



# Broken Journeys, Broken System

The impact of poor transport on court custody

October 2025



## Introduction from the Lay Observer National Chair

Lay Observer monitoring has consistently found secure transportation to and from court to be inadequate, which results in unnecessary suffering for detained people and high levels of wasted resources. On average, 54% of Lay Observer reports between September 2024 and August 2025 graded this category as “poor” (see annex A).

Many of the issues ultimately stem from a lack of transportation staff. As Lay Observers have consistently highlighted in annual reports, there are too few staff across the whole court custody process to ensure court functioning, staff are consequently diverted from transportation to custody suites. While this can be an efficient use of resource, the extent to which this happens means that there are not enough staff available to run an effective and reliable transportation service.

The negative impact this has on detained people includes: longer journeys in uncomfortable conditions; the risk of arriving in court custody too late to see solicitors, or even to appear in court; and women being transported alongside those charged or convicted of sexual offences.

Detained people regularly being delivered late impacts on the ability of the court to function, as court listings struggle to account for unreliable timings. At times this has resulted in missed court dates, worsening an already sizeable crown court backlog. Those returned from court late impact on custody staff work patterns and prisons who struggle to accommodate late arrivals.

Poor communication within the system has also resulted in detained people being delivered in error to courts, either because they are not needed or they are unfit to appear. This wastes scarce resource and is highly disruptive for the individuals involved.

Finally, Lay Observers consistently report the routine use of handcuffs in unsecure vehicle bays, regardless of individual risk. While restraint should be proportionate and informed on evidence-based risk assessments, current practices show little indication that such assessments are being applied. Furthermore, while Lay Observers acknowledge the significant resource it would take to secure every vehicle bay, it appears that little thought is given to measures to support the wellbeing and dignity of those being handcuffed, such as screening from the public.

Despite Lay Observers having highlighted these issues for many years, no appropriate action has been taken to alleviate them; in fact, many of them have got worse. What will it take to achieve an effective transportation service for court custody that also preserves the dignity of those detained?

**David Whalley**

**October 2025**

Lay Observers National Chair

## About Lay Observers and this report

Lay Observers monitor and report on the treatment of those held in court custody, providing independent oversight of all areas of the court custody and transfer process. They regularly visit and report on custody suites in England and Wales. Lay Observers are part of the UK's [National Preventive Mechanism](#) (NPM).

The Lay Observer remit is set out in the Criminal Justice Act 1991 and has been agreed with the Ministry of Justice in the [Protocol with the MoJ](#).

Monitoring focuses on the outcomes for people being brought to and from court and held in court custody. Lay Observers report on whether the individuals held are being treated with decency and respect and whether their welfare is being looked after.

This report provides an overview of the impact of the current state of court custody transportation on detained people, summarising the findings from all Lay Observer reports between 01 September 2024 and 31 August 2025.

## Key findings

- **Detained people are being incorrectly transported to court** when their attendance is not required and when they are deemed unfit to stand trial on arrival. Additionally, those with disabilities are being sent to inaccessible courts.
- **The efficiency of court operation is being disrupted by the late arrival of detained people**, which affects the ability to schedule hearings effectively and leads to unnecessary delays or cancellations of court proceedings.
- **Detained people are spending excessive periods of time on prison vans** with extended journey times due to detours being made to other establishments and long waits outside prisons prior to admission.
- **Women are often being transported with men charged or convicted of sexual offences**. Men, women, and children are regularly being transported together in the same vans, particularly from police custody.
- **The routine use of handcuffs is near universal where vehicle bays are unsecured**. In some courts this occurs in full view of the public, undermining the dignity and right to privacy of the detained person.

## 1. Unreliable timings, unnecessary and long journeys

Lay Observers consistently report concerns regarding the timing and duration of transport. Common issues include late arrivals and departures, excessively long journeys, and instances where detained people are transported unnecessarily, only to not appear in court. These inefficiencies negatively affect the welfare of detained people, disrupt court operations, strain custody staff, and waste limited resources.

Two recurring causes have been identified: insufficient staffing and the operational decisions made to compensate for that. These often result in fragile transport arrangements with no contingency. For example, at Basingstoke Magistrates' Court, a 10-minute transfer from the local police station was significantly delayed due to staff illness. A replacement had to be brought in from Poole which is over 90 minutes away, highlighting the lack of resilience in the system.

### 1.1. Late arrivals resulting in cancellations

Court custody suites are not designed for prolonged detention, so detained people are typically prioritised in court listings to reduce time in custody and minimise the strain on resources. However, this balance is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain as court staff cannot rely on detained people being delivered on time.

#### **Case study 1 - Management decisions resulting in missed court date**

A detained person from HMP Wandsworth was scheduled to attend a hearing at Guildford Crown Court, a journey that typically takes around 50 minutes. However, on this occasion the transport van diverted to deliver other detained people to Kingston Crown Court, extending the journey by nearly two hours.

The delay caused considerable distress to the detained individual, who arrived too late to participate in the hearing, resulting in its cancellation.

In 2024, 186 court appearances were missed as the defendant was not produced by Prisoner Escort and Custody Services (PECS), a 151% increase from 2019<sup>1</sup>. This figure excludes the frequent number of shorter delays, such as one observed at Birmingham Crown Court, where a detained person arrived 45 minutes late and had to be rushed directly into the courtroom.

Such delays are distressing for detained people, many of whom are eager to proceed with their cases. They also increase costs, particularly when interpreters or other time-sensitive resources are involved and can affect availability for later hearings. Furthermore, rushed arrivals often prevent detained people from consulting with solicitors or barristers before their hearings, potentially undermining their right to legal advice and a fair trial.

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<sup>1</sup> [Productivity in the Crown Court](#), Institute of Fiscal Studies, published 8 June 2025, accessed 27 August 2025.

Given the scale of the crown court backlog, avoidable transportation delays are particularly unacceptable. While Lay Observers occasionally see alternatives used, such as video links from police stations, when a court appearance is likely to be missed, these remain rare. Their use, though helpful, highlights the systemic fragility of current transport and custody arrangements.

### **Case study 2 - Lack of staff to transport detained people to court in good time**

Courts in South Hampshire have experienced persistent staffing shortages throughout this monitoring period. To maintain operations, transportation staff have frequently been diverted to support in the custody suite. The impact of this was evident during a visit to Portsmouth Magistrates' Court in May 2025, where three local custody staff were outnumbered by escort staff from transport vans.

With no escort staff available for transport, five detained people, who were ready for transfer early in the morning, were left waiting until 2:10pm to be moved from a police station just 20 minutes away. Upon arrival, the reception process was rushed, covering only basic checks which increases the risk of vulnerabilities being missed.

The knock-on effects of these delays meant that two of these people did not arrive at prison until 8:30pm, significantly later than standard arrival times.

## **1.2. Unnecessary journeys**

Missed court appearances due to late transport are not the only examples of wasted journeys reported by Lay Observers. Another recurring issue is detained people being incorrectly transferred from prison to court when they are not scheduled to appear, primarily due to prison or court errors. This causes significant disruption and distress for the individual, who understandably may be frustrated by the unnecessary upheaval, particularly as they may not return to the same prison as before. It also represents a clear misuse of resources, including transport costs and staff time.

### **Case study 3 – Incorrectly delivered to a court**

In July 2025, a detained woman was scheduled to be transported to Burnley Crown Court. However, as her appearance was only for a mention, she was ultimately not required in court. By the time this was identified, she had already begun her journey and was redirected to Preston Sessions House Crown Court to await return transport.

She then faced an almost eight-hour wait before being transported back to HMP Styal, arriving more than ten and a half hours after she had left, despite not needing to appear. Custody staff informed the Lay Observer that this was a recurring issue with HMP Styal, causing significant frustration for all involved.

Lay Observers also report instances where detained people are brought to court despite being unfit to appear, most commonly at Magistrates' Courts when transferred from police custody. For example, at Luton Magistrates' Court, a detained person was returned to the police station after being deemed unfit due to substance withdrawal. Such cases highlight the need for better assessments by the responsible organisations before transfer, as those who are unfit should not be sent to court.

#### **Case study 4 - Transported to a court to appear elsewhere via video link**

A detained person with disabilities, who was on remand at HMP Thameside, was scheduled to appear via video link at Portsmouth Magistrates' Court, which does not have disabled access. Instead of hosting the link from his home prison, he was transported alone in a multi-person vehicle on a five-hour journey to Portsmouth Crown Court to access the video link.

While in the courtroom, he suffered a seizure and had to be taken to hospital. Escort staff remained with him until 2am, despite being scheduled to work the following morning.

Significant resources were used to transport this man from prison to court, only to appear at another court, when the video link could have been facilitated from his home prison, raising concerns about efficiency and the welfare of the man in

Accessibility issues further compound the problem. A 75-year-old detained person who relies on a walking frame was loaded onto a van (taking 30 minutes) and transported to Winchester Crown Court, despite the court's custody suite only being accessible via three flights of stairs. He had to be returned to prison upon arrival, which was understandably frustrating for him, and a significant waste of time and resource.

### **1.3. Delays leaving court**

Court custody is not designed for long-term detention. Cells are uncomfortable, and there is often little to occupy detained people during extended waits. One detained person at Coventry Crown Court told a Lay Observer that, during a nearly five-hour wait for transport after their hearing, they would have been far more comfortable and productive had they appeared via video link from prison.

Prolonged detention in unsuitable conditions can be particularly harmful for vulnerable individuals. At Oxford Magistrates' Court, a detained person identified as being at heightened risk of suicide was held for four to six hours before being returned to prison. Holding individuals with suicidal ideation in such environments risks further deterioration of their mental health.

Custody staff do make efforts to prioritise vulnerable detained people, but these are often undermined by delays in return transport. For example, at Westminster Magistrates' Court in July 2025, a detained person suffering from alcohol withdrawal was prioritised for an early court appearance to facilitate transfer to prison where they are better able to care for him. However, he then waited six hours for transport, along with five other detained people, until a large van could be filled. While consolidating transport may be efficient, it should not come at the expense of detained individuals' wellbeing.

#### **Case study 5 - Long delays for a highly vulnerable individual**

At Oxford Crown Court, a highly vulnerable detained person, who was on constant watch due to acute mental illness, a history of volatile behaviour, and risk of self-harm, faced repeated delays throughout their time in court custody and transport.

The day began at 8:15am, with arrival at court by 9:20am. The detained person then waited nearly five hours for a 19-minute court appearance, followed by a further three-hour delay for transport. After completing the journey back to prison, they remained in the van for an additional hour outside the establishment, finally disembarking at 7:00pm.

This resulted in an 11-hour day for a brief court appearance. The Lay Observer noted that the prolonged delays negatively impacted the detained person's wellbeing and placed a significant burden on the custody staff responsible for maintaining constant watch.

Lay Observers frequently report detained people being held late into the evening due to transport delays. At Bristol Magistrates' Court, four detained people remained in custody until 10:12pm, six hours after their hearings ended, only arriving at HMP Bristol at 11:45pm. Such late finishes place a heavy burden on custody staff and negatively affect morale and wellbeing, which may impact the safe and effective operation of custody suites. Extended waits and uncertainty around departure times are also distressing for detained people, particularly those remanded for the first time.

Late arrivals at prison also hinder proper processing. Detained people may miss out on basic needs such as hot meals or showers. This is especially concerning for those on long trials. At the Central Criminal Court (The Old Bailey), multiple detained people reported being returned to HMP Belmarsh so late that they could only shower on weekends, leaving them feeling unclean and unable to present themselves appropriately in court, an unacceptable consequence of procedural delays.

Lay Observers have identified three main causes of these delays: insufficient transport capacity, a preference for grouping detained people by destination, and difficulties securing prison spaces. The latter is directly linked to prison overcrowding, which exacerbates delays when space becomes limited.

### **Case study 6 - Impact of prison lockouts**

At Exeter Combined Court, two detained people experienced prolonged periods in court and police custody due to a shortage of local prison spaces. Both individuals left police custody at 8:00am and appeared in court at around 12:30pm for hearings lasting seven and 29 minutes respectively.

Following their appearances, they remained in court custody for seven additional hours while staff attempted to secure accommodation. With no prison spaces available, both were transferred to Exeter police station to be held overnight.

The next day, one detained person was taken to HMP Exeter, arriving at 1:25pm, over 29 hours after leaving police custody. The second was transported to HMP Cardiff, a three-and-a-half-hour journey, arriving at 5:30pm, more than 33 hours after first leaving police custody.

### **1.4. Excessive length of time on vans**

Prison vans are not suitable environments for prolonged periods. The cells are small, cramped, and lack any form of distraction. While vans are often clean and equipped with essentials such as first aid kits, some detained people find the conditions distressing. At Wolverhampton Crown Court, a detained person threatened self-harm if placed in a vehicular cell; custody staff appropriately arranged alternative non-cellular transportation.

One particularly degrading item that detained people complain about is the use of specialised liquid bags for toileting. This is especially uncomfortable when vans carry mixed genders, as there is no privacy from sound and CCTV. Although Lay Observers occasionally see detained people allowed to use toilets during stops at other courts, this is rare. Many detained people report choosing considerable discomfort over using the bags.

Transport journeys are often unnecessarily extended due to logistical decisions. While minor detours can be efficient, significant diversions are unacceptable. For example, a detained person's journey from Reading Crown Court to HMP Bullingdon, normally 45 miles, was regularly extended to over 130 miles due to additional court stops, resulting in four-hour journeys.

Lay Observers also report detained people and staff waiting outside prisons in vans for up to two and a half hours. This places a considerable strain on both resources and detained people. At Southampton Magistrates' Court, a 65-year-old diabetic had to wait an hour and a half outside HMP Lewes despite being acutely unwell.

During these waits, vans are typically turned off, disabling air conditioning and heating. In warmer months, vans quickly become uncomfortable and are frequently referred to as "sweat boxes" by both staff and detained people.

Positively, in August 2025, PECS issued guidance stating that internal vehicle temperatures should remain between 18°C and 22°C, and that detained people should not remain on board for more than 20 minutes if these conditions cannot be maintained during loading and unloading. Lay Observers will monitor the implementation of this guidance closely.

## 2. Transportation of children, women and men together

Lay Observers expect that children, women, and men should be transported separately. However, mixed transport continues to occur regularly on certain journeys, particularly between police and court custody. Of greatest concern are the frequent instances of children and young people being transported alongside adults. PECS does not currently collect equivalent data on mixed male and female journeys from police custody.

One reason for the higher rate of mixed transportation from police custody is that, unlike prisons, police stations often hold these different cohorts together. While combining these journeys may be more efficient logistically, Lay Observers find this practice unacceptable when it comes at the expense of the welfare of detained people.

There are also notable differences between contractors. GEOAmev, which operates in Northern England, the Midlands, and Wales, consistently records a significantly higher number of mixed journeys compared to Serco, which covers Southern England.

### 2.1. Transportation of women with men charged or convicted of sexual offences or domestic violence against women

In July 2025, Lay Observers saw detained women in court custody on 28 visits. On 64% of these visits, at least one woman had been transported alongside a man. Alarming, on 44% of these mixed journeys, one or more of the accompanying men had been charged with, or convicted of, sexual offences or domestic violence against women.

Such arrangements are deeply distressing for detained people, particularly those who have experienced sexual or gender-based violence, and risk retraumatising vulnerable individuals. Transporting women in proximity to men accused or convicted of such offences is unacceptable.

### 2.2. Transportation of children alongside adults

While the mixed transportation of children and adults from prisons is less frequent than that of women and men, the transportation of children alongside adults in general, particularly the high level from police custody, remains a significant concern. In July 2025, Lay Observers recorded that on 38% of visits where a child was in custody, at least one child was transported with an adult.

Given their heightened vulnerability, it is essential that children are transported separately. Children should not be treated as part of the adult custodial system. Lay Observers maintain that children should be transported in non-cellular vehicles, accompanied by appropriately trained specialist staff, and kept entirely separate from detained adults to ensure their safety, dignity, and wellbeing.

| Proportion of mixed gender/age journeys to and from court                 |           |           |           |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| GEOAmey - North England, Midlands and Wales                               |           |           |           |           |
| Type of movement                                                          | 2024 - Q3 | 2024 - Q4 | 2025 - Q1 | 2025 - Q2 |
| Number of children moved between police custody and court                 | 623       | 681       | 566       | 570       |
| Percentage of children moved with adults between police custody and court | 49.8%     | 47%       | 41.9%     | 48.4%     |
| Number of young people moved between prison and court                     | 506       | 363       | 827       | 822       |
| Percentage of young people moved with adults between prison and court     | 7.3%      | 3.6%      | 10.9%     | 0.9%      |
| Number of women moved between prison and court                            | 2344      | 2483      | 2507      | 2435      |
| Percentage of women moved with men between prison and court               | 10.7%     | 12.4%     | 10.1%     | 7.3%      |
| Serco - South England                                                     |           |           |           |           |
| Type of movement                                                          | 2024 - Q3 | 2024 - Q4 | 2025 - Q1 | 2025 - Q2 |
| Number of children moved between police custody and court                 | 654       | 643       | 695       | 539       |
| Percentage of children moved with adults between police custody and court | 37%       | 19.3%     | 35.4%     | 34.3%     |
| Number of young people moved between prison and court                     | 751       | 462       | 703       | 449       |
| Percentage of young people moved with adults between prison and court     | 1.9%      | 0.2%      | 0%        | 0%        |
| Number of women moved between prison and court                            | 2541      | 2212      | 2554      | 2233      |
| Percentage of women moved with men between prison and court               | 2.9%      | 3%        | 5.2%      | 4.3%      |

### 2.3. Use of separation screens

The PECS contract permits the transportation of women with men, and children with adults (from police custody only), provided a separation screen is used and women are accompanied by a female custody officer. However, Lay Observers consistently find that these screens offer inadequate protection. They do not block sound, allowing for potential verbal abuse, and their visibility during boarding can signal the presence of a woman or child on board.



*Figure 1: Inside a 12-cell prison van, showing the corridor with cell doors on either side. Each door includes a viewing window into the cell. A separation screen can be deployed at the end of the corridor to shield the final two cells from view.*

Moreover, screens are not always used. For example, a vulnerable woman was transported to Oxford Magistrates' Court alongside three men. Due to her heightened vulnerability, she was placed near the vehicle crew, making it impossible to use the separation screen. As the cells have windows, other detained people could potentially see who was on board. In such cases, transporting vulnerable individuals separately would be far safer and more dignified.

### 3. Dignity and decency disembarking and embarking vans

All handcuffing in court custody should be based on individual risk assessments. However, Lay Observers frequently report blanket handcuffing at courts with insecure, or no, vehicle bays, regardless of individual circumstances. This includes vulnerable groups such as pregnant women and children, raising serious concerns about proportionality and dignity.

Some vehicle bays are only secure for smaller vans, yet larger vans are often used. For example, at Hove Magistrates' Court in May 2025, all detained people were handcuffed because the van exceeded the bay's capacity. In contrast, Birmingham Crown Court demonstrated good practice by transferring detained people to a smaller van to fit the bay at the Birmingham Crown Court Annexe.

Other staff decisions can also lead to the indiscriminate use of handcuffs. For example, in June 2025 at Peterborough Magistrates' Court a Lay Observer reported that all detained individuals were handcuffed despite the presence of a secure vehicle bay. This was because staff had parked a car and motorbike in the bay and handcuffing was used to prevent potential damage to these vehicles. In this instance there was a clear and inappropriate prioritisation of personal property over the welfare and dignity of detained individuals.

#### 3.1. Lack of privacy loading in public

At some courts with insecure vehicle bays, the loading and unloading of detained people is visible to the public. For example, at Wolverhampton Magistrates' Court, the vehicle bay opens directly onto a public road and is overlooked by windows from the court and surrounding buildings. Detained people, who are often in prison attire and handcuffed, can be easily seen.

#### **Case study 7 - Videos of detained people in public**

A popular YouTube and TikTok channel with approximately 250,000 followers features multiple videos of detained people being escorted on and off transport vehicles.

In one video filmed outside Preston Magistrates' Court, a detained woman, who was dressed in prison attire and handcuffed, is escorted from a van on a public street. Her face, as well as that of the escorting staff member, is clearly identifiable. The videographer calls out to her, asking what she is there for. The detained woman responds that she is not comfortable being filmed in her current state.

This incident highlights serious concerns around privacy, dignity, and the public exposure of individuals who have not been convicted of a crime.

Lay Observers have identified numerous instances where images and videos of detained people entering or exiting vehicles have been shared online, including in news articles and social media posts. This visibility undermines a detained person's

right to privacy and the principle of presumed innocence, as they are publicly presented as guilty individuals.

Currently, no measures are in place to screen detained people from public view during transfers. This lack of protection is a serious concern and calls for urgent attention to safeguard the dignity and rights of those in custody.

## Annex A

After each court visit Lay Observers submit a report of their findings. Reports are split into eight categories covering all areas of the custody process. Each standard is scored against one of three grades: poor, acceptable or good.

The graph below shows the percentage of visits (out of 776) scoring at each level for transportation for visits that occurred between 1 September 2024 and 31 August 2025.

