

What I learned from a recent experience with a homeless man in custody

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An opportunity to make things better and to help those who need it

Going equipped

At 5am on a Friday morning, a homeless young man was arrested and brought to me. His arrest was appropriate and his detention was authorised. But this is about more than crime.

This man was polite, respectful and hungry. He was in need of a shower, medical care and – most of all – kindness and humanity. He had psoriasis. It was sore and dirty, and covered his body. It was made worse by the cold, his clothes and poor hygiene, and may well have been infected. So what did we do?

We arranged medical care for him. We gave him food, hot chocolate, blankets and clean clothes. We made arrangements for him to get a shower, with appropriate shower gels so as not to inflame his skin. We were humane and we treated each other with respect, while adhering to COVID-19 guidelines.

I could have sent him to a cell, and he could have thrown abuse at me because of his arrest. But because we talked and were both honest, decent and fair, we were able to help each other. He reminded me of what policing is about, and I hope I made a difference to him.

We need more conversations like this. We must remember that just because someone is arrested, homeless or in need, they are not to be dehumanised. Be kind. It makes a difference.

I like to see custody as an opportunity to make things better and to help those who need it. Granted, that won't always be the case – such is policing – but we must all relish, seize, share and learn from the occasions when it is.

Every contact leaves a trace.

- This article was peer reviewed by Detective Sergeant Catherine Parfitt, Thames Valley Police

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