



Encouraging detainee dignity: A pilot and evaluation of digital and paper-based information guides to police custody for adult suspects in Norfolk and Suffolk Police

Layla Skinns and Lexine Smyth

Centre for Criminological Research, School of Law, University of
Sheffield

Final Report – Summary - July 2025

Published by and available from:
Centre for Criminological Research
University of Sheffield
Bartolome House
Winter Street
Sheffield S3 7ND
UK

© Layla Skinns and Lexine Smyth 2025

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored by a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Head of School, School of Law, University of Sheffield, or as expressly permitted by law or under the terms agreed with the appropriate reprographic rights organisation. Enquiries concerning reproduction which may not be covered by the above should be addressed to the Head of School. The right of Layla Skinns and Lexine Smyth to be identified as the authors of this Work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

1-872998-05-4

Layla Skinns and Lexine Smyth are at the Centre for Criminological Research, School of Law, University of Sheffield.

Printed in the UK

Summary

Background:

This project developed, piloted and evaluated the perceived impacts of accessible digital and paper-based police custody information guides for adult detainees. These aimed to improve suspects' understanding and autonomous decision making, the legality of police custody and police custody practices in Norfolk and Suffolk Police. They drew on existing research from Phases 1-5 of the 'good' police custody about the importance of detainee dignity to 'good' police custody experiences and, in particular, the importance of opportunities for autonomous decision-making, such as about due process rights and entitlements, as well as the crucial significance of legality, that is, the existence of and adherence to publicly known legal rules (Skinns, et al., 2020; Skinns and Sorsby, 2019).

These information guides (IGs) were collaboratively and rigorously developed between May and September 2024, drawing on the expertise of academics, police, accessibility consultants, Creased Puddle, and their Lived Experience Associates, who are paid by Creased Puddle to share their experiences, such as of neurodivergence, mental ill-health and of the criminal justice system to help inform change, animators, Alternative View Studios, and a translator. Whilst the IGs were to be implemented in Norfolk and Suffolk Police, it was agreed that they should be developed in such a way as to enable their adoption by other police forces, which meant omitting locally-relevant information. This development process culminated in four brief animations:

1. Your time in police custody and your treatment
2. Your rights and entitlements
3. Your welfare and wellbeing
4. Your safety and security

The voiceovers for the animations were in English. However, the subtitles were available both in English and Romanian. At the time of the pilot, the latter was the most commonly requested for interpretation purposes in Norfolk and Suffolk Police.

There was also a leaflet accompanying the animations, covering the same four topics. Like the animations, this leaflet was in English and Romanian (see the [‘good’ police custody project website](#) for the animations and leaflets). For the animations, the intention was for them to be offered to all suspects, who could opt out if they wished. For the leaflets, these were to be offered on request, for example, if someone did not wish to watch the animation.

After securing ethical approval for the project from the University of Sheffield, these guides were piloted and evaluated in two police custody facilities, one in Suffolk (Site A) and one in Norfolk (Site B). The research questions used in the evaluation were:

1. To what extent were the animations and leaflets perceived to be implemented, as intended, and with as many suspects as possible? What hindered or helped this process?
2. What were staff and suspect perceptions of the animations and leaflets? For example in terms of their style and content, value and utility? What features did they appreciate and which did they regard as being in need of improvement?
3. In what ways, when, to what extent and why did suspects engage with the animations and/or leaflets? For example, did they watch and/or read them in their entirety and at what point in their detention? What motivated them to engage with them?
4. To what extent did staff and suspects perceive the animations and/or leaflets to impact on suspects, such as on the uptake of rights and entitlements and on detainee dignity, particularly on the potential for autonomy and autonomous decision-making? How did this come about and which rights, entitlements and forms of dignity were impacted the most, if at all?
5. To what extent have the animations and leaflets established a proof of concept, justifying continued use either in Norfolk/Suffolk Police or elsewhere in the future?

The Phase 6 data collection took place from November 7th 2024 to November 29th 2024 in Site A and from January 14th 2025 to February 7th 2025 in Site B. In each

site, researchers spent 2 days per week over 4 weeks undertaking participant observation and then interviewing up to 7 staff, largely custody officers (COs), detention officers (DOs), and managers, and up to 5 suspects including a mixture of men and women, and those from different age groups.¹ After accessing the IGs, data were also collected from 12 suspects (6 in each site) through a brief survey administered by staff when the research team were not present in the custody facility in order to expand the pool of suspect views on the IGs. A spreadsheet was also used by staff to record which suspects agreed or not to watch the animations and why, during the pilot study period (n=71). In total, this report therefore draws on 115 hours of observation, 20 interviews (12 with staff and 8 with suspects), 12 brief surveys of suspects and data recorded by staff about 71 suspects and their reasons for using the animations or not.

Key findings:

Implementation

- There were a number of staff members committed to the success of the project and certain parts of the implementation process were successful, as a result. For example, there was consensus that playing the animations at the end of the booking-in process was the optimum time, given the challenges of suspects taking information in at the charge desk when under stress. Some staff were thus committed to delivering the animations in this manner, expressing positive views about the IGs and their aims to better support suspects in accessing their rights and entitlements.
- Challenges, however, included practical ones of the animation being played after suspects were in custody for multiple hours or when staff had to make multiple visits to a computer terminal away from their main desk area to play

¹ Throughout this report we largely use the term suspect, not detainee, to reflect that the giving of information about rights and entitlements is most relevant to those suspected of a criminal offence, rather than to the wider detainee population, such as those arrested on warrant following a failure to appear at court or those arrested on immigration grounds or taken to police custody as a place of safety in exceptional circumstances as per the Mental Health Act 1983.

the animations. Sometimes suspects were also not placed in cells with the necessary video technology, either due to busyness of the cells or staff overlooking this when allocating them a cell. At the time of writing, this challenge had been partially addressed by revising custody operating procedures to ensure all suspects arrested under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) were placed in a cell with the video technology.

- Staff also expressed concern about the extra workload generated by the pilot, as a result of playing the animations, and the extra demands placed on them by suspects making additional requests having engaged with the IGs. This culture of custody also inhibited implementation in other ways, in that staff did not necessarily view all detainees as deserving the extra support provided by the IGs. Some also saw the pilot as an imposition by managers, the aims of which they had not fully understood, albeit that a more extended lead time for introducing the changes would have better supported staff with this. Moreover, at the time of writing, there was an ongoing review of shift patterns in Norfolk and Suffolk Police, the aim of which was to improve staff capacity.
- Because of concerns expressed by staff at the time of the pilot and evaluation, the overall intention for all suspects to be offered the animation and to opt out of watching it, if they wished, was not realised. This limited suspect access to the IGs and created inconsistencies in which suspects were offered and accessed them.
- This inconsistency was further driven by staff perceptions of suspects' 'suitability' for the IGs. First-timers, those who had not been in custody recently and those considered vulnerable or less familiar with custody, such as children and young people, vulnerable adults and those for whom there were language barriers were all regarded as 'suitable'. Conversely, the intoxicated or aggressive were considered less suitable, at least until when they sobered up or calmed down, whilst 'regulars' were generally seen as totally unsuitable as most staff perceived them to already know their rights and entitlements.

Perceptions of the information guides: their content, format and accessibility

Regardless of these challenges with the implementation process, nearly all staff and most suspects viewed the content, format and accessibility of the IGs positively.

- Both the leaflets and animations were seen as informative, clear and concise, covering appropriate content, with staff and suspects being particularly appreciative of animation 1 on 'Your time in police custody and your treatment'. This was seen as covering the detainee journey, including information that staff did not typically provide.
- Most staff could not identify any key omissions from the IGs, though a couple mentioned the need for further information about: how those with hearing impairments should communicate with staff, local support services (though this had been deliberately omitted to make the IGs potentially useful to all police forces), and the need for suspects to reciprocate the dignity and respect shown to them by staff.
- As intended, staff saw the animations as accessible, simple to understand, jargon-free, and thus suitable for a wide audience, including for those who were neurodivergent, had learning disabilities, mental health conditions and/or low literacy levels.
- The accessibility features of the IGs were appreciated by participants including the use of subtitles, the pace and length of the IGs, and the format of the IGs as both leaflets and animations.
- At the same time, the focus on accessibility was sometimes to the detriment of the IGs, making them appear "condescending", such as to those without additional needs. Ultimately, however, participants saw the emphasis on accessibility for most to be more important, with PACE Code C being available to those who wished to receive more detailed information.
- A minority of suspects expressed more negative views about the IGs, for example reacting emotionally to them, particularly when they felt that the IGs did not correspond with how they were being treated. A few would have also preferred actors, not animations, to make the IGs more relatable and further information about privacy in the cells.

Perceived effects of the information guides

In terms of *engagement* with the information guides:

- It was difficult to fully ascertain how many suspects were offered access to and engaged with the IGs though, of the 1435 detained in Site A and Site B during the pilot period, the available data shows that at least 71 suspects were offered access and 38 watched the animations, mostly watching either all four animations or animations 1 and 2.
- They did so because they were interested to know their rights and entitlements and because of the benefits of this, as well as to alleviate their boredom in the cells.
- Those who did not engage with the IGs reported this was because: they already knew their rights and entitlements; negative feelings about the clocks displayed as part of the video technology used to play the animations, which over-rode their interest in knowing their rights and entitlements; or they wished to rest and did not want to be disturbed by the animations, hence the value of also being able to offer the leaflet.
- Engagement with the IGs also depended on staff perceptions of detainee suitability, whether suspects agreed to watch them in advance, and whether they were played at an appropriate point in their detention to be able to make use of the information provided (see also section 3.1.2).

In terms of the perceived *impacts* of the IGs, these were found to be on suspect behaviour, their understanding of custody processes and their rights and entitlement, and on detainee dignity, particularly in terms of improving their ability to make autonomous decisions:

- Unexpectedly, the animations were found to be *calming and a distraction*, such as when suspects were stressed and acting out. They also helped with particular stresses associated with suspect requests going unmet, as the animations explained that staff were sometimes too busy to act immediately on these.

- The animations were therefore, on occasions, deliberately used by staff to create a distraction and calming effect, for example, when detainees were displaying distressed and problematic behaviours in the cells.
- Staff and suspects perceived the most significant impact of the IGs to be the effect on *detainees' understanding of custody* by better informing them of processes, the custody journey, and what they were entitled to under PACE and Code of Practice C.
- This was seen as important given the stress experienced by suspects at the custody desk, which prevented them from fully listening to or absorbing information provided on booking-in. The IGs therefore helped to fill in any missing information, which could also be caused by staff giving differing amounts of information or by mistakenly missing information out. The IGs also helped reinforce any information that had been taken in by suspects.
- For suspects, these gaps in information encompassed parts of the custody process that they were less familiar with (e.g. how long they might be there or potential case outcomes) and rights and entitlements they were not previously aware of (e.g. access to the exercise yard or a shower), as well as staff busyness and how this may prevent staff from acting immediately on suspect requests for help.
- In this pilot, it was intended that *detainee dignity* would be enhanced by enabling more appropriate autonomous choices (Skinns et al., 2020; Skinns and Sorsby, 2019). The two most prominent examples of this in the research were when the IGs were perceived to influence autonomous decision-making through requests for legal representation, appropriate adults (AAs), and to a lesser extent liaison and diversion (L&D) .
- With regard to perceived increases in requests for legal advice, the information provided in the IGs was fuller than that provided by staff, who also did not regard their role as advising or persuading suspects to make use of custodial legal advice. Based on the IGs, suspects could therefore make a more informed decision.

- For similar reasons, staff perceived there to be an increase in suspects checking whether they might need an AA, also alerting staff to vulnerabilities not previously disclosed.
- The IGs also supported the more sensitive delivery of information relevant to detainee dignity, such as about menstrual products or menopause packs, which staff may not have known to whom to deliver it and which some staff may have found more difficult to deliver.
- Whilst IGs did lead to better suspect understanding and autonomous decision making, potentially better access to rights and entitlements and thus more dignified treatment, this could easily be undermined if staff did not then respond positively to requests suspects made, based on the IGs. Whether they did depended on staff availability, attitudes and willingness to help.

Proof of concept

- Staff and suspects expressed clear support for the continued use of IGs in the future, albeit with some adaptations to the implementation process. For this to be a success, the IGs should be used, not for all suspects, but for those new to custody and those particularly vulnerable or unfamiliar with it, thereby targeting the IGs at those most likely to use and benefit from them, as well as limiting the demand on staff and encouraging staff buy-in.
- This continued use was justified by participants in terms of the perceived effects of the IGs, such as on calming/distracting suspects, improving understanding and potential access to key rights and entitlements and dignity, as well as by the collaborative development process between police and academics and the resultant higher quality content of the IGs, than had the police developed them on their own. The intention therefore was to “carry on” with them.
- In other words, the implementation and evaluation established a proof of concept for the IGs and participants were positive about future adoption of them in other parts of England and Wales, alongside the video technology that supported their delivery.

Key conclusions:

These findings indicate four salient concluding points. First, they demonstrate the importance of suspects' due process rights and entitlements in supporting principles of legality central to 'good' police custody but also the limitations of (vulnerable) suspects' understanding of them. Second, the present project adds to the existing research on why these due process rights exist sometimes only in theory, rather than fully in practice, linked for example to suspect behaviour, understanding and misunderstandings, as well as to staff availability, attitudes and willingness to help. Third, the project reveals some of the reasons as to whether and how organisational change in the police happen. It demonstrates the importance of key individuals for driving change, as well as the need for change to "make sense" to operational staff (Bacon, 2014: 115), but also that police culture, that is the values and beliefs of police officers, can be difficult to change, if it is not simultaneously accompanied by changes to police policies and rules. Fourth, it demonstrates how the giving of information about rights and entitlements is closely connected to dignity rooted in autonomy and to police forces striving for more dignified treatment of detainees, and for 'good' police custody.

Recommendations:

1. **It is recommended that the IGs to police custody for adult suspects be made available for use in other police force areas, including via tablets or video technology, if available.** If adopted, it is a requirement that police forces notify the project lead, Layla Skinns (L.Skinns@sheffield.ac.uk), of this, so that she can monitor uptake.
2. If the IGs are adopted by other police forces it is recommended that they consider who is most suited to accessing the IGs and thus who will benefit the most from them, taking account of suspects':
 - Prior experience of custody and how recent this is (e.g. first-timers or those who have not been arrested recently may be more suitable), though police forces should consider carefully any problems of restricting use to 'first-timers', not 'regulars', given the unhelpful effects of these labels identified in other research (see Dehaghani and Newman, 2023).

- Vulnerability (e.g. whether suspects are PACE vulnerable or are perhaps vulnerable in other ways, as there is no need to restrict offering the IGs only to those who are PACE vulnerable);
 - Familiarity with custody (e.g. if someone is a foreign national and provided language barriers do not prohibit them from engaging with the IGs).
3. **The IGs are not recommended for use with children and young people**, as they were not designed with this group of suspects in mind, meaning they may not be age-appropriate and key information about appropriate adults (e.g. who may be a child's parent) have been omitted from the IGs.
 4. Currently, the IGs are also only recommended for suspects whose comprehension of English or Romanian is sufficient to be able to understand the more technical and legalistic aspects of the IGs, albeit that this has been kept to a minimum. It is hoped that the IGs can be translated into more languages in the future, based on any localised language needs reported to the project lead by police forces adopting the IGs.
 5. **It is recommended that the animations are played to suspects in the cells shortly after they have been booked-in and had a moment to calm down and collect themselves**, but near enough to the start of their detention, so that they can make time-sensitive requests for any relevant rights and entitlements, such as legal representation.
 6. **Prior information must be provided and consent sought before playing animations to suspects.**
 7. In terms of the practicalities of adopting the leaflets, it is recommended that a small budget is provided by police forces to cover professional printing costs, with a view to the leaflets being reused by multiple suspects.
 8. In terms of the animations it is recommended that they be played either on tablets or on video technology in the cells, if available. For the latter, it should be an option for any clocks showing on the video screens to be turned off and

how to do this should be explained to suspects (e.g. if they need to ask staff to do this on their behalf).

9. If using video technology, it is recommended that careful consideration is given to how the animations will be played, for example, in terms of:
 - The location of any computer terminals used to play the animations, ensuring that these are in close proximity to the usual desks of staff who will be playing them.
 - Whether the animations are played as a single integrated recording with appropriate gaps in between, as was adopted in Site B in the present project. Or, whether each animation is played individually, as was the case in Site A. Each option has pros and cons for staff and suspects, which need to be considered. For example, a single integrated video is better for staff in terms of minimising additional work, but less favourable to suspects who have less choice about which of the animations they watch.
10. If adopted, care should also be taken in preparing staff for this small adjustment to their working practices and in communicating to them in different formats (e.g. emails, briefings and training) about the aims of the IGs, expected changes to staff practices and their role in adopting them, so that there are greater opportunities for these changes to start to “make sense” to them (Bacon, 2014: 115).
11. Before fully adopting these changes, it is also recommended that there is a trial period beforehand, involving some of the staff who will be fully adopting the IGs later (e.g. with a single team of staff in one custody facility), thus giving opportunities to identify any challenges and make necessary adjustments before the IGs are rolled out further.
12. **If adopted, it is also recommended that this is not just on an informal basis, rather police forces should look at ways of integrating the IGs more fully into their policies and procedures**, such as through local police custody policies and role descriptions for COs and DOs. This might include guidance

on: who is responsible for the IGs and what these responsibilities are; the timing of the giving of the IGs around other custody processes; how they will be played, including via placement of PACE suspects in video technology enabled cells. For example, Norfolk and Suffolk Police revised their custody operating procedures to ensure all PACE detainees are placed in a cell with the video technology.