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Press release

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People satisfied when they call the police but forces cannot demonstrate best use of resources in call management

Scotland's police receive almost 16,000 calls a day and people are generally satisfied when they call 999 or a non-emergency number. Forces recently reorganised how they manage calls but a lack of performance information means they cannot show whether the new systems are delivering the intended benefits or providing value for money.

Police call management: an initial review examines the recent centralisation of the system, looking at performance, costs, and the experiences of callers. The rise in mobile phone ownership over the past decade has led to increased calls to the police. In 2006/07 Scotland's eight police forces received 5.8 million calls from the public, 15,900 a day, and spent £45 million managing these calls.

Audit Scotland found that up to half the 999 calls the police receive are not emergencies and people often don't know what number to call in a non-emergency situation. More non-emergency calls to the police are now being answered than in the past. People are generally satisfied when they call the police according to a survey undertaken for the report.

Alastair MacNish, chairman of the Accounts Commission for Scotland, said more needed to be done to raise awareness of the appropriate number or service to call in a non-emergency.

"People are generally satisfied with the service but there is much uncertainty about the number to call for non-urgent enquiries. The police need to do more to understand the range of demands from callers and to improve the information they give to the public about how to make contact when it's not an emergency," said Mr MacNish.

The report also says there was no national strategy when the new call management systems were being established, and police forces in Scotland now have a range of different structures and systems.

Robert Black, the Auditor General for Scotland, said there was an urgent need for agreement on best practice and for consistent information that would allow forces to compare their performance.

"It is concerning that each police force has developed its own way of recording the number and types of calls, because this makes it difficult to look at the demands on the police and assess how well they are responding," said Mr Black.

"Without clear and consistent information about police call management across Scotland, neither the Scottish Government nor the police authorities can scrutinise performance to make sure that the new systems are achieving the intended benefits and providing value for money."

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Notes to editors

1. This study is the first in-depth review of how police forces in Scotland manage calls from the public. The study covered both 999 and non-999 calls. While many of the calls made to the police result in officers attending an incident, this study focuses on call management and dispatch, rather than on how the police manage the incidents.
2. The new systems for calls to the police are intended to enable forces to manage the increase in call demand more efficiently and effectively and in particular to:

- provide a better service to the public, both by answering more calls and by providing more consistent information in response to enquiries
 - free up police officer time by resolving more calls at the first point of contact
 - make best use of the recent changes in telephone and radio technology
 - improve the resilience of forces to manage calls in an emergency.
3. Evidence of public satisfaction came from a survey commissioned by Audit Scotland as part of the study. The survey asked 2,500 adults in Scotland about their expectations and experiences of calling the police. Results included: about 80% of callers to both 999 and non-emergency numbers were satisfied with how quickly their call was answered; more than 80% were satisfied with the information the call handler took; and about 80% were satisfied with how understanding the call handling was. Full details are in exhibit 24 on page 33 of the report.
 4. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 can be found on Audit Scotland's website www.audit-scotland.gov.uk.
 5. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. Audit Scotland has prepared this report jointly for the Auditor General for Scotland the Accounts Commission for Scotland.
 6. The Auditor General is responsible for securing the audit of the Scottish Government and most other public bodies in Scotland, except local authorities. He investigates whether spending bodies achieve the best possible value for money and adhere to the highest standards of financial management. The Auditor General is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Government or the Scottish Parliament.
 7. The Accounts Commission for Scotland was set up in 1975 and is independent of both central and local government. The Commission checks whether local authorities, fire and police boards spend £9 billion of public money properly and effectively.