# **Police custody in rural Scotland: Negotiating boundaries, risk and organisational change**

## **Design/ Methodology**

This paper draws on data from a study funded by the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (2016-2018), entitled ‘Measuring Risk and Efficiency in Police Custody in Scotland’. The paper adopts a qualitative methodology to develop an understanding of the varying nature of police custody across Scotland. Two contrasting case study locations were selected, one urban and one rural. 12 semi-structured interviews and 15 hours of observation were carried out. Data was transcribed, coded and analysed and thematic analysis enabled themes to be developed. This paper draws on the data from the rural custody suite.

## **Purpose**

This paper explores the challenging nexus of police custody, risk and intra-organisational boundaries in the context of a recently reformed national police service. Police custody is an often-hidden aspect of policing, away from the public gaze and scrutiny. Although there is increasing recognition of the importance of rural policing (eg Harkness, (2020); Mawby & Yarwood, (2011); Ruddell & Jones, (2020); Yarwood & Wooff, (2016)), there has been little or no focus on rural police custody. This paper seeks to begin to redress this by focusing on the challenges faced by rural police custody in the context of large-scale organisational change.

## **Findings**

Drawing on the theoretical framework of Giacomantonio (2014) and more recent considerations of abstract policing Terpstra et al., (2019), this paper offers insights into the ways that police custody in rural Scotland has been organised, against the backdrop of challenging organisational change. I argue that as policing services in Scotland have become increasingly ‘abstract’ from communities, police custody as a national division has witnessed the impact of this more greatly than other parts of local policing. Intra-organisational management around staffing have led to complex management of risk, illustrating some of the challenges of national organisational change on police custody.

## **Originality/ value**

This paper focuses on the impact of large scale organisational change on rural police custody and intra-organisational relationships and dynamics. Rural policing is still a largely neglected area of study and rural police custody is even less understood. This paper therefore provides an original contribution by focusing on this under-researched area of policing. It also illustrates complexity around risk, staffing and management of people being held in rural police custody suites. It is therefore of value to policing scholars in other contexts, as well as rural criminology more generally. It has applicability to international contexts where macro level policing reform is occurring.

## **Introduction**

Police custody is a hidden aspect of policing, occurring away from the public gaze. Principally, it acts as a gateway into the criminal justice system where a suspect is held while parts of the criminal investigation process occur, such as identity verification and evidence gathering through suspect interviews and forensic samples. From a welfare perspective, it can be an opportunity to intervene in someone's life when they are in crisis, for example providing access to addiction services and, controversially, still on occasion, acting as a place of safety for those who might be at particular risk of harm if not detained.

Beyond these legal and welfare roles, police custody has been conceptualised in several ways. There is a growing body of literature on police custody focused on vulnerability (Dehaghani (2021), independent custody visiting (Kendall, 2022)and power, legitimacy, and the material conditions of custody (Skinns et al., 2023). For example, Wooff (2019) explored the role of the police custody suite as a site of emotion, risk, and resistance. Risk and its mitigation are key components for the way that the police prioritise attempts to ensure the safety and welfare of both detainees and custody staff (see Kelly, 2003; Hughes, 2011, and Skinns et al., 2017), especially concerning the 90% of detainees who have ‘some sort of mental health difficulty’ (Leese & Russell, 2017).

Despite the mitigations which have been implemented to manage these spaces and the people within them, police custody remains a complex and high-risk area of policing. This complexity increases when national police reform and a dispersed spatial geography mean that within rural communities the various dynamics of ‘good’ policing are not well understood (Skinns, Wooff, et al., 2017; Wooff, 2022). Indeed, police custody in rural areas has been largely neglected, not only by the policy context, but also with regards to the academic literature. It is therefore an important and timely issue to examine in the context of Scotland, particularly following the structural reform of policing in Scotland in 2013 and resultant impact on policing and police custody in rural areas.

Established in 2013, Police Scotland was formed by bringing together eight legacy police forces with two national policing organisations, the Scottish Police Services Authority and the Scottish Crime and Drug Enforcement Agency. There is a growing body of literature on the creation of Police Scotland (Fyfe and Henry, 2012; Fyfe, 2014; Fyfe, 2014; Hail, 2016), and rural policing (Wooff, 2017, 2019) especially around the implications of ‘centralising tendencies’ of Police Scotland’s adoption of a rational-efficient policing philosophy. Police forces in other contexts have also seen large-scale structural reform (e.g in Scandinavia), but Police Scotland has been one of the most significant reforms to date (Holmberg, 2019). Whilst the establishment of Police Scotland presented the opportunity to create centralised and specialist resources, the formation of a national organization has also been critiqued for neglecting the nuance of service delivery in rural localities (Buchan et al., 2022; Wooff, 2022). It is important to explore the impact of these changes on rural police custody.

The move to a single police force saw the formation of the national specialist Custody Division with its own command and control structure and standardised policies and practices at a national level. Prior to 2013 police custody had been a function of the eight individual forces. Operating at a national scale has implications for the way that intrapersonal relationships and risk are managed, particularly in custody suites located in rural locations.

Drawing on work by Giacomantonio (2014), this paper argues that scarcity and are part of the complexity of having a national custody division. Managing complex risk and decision making is something relatively junior rural police custody staff become accustomed to. This is framed by conceptualisations of abstract policing and having to manage these challenges with a remote line management structure. This paper highlights the complex and multiple organisational boundaries which need to be negotiated to take effective decisions around detainees in rural police custody.

Although police custody is relatively hidden from the public gaze, it is important for police trust and legitimacy (Skinns, Rice, et al., 2017). Thus, while the impact on service delivery has been keenly felt in rural communities more broadly (Wooff et al., 2021)**,** the focus of this paper is on the impact of local organization of police custody differs across local rural contexts, in a national police force. To explore these issues in more detail, the first section will outline police custody in Scotland.

## **Police Custody in Scotland**

Historically police custody was managed by eight legacy police forces in their respective geographic locations in Scotland, albeit shaped by national guidance framework. Since the amalgamation of eight legacy police forces and the inception of Police Scotland on the 1st of April 2013, police custody in Scotland has been through large-scale changes. In contrast to local policing, which retains thirteen local geographic police divisions, police custody has become a national directorate in Scotland. This means that resourcing, line management and decision making for those working in custody is centralised and organised in ‘custody clusters’ (ICVS, 2023). Police Scotland operate a model of primary, weekend and ancillary custody [[1]](#footnote-1). These are organized into twelve geographical clusters, each led by a Police Inspector and overseen by a Chief Inspector who report into a regional Superintendents (ICV, 2023) This model means that there are rural custody suites managed predominantly by Police Constables whose line management are located elsewhere in the country, meaning that the way that police custody is managed requires distinct local decision making.

Legislation provides an important context for police actions in relation to those people who come into police custody, principally the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995 and the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2016. These pieces of legislation shape the legal requirements of police custody in Scotland, including how long a person can be held in police custody and what rights a detainee has. Irrespective of legislative safeguards, police custody is a high risk and resource-intensive area of policing. The British Medical Association (2009) highlighted that a high proportion of detainees have mental ill health or under the influence of, or dependent on, alcohol or other drugs. This makes custody an inherently risky place, where the dignity of the detainee is often a secondary consideration compared with mitigating the risks to the detainee (Skinns et al. 2023).Tensions therefore exist around the purpose of police custody, not least because the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2016 introduced a presumption of liberation.

This act has had an impact on the number of people coming through police custody in Scotland. Changes in the law alongside changes in policing policy meant that while 192,848 were held in police custody in 2013-14, this had declined to 118,418 in 2018-19 and 98,960 in 2022-23 (SPA, 2023). Just under 1300 of these people were under 16. In addition, the average time a person spends in police custody has reduced by approximately 20% (ICVS, 2023; Scottish Police Authority, 2020). Although the numbers in police custody have reduced considerably, as Wooff (2022) highlights, the challenges of balancing ‘good’ custody practices for detainees as well as creating positive staffing conditions is challenging especially in context of abstract police services. It is therefore timely to explore these issues alongside some interesting wider organisational challenges that police reform has led to within Police Scotland.

## **Methodology**

This paper draws on data from a study funded by the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (2016-2018), entitled ‘Measuring Risk and Efficiency in Police Custody in Scotland’. To develop an understanding of the varying nature of police custody across Scotland, two contrasting case study locations were selected. Both were primary custody suites, located in different locations. Our urban case study was a large inner-city custody suite operating a typical management structure with 52 cells. 12 semi-structured interviews and 15 hours of observation was carried out across the sites. The rural case study had eight cells and operated a dispersed custody model, where the remote rural custody estate was managed by a central urban-based custody Sergeant and team. A qualitative methodology was utilised as it aligned with research objectives and allowed for the exploration of staff-detainee interactions, along with decision making and to observe the complexities of a working custody suite. Staff in the custody suits and in the custody cluster were interviewed, along with observations across three shifts. These contrasting locations offered varying opportunities and challenges and offered insights in to how custody was managed.

Participants included Custody Sergeants, Custody Inspectors, Police Constables in custody and Criminal Justice Police Custody Security Officer (herein PCSOs). Strategic interviews were also conducted with senior custody managers, at the rank of Superintendent. These were conducted through 2016 and 2017. Observation was conducted by observing different shifts working in a custody suite on different days and times, including Friday and Saturday nights and recording ‘systematic description of events and behaviours’ (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Data was transcribed, coded and analysed and thematic analysis enabled themes to be developed.

## **Theorising rural police custody in times of structural change**

To understand the complexities of police custody it is helpful to draw on existing theory. Abstract policing (Terpstra et al., 2019) and Giacomantonio’s (2014) work on organisational boundaries are particularly valuable.

There is a growing literature developing the concepts of managerialism in policing (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997) and the centralisation of services. Terpstra et al. (2019) helpfully theorise these shifts through the lens of abstract policing. They suggest that following the 2013 police reforms in Scotland, police have become more ‘dependent on rigid systems and system information’. They also argue (p. 340) that ‘police are … less dependent on personal knowledge of officer(s), as this is increasingly being replaced by ‘system knowledge’, framed within the ‘logic; and categorisations of computer data systems (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997)’. With organisational change in Scotland, it is argued, the police have become more abstract where local community knowledge is valued less than systems-based organisations which seek ‘efficiency’ and ‘professionalism’ (Terpstra et al., 2019: 343). The loss of local custody divisions is one such example of this and has led to intra-organisational relationships to be less personal, familiar and direct and more formalised and governed by ‘systems’.

Alongside the work on abstract policing, Giacomantonio’s (2014: 545) study of organisational boundaries in policing provides a helpful way for theorising rural police custody in times of organisational change. By treating boundaries as sites of negotiation that arise when overlap occurs between units organizationally, his work helpfully ‘focuses on operational aspects of public policing in creating typological categories’ The typology they develop elaborates on three boundary types: scarcity, proximity, and technical/systemic. These are helpful for understanding the impact of police organisational change on those working within rural police custody.

## **Centralising tendencies: Abstract policing, risk and the impact on rural police custody**

The systems created for a national police custody division mean that contact, command, and control systems within this division are increasingly abstracted from rural areas. Other work has explored this in the context of external facing policing and police-community relationships (Wooff, 2015, 2022), but understanding the impact of a more abstract policing model on staffing within rural police custody, especially when considering risk, is novel.

Managing risk and ‘risky‘ populations is a core part of role of working in custody. As Williams et al. (2017) note, a lack of bespoke training on mental health and a ‘one-size fits all‘ approach to risk assessment leads to custody staff feeling under pressure and ill-equipped to deal with the multitude of risks related to health. Importantly, consideration of the way that risk management is operationalised in a custody setting is important for understanding how detainees feel towards the police once they are released. This is particularly the case when trying to understand the interactions between the police and those who have been detained, and given the police-community relationships rely on ‘softer‘ forms of policing (Wooff, 2017), this becomes even more important for rural police custody.

Through the prism of abstract policing, the organisation of staffing in rural police custody in Scotland is challenging. There is a complex set of interweaving issues related to the way in which a national police custody model sits alongside, and is integrated with, local policing within the organisation. Staffing the national custody model has implications for managing risk and intra-organisational relationships. In terms of flexibility, the national model has helped facilitate this to a degree, with a Force Custody Inspector (FCI) noting that the single division ‘is more flexible’. A custody Sergeant also noted that things had improved:

*‘We are leaps and bounds ahead of [legacy forces], it was like spinning plates before, whereas at least now I can concentrate only on custody* [Custody Sergeant, Rural]

This is an interesting point, because as Skinns, Rice, et al. (2017) note, the ability for staff in custody to use their (perceived) independence to take discretionary decisions links to the balance between the management of risk and dignity of detainees. Although this isn’t the place to explore discretion in detail, for the purposes of this paper staffing flexibility and the impact on rural police custody is important. There are clear challenges around the staffing in a national division which operates alongside local policing divisions with diffused line management.

A national police custody division inevitably requires interaction between local policing and the police custody divisions, as the local policing teams are most commonly the people arresting individuals and bringing them in to custody suites. This local-division-meets-national-division interface made for some complex decision making. As one custody officer noted *'one of the things is that melding together the national [custody] model with awareness of the local policing is a real challenge'*. Linking together national custody staffing models with local policing priorities is a challenge for many police officers in both local policing and police custody areas. This tension manifests itself in different ways and most acutely in police custody in rural areas.

Firstly, custody staff regularly rely on local policing officers to support vulnerable detainees, including requiring local police officers to conduct level 3 or level 4 observation[[2]](#footnote-2) when the detainee is considered to be at high risk. When a person is detained in custody a risk assessment will be carried out as soon as is practicable and those detainees considered highest risk are put on level 3 or 4 constant observation. While this is standard practices, and expected by many officers in local policing teams, the process can be complex to manage. This is particularly true in rural locations where local policing resources are limited, especially since the reduction in ~1000 officers in Police Scotland between 2017 and 2023 (His Majesty’s Inspectorate of the Constabularies (Scotland), 2023) Additionally, it adds a bureaucratic layer to decision making for staff in custody, with custody Sergeants needing to negotiate resourcing with local policing line managers located elsewhere in Scotland, as a result of the abstract, national policing model. This complexity was underlined by a custody Sergeant:

*‘When I was backfill […] it was a constant obs[ervation] we were having to do a drugs case, because they had come in and they'd thought they had internal [concealment] and at that time the guidelines were you used constant obs to watch them. So I was like "we need an officer to come", so I went in, the [local policing] Inspector happened to be my Operational Inspector, I said "I need someone to do constant obs for that.” He says "oh no, you don't"...* [Custody Sergeant, Rural]

In rural custody suites this type of negotiation is complicated, especially when local policing provision is already stretched. Furthermore, owing to the national custody division, the line management of those working in custody is remote from the rural custody suite (and sometimes in another part of the country), the local policing and custody context can be lost in that decision-making process. As I have argued elsewhere, rural policing relies on knowledge of the local context (Wooff, 2015; 2017). The arguments made by Tepstra et al. (2019) on the nature of abstract policing therefore seem to be particularly apparent in rural police custody settings.

Giacomantonio’s (2014) work is equally useful for understanding the impacts of staffing challenges and negotiations on intraorganizational relationships. Their conceptualisations of scarcity and proximity boundaries within policing organisations is helpful for understanding the challenges of negotiating resources (Giacomantonio, 2014). One custody Sergeant noted:

*‘Sometimes I feel like a negotiator, always speaking to local policing trying to get the right resources to support us in custody’* [Custody Sergeant, Rural]

Moreover, in several of our research observations, custody staff were negotiating with local policing sergeants and, in two incidences, had to escalate the decision to the Force Custody Inspector. Whilst Giacomantonio (2014) discusses scarcity in relation to ‘interstitial’ police work – work which is considered at the boundary of the core remit and role of an individual officer – in rural police custody, discussions around the scarcity of resources appear to be a central part of the role of a rural custody worker. Often this is regarding who will provide observations for detainees deemed as high risk of self-harm. This means that because custodial *and* resourcing decisions are often dependent on staff located elsewhere in the country, it is time consuming and frustrating for rural custody staff. Drawing on abstract policing conceptualisations, it can also be riskier as these remote decisions are being taken in the absence of local contextual and community knowledge.

Although resourcing is not exclusively a rural issue, it is more critical in this context because there are fewer resources in rural locations to begin with. The implication of resourcing custody in this way is that local policing is frequently required to supply staff to police custody and local policing teams are already stretched. Indeed, in our study, decision making in police custody was, on occasion, subject to the pressures of the local policing resourcing. This was apparent when three juveniles were arrested at 2300 on a weekend night. Generally, juveniles will only be kept in custody as a last resort, but because of the drunk, argumentative state of one of the detainees and trouble finding the guardians of the young people, a decision was made to hold them in custody. This required the young people to be on level 3 and 4 constant observation which meant a requirement for local policing resource. This had to be negotiated:

*Custody Sergeant: ‘I’ll be needing 3 of your guys (local community officers) for these 3 [young people]*

*Local policing Sergeant: We have one officer abstracted tonight already, so we can’t give you three...can you release them...their parents are on their way?*

*Custody Sergeant: No; they are unfit to be released at this stage and we don’t have their guardians. We can’t release them like this, they need to calm down and they need guardians here, so I’ll need your officers. I’ll get the FCI (Force Custody Inspector) on the phone to let her know of the plan.*

*Local policing Sergeant: (obviously frustrated) Ok, I’ll pull some officers from [nearby small town] for cover and leave you with the three [officers] already here…*

[Notes from fieldiary, Rural, 12/17]

In this example, the negotiation of resources takes time and effort and will leave no police officers available for the local policing of the nearby town. When resources are already scarce, spending time negotiating this type of ‘interstitial’ work is a complication that can create tension (Giacomantonio, 2014). This is an unintended consequence of national custody model in Scotland, where line management is dispersed. In the past, the custody Sergeant and response Sergeant would have been part of the same local police division and therefore likely had a common line management and decision-making structure that would have accounted for local policing and police custody needs. In these circumstances, risk to the detainee and pressure on the custody staff is exacerbated by the need negotiate in this way.

In rural areas, access to healthcare provision is also patchier and more complex than in urban areas, with less healthcare in police custody, hospital and out of hours resource. Although not the focus of this paper, those in rural police custody requiring non-urgent medical attention or deemed ‘higher risk’ need to be transferred to a primary custody centre, often many miles away. This again requires negotiation and police officers to be out of their local policing area for long periods of time, and to manage risk in a dynamic way while the person in custody is being transported.

An important point in relation to the scarcity of staff connects to the role of backfill of police custody staff by non-custody division staff. This is typically when a local policing Constable or Sergeant is required to cover shifts in police custody. This not only requires negotiation of custody resources at the macro level from elsewhere in Police Scotland, but it also increases the risk to detainees. Although this practice has since been reduced significantly, it still happens. One PCSO stated: ‘*Risk? If you ask me backfill Sergeants are a big risk, they aren’t always up to speed*’ [PCSO]

Although backfill in this way also occurs in urban custody contexts, it is particularly risky in rural police custody where there is less support available and rarely more than one Sergeant on duty at a time. While those non-custody officers who are doing regular backfill shifts develop experience and confidence in custody, those who are less frequently backfilling in custody can experience additional stress and anxiety, slowing down the custody process and potentially increasing the risk to detainees:

 ‘*Obviously, it's experience, as with any job. If you're doing a job day in, day out, you get used to it, you have learned decision making, whereas if you are only filling in now and again it's not as learned, you're having to deliberate about a lot of your decisions so you go through things slower […] you don't have as much confidence as you would if you were here all the time as well. For instance, you saw the phone call I had for the transfer of custody, I'm out of my comfort zone with that decision, to be honest, so it's a case that I really must consider that at great length […] But probably, if I was here all the time, I'd know straightaway […] and I have to ask others for advice and I have to rely on my custody officers more than I would be if I was a Sergeant here full time’* [Backfill Custody Sergeant, Rural]

For this local policing Sergeant backfilling in custody, the experience is often stressful because of the unfamiliar surroundings, being the sole Sergeant on duty, protocols and the ongoing pressures associated with being responsible for managing high risk custody populations. In this study, backfill officers are rarely in custody and therefore rely heavily on the expertise of PCSOs who are non-warranted custody support officers, for guidance on the norms of the custody suite and the subtleties in custody processes:

‘*Some of the sergeants rely on us, they'll say "look I'm here" backfill, or wherever, "I'm relying on you guys to keep me right." And we do, because we work so well together and we know how it works’* [PCSO, Rural]

The backfill process was noted as a challenge for custody processes more broadly and was identified as a riskier way of managing the custody environment than resourcing custody from those officers that regularly work in that environment. From a resourcing point of view, in general, the police officers who are backfilling in custody also do not have their ongoing local policing workload (e.g. ongoing investigations) covered, meaning they have an additional backlog of work once they complete custody shifts. Additionally, backfilling in custody often means that local policing teams can be short of officers. This is a key example of the way that ‘on paper’ more efficient processes in covering gaps, may also be riskier to detainees and staff, particularly as this is more common in rural locations.

## **The implications of rurality on police custody in Scotland**

Giacomantonio (2014) uses the term ‘proximity’ in relation to boundaries within the police organisation. Negotiating across physical distance, he argues, can lead to less clear lines of decision making, meaning that the police are less likely to work together towards common outcomes. In the case of police custody in rural Scotland, despite being a national police division, the impact of distance on both risk for detainees and the relationship for staff was apparent. In one of our case studies, custody Sergeants routinely were stationed >70 miles away from the police station in which someone was being booked in. Overcoming a lack of proximity is therefore a key challenge in the custody estate in Scotland and one of the keyways this happens is through trust between staff built up over long periods of time.

Although this paper is not the place to examine the extensive literature on trust and the police (see Jackson et al., 2012; Tyler, 2004, 2006), it is important to highlight the links between trust and legitimacy for thinking about the ways that proximity (or lack of it) operates in this context. Trust and loyalty often masked the boundaries between the custody division and the local policing divisions. As the custody division was only formed in 2013, many of the staff members are working alongside old team members from local custody division. Staff therefore felt loyalty to those in the local policing division but less to those further afield:

‘*Despite being in a different division, technically, before the custody division was formed, I worked alongside [custody sergeant] for 18 years, so I trust her and her judgement…it’s those in the centre [of Scotland] who have no idea of the way this division operates’* [PC, Rural]

A sense of existing loyalty not only helped officers to navigate challenges around large distances but inferred a sense of allegiance towards old divisional boundaries. As Robinson et al. (2015) highlight in the context of changing probation services in England and Wales, existing loyalty can be a barrier to change within organisations. In the context of police custody, loyalty to existing police force boundaries and the perceived distinctiveness of pre-existing policing areas is wrapped up with concern over the move to the single police force (see Fyfe and Scott, 2013; Fyfe, 2014; Wooff, 2016). Although these early concerns have become less acute, a recent inspection highlighted ongoing issues with the instigation of a national force around trust and culture (His Majesty’s Inspectorate of the Constabularies (Scotland), 2023).

Internal organisational legitimacy requires respect, fairness and trust to be at the centre of the decision-making process. The remote management role of the Force Custody Inspectors relies on large amounts trust in custody Sergeants, Constables and PCSOs. This is trust that the colleagues in their custody cluster will alert them to situations which they are required to report on and that rural custody staff will use their judgement to take correct decisions:

 *‘I think it’s probably just human nature that, although you’ve not met the Sergeants, there’s certain ones you can trust and make the right decisions, and quite often they'll say "by the way, Inspector, this is what we’ve done, just to make you aware." And that’s satisfactory, and there’s others that, how can I put it, you’ve got to keep a closer eye on’* [Force Custody Inspector, Urban]

In the national context, this can be more challenging because this relies heavily on trusting staff and knowing how the remote team operates, with one participant describing this relationship as ‘golden’ and ‘built on trust over many years’. When staff in these positions are backfill, the inherent trust is not always as clearly developed, meaning that custody functions can be worse, and more decisions need to be deferred to the geographically remote Force Custody Inspector. In rural locations, where understanding of the local context and geography of the custody estate is even more important, inherent trust between senior management and those in the custody suites becomes even more crucial, yet, ironically, is more fragile because of the way that abstract forms of local policing have developed.

In the cases where a remote custody suite is staffed by a police constable, their line management is often removed from the immediate decision-making process:

‘*Where we are, trust is key. The Sergeant needs to know I’ll make the right decision. I update her frequently, but she is two hours away [...] so there is more pressure, responsibility here than in other [cities]’* [PC, Rural]

This means that detainee decision-making in rural custody is devolved down to the rank of Police Constable, where in urban custody suites a custody Sergeant is physically present to oversee processes. In the rural fieldwork location, the officer in charge of the rural custody suite had 25 years’ service in that location and eight years in custody. The officer had worked with the Sergeant, stationed >70 miles away, for a considerable period and they inherently trusted the remote decisions being taken. Thus, relationships matter, more so when considering the impact of a national police custody division and the implications of more abstract forms of policing. In rural police custody, this means that staff are required to implicitly trust the decisions of people they may not know and who are geographically remote to the custody suite. Conversely, Inspectors and more senior managers in the custody division must trust that decisions being taken by Police Constables and PCSOs in rural custody suites are safe and the context round those decisions is clearly articulated.

## **Discussion and Conclusion: Lessons from rural custody in a transforming policing context**

At the time of writing, it is ten years since Police Scotland was formed. As a recent His Majesty’s Inspectorate for the Constabulary Scotland (2023) report highlights, the culture and ethos within Police Scotland has ‘improved markedly’ since it was formed. Nevertheless, they identify a ‘risk averse style of management’ which undermines cohesion across police ranks (His Majesty’s Inspectorate of the Constabularies (Scotland), 2023). Considering internal culture and risk is a key prism in which to consider police custody given the inherently challenging context of this space. Giacomantonio (2014) provides a helpful way to analyse these boundaries, including at the technical and systemic level.

This boundary has systems ‘which regularly interact with one another, but do not always cooperate’ (p 560). In the case of police custody this is apparent in a couple of ways. At the time of the research, for example, there was not a national custody computer system. This meant that the eight existing police forces were using systems which lacked capability to ‘speak to each other’. As previous sections have alluded to, the dispersed line management of custody staff means that having a system which can be accessed nationally is important to allow national level decision making:

‘*We are hamstrung by our lack of technical know-how across the organisation. I know they are bringing in a rehashed internal system nationally, but our IT systems at the moment are laughable’* [Inspector, Urban]

Although progress has been made since the research was carried out in creating a technology solution for custody, echoing Giacomantonio (2014), we found that officers used personal relationships as work around to technological barriers. In relation to the booking in process in rural custody, this was particularly apparent. As described above, this process in rural areas is often carried out by a police Constable, with the detention and risk assessment being ratified by a Custody Sergeant many miles away in a different police station.

Under these circumstances and without the technology to visibly see the detainee, the custody Sergeant is relying on the verbal account of those doing the booking in:

‘*In rural areas we do often fly by the seat of our pants…managing custodies in remote locations*. *I’m reliant on what is being recorded on a risk assessment form which until very recently wasn’t always uniform. Technology should make this easier, but knowing the other officer makes the job much easier…I mean I have worked in the same shift with [name of officer] for eight years, so although we are in different stations 75 miles apart, I trust [officer] and I know that when they phone me and relay their concerns that I can trust that person. If you don’t know them, like sometimes when we have a backfill or something, then I request more [information] to be sent through* [Custody Sergeant, Rural]

This is an example of this Sergeant overcoming the challenges of distance. The remote custody model relies on a Sergeant making decisions about the health and wellbeing of a detainee and whether they are fit to be detained, effectively taking on the risk of that detainee, from a remote location. Not being able to visibly see or hear the detainee removes a layer of confidence in ratifying the decision:

‘*It would be far better if I could visually see the detainee to see what the PC booking them in is seeing’* [Custody Sergeant]

As discussed above, trust is central to this narrative, with time working together being key factor in that. The key challenges around policing in Scotland fit broadly with the scarcity, proximity and technological boundaries presented by Giacomantonio (2014). That is, the key challenges can broadly be framed by considering resourcing, by taking account of the complex geography of Scotland and by utilizing technology in a more systematic manner. The concept of ‘risk’ has been conceptualized in different contexts and while key at framing decision making in police custody, this paper has used the concept to frame broader structural arguments about the reorganization of police custody in Scotland. Having a national division, largely for efficiency reasons, has led to several complex multiple organisational boundaries which need to be negotiated to take effective multifaceted decisions, particularly in rural police custody suites.

Considering these challenges through the lens of abstract policing is helpful. The importance of trust and personal relationships when navigating the complexities of rural custody is apparent. Yet, with Police Scotland (understandably) creating national level organisational functions, local custody processes have been decontextualised. In a local policing context, Terpstra et al. (2019) illustrate the impact of this on community policing, but as illustrated above, police custody underlines the potential internal challenges around risk management and resourcing created by a more abstract, national service delivery. As I have written about elsewhere (see Wooff, 2015, 2016b, 2022), in policing rural communities, relationships and context matter and an increasingly abstract model of police custody obfuscates those relationships. A s Police Scotland seeks to address organisational and cultural concerns raised by HMICS (2023), it will be important to listen to Police Officers and staff working in rural custody and consider ways to mitigating these intra-organisational complexities.

This paper highlights these challenges. There are lessons which can inform rural custody development in other jurisdictions. It is important that risk in a rural custody setting is properly contextualised, and consideration is given to both the risk to staff and detainees. Increasing levels of technology makes it easier to mediate risk across large distances (e.g CCTV being viewed remotely), but the physical risks remain heightened because of the abstracted service provision. This article has focused on the police, but healthcare provision and other public sector withdrawal from rural space (Buchan et al, 2022) has exacerbated these issues. A key lesson for future public sector reform is to acknowledge, consult and understand the complexity of service provision in rural communities, engaging with practitioners and community members to examine impacts and possible solutions in these locations.

Furthermore, understanding the topography of different types of custody is important. As other jurisdictions move towards reform of their policing systems, this paper brings together Giacomantonio (2014) theoretical model to understand some of the challenging internal dynamics associated with the move to a national police custody division with ‘abstract policing’ associated with the introduction of Police Scotland. This allows for the complex intertwining of rural police custody, risk and widescale organisational change to be examined in this often-hidden area of rural policing.

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1. Primary Custody Centre – a centre which is open to receive persons in custody on a fulltime basis. Weekend Opening Facility – a centre which is routinely used at peak weekend times. Ancillary Custody Centre – a centre which may be opened due to demand. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. His Majesty’s Inspectorate for the Constabulary (Scotland) (2023) note:

■ Level 3 - constant observations. The detainee may be under constant observation via CCTV, a glass cell door or window, or a door hatch. Visits and rousing may take place at 15, 30 or 60-minute intervals.

■ Level 4 - close proximity observations. Appropriate for those detainees at or posing the highest risk. This involves detainees being supervised by staff in the cell or via an open cell door [↑](#footnote-ref-2)