

A Call for Help - Police contact management through call handling and control rooms in 2018/19

This reports upon HMICFRS's 2018/19 inspection of the way the police service deals with contact from the public. Publication was delayed given the Chief HMI's decision to suspend HMICFRS activity during the earlier months of the pandemic in order to relieve pressure on Forces. The report was published on 9th July 2020, a response is due by 3rd September.

Key findings:

- **Demand is in danger of overwhelming the police service**
The police service is handling a greater number of calls to 999.
- **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.
- **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.
- **Not always the best response to vulnerability**
The police service has become better at recognising vulnerability but its response to vulnerable people is inconsistent.
- **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').
- **Inconsistent trauma support for staff**
Call handlers often experience distressing situations. They need support from their force to help them cope with these experiences.
- **To meet the increasing and changing demand, forces need better contact management**

Next steps

Rather than making recommendations, HMICFRS takes the unusual step of issuing several 'next steps' or expectations, see below. These are categorised as AFIs (Areas for Improvement) on the HMICFRS portal and therefore do not qualify as formal



recommendations – although one must be adopted. HMICFRS make it clear that they expect Forces to follow these steps and will assess the progress towards achieving them and the success of the new initiatives in the PEEL 2020/21 inspections.

There are 8 ‘next steps’, of which 6 apply to Chief Constables.

The full report can be viewed here:

<https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/wp-content/uploads/a-call-for-help-police-contact-management-call-handling-control-rooms-2018-19.pdf>

Chief Constable’s response

A pivotal function within policing, the Control Room acts as the primary gateway into the police service by members of the public at what can be a highly emotive, frightening and sometimes life-threatening moment in their life. Recognising there is no second chance to make a first impression, it is imperative the public feel they receive a quality response from Call Handlers taking those reports. It is for this reason high standards of service remains a priority within Devon & Cornwall Police, and the Chief Constable welcomes the HMICFRS report that focuses on this initial point of contact that the public have with the police service in times of crisis.

The report highlights the increasing demand, both in terms of volume and complexity, that our Call Handlers manage which aligns with our own reflections in both of our previous Force Management Statements (FMS) (2018 and 2019). Based on trend data, we forecasted an increase in 999 calls of up to 7%, a similar volume of 101 calls, and an increase in email/text/webchat contact by up to 11% for the year 2019/20. The reality shown a 17% increase in 999 calls and a 33.9% increase in email/text/webchat across that period. This further reflects the observation within the report that the way in which the public wish to contact the police is changing. Increasing complexity of need and continually improving ability to identify vulnerability does impact on the length of time a Call Handler may spend listening to, reassuring and responding to individual callers. Whilst this may subsequently result in some non-emergency callers waiting slightly longer, and we welcome the Police & Crime Commissioner’s ongoing focused scrutiny in this area, we will continue to prioritise our response to those who need us most at that point in time. We have robust processes in place to assess threat, risk and harm, as HMICFRS recognised in our most recent PEEL report; “The force is good at protecting vulnerable people.

The workforce recognises vulnerability and officers attend incidents quickly.” During recent weeks Devon and Cornwall police have received and answered an unprecedented number of calls for service. During the last week of July we processed a record 6,722 emergency 999 calls. The following week a further 6,449 calls and in the second week of August that record was surpassed further, receiving 7,431 emergency 999 calls. In that particular week we also received a record 13,264 non-emergency 101 calls. Normally, we would expect the number of calls received per day to exceed 1,000 on one or two days during a week period. In this particular

week in August, the force received in excess of 1,000 999 calls on five days (Wednesday to Sunday). On 17th August 999 ring-fencing was introduced to better manage emergency call demand. The system 'reserves' 3 Call Handlers to be available for 999 calls at any given time, allowing for all remaining Call Handlers to be available for non-urgent demand. An improvement in both 999 and 101 call taking performance has been seen already, and this will be closely monitored over the coming weeks and months to ensure it works optimally.

2020 has been an unprecedented time internationally following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. I am incredibly proud of the way officers and staff within Devon & Cornwall have adapted to these circumstances and continued to protect the public.

Within the contact demand arena, a number of reactive and innovative measures were put in place to ensure performance and service standards were not compromised. Our Student Officer intake were reassigned and trained to take calls within the control room to provide resilience. Our Public Enquiry Officers continued to support the management of 101 emails as they have done during the last 12 months, and the reduced footfall at our front offices (including closure of 5 non-designated PEO sites) created capacity for them to support the management of 101 calls. They received training to manage Priority 2 calls and were able to access supervisory support within the contact centre via Skype. During the summer period an additional front office has been open in Cornwall and a further station within Devon is being prepared to offer a front counter service for a 6-month trial, with an anticipated go-live in September.

During the Covid period the Investigation Resolution Centres (IRCs) took responsibility for triaging all routine and vulnerable (excluding missing persons) incidents, enabling deployment where it was needed most and resulting in a more efficient service for victims by removing waiting times for attendance. Furthermore, the IRC expanded their crime remit, again improving timeliness of service for victims. When considering our force recovery from Covid-19, the changes made within the IRC environment will be maintained as business as usual.

To support contacting Devon and Cornwall police in a non-emergency matter, the force has invested in an Interactive Voice Recognition triage to enable the prioritisation of non-emergency calls; those that have higher levels of risk associated are prioritised. The force also provides alternative methods of contact in non-emergency situations including WebChat and email.

We continue to actively encourage the public to report to the police. Our Diverse Community Team "Say no to Hate" campaign actively promotes reporting hate incidents to the police, either directly or through a third-party reporting mechanism which feeds directly into the Control Room by way of online report, equally supported and promoted by partners across the Force area. Our own Victim Care Unit (including its volunteers), funded by the Police & Crime Commissioner, proactively supports individuals who may self-refer to report to the Police, again feeding directly into the Control Room for recording, either by telephone or through an online report.

We also continue to market and promote alternative methods for contacting the police. Our 'Click before you Call' campaign and promotion of the Webchat facility continue to ensure the public have a variety of contact methods available to them to meet their individual needs and circumstances. We will continue to encourage the residents of and visitors to Devon & Cornwall to contact us in their time of crisis, and we will continue to develop our processes, approach and innovation to endeavour to meet our demand.

Our recent documentary "Call the Cops" received overwhelming support from the public for the challenges faced by our Control Room staff on a daily basis, recognising the circumstances are in fact far more complex than the public may have borne witness to previously. Transparency is key in our relationship with our public and sharing with them the challenges we face specifically in this Force, both in terms of the breadth of our geography and the significant seasonal increases in demand we experience, is an important part of building confidence in those who require our service.

The quality of service provided to the public is a priority and the next steps identified within this report are included within our plans to further improve in this area.

Shawn Sawyer
Chief Constable
Devon & Cornwall Police

Police and Crime Commissioner's response

Devon and Cornwall Police covers a vast area home to 1.7 million residents with the population swelling enormously during the summer and school holidays. Our beautiful area attracts millions of visitors, so the Force is well used to managing huge levels of demand and coping as it does with the highest number of domestic visitors to its area of any police force in the country.

Devon and Cornwall Police took 12% (225,974) more 999 calls in 2019/2020 than the previous year, along with a 3% increase in 101 calls to 651,091. That has risen greatly following the unprecedented circumstance faced from the recent pandemic. The easing of lockdown measures and subsequent increase in travel resulted in some of the busiest weekends on record for the Force Control Rooms in terms of calls and contacts received. The Commissioner commends the staff and officers who work so tirelessly to serve the public and thanks them for their continued professionalism at a time of uncertainty and strain.

However, call waiting times continue to be an issue of concern for the Commissioner and account for a high proportion of correspondence to the PCC. It is also an area the Police and Crime Panel take a keen interest in. It is therefore right that the

Commissioner continues to scrutinise this area of work closely and challenges the Chief Constable to make further improvements in the service received by the public – call waiting times.

The Police and Crime Commissioner has prioritised access to policing in the Police and Crime plan, and supported the Force’s requests to invest in technology such as:

- Live webchat service via dc.police.uk
- Online reporting via dc.police.uk
- Email via 101@dc.police.uk
- the introduction of an improved contact management system in the summer of 2019 which included Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) – whereby callers are encouraged to make a selection from a number of presented menu options to route the call more quickly.

The system has seen some calls answered more quickly – for example important incidents of domestic abuse or missing persons, however the technology is yet to fulfil the improvements in general call waiting times as intended. The system is currently being developed further with action being taken to introduce more options such as call messaging to allow callers to understand queue times and to provide live updates on the Devon and Cornwall Police website. The online options were aimed to help speed up access to policing and remove the need to call 101 and therefore reduce the demand on the phone lines. However, this has not occurred.

The Commissioner has now prioritised the contact centre within the budget for 2020/21 to enable the Chief Constable to look at capacity and capability against the backdrop of the unprecedented demand. This builds on the work the Commissioner has prioritised in her term of office through her Police and Crime Plan which saw the Chief Constable publish a new Force connectivity framework in 2018 including a series of 10 minimum standards that the public can expect from the police.

<https://www.devon-cornwall.police.uk/your-right-to-information/our-people/our-performance/our-service-standards/>

Devon and Cornwall is now the safest Force area in the country both in times of recorded crime levels and levels of victimisation with public confidence in the police above the national average. This is to be commended. The Commissioner would like to see the same levels of performance in contact management also.

“Rarely has there been a time when the police need to be easily accessible to the public than now. For most of the public, 101 will be the only direct contact they have with the police and this experience will be important to forming their overall confidence in the service.”

“This HMICFRS review was conducted before the pandemic struck and could not have predicted what was to follow. The police service has had to adapt rapidly in recent months to continue to provide an efficient and effective service at a time of great pressure for the public and the police. The Force has coped well but future demand and pressures on society remain an area of great uncertainty”

“Through my Police and Crime Plan and Financial Strategy I have prioritised contact management and allocated investment including in new ICT. The pandemic and its impact on the police service leave us in uncertain times. However now more than ever, enhancing contact with our communities is paramount. Therefore, I will be seeking assurance from the Chief Constable that this investment will keep pace with the ever-increasing complexity and demand for service from the public”

“The forthcoming HMICFRS reviews into how the police has responded to the pandemic will set out more clearly the challenges faced and the path ahead. I believe it’s time we reconsidered the opening of police enquiry offices and am in discussions with the Chief Constable to look at this.”

Alison Hernandez
Police and Crime Commissioner
Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly