Centre for Policing Research and Learning

The Open University

An Evaluation of Demand Management Practices in UK Police Forces

(Summary report)

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April 2019

Overview

This report provides and overview of the work conducted by The Centre for Policing Learning and Research, funded by the Centre's member forces, into the demand and capacity management practices across the member forces. The objective of this report is to present the evidence of what work is being done by police forces to tackle the demand that enters the system. The data was collected during visits to fifteen of the Centre's member forces' locations. The report highlights where those practices are especially effective and also raises recommendations for further work. The full study is written up in a more detailed document, where all of the data collected during the study is presented in summary form.

Key findings

- All forces indicated they were still struggling to meet all demand that enters the system via 999 and 101 call numbers. The levels of perceived capacity and demand imbalance varied across forces, but there was always demand that could not be met.

- There was surprisingly little consistency in the ways forces designed their systems to measure demand, plan resource allocation and manage demand

- Most forces still work under the basis that demand is unpredictable and there are considerable barriers to effectively matching demand and resource allocation. However, some forces now have systems in place that make more of a link between work entering the system and the resources needed to meet that demand.

- There is still much frustration that unnecessary or avoidable demand is still present in the system and this is a major barrier to meeting demand where there is higher risk or vulnerability present.

- Some forces now have successfully gone through a process of improving their demand and capacity management practices

- There is often a disconnect between the work to improve demand & capacity management and the day-to-day running of the system. In some cases leading edge ideas about the reduction of unnecessary demand are not implemented or understood at a control centre level.

Background to the Study

All public services sectors are under significant financial pressure, originating after the financial crisis from 2007. The UK Police Service has experienced similar financial pressures to other public services, with a steady real-terms cut in funding from 2015 and other changes to funding from 2009. In the period 2009-2016 the number of full-time equivalent officers fell by 14% according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies[1]. At the same time the patterns of demand have been under considerable change, initially moving away from car theft, robbery and burglary towards "white-collar crime", internet offences, sex crime and trafficking. However, the latest figures show increases in crimes such as assault, stalking and harassment and domestic abuse[2]. The NPCC has launched a series of initiatives, including large-scale programmes, to understand the challenges of demand management in policing[3]. This study is sponsored by The National Problem Solving and Demand Reduction Programme hosted by South Yorkshire Police.

Research Methods

The study collates results from:

- A review of the international evidence on demand and capacity management practices in policing

- A detailed study of fifteen case sites taken from the membership of the Centre for Policing Research and Learning. Personnel involved in control centre management, demand and capacity management, demand reduction and strategy were interviewed at each site, in semi-structured interviews. Each control centre was studied and the flow of work from initial contact to resolution was process mapped at a high level at each site. Sample data about demand measures and performance metrics were taken where this was available.

- An evaluation of more detailed capacity and demand management changes in three forces has been generated by requests for follow-up information

Main findings

Nine overarching research questions were asked during this study. The sections below summarise the key findings for each of these questions:

1. How well do forces understand their levels of demand?

Forces had no consistent, agreed definition of what demand actually meant. Most forces measured the volumes of calls coming into their control centres and used this as their measure of demand. Demand from other sources was not usually incorporated. Forecasting of call volumes did occur and this was used to determine staffing requirements inside control centres and also gave some insight into how busy officers would be. Few forces translated this data into hard resource requirements outside of the control centre environment, especially officers needed to meet the demand and any other policing resource, such as investigative requirements.

2. Have forces changed their practices involving prioritisation and response?

All forces used structured techniques within control centres to prioritise work. Many forces are using the THRIVE assessment tool (threat, harm, risk, investigative opportunities, vulnerability and engagement). Most forces regularly assessed the call handlers' use of THRIVE to maintain consistency and monitor performance. One force reviewed every single call that had been assessed to monitor performance of

staff, to ensure risks were not being missed. Another force allowed call handlers to choose which model of assessment they used to deal with each call, so that each call handler was comfortable with the approach taken.

Most forces believed they had successfully implemented their methods of assessment. However, the levels of experience at handling calls does appear to affect the consistency of grading of incidents. The use of THRIVE has raised awareness of the need to attend incidents where there was a vulnerability issue. The system also improved awareness of calls where there were investigative opportunities that could be followed up.

There was evidence that all forces were simplifying their prioritisation systems, such as the number of levels of job grading, partly to improve the ways in which low-priority demand was dealt with quickly. There were clear trends towards remote resolution, where incidents would not be attended in person and would be classed as advice only. As such most forces now have just three main types of demand: urgent to be attended in person, attended soon and some form of bookable demand, such as diary car.

3. Are forces able to identify and reduce avoidable demand?

Three forces actively were measuring and attempting to reduce failure demand, i.e. demand entering the system as a consequence of error or poor process design[4]. Two of these forces had been able to significantly reduce the demand entering the system as a consequence of this type of demand reduction activity. However, the study noted that poor control centre design, such as unnecessary call handovers and re-prioritisation of incidents did generate extra work within the system. Most forces could do more to remove some of this internally generated demand.

The study found that there wasn't a consistent design archetype for control centres. All forces designed their control centres in subtly different ways. For example, many forces had all 101 calls arrive at a switchboard before the work was passed to call handlers in the contact centre. However the role of the switchboard varied where some merely filtered out calls that were routine contact with office staff but others deflected demand that was deemed inappropriate or unnecessary. There was also significant variation in how work passed through from call handling to dispatch. There was usually a clear distinction in the roles of call handling and dispatch, often with people on different job grades or classifications for each type of role. In two cases the roles were combined for 999 calls only. There was a move towards control centres becoming more orientated towards call resolution at the first point of contact, but the ways this was achieved also varied. In some cases the call handler would be the only point of contact, but in others work was passed on to other team members.

All forces were aware of the issues in dealing with unnecessary demand. For example, where calls were not a police matter, such as noisy neighbours, there was usually clear guidance or protocols about how call handlers should deflect this demand. However, there was also awareness of public pressure to deal with issues such as fly tipping. Hence all demand was usually assessed to see if there were issues of vulnerability and some avoidable demand would be met where relations with the public would otherwise be harmed.

4. What are the most commonly used demand management practices observed during the study?

The most common demand management practices found across all forces included:

- Changes to the way in which work is prioritised and graded, to simplify the system

- Protocols that identify types of demand that should not be dealt with by the police

- Increased use of telephone resolution to close an incident of demand as soon as possible, without the need for officers to be involved

- The use of forecasting models to identify likely peaks and troughs in demand entering the system

- The use of technology to help deal with demand entering the system and process information quickly. This includes the use of technology to direct calls and expert systems to categorise, manage or filter demand.

A number of gaps in practice were evident in most forces:

- Few forces translated call volume data into resource requirements as it was perceived to be too difficult to provide any meaningful information about resource requirements.

- Forces were often looking at average demand in their forecasts without fully addressing the impact of natural variation in demand. Consequently most forces were not easily equipped to deal with demand when it was above average.

- Forces were often focused on meeting control centre targets more that meeting demand overall. Protocols were often put in place to ensure that 999 calls were answered within the national target time, with staff being flexed to meet peaks where possible. Similarly, where 101 call response standards had been set, management control systems were always in place to provide real time data on performance. However, performance at attending prioritised calls is less well reported. It is quite normal to downgrade many calls once it is apparent there is not the resource to meet the demand. At busy times capacity is not flexed to meet demand – instead the service level is flexed to adjust to the levels of demand the service can cope with.

5. What evidence is there about the effectiveness of demand management practices?

Forces have taken similar evidence-based approaches to understanding demand either through their own internal studies or by commissioning independent research, often through one experienced consultancy firm. This has provided robust knowledge on their own levels of demand and capacity imbalance. Most forces have also conducted other improvement work, where the analysis of avoidable demand is often relatively sophisticated. Forces have often developed a team, sometime referred to as a demand management group, to tackle varied issues associated with demand reduction. Measurement of the effectiveness of demand management change programmes is less widespread, partly due to the urgency with which some changes have been introduced.

6. Are there Centres of Excellence in demand management?

A number of forces have been influential in conveying their practices to other forces, on request. Avon and Somerset have developed a demand and capacity model that has been shared widely with forces. The Durham constabulary have a well-known and relatively unique approach to demand management that is often used as a benchmark for other forces. Other forces, including Gloucestershire and South Yorkshire provide examples of good practice in some areas.

In our opinion there is too little sharing of practice across forces, resulting in duplication of effort to understand what practices are most effective. Many forces have to learn by making the same mistakes others have already made. The difference in practice across forces shows how forces are often trying a variety of options without understanding what has been attempted elsewhere. We are not proposing that all forces should adopt an identical model of demand and capacity management practice, as there are some regional variations in demand as well as local differences in policing practice that mitigate against this. There is still much work that can be conducted to reduce avoidable demand.

7. Are there implementation issues associated with managing changes to demand and capacity management practices?

There were a number of challenges associated with implementing change to practice:

- Forces often lacked internal capability to develop improved demand and capacity management practices at the start of programmes. It was noticed that forces widely recruited personnel from forces with a reputation for good practice as a means of bringing in expertise.

- Programmes for change were often developed as responses to short-term issues or events, such as comments in HMICFRS reports or highly publicised mistakes. Consequently projects often had a short timescale, threatening their potential impact and sustainability of practice.

- There is too much separation between the management of the contact centres and the strategic development of demand management practices. Often contact centre personnel were not aware of demand management improvement activities and were not involved in implementation.

- There remains a deep-rooted cultural issue concerning the perceptions of skill sets in operational roles. The hierarchy between call handling and dispatch roles is often a barrier to progress because work conducted by someone perceived to have a lower skill set is often ignored or reworked. Similarly a cultural belief that some decision-making or advice-giving can only be provided by police officers is a barrier to some change options.

8. What are the implications of these changes for the ways in which the service is delivered?

All forces fully recognise their current inability to meet all demand that enters the policing system and all of them are changing how services are delivered and what services they are willing to offer. Although the general pattern of decisions is fairly consistent, towards a tighter set of responses to demand, the precise timing and speed of some changes varies across forces. As a consequence of demand management practices the public should expect to see in the future:

- More services being provided remotely rather than visits by the police
- More service being dealt with in a single call, without additional follow-up
- Increased use of social media for reporting crime and contacting police
- More service being "advice only" rather than investigative
- Higher thresholds for what crimes the police are willing to investigate
- Greater responsibilities placed upon the public for crime prevention
- Businesses required to take on more responsibility for theft prevention and evidence collection
- Increasing reluctance to deal with demand related to non-police matters – but increasing levels of coordination with other agencies

9. Is there evidence of collaborative working with other public bodies?

The study provides a mixed picture in terms of the levels of collaborative working to reduce demand for policing. Most forces had some level of collaboration with Mental Health services, with mental health professionals being available to take calls during working hours in many contact centres. Some forces had other levels of mental Health collaboration, especially the use of a triage care that would contain a constable working alongside a triage nurse. Forces were also working with fire services, for example to coordinate the availability of defibrillators.

There remains a strong desire amongst many officers to engage with other services in a collaborative manner. For example, there is much frustration about the ways in which some other public agencies generate or report demand such as missing persons who are in care. We are of the opinion that some expectations of what demand can be handed over to other agencies are unrealistic and that police will also have to acknowledge the need to provide support for other services as art of more collaborative working.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research has shown there is no single, dominant model of how to manage demand and capacity in police forces in the UK. Although most of the forces share relatively similar types of emergency and routine demand coming through 999 and 101 call numbers, every single step of how that demand is filtered and graded has wide variation in how the work is processed and dispatched. There are emergent consistencies in how systems are being redesigned. In particular, most forces have simplified the ways in which urgency is graded within control centres. There is also a common trend towards earlier resolution of less complex demand, either to deal with this remotely or to pass this demand on to other public bodies.

The lack of consistency implies relatively low levels of collaboration, evidence and practice sharing outside those forces that have formal agreements to combine some services, such as contact centres. Equally, inside some forces there is a divide between the practical management of running the control centres and the development of new methods for managing demand and capacity.

Targets for the response times for calls entering the system have influenced practice within control centres, where most control systems are good at measuring performance and communicating current status of the ability to pick up new demand entering the system. However, just like triage in healthcare, this does not always imply that there is the front-line capacity to deal with this demand on the ground.

Consequently this study includes the following recommendations:

1. There should be more effort to share knowledge about demand and capacity management practices, so that an evidence base for good practice can be generated and forces do not have to duplicate the same experiments into what works.

2. There should be more of an integrative approach to the development of demand and capacity management within forces, where a wider section of force employees are involved in demand and capacity working, knowledge generation and implementation of new practices.

3. The majority of forces still need to do more work to integrate post-dispatch activity into their demand management planning. At present there is resistance to this type of work because of the belief that work is too variable and unpredictable for this to be of benefit. Some of the cases studies presented in the main report demonstrate the advantages of planning to cope with workload variability.

References

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