to focus more on how detainees under the influence of drugs/ alcohol are cared for.⁷²

⁶⁹ Youth Justice Legal Centre, [Bail: Information about bail for children](#) [last accessed 20 December]

⁷⁰ College of Policing, [New national guidance on detention and custody](#), July 2015

⁷¹ HMIP & HMICFRS, [Expectations for Police Custody – consultation on revised draft](#), October 2015

⁷² HMIP, [Annual report 2018/19](#), p70

3.3

Have outcomes for vulnerable people improved?

In its 2021 State of Policing Report, Her Majesty's Constabulary of Inspectorate, Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) noted that...

...forces continued to improve their custody services. Most were progressing well with our recommendations and, when improvements could be made quickly, many forces did so. Forces continued to work and engage well with their health and local authority counterparts. But we weren't seeing much improvement in outcomes for detainees. Children often still stayed in custody when they were remanded rather than being moved to local authority accommodation. And, too often, detainees who needed mental health assessments still waited too long. The capacity of other agencies to help forces meet the needs of detainees, and meet their own statutory responsibilities, remained a difficult problem.⁷³

Deaths in custody

19 people died "in or following" police custody and there were 54 apparent suicides following police custody in 2020/21.⁷⁴

The number of people who have died "in or following" police custody annually has been fairly consistent since 2012.⁷⁵ The number of people who appeared to have committed suicide following police custody increased sharply between 2011/12 and 2012/13 (from 39 to 65). Since then the number of apparent suicides following police custody has consistently numbered above 50 a year.⁷⁶

Of the 19 people who died "in or following" police custody in 2020/21, 12 were identified as having mental health concerns and 14 were known to have a link with drugs or alcohol (i.e. they were either intoxicated at the time of their detention or were known to have a substance addiction).⁷⁷

17 of those who died were White and 2 were Black. The Government says:

analysis of the ethnicity of those arrested or detained in police custody when compared with the ethnicity of those who have died during or following police custody during the last ten years is broadly

⁷³ HMICFRS, [State of Policing: The Annual Assessment of Policing in England and Wales 2020](#), July 2021, p123

⁷⁴ IOPC, [Deaths during or following police contact: Statistics for England and Wales 2020/21](#), July 2021

⁷⁵ Ibid

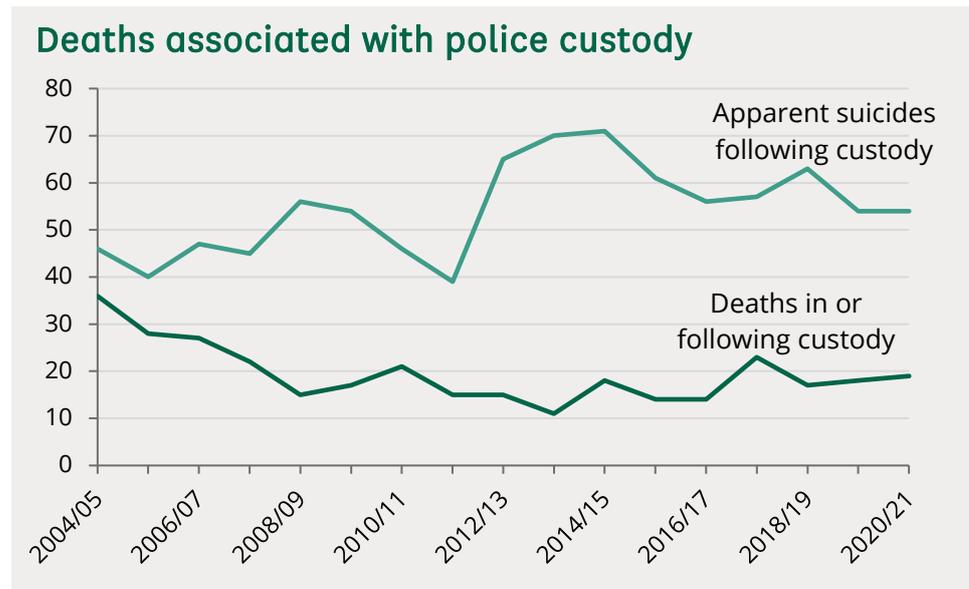
⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

in line and does not suggest that ethnicity impacts the likelihood of dying during or following police custody.

Data also does not suggest that black men are more likely to die in custody in cases where use of force or restraint is present. With such small numbers, no firm conclusion can easily be made as to whether there is a correlation between ethnicity and deaths caused by restraint.⁷⁸

Restraint featured in 18 of the 19 deaths in or following police custody recorded in 2019/20.⁷⁹



Michael Lockwood, the Director General of the Independent Office of Police Conduct (the body that investigates deaths associated with police conduct), said:

Each of these deaths is a tragedy and, while not all will have been avoidable, an over-reliance on the police service to step into critical situations involving medical emergencies or mental health crises is unfair to those who have died, their families, and the often ill-equipped officers involved. These issues cannot be solved by the police service alone and need a concerted, system-wide response to help prevent future deaths from occurring.⁸⁰

Deborah Coles, the director of the charity INQUEST (a charity which provides expertise on state related deaths), said...

...once again the data on deaths in police custody and contact in England and Wales repeat the same patterns, nothing changes. This

⁷⁸ Department of Health and Social Care, [Deaths in police custody: progress update 2021](#), Home Office, Ministry of Justice, para 1.19 & 1.20

⁷⁹ IOPC, [IOPC Director General comments on annual deaths statistics report 2020/21](#), July 2021

⁸⁰ Ibid

is despite the lifesaving recommendations from multiple inquests and the Angiolini review.⁸¹

Use of force

HMIP & HMICFRS have remained concerned about the use of force in police custody. In 2018 they wrote to all police Chief Constables to express this concern.⁸² In October 2020 they reported that:

- governance for the use of force in custody continued to be weak.
- forces were not correctly recording incidents of the use of force; and,
- evidence that incidents in which officers use force are not critically reviewed.⁸³

They said:

custody staff generally managed challenging detainees well and de-escalated many situations effectively without resorting to using force. In the cases we reviewed in depth, including cross-referencing against CCTV footage of incidents where available, any force used was mostly necessary and proportionate to the risks or threat posed, and it was managed well overall. However, we did refer several cases back to forces for learning points, particularly on the poor use of techniques, such as the prolonged restraint of detainees in the prone position.⁸⁴

Those with mental health needs

HMIP's 2019/20 annual report noted that the

All the forces we inspected, bar one, had seven-day-a-week mental health liaison and diversion provision. Street triage and mental health professionals supporting force control rooms continued to be a valuable resource in diverting vulnerable people with mental health issues from custody if needed. Arrangements for post-custody support for vulnerable detainees were developing in some forces.⁸⁵

However, they still raised some serious concerns about the support for those detained under mental health legislation.

⁸¹ INQUEST, [INQUEST response to new data on deaths in police custody](#), July 2021

⁸² HMIP, [Annual report 2018-19](#), July 2019, p72

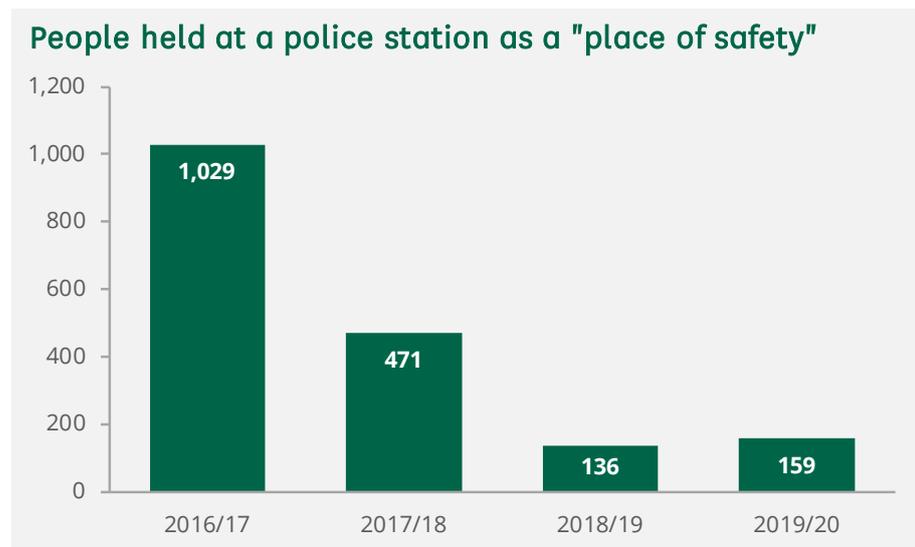
⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ HMIP, [Annual Report 2019-20](#), October 2020, p87

⁸⁵ Ibid, p88

Home Office statistics show a substantial decrease in the use of a police station as a ‘place of safety’ since legislation was passed to restrict the practice.

159 people were held at a police station under mental health legislation (section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983) in 2019/20. This has fallen from just over 159 people in 2016/17.⁸⁶ The proportion of people detained under section 136 who are held at a police station has also fallen; from 4% in 2016/17 to 0.5% in the year to March 2020.⁸⁷



However, HMIP reported that they have begun to see people held at a police station whilst they wait to receive a mental health assessment. They said:

The picture was complex, and further complicated by a lack of data and poor recording. If a detainees’ wait was so long that their time to be detained lawfully under PACE was running out, the police could apply section 136 to detain and then transfer them to a health-based place of safety. We judged that many such detainees to whom this applied were not well served by mental health services and should have been moved from custody sooner without the use of section 136 powers in this way.⁸⁸

As discussed in section 3.2 of this briefing, the Government has plans to further reform the Mental Health Act 1983 to remove police stations as “places of safety” by 2023/24.

⁸⁶ Home Office, [Police powers and procedures, England and Wales, year ending 31 March 2020 second edition](#), October 2020, table MHA_5a

⁸⁷ Home Office, [Police powers and procedures, England and Wales, year ending 31 March 2020 second edition](#), October 2020, table MHA_5a

⁸⁸ HMIP, [Annual Report 2019–20](#), October 2020, p89

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