A call for help

Police contact management through call handling and control rooms in 2018/19

Contents

Foreword

The control room is one of the engine rooms of a police force. If it doesn't have the right systems and processes in place, the force won't have an accurate picture of demand. This will affect its ability to respond to calls and investigate crimes effectively.

Answering the public's calls for help is hugely important work. The people who do it are, almost without exception, dedicated and professional public servants, doing their best within the limits of the technology and management structures in their forces. Yet they are often unsung and undervalued. Their career paths and opportunities for development are often limited, and they don't always receive the wellbeing support they need.

Often, staff take calls that aren't police emergencies or routine police work, and which other agencies would be better placed to deal with. This extra demand can result in calls from vulnerable people going unanswered or unassessed. Forces need to make sure this improves and that vulnerable victims receive an appropriate service.

The lack of agreed and consistent national standards for how long it should take to attend an emergency makes it difficult to draw meaningful comparisons between forces. The public have no way of understanding how the service they are receiving compares with other forces. It is time for the police service to agree a national set of response standards for emergency calls.

We also recommend that, during 2020, each force should adopt the national contact management principles and practice. The service to the public should be consistent and equitable, not dependent on where somebody lives.

Forces should act to adopt the next steps we have set out to make sure they are managing contact effectively, and that the public receive the prompt and effective response they have every right to expect.

Phil Gormley

HM Inspector of Constabulary

Headlines

To keep people safe, it is essential that the police service deals with contact from the public effectively. People generally contact the police when they are in crisis, when they need help, when they are vulnerable. The demand on control rooms is increasing and so needs careful management to make sure the police service doesn't become overwhelmed.

The way the public expects and needs the police service to handle their calls for help is changing. Improvements in policing and in technology are encouraging the service to be more ambitious in what it achieves at the first point of contact. While it faces these challenges to the way it manages contact, the police service is also working with smaller budgets and fewer people.

Demand is in danger of overwhelming the police service

The police service is handling a greater number of calls to 999. This is likely to be because:

- the public is making less use of the non-emergency 101 number; some forces can't answer calls to 101 in their target time and they don't always offer another way of making contact – so the public is losing confidence in 101 and using 999 instead;

- police forces are taking on problems that other organisations can no longer manage because of fewer resources; and

- crimes and incidents involving vulnerable people are rising.

Demand is becoming more complex

The police service is taking more calls that involve vulnerable people. Forces are dealing with mental health concerns and other complex problems, such as drug and alcohol dependency or homelessness, or a combination of all these. As a result:

- call handlers take longer to deal with calls because they must assess threat, harm and risk as they try to resolve complex problems over the phone; and

- call handlers need more knowledge, skills and support to deal with increasingly difficult situations; this includes working with other organisations.

Managing complex demand is not consistent

Many forces don't have effective systems in place to manage the risk and volume of work this increased demand creates.

- Some forces manage calls differently at times when demand is high, for example a Friday or Saturday evening in a busy city centre or during a major event in a town.
- When their response is delayed because of the high demand, some forces don't then rethink how they might best respond or what they should do next.

Not always the best response to vulnerability

The police service has become better at recognising vulnerability but its response to vulnerable people is inconsistent.

- Police forces now recognise vulnerable people who might have been missed before, so they are identifying more vulnerable people who need to be kept safe. This adds to the demand on policing.
- But the way police forces assess the risk of vulnerability is inconsistent and in some forces it can be affected by demand for police services. This means forces may not always keep vulnerable people safe.
- In a third (14) of forces we inspected during 2018/19, we established as an area for improvement the risk assessments at different stages of an incident.

Resolution without deployment is not used consistently

Not all calls for help need an officer to attend. Forces can resolve some calls over the phone (called 'resolution without deployment').

- But there is no standard approach to resolution without deployment: it varies by area, meaning the public doesn't get a consistent service.
- Two forces don't use resolution without deployment at all; of the 40 others (not including City of London), one uses it for 0.4 percent and one for 56.6 percent of calls. The average in England and Wales is 33.2 percent.

Inconsistent trauma support for staff

Call handlers often experience distressing situations. They need support from their force to help them cope with these experiences.

- Some forces provide good support for their staff to help them cope with shock, distress and trauma but not all do.
- Without such support for their wellbeing, staff may suffer from ill health. This results in a high human cost, poor staff retention and high rates of staff sickness. All this puts more pressure on forces.

To meet the increasing and changing demand, forces need better contact management

- The National Police Chiefs' Council issued a new national contact management strategy in 2019 and is now updating the supporting principles and practice.
- The College of Policing is updating the national contact management learning programme for early 2020. This will set the learning standards that must be met when training new contact management staff.

- Some forces are already starting to redesign their contact management, but others are not. Most forces are beginning to use the single online home facility, a consistent national approach to reporting crimes and for accessing non-emergency services.
- The absence of a national set of agreed response times for emergency calls means it is hard to make meaningful comparisons.

Next steps

- Each force must be sure it effectively assesses risk at all points of contact with the public and the community. It should use this assessment to provide the best response to vulnerability.
- Each force where there is a vulnerability desk should make sure it makes a positive contribution to initial safeguarding.
- Each force should make sure its staff are trained, supervised and supported to be effective in their control room roles; this should include assessing the effect of better terms and conditions and career development for control room staff.
- We expect forces to invest in technology and work with each other to use it to inform and improve their risk assessments, their responses and their investigations to keep the public safe.
- We expect all forces to make sure the service they provide to their communities meets the new national contact management strategy. We will assess how well forces adopt the contact management principles and practice as well as the learning standards during our 2020/21 inspections.
- We expect to see all 43 forces get involved in the single online home and the social media projects.
- We expect the police service during 2020 to make sure it has effective national guidelines, quality assurance and assessment in place for resolution without deployment.
- We expect the police service during 2020 to make sure that it has agreed a standard for how quickly forces must respond to 999 calls. The absence of a national set of agreed response times for emergency calls means it is hard to make meaningful comparisons.

We will assess progress towards achieving these steps and the success of initiatives during PEEL (police effectiveness, efficiency, legitimacy) inspections 2020/21.

Findings

Calls to 999 are increasing – in numbers and complexity

Emergency 999 calls to police forces have increased by 11.1 percent in the two years between 2016/17 and 2018/19. These calls are becoming more complex and the time it takes to deal with them is increasing. This trend is likely to continue for both the emergency 999 number and the non-emergency 101 number. More and more calls are about vulnerable people, mental health concerns and other equally complex problems, such as drug and alcohol dependency or homelessness, or a combination of all of them.

We have raised this before. In *State of Policing 2018*, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary said that cuts in other public services have shifted demands onto the police and other parts of the criminal justice system. The most vulnerable people in the community will call on the police in their time of need. It is important they get the right support and help, but the police can't always provide it. In our 2018 *Picking up the Pieces* report, we recommended that, by December 2019, all forces should carry out a 24-hour snapshot exercise to assess their mental health-related demand. All 43 forces took part in this exercise on 12 November 2019. This should help them understand better the nature and scale of mental health demand in their area.

Call handlers now assess the threat, harm and risk to the caller and the community and sometimes resolve problems over the phone. This means that call handlers now spend more time dealing with calls than they once did. Calls take longer, and call handlers need more skills to deal with increasingly difficult situations. They may need to talk to other organisations, such as health and housing agencies, with whom the caller may already be in contact, and agree next steps in the caller's best interests.

Demand on 101 now

The police service set up the 101 number to take calls that could be dealt with not just by the police but by other organisations such as health, social care, housing and environmental services. But other organisations withdrew their support for 101 as their funding reduced. Much of the demand on 101 now isn't police work. For example, people call about a housing or health need or a problem that would be better dealt with by social care. We have commented on this in *State of Policing 2018*. Cuts in other public services have shifted demands onto the police and other parts of the criminal justice system. Other organisations need to accept the public risk they have responsibility for when police resources are now so constrained that some forces are struggling to cope.

The call handler's task can be simple – giving someone the right contact details. Or it can be complex – finding a bed and help for a homeless person with medical problems. Resolving these calls takes time and waiting times for 101 non-emergency calls increase as a result. If they have no alternative contact method, some people might choose to call 999 instead or abandon their call.

We found examples of how forces are finding out what the demand includes:

- Lancashire Police told us that it estimates about 30 percent of the telephone calls it receives are matters that other organisations, such as the council or the NHS, should deal with. The force has greatly improved its understanding of the true demand on the control room. It can now see how it responds to all calls. It is using voice analytics, which shows that control room staff spend 40 percent of their time dealing with unlogged demand. These calls aren't logged as incidents but are perhaps a victim update, an information request or a query.

- Recent increases in the volume and complexity of 999 and 101 calls have stretched Essex Police's capacity to answer all calls and respond within the target time. The force's own review found that the demand it faces is becoming increasingly complex, with new types of crime, such as cyber crime. The force found that high-priority demand is also increasing. This is because the force's understanding of vulnerability has improved, so it is assessing more incidents as high risk.

Dealing with complexity

Some forces draw on specialists to support call handlers as they deal with complex calls. This might be by analysing what is happening, or by having other professional staff working in the control room or available on the phone. Examples we found include:

- In Devon and Cornwall Police, staff in the control room receive enhanced training to help them respond to people who may be in crisis. The force also has a joint working protocol with the Samaritans. Call handlers can refer people in crisis or who are emotionally and mentally distressed to a confidential Samaritans referral line. The individual will then receive a call back and expert emotional guidance and support.

- Cumbria Constabulary has done much to improve the quality of service to people who make contact. It has introduced a safeguarding help desk. This means officers trained in identifying, responding to and investigating vulnerability share a workspace with command and control room staff. They advise and guide call takers and initial responding officers, and make rapid referrals to partners, such as social services, to manage the risk to victims better. During our fieldwork, we found examples of officers attending incidents getting advice on safeguarding action, scene enquiries and opportunities to record evidence.

- Avon and Somerset Police performs better than many forces in its appreciation of the complexity of demand. Many types of police activity are relatively easy to quantify: anti-social behaviour or other instances of nuisance, for example. Other incidents, such as domestic abuse enquiries, are far more difficult to quantify. In these cases, the force can spend a considerable amount of time working with other organisations to safeguard victims. To help measure this, the force has devised a complexity score for each area of police activity. The score is

calculated from data analytics, with input from subject matter experts. Understanding the complexity of demand allows the force to make sure it puts in place the right resources and skills, both now and in the future.

Calls to 999 are increasing

The number of 999 calls is increasing. Both the 999 and the 101 national call systems have been under pressure for some time and this pressure continues to increase. The 999 service is for emergencies, and 101 is for non-emergency help. But the public doesn't always make the choice forces would like them to.

Some callers call 999 after abandoning calls to 101. The police service doesn't answer calls to 101 as quickly as it aims to. It takes too long and, in some places, calls may never be answered because staff need more time to deal with complex calls.

Our 2018 *Public Perceptions of Policing in England and Wales* survey shows that there has been a decrease in the proportion of respondents who think the police are easy to get hold of in an emergency. This, together with an increase in 999 calls and a decrease in 101 calls, suggests the public is losing confidence in 101. Rather than wait for an answer to a 101 call, they might instead phone 999, which some people may trust more.

Most forces we inspected reported an increase in the number of 999 emergency calls they received from 2016/17 to 2017/18 and from 2017/18 to 2018/19. The overall England and Wales number of 999 calls increased by 5.0 percent from 2016/17 to 2017/18 and by 5.8 percent from 2017/18 to 2018/19. Overall, this is an 11.1 percent increase between 2016/17 and 2018/19.

This is balanced to some degree by a decrease in the number of 101 non-emergency calls forces received over the same period. The overall England and Wales number of 101 calls decreased by 3.0 percent from 2016/17 to 2017/18 and by 10.5 percent from 2017/18 to 2018/19. Overall, this is a 13.2 percent decrease when comparing 2018/19 with 2016/17.

999 performance

All forces aim to answer 999 calls within 10 seconds of BT transferring them and certainly not to let the time to answer go over 2 minutes. But some forces do sometimes fail to answer some 999 calls within 2 minutes. Failing to answer within target times could indicate the increasing pressure from more 999 calls that may or may not be about an emergency.

Loss of confidence in 101

Performance for 101 isn't always as good as it could be. In our inspections we have found evidence of reduced performance and longer waiting times for 101. Sometimes, if people have to wait for their call to 101 to be answered, they give up and abandon the call altogether, leading to a loss of trust in 101. Each force has its own performance measures and targets, and these vary greatly. We haven't yet found a force that asks 999 callers whether they first tried 101 or whether they are using 999 because they have had a bad experience with 101 in the past.

These examples give a picture of the situation in different forces.

- In Sussex Police, over the year to March 2019, on average 43 percent of 101 calls transferred to the contact centre from the switchboard went unanswered. In March 2019 there were 30,183 calls transferred to 101, and 45 percent were abandoned: 12,905 calls.

- Northumbria Police's force management statement reports that the force has experienced an increase in calls for its service. It received 14 percent more emergency calls and 11 percent more 101 calls when comparing 2016/17 with 2017/18. It also describes a comprehensive improvement plan to meet this increased demand effectively.

- The Metropolitan Police Service introduced a new automated system during 2018. This diverts the caller to relevant departments and advises callers they can report online if they prefer. It has greatly improved the force's ability to answer 101 calls, reducing the numbers of abandoned calls.

- In Cleveland Police we found examples of the control room diverting 101 calls to enquiry desk answerphones as a way for the force to manage this demand. Some calls were being left on the answerphone overnight and sometimes over weekends and bank holidays without being responded to because enquiry desk staff weren't on duty. This means some vulnerable victims aren't being identified and responded to quickly enough.

- Essex Police worked hard to reduce numbers of abandoned 101 calls during 2017–2018. Its efforts have included promoting an online crime-reporting tool to reduce the demands on call takers. The force has seen the numbers of people accessing this route increase from about 1,100 to over 2,200 per month. But despite the force's work, the 101-abandonment rate is still too high, with about 20 percent of all 101 callers hanging up before the call is answered.

Confidence in different methods

Forces are beginning to offer alternative ways to make contact. The public can make choices and use different methods for non-emergencies. For example, in Avon and Somerset, the public can report shoplifting and road collisions online, and upload evidence of a crime. The force estimates that this reduces call volume by about 15 percent. In 2017 the website diverted about 85,000 calls. As the average 101 call is 11.53 minutes long, this has saved about 16,350 call-handling hours. Data provided by the force shows that citizen satisfaction with this digital service is 96 percent.

Other methods include:

- increased use of email contact and web-based contact;
- online reporting for hate crime, noise nuisance and shoplifting;
- web-chat facilities;
- reducing incoming calls for updates by making sure callers are consistently kept updated;
- voice recognition software for non-emergency calls so the force can automatically direct callers to relevant departments and help them get advice;
- a facility that allows people to upload evidence of road collisions; and

- tracking the progress of a crime report – a service that allows people who report a crime involving theft or criminal damage to follow the investigation stage easily and securely.

Most forces are beginning to use the single online home facility. This is a consistent national approach to reporting crimes and for accessing non-emergency services. We explain more about this in **Choices and channel shift** later in the report.

If these alternative communication methods are successful, the public should begin to trust them, use them more and make less use of 999 for non-emergencies. During 2020, we will assess how well the 43 forces adopt and adapt the *National Contact Management Strategy* to provide a consistent and effective public service.

Resolving a call but not attending incidents

When a force uses resolution without deployment, call handlers can resolve some incidents without the need for an officer to attend. The resolution can be through answering the caller's questions straightaway, a phone call back, written advice or directing them to a more suitable service. The call handler must assess the threat, harm and risk of the situation and justify the grade for the incident.

Telephone resolution and non-deployment resolution vary. Different forces offer different responses and services. There are neither national guidelines nor national quality assurance and assessment for resolution without deployment. Each force has devised its own system to manage demand with the resources it has. But the force's decisions must always focus on the victim.

Some forces don't use resolution without deployment at all and others use it for more than half their calls. During our inspections we found notable differences among the 43 forces. For England and Wales as a whole, in 2018/19, 33.2 percent of all incidents were resolved without deployment. In those forces that do use it, we found its use ranges from under 1 percent to over 50 percent of their incidents. Two forces don't use it at all; of the 40 others (not including City of London), one uses it for 0.4 percent and one for 56.6 percent of calls. These differences can't continue.

These examples show how approaches vary to resolution without deployment.
- Norfolk Constabulary has a desk-based unit that investigates low-level shoplifting, making off without payment and criminal damage offences. This unit is reducing demand on frontline officers and the control room. These crimes are allocated and investigated appropriately. The force is reviewing the work of this unit and is considering giving it additional types of offences to investigate.

- Durham Constabulary has one of the lowest levels of telephone resolution of incidents in England and Wales. All incidents are assessed against threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement (THRIVE) and five solvability factors: Is the offender at the scene? Is the offender known to the victim? Is there CCTV of the incident? Is there a possibility of DNA being present? and Is there the possibility of fingerprints at the scene? The resolution team doesn't deal with the incident if one of the five factors is present. Instead, a police officer will attend in person. The telephone resolution team deals only with certain types of crime.

Wherever someone lives in England and Wales, the response and service they receive should be of a consistent quality. If it is correct to do so, forces should resolve the call at the earliest point of contact rather than sending out officers or staff. Forces should base decisions on an assessment of threat, harm and risk to the person and the community and not only on available resources.

During 2020, the police service needs to make sure it has effective national guidelines, quality assurance and assessment in place for resolution without deployment. This guidance will need to link with other parts of a force's work such as investigative strategies and response policing. It will need to consider each force's priorities and funding.

Forces don't always respond to risk in the best way

People generally contact the police when they are in crisis; this crisis can get worse if the caller is vulnerable. Risk assessment of vulnerability is essential to protect the victim and the community in the best way. Risk assessment should be consistent, tailored to the call, reviewed at regular intervals and recorded effectively to inform responders, investigators and other agencies involved in the incident. Forces should also risk assess and reassess incident logs however contact is made: in person, on the phone, online or digitally.

Staff engaged at the first point of contact have an important role. They must pay attention to detail from the beginning. Their tasks include:

- supporting and safeguarding victims;
- recording information accurately; and
- making the most of every opportunity to find evidence and keep it secure so it can be used to solve crimes and bring offenders to justice.

Risk assessment

Most forces use a risk assessment tool to help them understand the level of threat, harm and risk posed to an individual when contact is first made. A commonly used tool is the THRIVE model. THRIVE assesses the appropriate initial police response to a call for service. It allows the force to judge the relative risk posed by the call and places the individual needs of the victim at the centre of that decision. The risk assessment tool helps staff to assess what the caller needs from the beginning by asking a set series of questions. Forces then prioritise the level of response needed. The model also helps them to decide whether any other organisations can help to safeguard the caller.

Improvement in recognising vulnerability

Overwhelmingly, our PEEL inspection reports for 2018/19 comment that the police are getting better at identifying vulnerability. But this improvement is adding to the problem of addressing demand effectively.

Having identified vulnerability, forces can't always provide the right response in the correct timeframe, whether that is sending officers to the scene or returning a phone call. The delays in attendance mean that identified risk goes unaddressed for

some time. While some forces then reassess this risk, not all do and not all reassessments include further contact with the victim or a supervisor overseeing the decision.

Some forces have, or plan to have, vulnerability desks within their control rooms. These vulnerability desks aim to give specialist advice and support to control room staff. During the next 12 months, we will monitor their effectiveness and see whether they have made a positive contribution to initial safeguarding.

Inconsistencies

Even though forces are better at identifying vulnerability, in most forces we found inconsistent approaches to the risk assessment of vulnerability. Some forces aren't making effective risk assessments of vulnerability, especially if the response is delayed. The way the police service assesses the risk of vulnerability is inconsistent and in some forces it can be affected by demand for police services. This means forces may not always keep vulnerable people safe. In a third (14) of forces we inspected during 2018/19, we established as an area for improvement the risk assessments done at different stages of an incident.

We found variations in the understanding of risk assessment, in the consistent recording of the initial risk assessment and in the consistent use of a risk assessment tool such as THRIVE. Some forces aren't making sure that risk and vulnerability are identified from the outset. Some forces reassess risk inconsistently and downgrade incidents too early, missing opportunities to safeguard vulnerable victims. Forces need to have objective and consistent supervision to manage risk and avoid backlogs. The standard of this supervision varies between forces. But some forces have staff from other organisations working in the control room making a multi-agency assessment. This good practice means the risk assessment is better because more data and expertise are available.

We have issued several causes of concern and areas for improvement to address problems in risk assessment.

- Cleveland Police needs to make sure that officers and staff can identify vulnerable people and repeat victims effectively. It must make sure it promptly attends incidents involving vulnerable people, with any downgrading of incidents based on a structured risk assessment with a recorded rationale and supervisory oversight.

- West Midlands Police should make sure that control room staff consistently apply THRIVE+ (threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement, plus prevention and intervention) and other risk assessment tools to the correct standard and record relevant information and their rationale for decisions. It should also improve the quality and consistency of supervision in the control room to support effective operational work and manage backlogs of non-emergency incidents.

- Warwickshire Police should improve the quality of incident risk reassessments when deployment delays occur so that safeguarding support can be prioritised. This action should be addressed promptly.

- Northumbria Police's ability to assess vulnerability when victims first make contact, and the timeliness of the response victims receive, are causes of concern. The force needs to be certain that there are officers available to respond to victims' needs. We recommended that:
  - To keep victims safe, the force's response to incidents must be determined by the initial assessment of risk, rather than the availability of response officers.
  - Any decision to delay a response to a vulnerable victim must be fully justified and subject to objective supervision.

Variations

The system that call handlers most commonly use to assess threat, harm, risk and vulnerability within an incident is THRIVE. But how forces use and record THRIVE varies. Almost all forces use it with some slight variations but only some forces document its use. Others have decided that their call handlers will apply the process but not record the rationale.

Examples of variations include:

- Under North Yorkshire Police's policy, the call handler decides whether to record their THRIVE assessment on the incident log. We have raised this as an area for improvement for the force. It should assure itself that it records risk assessment processes appropriately when dealing with calls from the public to manage risk for all vulnerable victims.

- In Greater Manchester Police the use of the STRIVE (safeguarding, threat, risk, investigation, victim and engagement) risk assessment model is only required for rape, other sexual offences and hate crime. It is left to the discretion of the call handler to use STRIVE for other calls, depending on the volume of calls to the control room and staffing levels. This impairs the ability of call handlers to correctly identify all vulnerability at the first point of contact, to assess and record risk, and to manage priorities effectively. The force needs to make sure it understands at first point of contact all aspects of a person's potential vulnerability, so it understands the risk and manages it effectively.

The use of question sets and drop-downs also varies greatly between all forces. A drop-down is a list of items that appear when clicking on a button or text selection. Question sets appear automatically on the call handler's screen and give prompts for more in-depth probing to get all possible information from the caller. Some can be very detailed and focus on safeguarding the caller and protecting evidence at the scene. Some can be more limited and consist of closed questions with yes/no answers. Each force has made different choices about which type of incident it uses these for. The reasoning behind choices for gradings and classifications of incident type also varies.

Each force must be sure it is making an effective assessment of risk at all points in its contact with the public and the community. It should use this assessment to provide the best response to vulnerability.

Improved care for control room staff has many benefits

During our inspection we found that, overwhelmingly, the people who answer 999 and 101 calls are highly professional and empathetic. Their role is to assess the threat, harm, risk and vulnerability of the person calling to help decide the best response. But this doesn't always happen properly. The volume and complexity of calls, the lack of clarity, and lack of training or right skills can make this difficult. Some forces also provide good support for their staff to help them cope with shock, distress and trauma, but not all do.

Training

A good force makes sure its control room staff are skilled and competent. Training usually covers THRIVE, vulnerability, domestic abuse, mental health, cyber crime and crime recording. Initial training may be followed up with some form of continued professional development and update or refresher sessions. Some forces provide a mentor or tutor throughout a shift or peer coaching. Some forces have multi-skilled staff who can take calls and function as despatchers for frontline officers and staff, or they may separate these functions.

Resolving complex contact will need better partnership working and improved skills mix. Some forces are beginning to make sure that staff have enhanced skills and support. For example, Durham Constabulary has trained control room staff to become digital media investigators, available 24/7. Typically, the police responded to missing persons cases by using officers in patrol vehicles to search for them in places they are likely to be. Using digital media investigators in the initial response, Durham Constabulary has found missing people quicker and deployed fewer resources.

Supervision

Supervisors play an important part in the success of the control room. Management supervision, monitoring of staff performance and quality assurance audit work should be of a high quality to raise and maintain standards. Some forces regularly sample audio files, to assess performance and improve services. When supervisors review such samples, they obtain more information about how well or not their control room staff are working. But not all forces have good quality assurance processes that include giving feedback to call handlers, both individually and as part of organisational learning.

Wellbeing and support

Sickness levels and absence can be high among control room staff. Within their force management statements, 20 forces identified that wellbeing is adversely affected in the control room by the overwhelming demand and stress. This is reflected in generally higher-than-force-average sickness rates and particular problems with long-term absence. Some forces concentrate specific effort in the control room to alleviate this. For example:

- Humberside Police has bespoke training for supervisors that addresses mental health concerns. It is inviting occupational health counsellors into the working environment and is locating a human resources absence manager in the team.

- In Greater Manchester Police's control room, call handling staff sickness had increased. Although only 30 percent of control room staff work in call handling, they accounted for 50 percent of control room sickness. The force responded with a wellbeing improvement strategy that focuses on physical, social, psychological and environmental wellbeing. The control room has an allocated lead and a volunteer wellbeing team to support activity. From early 2017 to early 2018 the force reduced long-term sickness by 40 percent and short-term sickness by 7 percent. Senior manager support for supervisors has helped. The force is recruiting two wellbeing volunteer coaches and a dedicated sickness manager to support the team.

The effect of seeing as well as listening to incidents as they happen can be harrowing for staff. Control room staff deal with road traffic collisions, serious assaults and terrorist attacks, among others. On some occasions, staff can see TV coverage of incidents in the control room as they answer the calls for help about major incidents. A lack of the right support can result in more staff becoming sick than elsewhere in the force. Some forces provide good support for their staff to help them cope with shock, distress and trauma, but not all do. Control room staff aren't always involved in incident debriefs and the post-incident management process, but they should be.

One example we found of effective support was from Leicestershire Police. The force reacted at once to help and support control room staff who dealt with the calls and aftermath of the helicopter crash at Leicester Football Club in October 2018. Not only were staff taking calls from people about the crash, they could also see it happening on CCTV and newsroom film coverage. Two call handlers were on duty in the stadium and witnessed the helicopter take-off. They then had to manage the radio transmissions from first attenders at the scene. The force put in place trauma support for all officers attending, including the control room staff. The force set up a welfare and logistics cell to manage trauma and risk management (TRiM) interventions, providing relevant support and signposting for staff groups and individuals.
The operators spoke of being supported and feeling part of the team, especially when they could visit the scene, lay flowers and have some time to reflect. This helped them come to terms with the incident. We commend the way the force dealt with a horrific major incident, and how it supported all its staff in the aftermath, which for some may never end.

Recruitment, recognition and retention

Some forces are investing in the working environment to alleviate stress and its negative effect on performance. This investment can include recruiting to match the demand. But not all forces do this and will have vacancies. This can reduce the effectiveness of the control room. Retaining staff and their skills can be difficult. Sometimes staff use the control room role as a stepping stone into other parts of the police service. The proposed recruitment of an extra 20,000 police officers may affect staffing in control rooms if control room staff apply to become officers.

Some forces have initiatives to retain staff, their skills and experience in the control room, such as call handler apprenticeships. Other positive initiatives include:

- West Midlands Police has a two-year tenure scheme – people trained to work in the control room stay there for a minimum of two years, so the force and the public see a return on this investment;

- Greater Manchester Police provides staff with career pathways for promotion and development; and

- Wiltshire Police gives accreditation for nationally recognised qualifications, which brings job satisfaction for staff.

We found in our inspections that the control room role is developing and becoming more skilled, with more responsibility. Greater parity with the police officer role in terms and conditions may encourage people to consider it as a long-term career rather than a stepping stone.

Technology doesn't always help

In other inspection reports, we have expressed concern about the ability of forces to identify repeat victims quickly. Control room systems often identify repeat callers through matching locations, names and/or telephone numbers, but not all forces have systems that do this automatically. Some systems fail to identify repeat callers because the caller may not always use the same address or phone number when they make contact. This means the call handler must carry out research on other systems, and this is not always done. As previously discussed, each force must be sure that it effectively assesses risk to provide the best response and service to vulnerable people.

Technology can help or hinder the work of call handlers and it needs to be better. Some forces have systems that give information to the call handler automatically; in others, the call handler has to find it for themselves. Manual searches for an address or a name to identify if someone has called before can delay the response. Staff need to spot vulnerability easily; technology shouldn't make it harder for them to do their job efficiently.

Repeat victims

Overall, the ability of forces to identify vulnerable and repeat victims automatically varies. Forces need to identify repeat victims as early as possible. Doing so should help them to recognise patterns of abuse. This is particularly important in cases where a single incident might not appear to be serious, but where previous reports show a pattern of behaviour (for example, coercive control or stalking and harassment). We were extremely concerned to find that not all forces have flags on their call-handling system to help call handlers identify repeat victims of, for example, domestic abuse. This can mean staff need to search several information systems to identify the potential risk to the victim and attending officers. This was highlighted in our February 2019 report, *The police response to domestic abuse: An update report*. It is an area in which forces need to improve, become more efficient and provide a better service to callers.

In our *State of Policing 2018* report we say that the police service needs to invest for the longer term, particularly in making better use of technology, to become more efficient. We expect forces to invest in and collaborate using technology to inform and improve their risk assessments, their responses and their investigations to keep the public safe.

Managing demand by working with others

Resolving complex demand places increasing emphasis on partnership working and specialist skills. Police forces work with other organisations to make sure that callers get the help they need. Organisations can be from the public sector, such as health, education, housing and social services, or a charity working with refugees or domestic abuse victims. In the control room, partnership working can also be a mental health professional working alongside call handlers.

- Hertfordshire Constabulary has gone to considerable lengths to identify and reduce vulnerability. Mental health nurses and intervention officers are available 20 hours each day in the control room. They help officers with appropriate patient information to improve the police response. They regularly intervene to support improved call-handling decisions and a better resolution for callers who are in a mental health crisis. Victims receive an assured and responsive service.

In our inspections we found that having a mental health professional in the control room or with the control room supervisor is good practice. Doing this makes a difference to understanding and dealing with vulnerability and effectively managing demand such as repeat callers with mental health problems.

We also found specialist officers trained in safeguarding working in the control room to help make sure that call handlers make the best decisions for the caller and their situation.

- Humberside Police has a domestic abuse co-ordination team in the force control room. A detective sergeant and three domestic abuse co-ordinators work in the control room between 7am and 5pm. The co-ordinators are members of staff from the force's protecting vulnerable people unit. The team deals with lower-priority domestic abuse incidents. Its role is to provide a specialist service to victims of domestic abuse quickly, to make sure there is adequate and appropriate risk assessment and safeguarding.

Sharing information effectively is paramount when helping vulnerable people. It is encouraging that we are also seeing more partnerships with, for example, ambulance and fire and rescue services as well as local authorities and health services. When we inspected fire and rescue services during 2018/19, we found that some services are working with police forces in control rooms. Usually the fire and rescue service control room staff will move into a police control room. This will involve co-location with staff from both organisations working in the same place, but not necessarily sharing systems – a shared room, rather than a shared control function. Simply co-locating staff is not a solution unless there is effective information sharing and joint problem solving. We did find some examples of co-locating and sharing information including:

- Kent Fire and Rescue Service moved into the Kent Police control room in 2012 in Maidstone and they now share the same IT platform. Co-location of the two

emergency services has allowed for improved effectiveness and efficient use of resources.

We are keen to see how joint working develops and how it helps forces manage demand and share information to identify risk and vulnerability.

Contact management in 2020 and beyond

The service that control rooms provide to the public needs to improve. To meet the increasing and changing demand, forces need to redesign contact management. Forces need better systems for call handling and contact management.

The redesign should be aimed at diverting demand, managing service user engagement and providing stronger online reporting. Most forces are investing in technology to change the way they work. They all aim to have better systems for call handling and contact management. They should be able to connect across each other's systems and share information.

The National Police Chiefs' Council issued a new national contact management strategy in 2019 and is now updating the supporting principles and practice. The College of Policing is updating the national contact management learning programme for early 2020. This will set the learning standards that must be met when training new contact management staff.

Some forces are already starting to redesign their contact management: working with partner organisations, implementing online reporting and investing in training and technology. However, other forces aren't, and we have issued causes of concern and areas for improvement in our 2018/19 inspection reports.

An important consideration for answering calls for help is how quickly a force responds and sends officers out. The absence of a national set of agreed response times for emergency calls means it is hard to make meaningful comparisons.

Choices and channel shift

Of the 43 police forces, 41 have signed up to and confirmed their intention to use the national single online home. This online home provides a consistent approach to reporting crimes and for accessing non-emergency transactional services to make payments. It allows users to report crimes online, helping to improve the police response and quality of victim support. Data from the National Police Chiefs' Council social media project shows that the volume of incidents being reported during 2019 on the single online home is growing steadily. The online home also allows the public to make online payments, such as for firearms licensing or penalty fines, and will expand to other services as the programme develops.

It will be a national system but allow local variations and branding so each force can develop specific services according to local need. Some forces, for example West Midlands, are already answering the public expectation by letting a victim 'track my crime' online – just as you can for an online order and its delivery.

Some forces are using live chats on their websites for reporting crime. Some have bots for non-emergency calls – an automated application for simple and repetitive

tasks that would be time-consuming, mundane or impossible for a person to perform; others use intelligent digital telephony. These are all ways of managing calls for service more efficiently and effectively. Most forces use social media such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to let the public know about current activity and get people to contact them. These all encourage callers to use alternatives and think about the reason for their call before using 999. A new operating model for social media and digital contact developed by the National Police Chiefs' Council should affect how forces use social media and digital contact effectively. However, its future funding is currently under discussion. We will assess progress during PEEL 2020/21 inspections.

Next steps for better contact management

To keep people safe, it is essential that the police service deals with contact from the public effectively. The demand on control rooms is increasing and so needs careful management to make sure the police service doesn't become overwhelmed.

- Each force must be sure it effectively assesses risk at all points of contact with the public and the community. It should use this assessment to provide the best response to vulnerability.

- Each force where there is a vulnerability desk should make sure it makes a positive contribution to initial safeguarding.

- Each force should make sure its staff are trained, supervised and supported to be effective in their control room roles; this should include assessing the effect of better terms and conditions and career development for control room staff.

- We expect forces to invest in technology and work with each other to use it to inform and improve their risk assessments, their responses and their investigations to keep the public safe.

- We expect all forces to make sure the service they provide to their communities meets the new national contact management strategy. We will assess how well forces adopt the contact management principles and practice as well as the learning standards during PEEL 2020/21.

- We expect to see all 43 forces get involved in the single online home and the social media projects.

- We expect the police service during 2020 to make sure it has effective national guidelines, quality assurance and assessment in place for resolution without deployment.

- We expect the police service during 2020 to make sure that it has agreed a standard for how quickly forces must respond to 999 calls. The absence of a national set of agreed response times for emergency calls means it is hard to make meaningful comparisons.

We will assess the progress towards achieving these steps and the success of the new initiatives in our PEEL 2020/21 inspections.