

**Speaking to individuals with mental ill-health:  
An expert through experience perspective  
A briefing for ICVs  
June 2024**



**Introduction**

The following briefing is with thanks to António Ferreira, who is an expert through experience, who has written advice for ICVs engaging with detainees who may be struggling with mental ill-health and what ICVs can look out for to try to improve their time in police custody.

**António's Experience**

*“Individuals struggling with mental ill-health while in custody would struggle with intense feelings and emotions. From my experience, I felt that the world was against me, and no one would or could understand my perspective of what I was going through. Being treated as a criminal before being given the proper support is a highly confusing position. Therefore, it is only that the individuals can be hostile to others. Most violent and reckless behaviours among those with mental ill-health are not intentional and are from their needs not being met.”*

**Checking on Rights and Entitlements**

António advises that it is best to assume that detainees have no knowledge of what their rights and entitlements are as they are likely very distracted by the situation they are in.

*“I wasn't bothered whether I was having my rights upheld or not; I was more bothered by the shame and guilt I was experiencing.”*

Therefore, ensuring you are asking them in a calm manner and giving the detainee plenty of time to respond is important.

*“Had I had more time to calm down, consider the support, and then ask whether I needed it – I might have taken it up. You don't want to create any more trouble or hassle as a detainee. Detainees might be anxious, scared, and in despair and may not ask for more support.”*

*“Communication, competency, and consideration are vital to getting the most out of those individuals.”*

Further, you may consider different ways to communicate if a detainee is in distress such as offering them to write instead of speaking.

*“Ask the detainees if they would feel comfortable responding with other means of communication, such as writing down their needs.”*

**Examples of Language to Use**

António stresses the importance of taking your time and potentially asking a detainee in distress a few times, so they are able to properly consider your help. It is also helpful to

be aware of body language and any subconscious signals you are sending (e.g. how might it come across if your arms are folded?)

*“Examples of phrases of language we can use when approaching detainees can include:*

- *Asking twice, are you okay?*
- *Are you sure you're alright?*
- *Also, if you receive no input when visiting detainees, think about offering another chance: 'I understand you don't want any support, but if you don't mind, I'll come back around, and if you still feel the same way when I come back, I won't insist further.'”*

Further, ensuring you have good rapport with detainees can aid tremendously in communicating with them, particularly when a detainee is in crisis.

*“Be competent about the detainees' culture and try to be relatable to them. Gain rapport with the detainees to make them feel comfortable enough to ask for support.”*

### **Summary**

- Ensure you communicate clearly and do not rush
- Be aware of body language
- Circle back to detainees who seem too distressed to decide on your support
- Use clear and kind language
- Consider other types of communication such as writing things down
- Try to build rapport to ensure they are comfortable asking for help

Briefing ends.