

“VULNERABILITIES – BRIEFING REPORT ON KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE ACTIVITIES WITH 999/101 CALL HANDLER SHIFT MANAGERS (2016)”

PLEASE NOTE: THIS WORKING PAPER IS A
LIVE DOCUMENT INTENDED TO INFORM
AND STIMULATE DISCUSSION AND DEBATE
WITHIN THE PARTNER ORGANISATIONS
INVOLVED IN THIS SPECIFIC RESEARCH
PROJECT, BUT ALSO TO CONTRIBUTE TO A
WIDER CONVERSATION INVOLVING
ACADEMIC AND POLICE RELATED
COLLEAGUES. PLEASE DO CONTACT US IF
YOU HAVE ANY COMMENTS OR
QUESTIONS OR WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS
THE IDEAS IN THIS PRESENTATION FURTHER:
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STAFFORDSHIRE
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DISCUSSION
AND POLICY
DOCUMENTS*

Keele & Staffordshire Universities Police Knowledge Fund Discussion and Policy Documents

This partner briefing report is one of a series of papers published in open access format by members of the joint academic research team from Keele and Staffordshire Universities as part of a broader research project - ***Developing an Action/Work-based learning system for improved knowledge exchange, development and implementations through partnership working (Project code J11).***

This research was made possible thanks to financial support from the *Police Knowledge Fund*, provided by The Home Office, The College of Policing and the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE).

This series of discussion and policy documents is intended to inform and stimulate discussion and debate within the partner organisations involved in this specific research project, but also to contribute to a wider conversation involving academic and police related colleagues.

The views expressed in these documents are those of the individual authors and should not be regarded as representative of the views or official policies of any of the Police or related agencies that have collaborated in our research.

These documents regularly draw on research and evaluation of procedures and practices in a range of Police Forces, Offices of Police and Crime Commissioners and related partner agencies. While the project that has stimulated these documents was initially formulated in partnership with particular Police and related agencies and organisations, it should not be assumed or inferred that the discussion contained in these documents specifically relates to these partners, their policies or practices.

These documents are intended to be accessible to non-academic readers, and to provide an overview of a range of ideas, concepts and outputs from our research. We want these documents to stimulate debate and develop further knowledge exchange and production with a wider range of potential partners. If you have any comments or questions or would like to discuss the ideas in this document further, please feel free to contact the lead author cited on the title page.



Context and Rationale for this Presentation – ‘Calling for Help: Assessing and improving the effectiveness of communication during calls to the police’

This document is an initial briefing report prepared for partners in light of Knowledge Exchange activities carried out with 999/101 Call Handler Shift Managers on the topic of how staff deal with vulnerability and potentially vulnerable callers. It is part of a wider PKF funded project ‘*Calling for Help: Assessing and improving the effectiveness of communication during calls to the police.*’

The issues of potential mis-communications in interactions between police call handlers and members of the public who ring 999/101 have been flagged up in discussions within the partnership, not least in the context of ongoing reviews of the 999/101 service, several critical practice reviews, a recent Domestic Homicide Review and a related IPCC investigation. Specialist academic colleagues have been working with call staff to identify and address these underlying issues.

Outcomes to date (Updated February 2017).

It can be useful to think of a conversation in terms of a racetrack. You start at the beginning with the caller and along the way you complete various projects. You anticipate and avoid hurdles or you construct hurdles that can knock the interaction off course and prevent you reaching the finish line successfully. This ‘Test Bed’ project has mapped out the conversational ‘racetrack’ of 501 999 and 101 calls and fed this analysis into a series of Knowledge Exchange Groups (KEGs) with key staff to help call handlers identify what sorts of problems and roadblocks can occur in conversation, as well as the techniques and strategies that best resolve these problems.

Significant progress has been made with the analysis of the call recordings. The team have been focusing on developing collections of call extracts that it will be most useful for the call handlers to look at during KEGs and training. In addition to the 100 complete detailed call transcripts, we now have collections of:

- 149 examples of opening requests for help
- 35 examples of call handlers asking callers for their ethnicity
- 33 examples where the call handler declines to provide the assistance requested by the caller (either because it is not a policeable matter or because a different response will be provided)
- 8 examples of either particularly clear explanations of what will happen next or where the caller queries this
- 25 examples of where the action of completing the computer log interferes with the verbal communication within the calls
- 19 examples of call handlers addressing issues of vulnerability in the call or log
- 27 examples of calls involving individual with mental health concerns
- 37 examples of calls involving domestic incidents
- 6 examples of 999 callers being told to call back on 101

The team is continuing to build these collections for use in the upcoming KEGs and in training of new staff. Various formats for the KEGs have been trialled over the course of the Project to explore the most effective approach to sharing knowledge. This has included

Shift-based workshops - focused on exploring the landscape of 999 and 101 calls and encouraging call handlers to become analysts of their practice.

Cohort training working with small groups of new call handlers during their initial training. These KEGs focused on helping them retain an appreciation of the caller's perspective, particularly when informing them that it is not appropriate for the police to respond to their request for assistance in the manner they have sought.

Managers Discussion KEGs

- **Vulnerabilities.** – The team has conducted work with managers on the issue of vulnerabilities. This resulted in tangible recommendations that have subsequently been submitted as a report to the Head of Contact Services
- **Call Resolution.** – The team has conducted work with managers on the issue of call resolution. This resulted in the managers resolving to change some aspects of how they advise and support the call handlers on their shifts. It also helped to inform and focus my subsequent analysis of how call handlers can effectively close down calls for which no police response will be provided.

Work Shadowing - Team members have observed call handlers during night shifts (10pm-7am) and evening shifts (3pm-10pm) to explore the situated experience of their work environment. During these shadowed shifts the researchers were able to discuss with several call handlers issues relating to their call handling practices and explore the rationale behind their choices during a call. The researchers also observed how the computer system both facilitates and impedes the call handlers' effectiveness.

Vulnerabilities – Briefing Report on Knowledge Exchange Activities with 999/101 Call Handler Shift Managers (2016)

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Invitation brief that went out to Managers in advance of the event

In these activities we will be focusing on how call handlers identify and record information about vulnerable callers.

I'll bring along a couple of short examples from the calls I've been studying that we can use as case studies during the discussion. It would be useful if you could have a think in advance about current guidance, processes and good practice that you are aware of.

If you have any documents or training slides around vulnerability that you are willing to share with me then please do bring them with you to the discussion or email them to me in advance so I can bring copies of them.

The purpose of this discussion is to share our different specialist knowledge and experience in order to begin to develop effective practices for assessing vulnerability during calls.

KEG Discussion Report

Defining vulnerability

Call handlers are encouraged to use their personal judgement and understanding about what constitutes a vulnerable person. During the discussion we considered different definitions of vulnerability. There was no clear agreement about a shared definition. Managers stated that each individual call handler is advised to use their own judgement. The discussion highlighted the dynamic nature of vulnerability: A caller could be highly vulnerable/upset at the time of calling, but no longer vulnerable by the time a unit arrives on scene. Anecdotally, this has resulted in some disagreements between control room staff and response units or investigating officers about the appropriateness and/or purpose of a vulnerability tag.

Recording vulnerability

I sampled 338 calls (with their associated incident logs) received May 2015 – March 2016. During this period, call handlers were prompted to use a fixed question set to assess and record vulnerability during calls

The question set has now been removed from the STORM system. This means that the only prompt call handlers now have to remind them to identify and assess vulnerability is a single Y/N/? tag that does not necessarily have to be completed in order to transfer an incident to dispatch.

During our discussion there was considerable uncertainty about what action, if any, was triggered by the use of the Y=Vulnerability tag:

- The tag might act as a prompt for staff doing Crime Validation to send the incident through to Victim Support. However, managers commented that incidents do get sent to Victim Support during Crime Validation even if N=Vulnerability.
- A call with a Y=Vulnerability tag might automatically get sent through to Victim Support when a V-COP is completed. However, managers were uncertain about what

action Victim Support would be prompted to undertake based on a Y=Vulnerability tag.

- The Vulnerability Tag turns red on the Dispatcher's screen to highlight the situation to them. However, it isn't clear what action a dispatcher should take when they see the red tag.
- There was no clear sense about when it was appropriate to change the Y/N=vulnerability tag during the course of a call, dispatch, or investigation.

Managers identified that there is uncertainty around how call handlers can signpost vulnerable callers to appropriate support services either within Staffordshire Police or relevant partner agencies. It is unclear what support call handlers can provide to vulnerable callers (especially considering they are uncertain of the value/purpose of the Y=Vulnerability tag).

Tagging for vulnerability

Call handlers are not tagging for vulnerability consistently or sufficiently. We discussed possible reasons for the low tagging levels and concluded that the most likely cause was that there was no clear consequence for how incidents were dealt with based on either a Y or N tag. Call handlers do not know of any consistent, direct benefits or resources that are made available to support callers as a result of tagging them as vulnerable. They are however, aware of being occasionally challenged by response units for tagging Y=Vulnerable for transient distress, borderline cases or differing personal interpretations of what constitutes vulnerability. The force-wide purposes and consequences of Y/N=Vulnerability tagging need to be identified and communicated to call handlers before they can begin to use the tag effectively and justify its use when challenged by colleagues.

Identifying vulnerability

One of the problems with a binary (Y/N) tag for vulnerability is that it over simplifies what is, by its nature, a complicated judgement about an individual's resilience, confidence, self-advocacy, self-awareness, and viable support networks. As part of the discussion we looked at some examples of calls in which the question-set had been used to assess and identify vulnerability. The question-set appeared to overwhelm more natural and context-sensitive approaches to gathering information. This resulted in an incomplete and under developed appreciation of vulnerabilities. As soon as one answer had been identified, no further explicit exploration was conducted during the call and virtually no additional details that cropped up organically were recorded in the log.

The question-set inhibited call handler's ability to thoroughly assess a caller's vulnerability by restricting it to single tick-box exercise rather than elevating it to an on-going orientation throughout the conversation. I was therefore pleased to hear that it had been removed from STORM and that call handlers are now being empowered to investigate vulnerability in a more context-sensitive manner. However, there is a need for either revised guidelines or training for call handlers around how they should both define and assess vulnerability during a call in the absence of the question-set.

We discussed that callers often mention potential vulnerabilities in passing whilst describing something else or at unexpected/unprompted moments during a call when it is easy for the importance of the information to be overlooked by the call handler.

P005_101_CH38_(FC)

Police: Police control room, How can I help?

(0.8)

Caller: Um I want to report a theft of some money (0.6) from my home.

(0.7)

Police: Okay, No problem, D'ja know when it happened.

(0.5)
 Caller: Pardon?
 Police: Erm. D'ja know when it happened.
 Caller: When it happened Yeah- Well I think it happened on Monday.
 (0.5)
 Police: Monday, Okay, No problem. Um first of all would I be able to take down your postcode please.
 (0.6)
 Caller: F for Freddie L L
 Police: [Yeah]
 Caller: [F L]1 6 4 S D
 Police: S D. Right okay, Just bear with me?
 (1.2)
 Caller: I vetter tell you I'm eighty one.
 (1.2)
 Police: Pardon?
 Caller: I've ur- I'm eighty one,
 Police: Okay,
 (0.5)
 Police: Urrm is it Holly Road

From my analysis of calls it is clear that when call handlers become focused on the institutional processes involved in registering and recording an incident, the quality of the interaction declines. For example, in the extract above, the caller informs the call handler that she is elderly ("I better tell you I'm 81"). However, at the time the call handler is trying to validate the address so doesn't really respond to the information, beyond simply acknowledging it ("okay").¹

A process-driven approach to call handling will result in key information provided by the caller being missed or not followed up during the conversation. During moments when the call handler is completing the log (and not talking), callers are likely to fill the silence with extraneous information that, whilst not directly related to the incident, does provide context to their personal situation and can reveal previously overlooked vulnerabilities. This highlights the importance of training call handlers to focus on their conversation with the person and allow this to shape and drive the interaction, rather than the institutional processes.

Summary and Recommendations

- There is significant under-use of the Y=Vulnerability tag by call handlers
- There is no shared understanding of what vulnerability means or looks like (e.g., time-limited periods of extreme distress versus enduring vulnerable status)
- There is uncertainty around the purpose and consequences of tagging for vulnerability, and around the services available to support vulnerable callers
- Process-driven call handling procedures mean that opportunities to identify and investigate potential vulnerabilities are routinely being missed.
- Training on how to remain alert and responsive to potentially relevant information provided during a call could help call handlers more effectively identify vulnerabilities.
- Training on questioning strategies to maximise the detail of information that is provided could help call handlers improve their ability to assess vulnerabilities.
- Call handlers (and shift managers) need a clearer understanding of the purpose and consequences of the various data items that can be collected via STORM (including a vulnerability tag) so that they can make more informed decisions about when it is appropriate to ask callers for specific information or add particular tags to an incident log.

¹ Personally identifying information has been modified in the transcript to preserve anonymity (e.g., address, age)