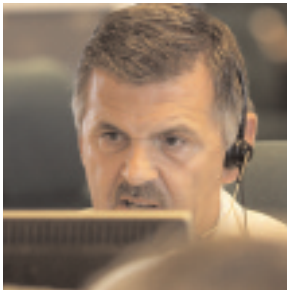




Beyond the call

A thematic inspection of police contact centres' contribution to incident management

Summary



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Preface

The first, and perhaps the most important, contact that the general public has with the Police Service is when individuals seek assistance. In England and Wales, this amounts to over 67 million calls every year, and the way in which police forces respond to such calls – both at initial contact and during any subsequent visit, where appropriate – shapes both the public view of the Service as a whole and the degree of confidence that communities have in their local police force.

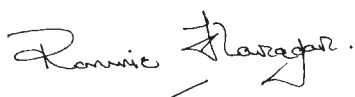
In 2005, in recognition of the core importance of call handling and subsequent response, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) commenced a two-phased inspection of the end-to-end process of police contact management. Phase one examined the way in which police contact centres receive and deal with the initial calls from the public. The resultant thematic report, *First contact*, was published in November 2005 and has formed the basis of substantial progress by the Service in the area of call handling.

This report, *Beyond the call*, presents the findings of the second phase of inspection, which has focused on the contribution of police contact centres to delivering effective incident management and resolution. In particular, it highlights the importance of incident grading, proportionate response, clear resolution and capturing meaningful customer feedback.

For too long, contact centres and their staff have been regarded as an adjunct to operational policing rather than a core element of service delivery. The role of controller or dispatcher is pivotal to achieving the appropriate response and effectively resolving every incident. Their decisions can result in either a positive outcome – with a highly satisfied and reassured customer – or a poor response – with a failure to meet expectations and the consequent degradation of public support for policing. In an environment where forces face increasing pressures on scarce operational resources, good judgements made by contact centre staff can also help ensure that resources are used efficiently, thereby avoiding inordinate delays in response and relieving pressure on individual operational staff. Poor decision making by contact centre staff presents a threat to forces' ability to continue to deal with issues at neighbourhood, command unit and force level.

I am confident that implementation of the recommendations in this report will help forces build on the progress achieved since the publication of *First contact*. They represent a further enhancement of the best practice framework and self-assessment matrix, which have been core to that progress and remain core to sustainable improvements. To move the Service forward, it is important that chief officers and senior managers recognise and support the valuable contribution of contact centre staff in achieving high-quality operational service delivery.

My personal thanks are extended to the inspection team, police forces, and many individuals who have helped to identify current good practice and areas requiring improvement. I am particularly grateful for the critical contribution of the Inspection Reference Group, whose experience and knowledge have been invaluable to this inspection.



Sir Ronnie Flanagan GBE QPM
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary

Executive summary

1. A major and enduring strength of British policing is that it is undertaken with the consent and support of the public at large. Absolutely key to retaining public consent and support is the maintenance of the public's confidence that when they call for assistance, the police will respond effectively and quickly. Police forces in England and Wales receive over 80 million such calls for assistance each year and the first point of success or failure in dealing with these calls is the police contact centre.
2. Reflecting the key importance of contact management, in 2005 Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) carried out a comprehensive thematic inspection of this business area. In keeping with the principle of examining end-to-end processes, the scope of this scrutiny included both the initial call handling and the role of contact centres subsequently in the resolution of the incident. In light of the scale of this task, HMIC approached it in two phases: Phase 1 examined initial contact management while Phase 2 focuses on incident management – taking account of initial grading, resource deployment, incident resolution and feedback to the customer.
3. The final report from Phase 1 – *First contact: A thematic inspection of police contact management* – was published by HMIC in November 2005. It provided a catalyst for police forces to improve their handling of telephone calls and other forms of contact from the public. Many forces reported that the self-assessment matrix and good practice framework included in *First contact* helped them to identify areas for improvement and to formulate plans for achievement.
4. Between 2004 and 2006, HMIC's baseline assessment of the 43 forces in England and Wales revealed a significant improvement in contact management performance, from a position where no forces were graded 'Excellent' and just 16 were graded 'Good' in 2003/04 to having four forces recognised as 'Excellent' and 20 as 'Good' in 2005/06. Despite the progress to date, there is clearly still room for further improvement.
5. This report – *Beyond the call* – covers Phase 2 of the inspection and focuses on the way that dispatch or control staff within contact centres manage and resolve the incidents that result from the calls they receive. The report does not, however, seek to evaluate how individual incidents have been specifically managed within forces from a strategic, tactical or operational perspective.
6. With the exception of 'location and facilities', the same key business drivers discussed in *First contact* have been addressed in this report (Chapters 2 to 8). The self-assessment matrix and the good practice framework from *First contact* have both been further enhanced to help forces make the changes needed to improve performance across the whole spectrum of contact and incident management.

CUSTOMER FOCUS

7. Since the publication of *First contact*, forces have improved their collection and use of customer feedback at the call-handling stage, but this now needs to be extended more consistently 'beyond the call'. Some forces have made good use of customer surveys to assess satisfaction with the response to and resolution of their contacts

with the police. Such surveys consistently reflect that, while response to emergencies is well regarded, action following non-emergency calls often leaves callers' expectations unfulfilled.

8. Effective use of a scheduled response – ie attendance by agreed appointment – can significantly reduce the queue of unattended incidents and ease caller dissatisfaction. Application of clear criteria for grading of response greatly assists in establishing realistic customer expectations, helps to ensure the appropriate and proportionate response and thereby improves satisfaction levels. Despite commitment from the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) to implement the grading criteria set out in the National Call Handling Standards (NCHS), almost half of forces have yet to make these criteria the sole method of grading incidents. It is important that all Chief Constables now adopt and implement these standard criteria.
9. Providing customers with accurate and timely information about the progress of reported incidents is also still an important issue for the Police Service, as indicated by results reported in the 2005/06 Policing Performance Assessment Framework (PPAF). While there have been some improvements in this area, forces need to establish clear standards for ongoing contact with callers and to adopt national good practice in respect of victims and witnesses, as set out in guidance developed by the Office for Criminal Justice Reform, in conjunction with the Police and Crime Standards Directorate.

OPERATING CULTURE

10. The right operating culture is a key element in service delivery and improving performance. Central to achieving such a culture is the effectiveness of front-line supervisors, both in directing resources and, importantly, in making sure that staff availability is notified to controllers. Staff can also play a core role in identifying areas for improvement to operating practices, and should be actively encouraged to do so.
11. Another absolutely key factor is the effectiveness of joint working between control and response staff. Any conflict or disconnect between these functions directly affects service consistency and quality. It is important that senior managers for the two disciplines overtly share accountability for the full range of service delivery and that this is reflected in the application of National Intelligence Model processes and in personal development reviews.
12. Undoubtedly, to achieve corporate cohesion in service delivery, it is important that each force adopts a single corporate approach to incident management. In some forces, there is a 'mix and match' approach between different command units and this can create confusion and inefficiency.
13. Perhaps the most enduring cultural debate in respect of control room environments, however, is the search for the ideal balance of police officers and police staff. The evidence of this inspection is that, while typically the ratio in most forces is 20:80, the important factor is that every member of staff has the requisite skills – only a very few specialist roles, such as duty officer, definitely require a police officer.

STRATEGY AND STRUCTURES

14. A number of forces rightly consider their contact centres a strategic part of service delivery, acknowledging that they are integral to operational policing. They have developed strategies around telephone resolution, thereby releasing valuable resources to engage in emergency response or in longer-term, proactive problem-solving initiatives. Some 8 million incidents per year are being resolved without officer attendance; information collated from these incidents is used to identify and target areas and trends. Every force should proactively seek to increase the use of telephone resolution in a way that meets quality standards and customer satisfaction and as a means to efficiently and effectively manage demand.
15. Although the creation of strategic forces is not currently high on the Government's agenda, some forces are still examining options to improve their capacity and capability by entering into collaborative agreements. ACPO has a key role to play in setting visionary goals that will nurture the development of a shared national approach to service delivery, and contact management should be considered as part of this approach.
16. Nationally, most forces have adopted either centralised or locally distributed structures for their contact centres; some have wavered between the two. The key to effective working does not lie in the exact structure of contact centres but in how the functions are managed, supervised and resourced, and in their policies, practices and information flows. The four forces identified as 'Excellent' in the latest baseline assessment use four different models.

PEOPLE

17. It is important that the Police Service explicitly recognises the increasing need for professionalism for all roles within contact centres. The role of the dispatcher or controller has become highly technical and complex. It is important, therefore, that the staff recruitment process incorporates an appropriate range of skill sets and competencies to ensure that staff have the requisite ability to deliver a high-quality service.
18. Good forces are now deploying or developing scientific staffing models to ensure that the right number of appropriately skilled staff are scheduled for duty at the correct time. Evidence suggests that such models need to include both the dispatch or control function and patrolling officers.
19. Forces must also acknowledge that contact centre staff abstraction, and how this is managed, can have a considerable impact on the organisation's staffing levels and costs. Some forces have recognised this and have implemented initiatives to improve the situation, but it is still proving a challenge for many because of the intensive nature of the work.

TRAINING, SKILLS AND EDUCATION

20. Training is a vital element in developing and empowering contact centre staff so that they contribute directly to effective incident management. Their training needs include gathering accurate intelligence at the outset, making the right decisions on incident gradings and either resolving incidents there and then or deploying resources to incidents. Induction training for staff entering the contact centre is generally good; however, there is a disturbing lack of refresher training in some forces for staff in all roles. This omission needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.
21. A general lack of formal professional qualifications in the dispatch or control function is problematic. It is encouraging that individual forces are developing their own training modules and some have had them formally accredited. The dispatch or control function is fundamental to service delivery and a national approach to the development of formal professional qualifications is required. Skills for Justice has been working with forces to develop a model for the dispatch or control function, but this is still awaiting accreditation. There is an opportunity for this to be developed as part of the National Contact Management Programme (NCMP).

TECHNOLOGY

22. The two most important technological enablers for incident management are the command and control system – to aid incident logging, grading and resource allocation – and the radio. In English and Welsh forces, the Airwave digital radio system is standardised and allows communications across force borders. Conversely, command and control systems vary from force to force and are generally mutually incompatible. A previous project to rectify incompatibility has lost its funding; with the increasing need to expand cross-border collaboration, consideration should be given by the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) and the Home Office to funding this.
23. The further development of automatic vehicle location and geographic information facilities, in conjunction with command and control systems, would maximise the availability and deployment of scarce resources. A wider availability of mobile data solutions is being tested across several forces and, if successful, could have a significant impact on both the control function and patrols, as access to incident information becomes more timely and accurate.
24. Technology can also be exploited in the drive to keep customers informed of the progress of reported incidents. Some forces already use their command and control and crime management systems to prompt officers, dispatchers or controllers to deliver progress updates and to record when contact has been made. Some improvement in performance in this area is indicated in the 2005/06 PPAF results. However, forces should consider using new and existing technologies to support and monitor key standards at the follow-up phase of customer service.

USING INFORMATION TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE

25. An increasing number of national performance measures relate to incident management. Historically the focus has been on call answering and patrol response times, but more recently the Quality of Service Commitment (QoS) and PPAF have embraced a broader range of national indicators.
26. At force level, however, measures remain highly inconsistent, despite the emergence of local quality management teams in some forces. Local capture of appropriate performance and management information would support far better demand prediction and improve subsequent resource deployment. Better performing forces use workforce management products or Excel spreadsheets to schedule staffing profiles for both contact centre staff and patrolling officers.
27. A clear need exists to introduce a standard suite of measures that are relevant both nationally and locally. The expanded NCHS provide an opportunity to do so for all aspects of contact and incident management.

NATIONAL CONTACT MANAGEMENT STANDARDS

28. The recent work undertaken through the NCHS, PPAF, the National Standards for Incident Recording (NSIR) and the QoS has supported significant improvement in police contact management. However, these standards are essentially about call handling and data recording rather than managing incidents. To extend the focus across the full spectrum of contact management, the NPIA is to set up an NCMP that will incorporate NCHS, NSIR and the National Crime Recording Standards.
29. HMIC fully supports the NCMP and emphasises the importance of implementation of all recommendations from both *First contact* and *Beyond the call*, further development of the good practice framework and assessment matrix, and development of a national contact management strategy.
30. The Service should grasp this opportunity to transform police contact management, based on the considerable good practice highlighted in forces across the country. If it fails to rise to this challenge, recommendations from the recent HM Treasury report¹ will enforce changes that could challenge the unique relationships between locally based police and their public.

¹ *Service transformation: A better service for citizens and businesses, a better deal for the taxpayer*, Sir David Varney, HM Treasury, December 2006.

Recommendations matrix and suggestions

This matrix lists the recommendations stemming from the thematic inspection.

The matrix includes:

- the chapter and page number of the main report where the recommendation appears;
- the recommendation made;
- a suggested owner of the recommendation; and
- the timescale within which the recommendation should be implemented.

No.	Chapter	Recommendation	Owner			Timescale
			Chief Constable	Association of Chief Police Officers	National Policing Improvement Agency	
1	Customer Page 27	All forces should adopt and implement fully the national incident grading criteria set out in the National Call Handling Standards, supplemented, where appropriate, by their own local response times.	✓			Within 6 months
2	Customer Page 31	Forces should develop local measures to support or explain Policing Performance Assessment Framework data and to gauge which part of the customer experience is good, and why. Customer satisfaction information should be used to improve performance.	✓			Within 12 months
3	Customer Page 34	Forces should establish and publish standard processes to gather relevant information at the first point of contact and should agree with customers the appropriate means and timescale for providing timely, meaningful information and feedback on the progress of incidents.	✓			Within 6 months
4	Culture Page 42	Forces should ensure that front-line supervisors have access to relevant support and training to ensure that the impact of their proactive leadership on overall service delivery is enhanced.	✓			Within 6 months
5	Culture Page 46	Basic command unit commanders and heads of contact centres should be jointly accountable for incident management, making it an integral part of their commitment to providing customer service. This should be reinforced through the force's personal development review process.	✓			Within 6 months

No.	Chapter	Recommendation	Owner			Timescale
			Chief Constable	Association of Chief Police Officers	National Policing Improvement Agency	
6	Culture Page 49	Forces should adopt a single corporate incident management model, which is championed at chief officer level.	✓			Within 12 months
7	Culture Page 50	Operational supervisors should ensure that information on patrolling officers' availability status is accurate and up to date, in order to achieve the force's organisational objectives.	✓			Within 12 months
8	Strategy and structures Page 57	Forces should take the earliest opportunity to explain options whereby part or all of the contact centre service could be delivered or procured collaboratively.	✓			Within 6 months
9	Strategy and structures Page 57	The Association of Chief Police Officers and the National Policing Improvement Agency, supported by the national forum introduced following the recommendations of <i>First contact</i> , should collate and use good practice from regional fora. This should include incident management and call-handling practices and should be developed into national customer service standards.		✓	✓	Within 12 months
10	People Page 66	Forces should use a selection procedure for contact centre staff that tests the full range of skill sets and competencies for all roles.	✓			Within 6 months

No.	Chapter	Recommendation	Owner			Timescale
			Chief Constable	Association of Chief Police Officers	National Policing Improvement Agency	
11	People Page 67	Forces should use staffing models for contact centres and patrolling officers, to ensure that resources involved in incident response and management are effectively aligned to demand.	✓			Within 12 months
12	People Page 69	Forces should monitor the impact of contact centre abstraction rates and adopt robust processes to manage abstractions.	✓			Within 12 months
13	Skills and training Page 74	Forces should ensure that dispatch or control staff use Airwave radio-speak standards developed by the National Policing Improvement Agency and then test them for competency as part of their personal development reviews.	✓			Within 12 months
14	Skills and training Page 76	Forces should provide all contact centre staff with effective, relevant induction, refresher and regular ongoing training, tailored to the needs of their role.	✓			Within 6 months
15	Technology Page 83	The Association of Chief Police Officers and the National Policing Improvement Agency should work together to develop a business case to enable forces to procure the technology needed to share data with each other and with other agencies.		✓	✓	Within 12 months

No.	Chapter	Recommendation	Owner			Timescale
			Chief Constable	Association of Chief Police Officers	National Policing Improvement Agency	
16	Technology Page 87	Forces should review their fleetmap ² on a regular basis to gain full benefit from Airwave capability and functionality, in collaboration with neighbouring forces, to support core policing duties and business continuity.	✓			Within 6 months
17	Performance information Page 93	The National Policing Improvement Agency should, through the National Contact Management Programme, further develop the National Call Handling Standards suite of performance indicators to incorporate incident management, thus providing complete contact management information.			✓	Within 12 months
18	National standards Page 100	The National Policing Improvement Agency should develop a national contact management strategy, building on the National Call Handling Standards, <i>First contact</i> , <i>Beyond the call</i> and HMIC baseline assessments, and covering all aspects of police contact management.			✓	Within 12 months
19	National standards Page 101	The National Policing Improvement Agency, through the National Contact Management Programme, should further develop the existing centralised repository for good practice in contact centre management, ensuring that the element of incident management is incorporated.			✓	Within 6 months

² The configuration plan of radio terminals, talk-groups' associated functionality, users' rights and identities on the system, access to external telephony and other control room systems.

Suggestion letter	Page number	Suggestion
A	28	Forces should ensure that processes are in place to quality check incident details and information, to ensure accuracy and appropriate response.
B	30	Forces should have processes in place to ensure that front-line staff are aware of customer feedback results, helping them to understand the importance of their role in setting customer expectations at the first point of contact.
C	36	When implementing and updating systems and new technology, consideration should be given to key standards for the follow-up phase of customer service.
D	43	Forces should ensure that staff delivering front-line services have the opportunity to contribute to improvement in processes and systems, to enhance overall service delivery.
E	46	All forces should ensure that their contact centres apply National Intelligence Model disciplines and use the flow of intelligence to develop and meet individual and corporate strategies.
F	52	Forces should create a forum or process whereby contact centre and front-line staff meet to discuss and resolve issues that affect their contributions to incident response and management.
G	56	Forces should evaluate the benefits from their attendance or non-attendance policies and realign them with the results from customer satisfaction feedback.
H	56	Forces should put mechanisms in place to keep customers informed at timely intervals using first contact as an opportunity to explain and set realistic expectations for callers on how and when they will be updated.
J	58	A senior management team member from the contact centre should attend any force strategic communication meeting, to achieve a corporate approach to media and marketing.
K	62	Forces should evaluate the full cost, benefits and return on investment before embarking on any major change to their service delivery model.
L	66	To support robust succession planning, forces should maintain a recent list of people who passed an interview and assessment for contact centre positions but could not be offered a post; this would allow prompt replacement of leavers by people who could take up employment at the earliest opportunity. People on the list should only remain on it for a maximum period of 12 months before having to reapply.

Suggestion letter	Page number	Suggestion
M	76	Forces should ensure that staff with a tutoring or mentoring role have been selected to do this and have received appropriate training.
N	84	Forces using mapping systems to dispatch resources need a system that keeps command and control system data as up to date and accurate as possible. It is recognised that there may be cost implications, but forces could work together on a regional or collaborative basis to put such systems in place.
P	85	Forces should use the results from the forthcoming mobile data pilots to evaluate the full impact of mobile data and the benefits it can achieve. They should consider collaborating on a regional or national basis to develop a solution that supports front-line service delivery.
R	87	Training for staff and supervisors should include a module explaining the full range of services available through the Airwave package and highlighting the potential benefits.
S	88	Forces' working practices should take full advantage of all Airwave functionality. Forces should also implement a marketing strategy to increase staff awareness of that functionality in order to fully exploit the system.
T	95	Forces should develop local management information on incident response and management, to ensure that customers receive a quality service throughout the life of the incident, from taking the call, through grading, deployment, resolution and feedback.

This report is available in alternative languages and formats on request.

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