Key messages

Police call management

An initial review

AUDIT SCOTLAND

Key messages

Introduction

1. The police in Scotland receive about 16,000 calls a day. Many of these calls are very important to the people who make them and some need urgent police attendance. The number of calls to the police has grown significantly in recent years.

2. The effectiveness with which the police manage calls (both 999 and non-999) contributes to both the quality of service they provide and the efficient use of police resources.

3. Since 2003, all police forces in Scotland have introduced more centralised approaches to managing calls to improve the service to the public. The introduction of a digital radio network across all UK forces also encouraged the consolidation of police control rooms.

4. Police spending in Scotland is around £1.3 billion per year, with £45 million spent on call management in 2006/07. Most of the expenditure is to cover the costs of the 1,550 staff employed in police call management.

5. Our study looked at the numbers and types of calls made to the police (including both 999 and non-999 calls) and the effectiveness of the arrangements to manage this demand. While many calls made to the police result in officers attending an incident, we focused on call management and dispatch, rather than how the police manage the resulting incident.

6. In collecting our evidence, we reviewed each force's call management arrangements, carried out surveys of contact centre staff and of the general public, collected information on recorded incidents and interviewed relevant staff in each force.

Key messages

1 The police received 5.8 million calls from the public in 2006/07, but different recording practices across Scotland make it difficult to form a national picture of the types of calls the police receive.

7. During 2006/07 the police received 5.8 million calls from the public, an average of 15,900 calls per day. Thirteen per cent were 999 calls. The number of calls per head of population, and the proportion of these that were 999 calls, varied across the forces (Exhibit 1).

8. Our survey of 2,500 adults in Scotland found that half had called the police some time in their lives. In the year preceding the survey, twenty-two per cent had called the police, with

eight per cent having called 999 and 16 per cent a non-999 number (two per cent had called both).

9. Each force has developed different recording practices to capture the number and types of calls they receive, making it difficult to compare demands on forces and their responses to calls.

10. Many calls to the police do not result in the creation of an incident record, and existing systems are unable to categorise these calls in any detail.

11. A national standard for incident recording was recently agreed which should provide more consistent information on how reported incidents are recorded in future.

Exhibit 1
Numbers of calls received from the public per 10,000 population in 2006/07
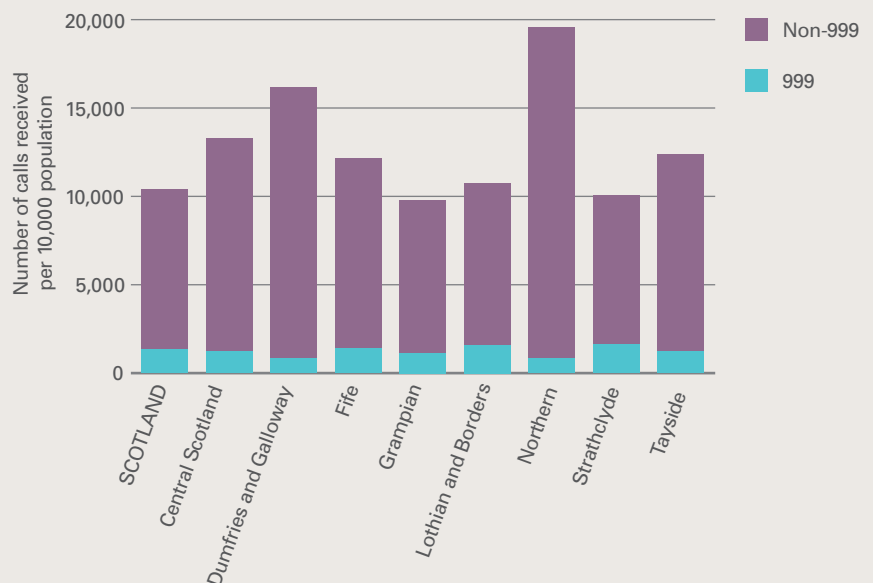
Note: While Northern had the highest rate of calls at 19,567 per 10,000 population, this is an inflated figure as some calls from non-public numbers cannot be separated out from its non-999 calls from the public. Northern is continuing work with its systems to separate out more of these calls in the future.

Source: Audit Scotland fieldwork

2 The police and other public sector organisations need to improve public understanding about how to access non-emergency services.

12. The police receive more than half of the 999 calls that request an emergency service, but many of these are not emergencies. Our data shows that the proportion of 999 calls to the police that are not police emergencies ranges from 30 to 50 per cent.

13. Our survey found that people do not always know the most appropriate number or organisation to call in different situations. All forces report that a significant proportion of their calls are not police business. However, forces cannot identify these calls systematically, making it difficult to identify which organisations need to improve access to their services.

14. All forces agree that they need to make it easier for people to know the right number to call for non-urgent police enquiries. While ACPOS is trying to address the issues in establishing a national non-emergency number, it has recently agreed a sequence of 0845 numbers for non-emergency calls, one for each force. It is not clear yet whether this will significantly improve access or reduce calls that are not police business.

3 Since 2000/01, there has been £30.1 million capital investment in police call handling. There was no national strategy during this time, and forces adopted very different approaches as a result.

15. In the last four years, all forces have introduced new systems for managing calls, with £30.1 million invested in capital projects related to police call handling since 2000/01. Previously non-999 calls to the police were usually routed to local police stations. 999 calls were answered either centrally or in regional divisions.

16. Under the new arrangements all forces receive 999 calls at centralised sites. Five forces now also receive non-emergency calls centrally. Two forces receive non-emergency calls at multiple sites that are 'virtually' connected, while one force receives these calls centrally then transfers those requiring special assistance to multiple sites.

17. During the selection and implementation of the new contact centres and call management systems there was no national strategy for managing calls to the police. As a result, forces have developed their own local structures, strategies and policies, underpinned by different types of technology.

18. More than 25 call and incident management IT systems operate across the eight forces, making it difficult for forces to communicate effectively both internally and with each other.

19. Forces have recently committed to converging their existing IT systems over time and all forces will adopt the same incident management system as their existing systems come up for renewal.

20. In most force areas, police authorities had little direct involvement in planning for the new call management arrangements. The Scottish Executive also played a limited role. It did not take an overview of the different business cases submitted to assess the extent to which they might meet the needs of Scottish policing, or ask that forces later provide evidence as to whether the objectives outlined in the individual business cases had been achieved.

4 Forces face a continuing challenge to match staffing levels to demand. They also need to do more to understand and address the training needs of staff.

21. Contact centre staff are typically the public's first contact with the police, and the service they provide influences the caller's perception of the force.

22. Contact centre managers reported that the inability to assess accurately the level of call demand prior to restructuring led to most forces underestimating the level of staffing required for their new arrangements.

23. More than 75 per cent of respondents in our staff survey said they enjoyed their job and found it interesting. However, half found their job stressful and only around a fifth had received training in stress management. Less than half felt their role was valued within their force.

24. Just over half the staff we surveyed thought they received enough ongoing training to meet the needs of their job. Only two forces had systematically assessed the training needs of their call management staff.

25. Most forces reported that training on IT telephony systems had been prioritised over other training. Forces are now working together to improve their 'soft skills' training relating to customer care.

26. Police officers who attend incidents commented that the information they receive from call handlers and dispatchers regarding incidents needs to improve. For example, they reported that call handlers often did not ask callers the right questions to give them enough information to handle the incident professionally.

5 People are generally satisfied with the response they receive when they call the police but they are less satisfied with how they are kept informed about the issue they had called about.

27. Under the new call management arrangements more non-999 calls are being answered; in 2006/07, 92 per cent of non-999 calls to the police were answered. Forces also report that they are now resolving more calls without the need for officers to visit the caller.

28. In our survey of the public we found that people were generally satisfied with how their calls (both 999 and non-999 calls) were handled. This included satisfaction with how quickly their calls were answered and the understanding and helpfulness of the call handlers (Exhibit 2).

29. However, fewer than half of the people we surveyed who had called the police were satisfied with the way they were kept informed about the issue they had called about. This is the responsibility of attending officers and poor performance in this area can create increased demand on the contact centre from callers enquiring about progress.

30. Forces also conduct their own surveys of public satisfaction. In 2005/06 over 80 per cent of people surveyed by forces were satisfied with their initial contact with the police, and 77 per cent were satisfied with the way the police then dealt with the matter after their call.

6 New IT systems are providing better information on call handling, but consistent performance information to support benchmarking and inform strategic planning at both national and local levels is limited.

31. The implementation of more sophisticated IT systems has enabled forces to collect and analyse information on the number of calls received, the number and proportion of calls answered or abandoned, and the time taken to answer calls.

Exhibit 2
Proportion of 999 and non-999 callers in the public survey who were satisfied with different aspects of police call handling
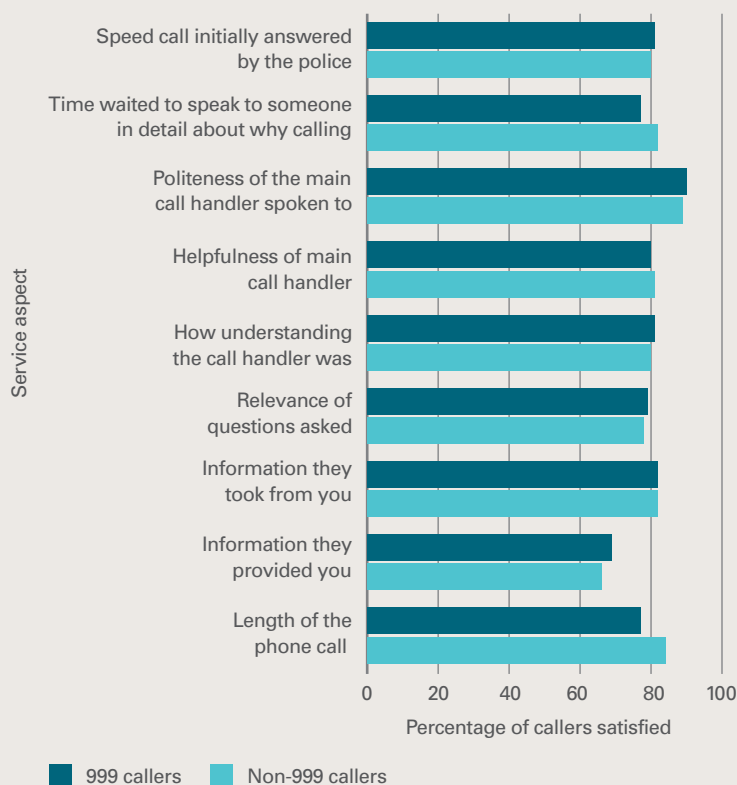
Source: Audit Scotland fieldwork (general public survey)

32. However, forces have adopted different approaches to the setting of call management standards and targets and how they report performance varies, making valid comparisons of performance difficult.

33. Performance reports on call management to the force executive and police authorities vary in their content. They generally contain minimal data analysis or comparisons with other forces.

34. Few forces have developed any indicators to assist them in the financial management of their call handling.

35. Police authorities require better call management information if they are to fulfil their strategic responsibilities in relation to police performance. Without better performance information it is also difficult for the Scottish Government to exercise effective national oversight of call management.

Key recommendations

36. The full report makes 18 detailed recommendations intended to assist the Scottish Government, police authorities, chief constables and other relevant organisations to improve the effectiveness of police call management in Scotland.

37. The main recommendations to improve the experience of people calling the police are that:

- Forces should improve their information systems to identify the extent of the inappropriate use of 999, work together to agree and implement best practice in how to handle these calls and work with the Scottish Government and other emergency services to improve the public's awareness of when to use 999.

- Forces should work with their community planning partners to improve awareness within local communities of what numbers to call in different situations.

- The Scottish Government should liaise with ACPOS, CoSLA, the Scottish Police Authorities Conveners' Forum and other public services to look at options for providing easily accessible non-emergency numbers across police and local authorities.

38. The main recommendations related to improving arrangements to manage calls are that:

- The Scottish Government, ACPOS, and the Scottish Police Authority Conveners' Forum should work together, and with the Scottish Police Services Authority (SPSA), to agree a national strategic approach to developing call management in Scottish police forces.

- Forces should do further work with other agencies, local communities and their own staff to build greater understanding of their needs and to improve awareness of the functions and benefits of a centralised approach to call management.

39. The main recommendations related to improving staff management are that:

- Forces should continue their efforts to ensure they have appropriate staffing resources with sufficient resilience to meet anticipated call demand.

- Forces should undertake systematic training needs assessment and, in conjunction with SPSA, develop a national training approach to address unmet training needs, including skills required to meet the needs of internal customers, staff management training for supervisors and formal call management qualifications.

40. The main recommendations related to improving financial and performance management are that:

- Forces should improve their call management systems to provide information about the full range of calls received to enable demand to be more effectively managed.

- The Senior Strategic Steering Group,[1] individual forces and police authorities, in consultation with contact centre managers, should agree a range of relevant performance indicators for call management.

- Police authorities should, as part of their responsibilities for the strategic oversight of police performance, ensure that they regularly receive and scrutinise reports by chief constables on the effectiveness and costs of local call management arrangements.

- In light of the inconsistencies in approach highlighted in this report, the Scottish Government should consider clarifying which policing decisions require a national strategic approach and how to strengthen accountability for these decisions.

Note:
Prior to September 2007 the Scottish Administration was generally referred to as the Scottish Executive. It is now called the Scottish Government. When dealing with the earlier period this report refers to the Scottish Executive. Recommendations for the future refer to the Scottish Government.

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1   The Senior Strategic Steering Group is convened by the Scottish Government Director-General for Justice and Communities and includes senior representatives from ACPOS, HMIC, Scottish Police Authorities Convenors' Forum and Audit Scotland.

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