

**NON-EMERGENCY TELEPHONE NUMBER**

Report of the Chief Constable

**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 This report updates the Committee on the use of the non-emergency phone number for West Midlands Police and the national single non-emergency number - the 101 scheme.

**2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 West Midlands Police undertook a major review of its telephone handling arrangements during 1999 - 2001, as a result of low satisfaction from callers and a range of feedback from partners.
- 2.2 Resulting from the review, changes were made to the central telephony, including new PABX, software and voicemail systems. One of the significant changes made was to provide an overlaying single non-emergency call number. This number would be able to deal with all non-emergency calls and either deal with the issue immediately or pass the query to the relevant OCU or Department.
- 2.3 The central number was provided through the force's telecommunications provider under the 0845 range of telephone numbers.
- 2.4 Nationally, the Government started to consider a national single non-emergency number (SNEN) in 2004. The Home Office was one of the lead Departments for what has become known as the 101 number.
- 2.5 The original aspiration of the 101 number was that it would operate nationally within 1 or a few call centres and would either be able to address the non-urgent issues directly or pass it on to the relevant force. Some early scoping was then carried out to determine the potential capability of the scheme and funding was set aside within the Home Office. Since then, as part of a major review of Home Office capital commitments, the funding for SNEN has been removed.

**3. CURRENT POSITION**

- 3.1 The 0845 number has been in use in West Midlands Police since 2002. It currently takes 1.7 million calls on average per year.
- 3.2 The results of the change are highlighted in the below table, and show that there has been a decrease in calls received through public awareness campaigns and an increase in calls answered and public satisfaction with time to answer (86% -97%).

	May 2002	December 2005
Calls offered	289,000 (per month)	184,458 (per month)
Calls answered	90.5%	99.2%
Grade of service (% answered within 15 seconds)	74%	93.2%
Abandoned calls 0.7%	11% (27,000 per month)	(1,735 per month)
Returned calls	18%	5.3%
Public satisfaction (with time taken to answer)	86%	97% <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> HMIC Citizen Focus Good Practice Guide 2006

- 3.3 It is not possible to easily determine the type of phone calls received although our research identifies four major categories of calls. These are:
- Calls for advice.
  - Calls to report an incident.
  - Calls to provide information.
  - Failure demand (progress an unresolved issue).

Empirically there is a wide range of calls in each category from important news or updates to other frivolous requests or queries.

- 3.4 The call rate structure at the time of implementation of the 0845 number was not a major consideration in terms of cost to the public due to the then existing pricing structures of service providers. In essence a 0845 call made was of a similar price (a local charge rate for local users) to 0121 calls. But 0845 was a universal number i.e. not related to geography and would always be charged at a local rate, no matter where (in the world) the call was made.
- 3.5 With the change in competing market demand, current "bundle of" packages for calls are now cheaper and often free (depending on service provider and geographic locality). Landline calls made to the 0845 number from BT for example are currently 4 pence per minute (ppm) on weekdays and 1ppm evening and weekends. Mobile calls to the 0845 number can, however, vary by service provider. The average call to the non emergency number lasts just under 4 minutes, meaning a cost during the evening or weekend of 4 pence per call to 52 pence per call from a mobile. The 0845 number is currently excluded from "bundle" packages.
- 3.6 The revenue sharing characteristics of the 0845 number allowed West Midlands Police to receive an estimated £23,000 from NTL Telewest service provider in 2007/08. This is a relatively small amount of income but needs to be compared with the cost of providing a 0800 or equivalent number. The call costs under this sort of arrangement are borne by the host organization (WMP) and are demand led, leading to a significant additional costs for this force.

#### **4. IMPLICATIONS FOR CHANGING THE 0845.**

- 4.1 The current options available to West Midlands Police are:
- Move to the 101 nationally recommended number.
  - Move to use 0800 free call number.
  - Move to the use of 0300/0345 number
  - Return to the use of the 0121 number.
- 4.2 Use of the 101 number introduced by the Home Office is a now non funded partnership solution to non emergency calls and requires some technical and service solutions to ensuring that a local call (funded in part by one of the seven local authorities) is directed and charged at the appropriate rate. This will have technical implications and (potentially) funding implications that will need to be explored fully.
- 4.3 Moving to the use of the 0800 number (free call) has an estimated cost of £412k p.a. to West Midlands Police. This is based on a landline charge of 4.73 ppm to West Midlands Police. Users of Mobile phones would still have to pay an additional cost of 12 ppm in addition to the charge to West Midlands Police.
- 4.4 The use of the 0300 / 0345 number is being made available to all 0845 users and would mean that a call made under this local number would be charged to West Midlands Police albeit at a discounted rate. 0300 / 0345 numbers would be included in "bundle packages and therefore would be free to those users. There would be an estimated charge to West Midlands Police for this service of £90-100K pa. Again, phone calls from mobile phones would incur the caller with an additional cost from the service provider.

- 4.5 Re-instating a 0121 number would mean no additional costs to WMP other than marketing and awareness (a recent campaign to re-launch the 0845 cost £10,000). There would be no costs to people in the West Midlands area that have a bundle of free local calls. Use of the current 0845 number could still be used as the prime contact number as it has better inbuilt network resilience and stats etc and can prevent local regional issues. In the past it was thought that people in Coventry, Wolverhampton etc may feel disenfranchised if they had to dial a Birmingham number (0121) to talk to their "local" police. This would also overcome connection issues when ringing from abroad, as not all countries recognise 0845 or even the 101 or 0300/45 codes. However to phone 0121 from a distance would incur additional costs for the caller in the UK, unlike 0845.

## 5. COMMENTARY

- 5.1 It must first be stated that, if a caller requires an urgent Police service or wants to provide urgent information to the Police, then the use of 999 is not only the most appropriate route but is always free to the caller.
- 5.2 The market place has changed significantly from the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Mobile phone proliferation has resulted in telephone companies responding (in part) by restructuring pricing including "bundling" as a marketing ploy.
- 5.3 From the analysis identified above, there are a number of options that can be considered. "Free" calls are a conceptual myth. One or other party pays (and will continue to pay) for calls. It may be that to provide a "Free to caller" system would encourage significantly more frivolous or vexatious calls that are in part filtered out by incurring a cost to the call.
- 5.4 However as part of our revision of telephone arrangements and Sir Ronnie Flanagan's wish for increased partnership approaches the force will further review the options listed to evaluate the technical and financial implications of changing the 0845 number and the impact that this will have as a consequence of the issues identified.

## 6 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS.

- 6.1 The current usage of 0845 as the vehicle for non emergency calls to West Midlands Police results in a small income stream of £23K p.a. based on current volumes.
- 6.2 The other options identified in the report would change the cost structure and result in additional costs to the force and Authority of £100-£400K p.a. If any of these options were followed this would reflect an additional ongoing cost on the base budget.

## 7 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS.

- 7.1 Section 6 of the Police Act, 1996 requires the Police Authority to secure the maintenance of an efficient and effective police force for its area.

## 8. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS.

- 8.1 It is the aim of West Midlands Police to be accessible to its communities, partners and other interested persons. The single non emergency number has been part of a wider strategy of "Contact Counts" with that aim in mind.
- 8.2 The options for changing the single non emergency number, or ways in which contact with West Midlands Police are changed, will be carefully evaluated before any final decision is made, taking all relevant issues and factors into account.

**9. RECOMEMNDATION.**

9.1 The committee is asked to note the current position with regard to the West Midlands Police single non emergency number.

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**BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

Home Office Single Non -Emergency Number  
Programme – 101 (3.3.08)