

A Criminal Use of Police Cells? The use of police custody as a place of safety for people with mental health needs

PCC Response

I am pleased that HMIC have undertaken this inspection as it highlights a number of issues associated with those people who are detained under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983 for their own safety, and the associated strain and pressure that this places on the police service both nationally and locally.

Police custody should only be used as a place of safety on an exceptional basis or in exceptional circumstances but it is clear that its use is much more of a regular occurrence. I support the recommendations put forward by HMIC which will potentially go a long way to reducing the inappropriate use of police custody for those experiencing mental health issues in public and requiring specialist assessments and care.

In particular I am pleased to see the recommendation highlighting the key role that local Health and Wellbeing Boards (HWBs) should play in including Section 136 provision as part of their Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and establishing processes to oversee and quality assure the use of Section 136 locally. In January 2013 I wrote to the Home Secretary outlining the importance of Police and Crime Commissioner engagement with HWBs given the significant impact placed on Dorset Police in dealing with people with mental health and drug and alcohol issues. I am keen to ensure that the HWBs in Dorset work closely and effectively with the police in order to try and address some of these issues.

From a Dorset Police perspective there are no surprises in the issues raised by HMIC and the recommendations are being discussed, progressed and monitored by the existing Multi-Agency Health Operations Group.

Martyn Underhill
Police & Crime Commissioner for Dorset