

## **Background**

This briefing is a 'straight to ICVs' resource from ICVA with some hints and tips on how to engage with detainees and get the most out of unannounced visits made to check on detainee rights, entitlements and wellbeing. There is also a basic checklist of things to discuss with detainees from ICVA which you can read [here](#).

## **Hints and Tips**

Whilst we are sure that you are brilliant at talking to people, here are just a few things to consider when visiting and talking with detainees in police custody.

### **Tip 1 - It's all in the intro!**

How you present to the detainee when introducing yourself (even if the officer has introduced the visit) is important, it will set the tone for your discussion with the detainee and how they engage with your visit.

#### **Hints:**

- Be friendly and mindful of your own body language, be relaxed and open to conversation.
- Be clear on the purpose of the visit and what an ICV can/can't discuss or assist with<sup>1</sup>.
- Check in with the detainee that they are happy to speak to you.

### **Tip 2 - Respect the choices of the detainee.**

If a detainee does not want to engage with the visit, or wishes the visit to stop at any point, it is really important that ICVs respect the detainee's choices.

#### **Hints:**

- It can be really helpful to make sure there isn't anything you can do to help a detainee, but if a detainee is asking for the visit to end, make sure you don't badger them into keeping the visit going.
- Say something like 'no problem at all that you want to end the visit, is there anything I can ask the staff to do for you before I go?' or an end question of that ilk, but only ask once.

### **Tip 3 - Be thoughtful in the type of questions you ask.**

It's really important to avoid closed end questions or leading questions when you are talking to detainees as much as possible. Sometimes closed questions can be helpful to establish if a detainee has received a certain entitlement and so on, but it's worth remembering that visits work better as a conversation, so asking all closed questions is not optimal.

#### **Hints:**

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.apr.ch/sites/default/files/publications/apr\\_PoEI\\_EN\\_09.pdf](https://www.apr.ch/sites/default/files/publications/apr_PoEI_EN_09.pdf)

- As a general rule, it is better to ask questions beginning with the words 'who', 'what', 'where', 'when', 'how' or 'why'.<sup>2</sup>
- Give the detainee time to tell you about their experience of custody and their treatment.

#### **Tip 4 – One thing at a time.**

Asking multiple questions at the same time should be avoided – it can be confusing for detainees and if you ask too many at once, the visit might feel more like an interrogation than a wellbeing visit.

#### **Hint:**

- Ask one question at a time and leave space for the detainee to answer before moving on.
- Use plain language and be careful of acronyms – there are lots in policing and not everyone will understand them!

#### **Tip 5 - Empathise don't patronise.**

Empathy can help establish a rapport with detainees, but it is really important that you are effectively empathetic without appearing as patronising to the detainee.

#### **Hint:**

- Ask don't assume. So instead of saying something like 'I'm sure this must all be overwhelming for you,' you might want to say something along the lines of 'how are you feeling at the moment?', and then take the conversation from there.
- Avoid saying things like 'I totally understand' or 'I'm sure things will feel better soon' and focus on 'how can I help' type questions.

#### **Tip 6 – Active Listening.**

It's really important that if you have asked the detainee a question, you give them time to answer at their own speed, be mindful of this and make sure that you allow the detainee all of the time they need.

#### **Hints:**

- Use non-verbal communication to let the detainee know that you are listening such as open body language, nodding and smiling to encourage them to continue.
- Use pauses to allow the detainee to finish what they are saying without interruption. If you need to, you can then prompt for more information or let the detainee on how you will follow up on their feedback.

#### **Tip 7 - Body language.**

We all get cues from others and the body language we see, but it's really important not to make assumptions based on a detainee's physical presentation in this way.

#### **Hint:**

- Remember that people present in a multitude of different ways in stressful situations and vulnerability can look very different for different people.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.apr.ch/sites/default/files/publications/monitoring-police-custody\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://www.apr.ch/sites/default/files/publications/monitoring-police-custody_en_0.pdf)

- Eye contact is often thought of as incredibly important, and some people draw inferences from a lack of eye contact from others. It's important to recognise that not all people are brought up to see eye contact as a good thing, both culturally and by experience.

### **Tip 8 – Ending the visit**

When you are happy that you have had a full conversation with the detainee, checking on all of their rights, entitlements and wellbeing, it's time to end your visit (or the detainee wishes the visit to stop).

#### **Hint:**

- The detainee should be given an opportunity to add anything else they would want to say (other than disclosing reasons for arrest and so on).
- The ICV should run through any actions from the visit to make sure they have captured them and let the detainee know that they will raise these with the custody staff and when.
- The ICV should thank the detainee for their time.

We really hope this information is helpful and assists with thinking about how to talk to detainees in custody. You might also want to check out our briefing specifically on how to engage with children and young people [here](#).