

# Buildings and facilities

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Owing to the specialist and safety-critical nature of police custody facilities, products, materials and specifications used should be tried and tested before being installed in an operational police custody environment. Appropriate design, planning, building and maintenance of police custody suites minimises risk to the safety of detainees, visitors and staff.

All new custody suites (and refurbishment work) should be undertaken in accordance with the Police Custody Suites Design Guide (PCDG), which provides essential guidance. Forces can obtain this guidance from the Ministry of Justice Estates Directorate, Technical Standards, 102 Petty France, London SW1H 9AJ ([moj\\_ed\\_technicalstandards@justice.gov.uk](mailto:moj_ed_technicalstandards@justice.gov.uk)).

Additional information

- National Police Estate Group ( NPEG) has a custody review group. NPEG can support forces with their custodial projects by providing peer review, advice and support. This panel can be accessed via [moj\\_ed\\_technicalstandards@justice.gov.uk](mailto:moj_ed_technicalstandards@justice.gov.uk)
- [\*\*HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services \(HMICFRS\) Expectations for Police Custody\*\*](#)

## Design and maintenance of a custody suite

All new custody suites and cells should meet the standard PCDG design and specification. When older suite and cell stocks are refurbished, the new cell fittings should meet current PCDG police standards. Custody managers should ensure that routine checks by custody staff are supplemented by a regular regime of cell and equipment inspections. Custody managers should establish stock control systems, taking into account projected demand and realistic lead times.

Forces must complete a risk assessment before placing any moveable furniture in areas such as medical and interview rooms. The materials used must be capable of withstanding heavy impact. If

placed in medical rooms, the material used must meet requirements for infection control and forensic cleaning. These requirements may be specified by a healthcare professional or within the contract for healthcare services to custody.

## Ensuring cells are fit for occupation

Forces should identify a competent person who is aware of the specific risks associated with detention. The person must have the authority to declare cells fit for occupation or to close them should they not meet health and safety requirements. They should carry out this task in consultation with the custody officer (if that custody officer is not the nominated person), as the custody officer is ultimately responsible for placing a detainee in the cell.

Officers and staff must inspect cells which have been taken out of use for safety reasons after remedial work has been completed. They must inspect the cells before the cells can be reused. This includes cells which have been taken out of service after staff have found ligature points.

## Cells

All cells should have adequate natural and artificial light. Cell fittings and furnishings should meet the appropriate current fire rating and must be robust enough to withstand extreme and continual abuse. They should be constructed and maintained to prevent ligature attachment or other forms of self-harm.

Furnishings in areas of a custody suite accessible to detainees should be secured to the floor where operationally practicable. They should also be well maintained and not have any sharp edges. Furniture should not be allowed to come loose in a way that would enable a detainee to wedge part of their body in or behind it, or to create a ligature.

## Hatches

Cell hatches can present risks. Older police cells which may not have been designed to current specifications present greater risks. Forces should consider replacing old hatches of the types associated with past self-harm incidents with safer current types. Officers must always leave hatches fully closed after use. Forces may place signs on cell doors to remind staff of this.

## Doors

All cell doors should open outwards and be fitted with the Home Office anti-ligature handle, food hatch, viewer with privacy cover and an adjustable and removable door keep. Doors should be well maintained and fitted tightly. The gap between the cell door and rebate when the door is closed should be no more than 2mm.

All doors to rooms that a detainee may have access to within the custody suite should have vision panels. The only exception is the medical examination room. Here, forces must strike a balance between confidentiality and the safety of the staff and the detainee.

## Booking-in area

The layout of the reception or booking-in area should allow the custody officer to have good vision of the detainee and allow good verbal communication during the booking-in process. The layout should also allow the detainee a reasonable degree of visual and auditory privacy during the booking-in and charging process. The use of privacy screens or a separate, discreet charging area may help in this regard. The design of new charge counters should meet current safety and ergonomics advice.

## The exercise yard

Forces should provide an external exercise yard in all custody suites. The yard should be as free as possible from ligature points and any other features that might permit self-harm.

The custody officer must carry out a risk assessment before a detainee is allowed to use the exercise yard. This is to determine whether the detainee may safely be left in the yard unsupervised for a designated period of time, and/or to determine an appropriate level of supervision and monitoring.

For further information see [Risk assessment](#).

## Cell call systems

All cells should be fitted with a working cell call system. Where the cell call system is found to be defective, the cell must be put out of service until the system is repaired. If this causes significant issues for managing the custody suite, the force should put in place control measures for the managed use of that cell, subject to a risk assessment, (for example, placing the detained person

under close proximity supervision (level 4)) until the cell call system is repaired. Forces must use such a cell as a last resort only.

The cell call controls within the cells must be safe for police custody use.

## Entry to the custody suite

Detainees under escort should enter through a custody vehicle dock wherever possible. This provides security and privacy. Other visitors, such as family members, appropriate adults, solicitors and those returning on bail should come through a public entrance. When detainees who have been exposed to CS spray or another incapacitant spray enter the custody suite, officers must address contamination issues.

## Holding areas

All detainees must be brought before the custody officer as soon as practicable after their arrival at the police station. It may sometimes be necessary, however, for staff to wait with a detainee until they can be seen by custody staff. Custody suites should be designed with areas for staff to wait with their detainees. Such holding areas should be located between the vehicle dock and the main charge area. The detainee should be provided with a reasonable degree of privacy while being held, allowing space for the arresting/escorting officers to remain with the detainee to ensure their safety.

For further information, see [Response, arrest and detention](#).

## Separation

[Section 31 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933](#) requires forces to separate children and young persons from adults while in a police custody suite. The UK is also a signatory to a number of treaties dealing with detention standards.

To aid compliance with treaty commitments and the law in England and Wales, forces should design a new custody suite that is capable of allowing suitable separation between adult males, adult females and children and young people.

To ensure that these requirements and commitments are met, forces should design a new custody suite to incorporate at least three separate cell blocks or cell areas. There should be more than

three separate cell blocks to ensure optimum operational flexibility.

Appropriate separation between cell blocks should allow visual privacy so that detainees on one side of the separation are unable to see or be seen by those on the other side.

Separation should allow a reasonable degree of acoustic separation so that any sounds made by detainees on one side of the separation are not unduly loud, disturbing, intimidating or oppressive to detainees on the other side and so that detainees cannot easily associate via voice communication.

For further information, contact Ministry of Justice Estates Directorate, Technical Standards, 102 Petty France, London SW1H 9AJ ([moj\\_ed\\_technicalstandards@justice.gov.uk](mailto:moj_ed_technicalstandards@justice.gov.uk)).

## Cell corridors

Cell corridors should have CCTV and forces should record the footage. The CCTV should also have the capability for real-time monitoring. Forces should fit cell corridor areas with an effective personal attack alarm system.

## Alarm systems

Forces must install personal attack alarm systems which allow immediate assistance to be summoned throughout the custody suite. Forces should take care not to place additional furniture or technical equipment in locations that might hinder access to alarms. When in a room with a detainee, staff should be seated closest to the door with an attack alarm call point readily accessible to them.

Forces should consider linking custody alarms to force control rooms so that other staff can assist if the alarms are activated. Forces should avoid systems that only allow access to the custody suite by someone inside opening the door. There must be a method of opening the entrance from the outside in an emergency.

## Health and safety

There are many aspects of health and safety to consider when detaining a person in custody.

## Definition of hazard

The Health and Safety Executive defines a hazard as ‘anything with the potential to cause harm’, and a risk as ‘the likelihood that a hazard will cause a specified harm to someone or something’. Police forces and all of their officers and staff have a responsibility under health and safety legislation to identify hazards and risks.

Forces must use risk management, as set out in health and safety legislation, when assessing possible hazards.

For further information, see the [Health and Safety Executive website](#).

## Ligature points

The most innocuous fixture, fitting or space can provide a ligature point for a person intending to self-harm or take their own life. People who are determined to self-harm may go to extreme lengths to do so. Detainees can be ingenious in the methods they use. Forces should check items in a cell for damage, including the mattress, blanket and pillow (if provided) to ensure they do not provide potential ligature material.

To commit suicide using a ligature, a person requires the means to form a ligature and something to attach it to, normally a structure. Removing one or preferably both opportunities minimises the risk.

Staff who inspect cells must be aware that ligature points can be found at high and low levels. They can take any form, such as cracks, gaps in benches, CCTV fittings, WC rims and other features – any pipe, tube, bar or similar fittings. Forces should conduct inspections methodically, working from the ceiling to ground level. This is not just a problem in older custody suites, but can also occur in new buildings.

Forces should use hard anti-pick mastic to make potential ligature gaps safe. Forces must not use soft silicone-type mastics in areas of custody accessible by detainees.

Poor repair work can create ligature points. Repairs must be undertaken professionally, with material appropriate to the specific situation. The higher initial cost of safer materials is offset by their longevity and safety.

## Examples of ligature points

These can be created in various places:

- old wooden benches
- ventilation or heating grilles where they are poorly positioned or the grille apertures are too large (greater than 2mm diameter)
- toilets with filler or sealant missing between the junctions with walls and floors
- washbasin tap fittings or plugholes
- welding around doors that creates points, blade edges or provides gaps between steel sections
- poorly fitting doors providing means of wedging a ligature (particularly where the gap narrows as it travels further downwards)
- cell hatches which are defective or do not shut properly and can be opened by the detainee from inside the cell, thereby providing a gap into which a ligature can be lodged
- unsuitable door handles, for example 'T' handles
- light fittings, CCTV cameras and other similar fittings that provide any means of attaching a ligature
- walls or tiles with render or grout missing
- smoke detectors which provide a potential means of ligature attachment
- cell call buzzers or toilet flush mechanisms that have become loose
- cell door spy glass (defective glass lenses or casings)
- cell window fixing points
- cracks or gaps between cell fittings and walls, floors or ceilings
- cracks or gaps that have been improperly filled with a soft mastic
- floor drainage grilles
- half-height privacy walls which provide access to high-level fittings or themselves provide a means for self-harm
- hand-wash unit drain points and hand-wash units

## Identifying a ligature point

If officers identify a potential ligature point, they should either remove the detainee from the cell or effectively manage the risk. Where the ligature point has been caused by damage or wear, remedial work must be carried out as soon as is practicable. The custody officer is required to constantly manage the risks associated with that cell until it has been fixed/improved, inspected and declared safe for normal operational use – this will normally involve putting the cell out of use.

## First-aid equipment

Forces should store and properly identify all first-aid equipment. They should place first-aid containers conveniently and, where possible, close to hand-washing facilities.

Sufficient quantities of each item should be available in every first-aid container. Staff should examine the contents of first-aid containers frequently and restock them as soon as possible after use. Staff should take care to discard items safely when the use-by date has passed.

All custody suites should have a defibrillator. All staff should be trained to use it.

## Suicide intervention pack

All custody suites should be equipped with a suicide intervention pack. This emergency kit should include the tools necessary to undo removable keeps in an emergency when the lock jams.

Forces should consider issuing all custody staff with ligature knives or emergency cut-down tools. Staff should carry these at all times when in the custody suite.

## Cleaning

Forces can greatly reduce risks by adopting a comprehensive cleaning regime of all custody areas. Forces must implement policies and procedures for specialist cleaning services to remove body fluids. Forces should also provide adequate drainage in custody areas and exercise yards. If drainage becomes contaminated by body fluids, this must also be professionally cleaned.

Forces must ensure that rooms used for medical examinations are frequently and thoroughly cleaned. Those used for forensic examination must be forensically cleaned.

Forces must store all cleaning fluids securely.

For further information, see [Faculty of Forensic and Legal Medicine \(2007\) Operational procedures and equipment for medical rooms in police stations](#).

## Custody suites at non-designated stations

Suites at these stations must meet the same health and safety standards as at designated stations and be fit for purpose. Forces should carry out improvements, within available resource limits, to existing buildings where they cannot reasonably be modified to fully meet new-built standards.

Forces should carry out risk assessment and introduce appropriate control measures for any risks identified. Where appropriate, they should put standard operating procedures in place.

## Inspection and maintenance regime

Advice and a suggested inspection and maintenance regime for custody suites are contained in the PCDG, which can be obtained from the Ministry of Justice Estates Directorate, Technical Standards, 102 Petty France, London SW1H 9AJ ([moj\\_ed\\_technicalstandards@justice.gov.uk](mailto:moj_ed_technicalstandards@justice.gov.uk)). How it is put into practice is a matter for local policy.

### Daily

The following checks could be the responsibility of all custody staff and are in addition to the areas identified in cell searches and ligature points:

- check test cell call system (should be checked when detainee is placed in a cell)
- inspect for damage in custody suite (risk assess for continued use)
- inspect cells each time they are vacated
- clean suites daily, although some areas may need to be cleaned more frequently
- check contents of first-aid kits and any suicide intervention kits, replacing any used or missing articles
- ensure recording equipment is tested before use if it does not have auto-test facility

### As required

- check and reset calibration of specialist equipment (for example, LiveScan, evidential breath-test machine)
- clean forensic search rooms after use to ensure that they are suitably sterile for the next time they are required

### Weekly

The following could be the responsibility of the custody manager or equivalent:

- test the fire alarm
- test the emergency call alarm system
- check the cleaning of all surfaces
- inspect exercise yard/vehicle dock for damage/potential problems

## Monthly

The following could be the responsibility of the custody manager, duty/custody inspector or equivalent:

- assess the need for any specialist cleaning regime
- ensure a testing regime for power failure is completed to maintain uninterrupted power supply (UPS) and generator working capability
- check the cleaning and topping up of floor gullies, including exercise yard – some internal gullies may require more regular topping up due to evaporation

## Quarterly

The following could be the responsibility of a building surveyor with the custody officer/custody manager and the health and safety representative with the custody portfolio:

- quarterly inspection of all areas by the custody officer or custody manager with the building surveyor
- check the operating efficiency of heating, cooling and ventilation plan, including filter replacement
- health and safety risk assessment walk-through – this must be carried out after each change in layout and change in equipment use

## Annually

The following could be the responsibility of the building surveyor with the custody officer/custody manager and the health and safety representative with the custody portfolio:

- annual checks undertaken by specialist suppliers/manufacturers
- decoration check (biannually and redecorate as required)

- annual search of the custody suite (this could be an opportunity for the search team to carry out training)
- calibration check of building management control systems
- undertake the testing regime for a power failure to ensure UPS and generator working capability
- water testing, disinfecting and certification
- deep cleaning of suite by professional cleaning company
- practise evacuation drills
- smoke tests from within each cell to ensure that the aspirated smoke detector system is working rapidly and effectively

## Tags

Detention and custody