

Case 6 | Issue 35 – Custody

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Detainee self-harms with red lifeline cord from disabled toilet

Man with warning markers for self-harm uses cord from toilet to harm himself, raising issues about:

- *Supervision of detainees using disabled toilets*
- *Risks surrounding red lifeline cords*

This case is relevant if you work in:

Custody and detention



Mental health



Overview of incident

Mr A was arrested on suspicion of shoplifting and trespass upon a railway line and taken to a police station. His detention was authorised by Police Sergeant (PS) B.

PS B carried out a risk assessment on Mr A and found that he had anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and depression. He was receiving medication for all of this. It was also noted that Mr A had warning markers for self-harm, including biting his wrist. PS B asked Mr A about this. He said that he had no intention to bite his wrists due to the length of time it took to heal last time. PS B noted on the custody record that Mr A was calm and compliant when booked into custody. Mr A was placed on level one observations, requiring cell visits every 30 minutes. All cords were removed from Mr A's clothing.

PS B had dealt with Mr A on a previous occasion in custody, and later told colleagues that Mr A appeared agitated and less calm than when he had dealt with him before.

Anti-rip clothing was considered but it was decided that it was not needed. This was due to a recent Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspection which recommended that "anti-rip proof clothing should only be used in exceptional circumstances and as a last resort to protect the detainee from harm. There should be a recorded rationale, based on a risk assessment, and the detainees own clothes should be returned to them at the earliest opportunity."

A health care professional (HCP) was requested by PS B. While waiting for the HCP to arrive, Mr A's detention responsibility was handed over to PS C.

Mr A asked to use the disabled toilet opposite the custody booking-in desk. PS C allowed Mr A to do this but asked him to keep the door open so that he could supervise. It had become common practice within the custody suite for recently arrested detainees who had been searched but not yet placed into a cell to use the disabled toilet because of its proximity to the custody desk. PS C walked over to the disabled toilet behind Mr A. He stood very close to the door while not actually watching him use the toilet. While in the disabled toilet, Mr A removed a portion of the red lifeline cord by biting through it. PS C was unaware that Mr A had done this.

The HCP's arrival was delayed. Therefore, Mr A was placed into a cell at around 11pm. He was visited a few minutes later by custody detention officer (CDO) D. CDO D looked through the spy hole and saw Mr A lying on the bed. He had a blanket over him which came up to his chest/shoulder area. CDO D could see Mr A's chest moving up and down and believed he was asleep.

A few minutes later CDO E went to Mr A's cell to take him to the HCP. CDO E found Mr A unresponsive with a portion of the red lifeline cord from the disabled toilet wrapped around his neck.

Type of investigation

Local DSI report.

Findings and recommendations

National recommendations

Finding 1

1. The red lifeline cord in the disabled toilet of the custody suite was not identified as a risk and was used as a ligature by Mr A.

National recommendation 1

2. The IOPC recommends that the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) makes sure that all forces are made aware of this risk and the injury caused by the use of an alarm cord as a ligature in this case. All forces should be advised to review their own custody facilities as a matter of urgency to make sure that any cords that could present a similar risk are replaced with alternative means of raising alarm which cannot be used as a ligature. The National Police Estates Group should be advised that this measure is incorporated into guidance for any new facilities or refurbishments.

Action taken by this police force

1. The force immediately stopped allowing detainees who had not yet been put into a cell to use the disabled toilet.
2. All lifeline cords were immediately removed from disabled toilets across the force area. They were replaced with a different product that reduces the risk presented by the cord.

3. The incident was brought to the attention of all custody staff through the departmental newsletter.
4. The incident was described on the force's custody refresher training.
5. The force worked with the NPCC to make sure that learning was shared quickly with heads of custody in other forces.

Response to the recommendations

National recommendations

National recommendation 1

1. Learning from this case has been shared with all force custody leads via the NPCC custody portfolio forum.
2. All forces have been advised to review their own custody facilities as a matter of urgency to make sure that any cords that could present a similar risk are replaced with alternative means of raising alarm which cannot be used as a ligature.
3. Learning from this case has been uploaded to the NPCC ChiefsNet to make sure that it can be accessed by a wider policing audience.

Outcomes for officers and staff

PS B

1. PS B, the custody sergeant who first dealt with Mr A when he was brought into custody, received management action.
2. The force decided that while conducting the risk assessment and creating the care plan for Mr A, PS B failed to consider that Mr A was a vulnerable detainee who was visibly agitated on arrival and had warning markers for recent self-harm attempts. Instead, PS B had placed Mr A into a cell on a level one care plan, rather than on a level three or level four close proximity regime, and had chosen not to place him in anti-rip clothing.

CDO D

1. CDO D, the officer who visited Mr A after he was first placed in his cell, and checked on him by looking through the spyhole, was given advice on making appropriate checks.

Questions to consider

Questions for policy makers and managers

1. If your force uses red lifeline cords in disabled toilets, what action have you taken to reduce the risk of cords being used as a ligature when toilets are used by detainees?

2. How does your force make sure that detainees are adequately supervised during toilet visits, particularly where the risk of self-harm has been identified?

Questions for police officers and police staff

3. How would you have handled this situation differently to make sure that the man did not have the opportunity to self-harm?