

**RESPONSE DATED 8TH SEPTEMBER 2020 TO 'A CALL FOR HELP - POLICE CONTACT MANAGEMENT THROUGH CALL HANDLING AND CONTROL ROOMS IN 2018/19' PUBLISHED BY HMICFRS ON 9TH JULY 2020**

This report highlights the crucial nature of call handling in policing; for most people this is where their journey with the police begins. It is referred to as first point of contact and this first contact is crucial in protecting victims, identifying the appropriate response and instilling confidence in victims and the wider public alike.

In Avon and Somerset Constabulary call handling is consistently one of the best performing areas of the business. In the 2019/20 year the 999 abandonment rate was just 0.08% and the 101 abandonment rate was 3.23%. The average time taken to answer a 999 call was just 1.4 seconds. The team also return some of the best results in the annual internal staff survey. Irrespective of the Constabulary having one of the best call handling teams in the country we still accept there is, of course, room for improvement.

The areas for improvement directly applicable to the Chief Constable are noted as:

- 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.

There were also two other areas for improvement at a national level:

- 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.

In response to these areas for improvement, I can confirm the following.

The Constabulary have worked really hard over the past two years and made significant progress in the call handling and control rooms. They've worked to ensure that all members of the public who make contact with the police receive the same level of service, regardless of whether they call via 999, 101, use the online service or go in to an enquiry office. Enquiry office staff have been trained in the use of call scripts to ensure continuity of service to the public and correct onward allocation.

The online service has adopted the call scripts from the control room resulting in the customer being asked the same questions and assessed in the same way no matter how the contact to police is made. "Do you consider yourself to be vulnerable" is a specific question on the call script and gets asked to everyone. All parties being asked the same questions allows the force to assess the vulnerability and risk to each person in order to provide them with the best service possible and manage the risk to the situation.

In addition to this all staff in the control room have had 'what is vulnerability' training to assist them in identifying vulnerability.

The Constabulary do not have a vulnerability desk however the following contributes to initial safeguarding:

- All missing persons go through a control room supervisor, so the grading can be set and the risk to the missing person, and the vulnerability, can be assessed properly before an officer is dispatched.
- All crimes that a call handler grades as appropriate for a desktop resolution has an initial supervisor review, a check and test is then conducted for vulnerability and safeguarding. If this job is assessed as needing an officer to attend then the job will be returned for officer deployment.
- All firearms incidents will be reviewed by a Force Incident Manager.

The Constabulary have refreshed all the training for call handlers and dispatchers. Both call handlers and dispatchers now go through an initial training programme where the first three weeks are the same. This allows for both call handlers and dispatchers to be trained in taking 999 calls so when demand dictates both roles can assist in answering these emergency calls. Training has not been halted due to COVID-19. Instead social distancing measures have been put in place to allow this to continue and ensure recruitment is ongoing.

There is also a clear pathway for career progression for control room staff. After their initial training and completion of the probation period, staff have the opportunity to take on a role as a tutor for new staff members, this involves them returning to training school to enhance their skills. They will then be a call handling assistant where they can create lesson plans, design course inputs, and then deliver lessons to new students. Staff can also go on to progress their career by becoming an acting supervisor and in turn supervisor or control room manager. Many members of staff also have the option open to them to diversify into other areas within the force or other departments alongside opportunities to get involved in managerial aspects of the department such as recruitment or complaint handling.

The Constabulary have invested in an integrated voice recognition system (IVR) on all non-emergency calls. This system has successfully answered between 20–25% of all 101 calls to call handlers. The Constabulary has a good understanding of incoming demand and have effectively streamlined the process to enable calls to be diverted to the most appropriate place if not requiring a call handler to answer. This leaves them available to answer calls with higher risk and the most vulnerability attached. The Constabulary have also introduced a 'call back' option for 101 callers. This allows callers who have been waiting for their 101 call to be answered to opt for a call back without losing their place in the queue. Once their call is ready to be answered the technology will automatically call the informant back.

In addition The Constabulary have also designed and implemented an automated system which will hold back three call handlers at any given time, who will always be available to answer any 999 calls coming in. This allows the control room to utilise the full call handling team in 999 and 101 calls without the need to manually protect the 999 telephone line.

In Avon and Somerset we also agreed to invest in maintaining a secondary control room facility at an alternative location. This builds resilience and acts as a back-up site if there are problems with the primary site but it also allows for training exercises to be undertaken, such as Operation Plato, using actual control room equipment and processes with no interruption to the live service. On the point of resilience it is also important to mention that this is an area where forces work together well. If one force has an outage in its call handling – which might be caused by power or technology failures – then there is the ability to transfer the 999 calls to another force area to help ensure emergency calls are not being lost.

Operation Plato is the multi-agency response to an ongoing marauding terrorist attack (MTA). The declaration of Plato is designed to both inform and prepare the emergency services and other stakeholders for the response to an extraordinary event. The Constabulary conduct five Operation Plato exercises every year, this simulated response to a terrorist attack enables it to be as real life as possible and to check and test the processes identifying learning and areas for improvement.

The business lead for the Constabulary's control room supported the content and discussions that resulted in the new national contact management strategy. Having been so involved in its development the Constabulary recognise working towards this strategy as a priority.

The Constabulary already have a well-used and high quality digital platform that has resulted in a shift of demand from 101 to digital. The national team developing the Single Online Home made a number of visits to see the digital capabilities and for the Constabulary to share ideas and best practice. One of the options for the Single Online Home was to use the Avon and Somerset platform but the national programme opted for a different approach. The current version of the Single Online Home does not meet the online service capability the Constabulary currently have and for this reason I support the Constabulary in not changing platforms. The service to the public is more important and I believe this service would suffer if the Constabulary were to move to the Single Online Home.

When the national best practice is defined for resolution without deployment I will scrutinise the performance of the Constabulary to ensure it meets these standards.

However, in March 2020, the Constabulary restructured the way they deal with incidents that are resolved without deployment to ensure consistency and promote efficiency. This change saw the streamlining and simplifying of the route to and experience of desktop investigation. This was to help ensure that front-line resource is deployed in a more timely way to those crimes and incidents that pose more risk. Part of this change saw the introduction of a new assessment process at the call handling stage to help determine appropriate allocation. Support for this desktop work has come from appropriate members of the workforce that have had to self-isolate or work from home as well as from officers on restricted duties. To ensure these changes are embedded on a more permanent basis some of the additional funds raised through the Council Tax precept will be used to recruit additional Police Staff Investigators into this function.

I welcome a national standard for response times to 999 calls that Constabularies can be held to account for and can be used for benchmarking. The Constabulary have set a service level agreement that states calls graded as Immediate (the highest risk category) should be responded to within 15 minutes in urban areas and 20 minutes in rural areas. This SLA is common to many forces across the country. It is important to note that the Constabulary made the ethical decision to measure this time from the point the call card is saved (which is within a few seconds of the call being answered) rather than from the point of allocation. In the last year the Constabulary responded to 76.2% of Immediate-graded calls within the SLA.

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