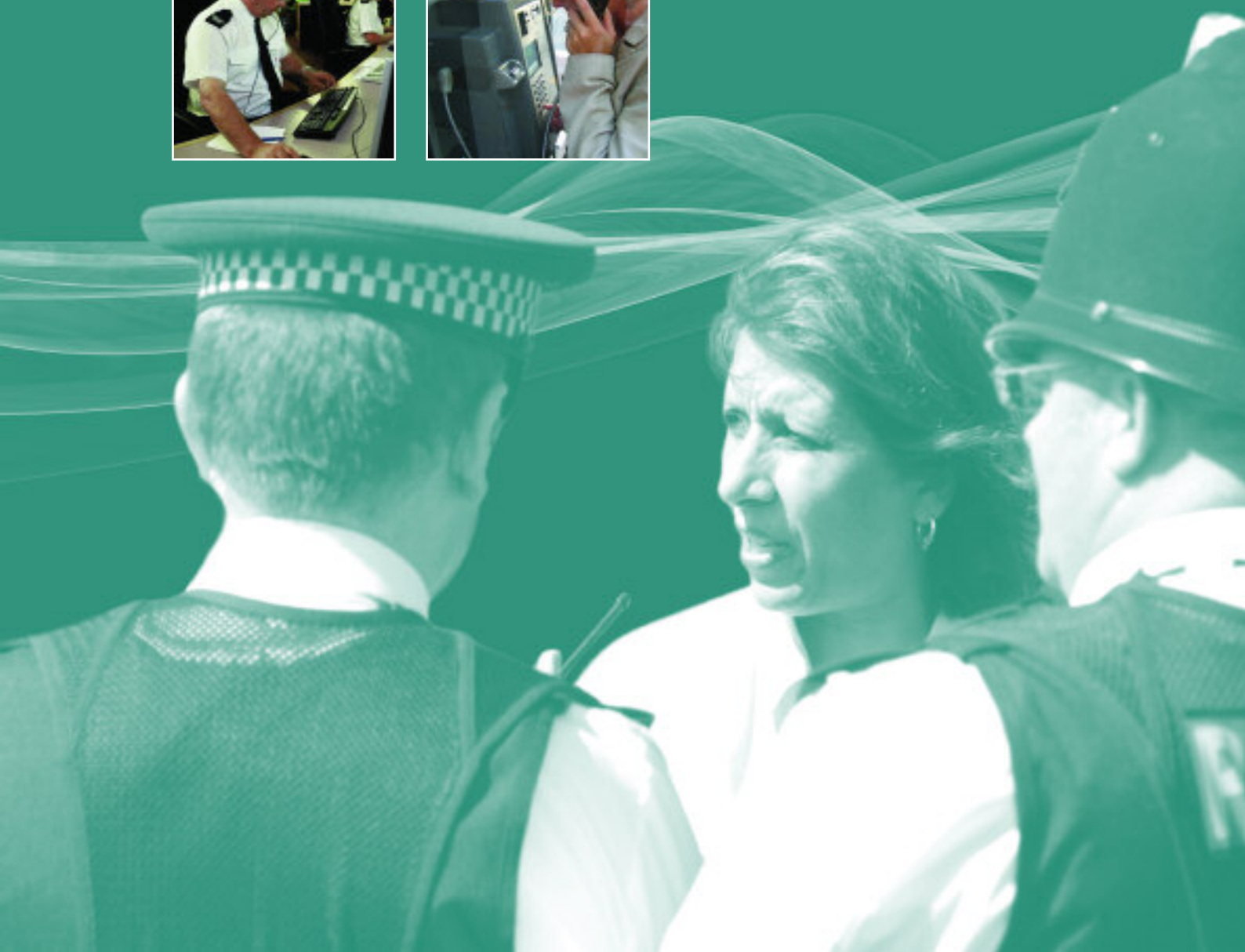
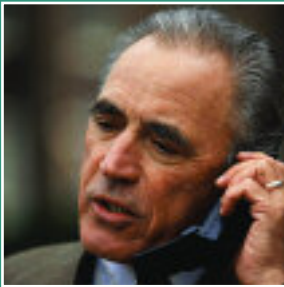




First Contact

A Thematic Inspection of
Police Contact Management

Summary





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Preface

The UK police service currently receives over 67 million calls for assistance from the public annually. While the majority of these calls represent first-time contact with the police, individual callers increasingly have significant experience of dealing with contact centres, and the quality of the police interaction is then measured against these commercial benchmarks. Police forces have just one chance to make a good first impression, but too often they fail to achieve the required standards.

In *Open all hours*, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary's (HMIC's) thematic inspection of public reassurance (2001), we emphasised the importance of contact management and challenged forces to deliver a service where "callers will be answered promptly by a trained and knowledgeable operator who, with the appropriate information technology (IT) support, will be able to resolve their call at the first point of contact". Three years later, HMIC's first Baseline Assessment (for the year 2003/04) identified call management as the second worst performing function across a wide range of policing activities in England and Wales – the *Open all hours* vision seems far from being achieved.

This inspection benchmarks current police performance against wider industry standards. While forces have invested both money and effort in technology, staffing and structural changes, most provision currently falls short of the standards the public demands and deserves. In particular, forces must embrace the concept of customer focus and tailor the access offered and the services provided to users' actual needs and expectations.

Contact management must also be promoted within policing priorities to be recognised as one of the most important police activities, alongside crime reduction and investigation. Chief officers and senior managers need to value its vital contribution to delivering core operational services and building public confidence in the police – the service must aspire to, and achieve, high standards of contact management. This report identifies such standards in key areas which, if accepted and addressed energetically, will greatly improve the all-important 'first contact' between the public and the police. While we recognise that forces have a substantial change agenda to absorb, this issue is too important to ignore – it underpins every aspect of modern policing.

HMIC in Scotland collaborated fully in this inspection, providing a full-time member of the inspection team. This increased the scope of research and, while recommendations and suggestions are aimed at forces in England and Wales, the report will be a very useful reference point for Scottish forces and for HMIC in Scotland in pursuing its inspection programme.

My personal thanks are extended to all of the inspection team, police forces, commercial companies and many individuals who helped to identify current good practice and those areas requiring development. I am particularly grateful for the critical contribution of the Inspection Reference Group, whose experience and knowledge were invaluable to the inspection team.

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



Executive summary

1. There is no area of policing service where direct comparison with the commercial sector is more valid – but unfortunately more damning – than the handling of calls from the public. The exponential growth of call centres as the first point of contact between organisations and their customers has incrementally raised callers' expectations and set a high benchmark for quality, speed of response and professionalism that the police service is struggling to match.
2. Since highlighting the importance of contact management in the 2001 thematic inspection of reassurance (*Open all hours*), HMIC has established 'call management' as one of the core frameworks within the Baseline Assessment of policing performance. Disappointingly, in the 2003/04 assessment not one force rated an *Excellent* grading, and 27 of the 43 forces were graded *Fair* or *Poor*. This finding was a catalyst to action, one response being this thematic inspection.
3. Not only has the Government not accepted the current inadequate levels of overall service, it has raised the bar. During 2004/05 the Home Office, with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), introduced the Quality of Service Commitment, setting standards for: ease of contacting police; the quality of service offered; the initial handling of enquiries; and provision of information and feedback. In addition, a tripartite working group has produced the National Call Handling Standards (NCHS), which provide specific direction on contact management. Chief constables have promised full compliance with both sets of standards during 2006 – a challenging timescale.
4. The need for more urgent progress is highlighted by the 2004/05 Baseline Assessment. While 13 forces have improved their grading – including three that achieved *Excellent* – six others slipped at least one grade, with the result that the overall picture shows exactly the same numbers of *Good* and *Fair* as one year earlier. This represents very modest progress and is clearly not the step change needed if every force is to meet the standards set out in the Quality of Service Commitment and the NCHS. Such a step change will require a significant effort and a far greater focus on the effectiveness of contact management during 2005/06.
5. This inspection has examined good practice in commercial contact centres and drawn comparisons with police contact management performance. In a few areas – notably some staffing issues – the police service outperforms its private sector counterparts, but generally there is a great deal to learn from commercial approaches. How can police forces move quickly up the learning curve to reach these standards of service? Helpfully, a significant body of research and good practice has defined eight key business drivers that combine to deliver excellent contact centre performance. The report addresses each of these drivers in turn (Chapters 2–9), highlighting good practice from both the private sector and within policing, and it pulls together an enhanced framework of standards that, if adopted and applied nationally, will help the service to make the required change in performance and meet the 2006 deadline.

KEY BUSINESS DRIVERS

Customer focus

6. Successful businesses devote substantial effort to finding out who their existing and potential customers are and then asking them directly what they need or expect of the service offered. Not one UK force has a comprehensive approach to this 'customer segmentation'. While most forces use one or more public survey methods, they are rarely dedicated to contact management issues. Their timing, format and coverage invariably make it difficult to distinguish comments about initial contact from those relating to more general engagement with the police.
7. Without such specific and focused feedback from customers, opportunities to tailor and improve the service are routinely missed. In addition, the absence of such information at a local level impedes the creation of a comprehensive picture from which national good practice and standards could be formulated for the benefit of the service as a whole.
8. In an increasingly multi-channel world of communications, the service needs to open as many different channels as possible to provide the appropriate breadth of access. Most forces have recognised this need, and the use of internet, email and texting is progressing particularly well.
9. An important development in further expansion of access is the single non-emergency number (SNEN) project. This has real potential both to provide a wider public service – with easy access to police and local authorities – and to free up police contact centre staff and allow them to deal more effectively with higher-priority calls for assistance. Success is not a foregone conclusion, however, and it is vital that the lessons from mainstream contact management and earlier localised non-emergency call handling inform the SNEN project.

Business culture

10. To achieve a step change in call handling quality the service as a whole, and chief officers in particular, must recognise the importance of contact management and make it a core operational priority. For example, contact centre representatives should feature at all levels within National Intelligence Model (NIM) structures, actively contributing to strategic and tactical assessments and targeting their own service delivery accordingly.
11. In addition, there should be a far greater involvement of contact management staff – through internal surveys and consultation – in shaping the service they provide, so that their frontline experience helps to improve operational policing more generally. This could also assist in reducing the inter-departmental friction that too often characterises the relationship between contact centres and operational response staff, who do not always understand or value each other's contribution.
12. The prevailing view that contact management is undervalued is reinforced by the absence of a high-profile national professional forum to consider policy and practice. HMIC acknowledges the recent good work of the tripartite group that produced the NCHS but, disappointingly, this group has been disbanded. A strong cultural message would be sent out by ACPO if it were to create a permanent joint national forum, with a regional structure in support. These could energise new approaches to contact management, monitor progress against standards and spread good practice.

Strategy and structures

13. It is also disappointing that there is no national contact management strategy, nor is there any plan to produce one. This should be an immediate priority for the service, to ensure that the promising NCHS sit within a clear strategic framework and are regularly and routinely updated against national objectives. The previously proposed national forum would be an ideal vehicle for establishing a national strategy and ensuring that it remains a dynamic spur to improvement. Equally surprising is the fact that almost a third of forces do not even have a local call handling or contact management strategy. It is important to the success of national efforts that every force has both a strategy and a chief officer champion to drive implementation, compliance and continuous improvement.
14. Perhaps most worryingly, given the core importance of the function to operational policing, six forces have no business continuity plan, and a similar number have no disaster recovery plan to cope with serious malfunction or loss of communication systems. One in five UK forces has only one of these two plans in place. This is wholly unacceptable. Every force must ensure it has both plans and, as importantly, that they are reviewed and tested in practice at least annually.
15. In terms of structure, forces are increasingly moving away from local control rooms to centralised contact management (or consolidation in a very small number of centres). There are a limited number of options to achieve this. In recent years, some 33 forces have created central or consolidated contact centres, and yet there is no national advice or guidance on the key issues to consider. This inspection has mapped out four of the more popular options for consolidation and drawn up model templates, together with examples of good practice and potential barriers, to assist forces considering reorganisation. Such information needs to be regularly updated by the service.

People

16. Much of industry lags behind the police service in recognising the importance of staff in delivering a high-quality contact management service. The *Open all hours* thematic report recommended that staff development and career progression plans should be linked to development needs, and 92 per cent of forces now have structured career progression plans. The impact on staff turnover has been positive, and the current average rate of 14 per cent compares very favourably with the private sector norm of 27 per cent. However, there is still some way to go before all forces reflect the best commercial practices. *Open all hours* also recommended the introduction of routine staff surveys and exit interviews to inform service improvements, but to date only 37 per cent of forces have implemented this recommendation.
17. The single most important 'people issue' is the need for the whole policing organisation to recognise the importance of dealing professionally with calls from the public. Although traditionally viewed as something of a backroom 'Cinderella' function, good call management can make a major contribution to effective crime investigation and efficient resource deployment. Many police contact management departments employ more staff than an operational Basic Command Unit (BCU), and yet it is rare for them to have the human resource (HR), finance and training resources and expertise now commonplace in BCUs. At the very least, each contact management department should have dedicated HR expertise and customised policies for recruitment, development and retention.

Training, skills and education

18. Contact management increasingly requires specific skills and should be seen as a police specialism with nationally recognised training courses for all staff, including senior managers. The availability of accreditation and qualifications such as NVQs is being explored, building on progress already made in a few forces. This should be treated by all forces as a priority.
19. At force level, there should be a formalised mentoring and tutoring process, linked to performance and development reviews. Ideally, staff should have a structured briefing and debriefing at the beginning and end of every shift, both for the benefit of the individual and to aid organisational learning. It is important that training, briefing and tutoring are embedded as core working practices and are not viewed as expendable options, diversions or abstractions. Dedicated training teams offer significant advantages in achieving such objectives.

Location and facilities

20. In spite of significant recent activity in both premises refurbishment and the building of new dedicated call centres, there is no central repository of good practice advice on project management, processes, design or procurement. The most up-to-date government guidance dates from 1994 and is very basic. There is a need for central consolidation of good practice and a process for reviewing and updating advice. Current responsibility for this lies with the Home Office, but it may well transfer in the future to the National Policing Improvement Agency.
21. The same absence of central advice besets environmental, spatial, furniture and equipment design. Experience has proven the value of involving staff in the design and improvement of the working environment, but the results of such involvement and lessons learned are not collated for wider reference. Without these central reference points, forces considering further new-build or refurbishment projects are likely to incur substantial – but largely avoidable – consultancy costs, and they may repeat the mistakes of previous experience.

Technology

22. Technology is an important enabler for good contact management but should not drive the business. There is a plethora of technology in the contact centre landscape, but a few core systems are now widely accepted as the main elements of an effective operation. The key applications of IT¹ relate to initial access, workflow processes, providing timely and accurate information to call-takers and assisting decision-making.
23. One specific, and increasingly popular, option is Customer Relationship Management (CRM). This is invariably an expensive option that should only be adopted with great care and forward planning. Both private and public sector organisations have made expensive mistakes in introducing CRM systems that appear attractive but neither match organisational needs nor support their core processes. In one example, a million-pound system was routinely switched off by practitioners to allow them to work more efficiently. Conversely, Enhanced Information Service for Emergency Calls

¹ While commercial products and suppliers are mentioned in the report, HMIC is not seeking to endorse particular suppliers or products.

(EISEC) is an important application that should be used by every force. The value of early, automatic notification of caller details through EISEC has been well proven and yet nearly half of all UK forces have not installed this facility.

24. There is sufficient cumulative knowledge about core technological issues, from industry and within policing, to provide a substantial body of advice to forces. Currently, however, this knowledge is dispersed and not easily available to those requiring it. A central bank of technological good practice advice is needed urgently. In addition, a more explicit and shared approach to identifying and acquiring appropriate technology would provide significant opportunities for financial savings through the increased buying power of interested groups of forces.

Performance information

25. Contact centres are generally awash with technology able to generate a wide range of performance and workload statistics. It is therefore disappointing to note the paucity of valid, comparable performance information, together with a virtual absence of national performance indicators. Nationally, current measures in use (within the Policing Performance Assessment Framework) are limited to the satisfaction of victims of a limited category of crimes – thus representing a tiny minority of callers. Although every force measures 999 and non-emergency call answering times, more relevant measures of service quality, such as the abandoned call rate, are captured by just four forces. This report recommends that a wider basket of relevant performance indicators – both primary and diagnostic measures – are used both locally and nationally.
26. A further concern, given the importance of cost-efficiency, is the limited use of technology to support demand management and workforce management modelling. With the widespread availability of predictive models, some free of charge, there is little excuse for not deploying such technology or applying dedicated resources to data collection and analysis. Currently, fewer than a third of forces have the relevant technology to assist; under a half employ resource planners or analysts within contact management; and only 5 per cent have a demand management strategy.

WHAT SHOULD 'GOOD' PERFORMANCE LOOK LIKE?

27. HMIC commends the production of the NCHS – both the measures proposed and the standards set out are good first steps towards consistent approaches, and they will undoubtedly help to raise the overall quality of service. However, this inspection has identified additional important issues that warrant inclusion in any national standards or measures. The report sets out clearly at the start of each chapter a bullet-point summary of the key factors of good performance within the relevant 'business driver'. These summaries encompass the standards already published within the NCHS, which have been expanded as a result of the inspection findings.
28. In addition, the inspection team has produced a comprehensive 'marking matrix', suitable for use both as a self-assessment tool or as the basis for external inspection. It makes explicit the evidence needed by assessors or inspectors to underpin relevant gradings or scores. This matrix will form the basis for any focused HMIC inspection of contact management and will underpin the future Baseline Assessment process.

NEXT STEPS

29. Throughout this report HMIC identifies a need for national co-ordination of good practice and advice and urges recognition of the importance of the contact management function. The single most important step required to achieve these two aims is the establishment of a national tripartite forum. This group should: take responsibility for collating and disseminating good practice; provide the leadership and focus required to produce a national strategy; foster implementation of the agreed standards; and monitor performance using agreed national measures. The ongoing work would also benefit a number of other important national initiatives, not least the citizen focus agenda and the SNEN.
30. Chief constables are currently committed to achieving the standards set out in the NCHS and the Quality of Service Commitment, but there is no statutory or mandatory requirement. The experience of voluntary Police National Computer (PNC) standards (2001/03) does not offer a promising precedent – intensive HMIC engagement and, later, a statutory Code of Practice were needed before most forces tackled backlogs and poor standards. The limited improvements in call management as evidenced by the 2004/05 Baseline Assessment raise concerns over voluntary delivery. Before reaching conclusions about the likelihood of achieving these standards, however, it will be necessary to review the progress of the six forces currently piloting NCHS implementation – early results should be available in November 2005.
31. It would be premature to propose any statutory reinforcement of this commitment to achieve national standards before these pilot outcomes are known. HMIC will reserve judgement until the results of Baseline Assessment 2005/06, and recommends that in April 2006 all forces complete a full self-assessment on contact management (as set out in Appendix G of the report) to inform the baseline grading.
32. If the service is to meet the vision set out in *Open all hours* and achieve the standards contained within the NCHS and the Quality of Service Commitment, every force will need to take a quantum leap forward to exceed current performance. The subject is too important for continued under-performance to be countenanced. It is vital that all concerned – and in particular chief constables – translate commitments into tangible action and sustainable improvements in service. The findings of this inspection should make a valuable contribution to this endeavour.



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;
- the timescale within which the recommendation should be implemented; and
- the evaluation criteria by which to gauge progress against the recommendation.

No.	Chapter	Recommendation	Owner					Timescale
			Home Office	ACPO	APA	Chief Constables	HMIC	
1	Customer Page 24	All forces should develop a detailed, structured and timely process to capture the customer experience and satisfaction levels.				✓		Within 12 months
2	Customer Page 29	All forces should, as a minimum requirement, provide access to their service via standard telephony, internet, SMS text facilities, email, and the equivalent of minicom, talk-type and Language Line.				✓		Within 12 months
3	Business culture Page 36	A national tripartite forum should be established to drive the implementation of the NCHS, as enhanced by the findings of this inspection, and provide focus for consolidation and dissemination of good practice, policy and procedures.	✓	✓	✓			Within 3 months
4	Business culture Page 36	The tripartite forum should develop a centralised repository for good practice in contact centre management, which should be accessible to all forces and have established processes for ongoing review and update.	✓	✓	✓			Within 12 months
5	Strategy and structures Page 45	ACPO and APA should jointly develop a national contact management strategy with agreed milestones for implementation timescales. This strategy should provide the framework for the implementation of the NCHS, as enhanced by the findings of this inspection.		✓	✓			Within 6 months
6	Strategy and structures Page 47	All forces should have a contact management strategy which complements the national strategy, includes appropriate objectives and action plans which are regularly reviewed, and is championed by a nominated chief officer.				✓		Within 12 months

No.	Chapter	Recommendation	Owner					Timescale
			Home Office	ACPO	APA	Chief Constables	HMIC	
7	Strategy and structures Page 48	All forces should actively communicate the policies and practices underpinning the contact management strategy to staff to jointly improve service delivery, and to partners and the public to raise awareness and help manage expectation and demand.				✓		Within 12 months
8	Strategy and structures Page 49	All forces to take immediate action to ensure that comprehensive business continuity and disaster recovery plans are in place to enable service delivery of the contact management function to be maintained at all times. These plans should be tested annually and kept under constant review.				✓		Within 3 months
9	People Page 61	All forces should have a specific HR strategy for contact management that encourages a high level of involvement from HR specialists and incorporates the key issues that drive operational performance – effective resource planning to demand, a staff retention policy, succession planning and recruitment.				✓		Within 12 months
10	People Page 64	All forces should undertake regular staff surveys and exit interviews and use the results to form an action plan to improve the quality of services provided.				✓		Within 6 months
11	Skills and training Page 71	ACPO, on behalf of the Service, should establish an externally accredited National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) to provide a consistent approach to standards and training.	✓					Within 24 months
12	Skills and training Page 73	All forces should introduce a mentoring and tutoring process for new and existing staff to provide the support they require at a vital stage in their development and help improve their skills base which, in turn, will lead to a better service provision.				✓		Within 6 months

No.	Chapter	Recommendation	Owner					Timescale
			Home Office	ACPO	APA	Chief Constables	HMIC	
13	Location and facilities Page 81	The Home Office should produce an updated guide to the design of police control room and communications facilities, to include good practice and minimum specifications for the design and refurbishment of police contact centre accommodation.	✓					Within 24 months
14	Technology Page 90	All forces should introduce the EISEC software solution in 999 call management.				✓		Within 12 months
15	Performance information Page 101	An additional service level should be introduced within NCHS of answering 98 per cent of all 999 calls from the service provider within two minutes.	✓	✓		✓		Within 12 months locally Nationally accepted measure within 24 months
16	Performance information Page 102	All forces should implement a collaborative process whereby another force, or forces, agrees to take 999 calls on their behalf when high demand is experienced. Clear policies and procedures are required to ensure consistency of approach and appropriate safeguards to service.		✓		✓		Within 6 months
17	Performance information Page 102	The national forum (see Recommendation 3) should, as an early action, agree a suite of measures to be introduced nationally to reflect the important elements of both emergency and non-emergency call management.	✓	✓	✓			Agreement within 12 months for implementation within 24 months
18	Performance information Page 105	All forces should have a demand management strategy and employ demand forecasting and resource planning models linked to that strategy and to the budget setting process.				✓		Within 12 months

No.	Chapter	Recommendation	Owner					Timescale
			Home Office	ACPO	APA	Chief Constables	HMIC	
19	Performance information Page 107	There should be a targeted public education programme that uses demand analysis to identify areas for improvement, specifically around the use and misuse of the 999 emergency system. The programme should incorporate specific measures and targets and have an evaluation plan to measure the impact.	✓					Within 12 months
20	National standards Page 112	ACPO should work with HMIC to further develop the standards and assessment framework and identify any relevant weighting of standards or drivers that should occur before grading forces' performance.		✓			✓	Within 6–12 months
21	National standards Page 113	HMIC should carry out a national assessment of forces against the assessment matrix after April 2006 and review the need for a statutory Code of Practice in light of the results.					✓	By September 2006

Suggestion letter	Page number	Suggestion
A	25	Detailed, structured and timely contact centre customer satisfaction level results should be used to build performance indicators for improvement. Forces should then feed these results to staff to address issues identified and use them to improve performance where appropriate.
B	27	All forces should produce automatically generated confirmation messages to acknowledge the receipt of a text message. This should be publicised as part of a contact management communications strategy.
C	29	Forces should, through their Data Protection Officer, examine their processes to ensure that they are complying with the First Principle of the Data Protection Act 1998.
D	35	Representatives from BCUs and other departments should be included in appropriate contact centre management meetings in order to help develop a close understanding of each other's requirements, resolve issues of mutual concern and promote a culture of co-ordinated service delivery.
E	37	Forces should ensure that all contact centre staff are briefed at commencement of duty, either in person or by remote media. As well as delivering operational information, the opportunity should be used to convey corporate messages, recognise good work and reinforce the appropriate culture.
F	39	Forces should pursue joint training for contact centre staff with operational officers, in order to promote understanding and awareness of each other's roles and an appreciation of how each contributes to force performance.
G	62	All forces should treat business planning and forecasting as important for contact centre service delivery. Contact management centres should be provided with similar support to BCUs of equivalent size in respect of specialist roles such as dedicated human resource planners, analysts, and performance and quality assurance managers.
H	62	Good workforce planning linked to effective demand management supported by timely recruitment must be in place to avoid operating under authorised staffing levels and recruiting at peak demand or leave times.
J	63	All forces should ensure that when using police officers on restricted duties within the contact centre, those officers should go through formal selection processes and have the appropriate competencies, skills and training to carry out the function.

Suggestion letter	Page number	Suggestion
K	70	All forces should design and develop an appropriate induction package, together with basic training in contact centre management. All senior management promoted or appointed as head of the contact centre should have the necessary skills base prior to appointment within call management.
L	73	Forces should acknowledge the role the contact centre has to play in delivering customer service. In many cases the size of the department and its specialism suggests that it would benefit from having a dedicated team of trainers and appropriate training facilities for contact management staff.
M	81	Design and facilities of contact management centres should be included in discussions at the national police contact management forum. (See Chapter 3.)
N	93	Forces should take full advantage of the advances in technology to assist in providing more resilient services by entering into collaborative agreements to transfer incidents, intelligence and other information.
P	93	Forces should consider collaborating with each other when procuring technological solutions in order to attract savings associated with bulk purchases. For example, the current STORM user group have a collaborative arrangement whereby the 18 forces involved contribute £5,000 per annum. This is used to fund ongoing development work from which all forces benefit.
R	104	If a force is using an Excel spreadsheet to calculate required staffing levels, then the calculation should be based on Erlang C, which is a well known calculation model that is used to forecast demand. It accurately calculates the amount of staff required against forecasted demand patterns, and it has been successfully used in public and private contact centres for many years.
S	106	To make effective use of the system, all DDI extensions should have a voicemail facility to manage customer contact. The policies and management of the voicemail system impact greatly on overall demand management.
T	112	The self-assessment matrix can be used by forces to health-check established contact centre performance or to help with the implementation of new or developing centres.

