Justice Sub-Committee on Policing

Thursday 23 February 2017

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Thursday 23 February 2017

CONTENTS

JUSTICE SUB-COMMITTEE ON POLICING
4th Meeting 2017, Session 5

CONVENER

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)
Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Mairi Evans (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Laura Paton (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland)
Derek Penman (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland)
Christina Yule (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Diane Barr

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Justice Sub-Committee on Policing

Thursday 23 February 2017

[The Convener opened the meeting at 13:06]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Mary Fee): Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the fourth meeting in 2017 of the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing. Apologies have been received from Stewart Stevenson and Margaret Mitchell. I welcome Mairi Evans to the meeting.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Are members content to take in private items 3 and 4, on consideration of the evidence heard at today's meeting and discussion of our work programme?

Members *indicated agreement.*

"Independent Assurance Review Police Scotland—Call Handling Update Report"

13:07

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence session on "Independent Assurance Review Police Scotland—Call Handling Update Report", by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland. I welcome Derek Penman, Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary, and Christina Yule and Laura Paton, who are lead inspectors.

We do not have a huge amount of time—we are a bit constrained on a Thursday lunch time—so I intend to move straight to questions. I refer members to paper 1, which is a note by the clerk, and paper 2, which is a private paper.

I will start by asking Mr Penman to expand on the work that is being undertaken to progress the contact, command and control division integration and remodelling—C3IR—project to completion. Once it is completed, will you be satisfied that it is the optimum model for call handling?

Derek Penman (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland): We issued our report 18 months ago. It was highly critical of Police Scotland's call handling, and we made 30 recommendations that we thought would drive improvement and provide the stability that is required for the next stages of transformation and for moving calls from other centres to the new virtual service centre.

Since then, we have been working extensively with Police Scotland and we have made about 60 visits, some of which were unannounced. We have also been working very closely with its project team.

We have a high degree of confidence that Police Scotland has picked up on our recommendations and that its project and programme planning have driven significant improvements. On that basis, we are confident that, as Police Scotland progresses to the final stages of C3IR, the project will be delivered safely.

One of our recommendations was that Police Scotland undertake a gateway review so that, in addition to our own assurance, there would be independent assurance that the project was ready for delivery. Although the report has not been published, I can tell you that it was positive and the project was given green status, which means that there is confidence that the project will be delivered.

The Convener: Thank you. In the update report, under the key findings on leadership and governance, there is a paragraph that says:

"There is now clarity between the management of the C3IR change programme and the management of 'business as usual' (BAU) within the division."

Will you explain in a bit of detail exactly what that means?

Derek Penman: We had a project that was being delivered by a project team and, at the same time, the Police Scotland management was delivering the here and now of that. When we wrote the report, we were concerned that, although the here and now was about the change, there was a disconnect between the two parts of Police Scotland. We were keen to make sure that the business as usual side and the project side were working much more closely, so that the project team was able to identify the change and make it happen and the business as usual side was able to take that change and start to make it work.

As we have gone through the review, we have found that the project management of the change has been governed far better than it was before. The commander who runs the business as usual side of things is also heavily involved in delivering the programme and we now have much better integration, with the changes being delivered by the people who are responsible for the day-to-day business.

The Convener: Are you content that things are progressing smoothly now?

Derek Penman: Yes, absolutely. The commander of the contact, command and control division—C3—is now heavily involved in the change programme as well. The two parts have been brought together. There had been a disconnect between the project team that was trying to deliver the project and the management that was running business as usual, and our point was that, as the change progressed, it should be fed into the business as usual side and the two parts should be much more closely integrated. We have certainly seen that through our visits and our work with Police Scotland.

The Convener: Can you give us a bit of detail on the work that has been undertaken by Police Scotland to reduce failure demand and what part that has played in the overall reduction in the number of both 999 and 101 calls?

Derek Penman: You will see in the figures that call volumes have dropped between the time when we first undertook the review and now. One of our recommendations was that Police Scotland should understand the demand better. Failure demand is a technical term that is used in call handling to refer to instances when people phone in to report something but the matter is not progressed, so they phone in again. There were frequent calls coming through on certain issues.

We asked Police Scotland to do a number of things, the first of which was simply to identify the people who were phoning in repeatedly. Quite a lot of the repeat calls were from agencies such as the Crown Office that were using the 101 system to phone in. Those calls were identified, the system was streamlined and that has taken some demand away. Police Scotland also identified some of the more frequent callers and has been able to manage those calls better as well. However, we feel that Police Scotland still needs to do more on the demand from the point at which the call is taken to the point at which the call is resolved and officers have attended the incident locally.

There is now real efficiency within the service centre and area control rooms in taking the calls, recording them and passing them out to operational officers. The bit that we think still needs to be looked at is how quickly the officers are able to attend the calls and what resources are available to enable them to do that. The call may be dealt with really efficiently, answered within the target time and passed out to local police officers but, if the local officers do not attend the call within the expected timescale, the person will phone in again. More evidence is needed around the local policing part of failure demand.

The Convener: Before I bring in other members, I want to ask about partnership working. When we have had Police Scotland in front of us, an issue has been identified with the way in which police on the streets deal with adults with vulnerabilities or difficulties. What degree of partnership working is there between the call handlers and other services, whether that is the national health service or other support workers, to make sure that they get the right support when they are handling calls and that they have enough information to be able to deal with the calls effectively?

Derek Penman: That is a really good question. One of the recommendations in our call handling report was that Police Scotland ensure that it has the ability to deal with vulnerable callers and prioritise calls around vulnerability. Police Scotland has done a lot of work with the call handlers to enable them to make a more informed assessment of people's vulnerability—that side is working quite well and has involved a degree of partnership and other agencies working alongside them.

Although this is not yet in place, I know that Police Scotland is actively considering how it can bring additional support into its service centre to deal with people who might be vulnerable or have

mental health problems. Discussions on that are taking place, but I am not sure what stage they are at. Police Scotland is interested in how it can provide support in its service centre, which might include its having the ability to pass calls on to other agencies for them to deal with.

I know that Police Scotland has been working very hard to get other agencies and partners to support operational officers at the front line, and work has been done on triaging of mental health calls in some cities. The issue is very much on Police Scotland's agenda.

13:15

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Mr Penman, are you satisfied that C3 will have the necessary resources and staff to provide a first-class call-handling service?

Derek Penman: That is another very good question. One of the key issues that we found in 2015 was the need to make sure that Police Scotland had adequate staffing levels. That is one of our criteria for a stable system in the future.

Police Scotland has embraced that. It has brought in an independent consultancy that has experience in call handling—and police call handling, in particular—elsewhere in the United Kingdom. It has developed a tool that, by modelling the number of calls that come into a service centre and how long it takes for them to be answered, can tell Police Scotland how many staff it needs at a specific point in time. That tool has been used and tested, and, on that basis, Police Scotland has worked out what staffing levels it needs at those critical points. It has developed that into some reporting, which has been shared with the Scottish Police Authority. The SPA had a look at that reporting, was clear about Police Scotland's assumptions and approved those staffing levels. We have also looked at that reporting, and we, too, are content with Police Scotland's planning assumptions.

Since the publication of our report, Police Scotland has made a number of significant changes. For example, in January it moved call handling from Dundee into the central belt, and the model was used to get the staffing levels right. In the virtual service centre, call performance levels are at 97 or 98 per cent, which would indicate that, when people are phoning the police, their calls are being answered in time. That is a good indication that there are sufficient staff on duty at that time.

That was a long answer. Police Scotland now has a tool that it can use, which will help it to get the optimum staffing levels. As it moves towards the change programme, it is keeping its staff levels quite high to give it the support that it needs to

make sure that, as calls are transferred down, it can cope with the demand.

Rona Mackay: I take it from your answer that the resources are available to cover all of that.

Derek Penman: They are, and Police Scotland is putting those resources in place. We check to make sure that, if Police Scotland says that it will have 400 staff on duty for call handling at a critical point, it can evidence to us that it has those staff in place. We checked the staffing levels that were in place at the time of the critical change involving the move from Dundee.

Rona Mackay: Can you expand on what you mean by "greater innovation within C3" and how that could improve the current service?

Derek Penman: I would need to check the context of that remark. In general, I would encourage Police Scotland to be innovative and to find new ways of working that would help it to manage its demand down in order to create capacity for front-line services. Are you referring to a specific comment in the report?

Rona Mackay: I do not know what page it is on, but it is in your report.

Derek Penman: In general, I would encourage Police Scotland to be innovative in its approach. That would include its bringing into the service centre environment mental health professionals who could help to deal with vulnerability. It would also involve Police Scotland bringing in new technology to enable people to communicate with the service centre through online means or social media, which would take demand away from the phone lines. I would generally encourage an environment in which staff could come up with ideas and look for best practice in call handling.

Rona Mackay: It is a case of monitoring the situation on an on-going basis and being proactive.

Derek Penman: On Monday, Police Scotland will release its "Policing 2026" strategy, which we welcome, and I understand that innovation will be one of the key features of the strategy. That is just part of looking at best practice and identifying how it can be rolled out.

It is important that front-line staff are listened to, because they can often be the most innovative people, as they understand ways of doing things. The whole point of innovation is to make service centre call handling as good as it can be and to enable Police Scotland to manage its demand in such a way that it can create some capacity for front-line officers to deal with the new threats. The service centre will be a key part of that.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Mr Penman, I thank you for your various reports. A

lot of people might wonder about the committee looking at call handling, but the background that we have had has put the issue into perspective: the majority of people's contact with the police is by telephone and the figures are really quite staggering, at half a million emergency calls and more than 2.5 million calls altogether. With that number of calls being handled, things will go wrong and, sadly, some of them might be important.

I sense that you are upbeat about how Police Scotland has approached the issues around call handling.

Derek Penman: Yes, but that is against the backdrop of the call handling report being one of the most critical reports that HMICS has ever written. Rather than just write the report, we took a conscious decision to work alongside Police Scotland. Today, I have a team working in call handling to make sure that we are getting the assurances that we need.

In fairness, Police Scotland has embraced the improvement plan and the leadership and staff have made a real commitment to drive improvements forward. Our update report shows that, measured against the recommendations, considerable improvements have been made to call handling.

John Finnie makes a valid and mature point about the inherent risks of call handling. As I mention in my report, there will always be a level of risk inherent in the operation of police call handling. That is true of not just Scotland, but any system in the United Kingdom or worldwide. Such systems rely heavily on human interaction. The call taker picks up the call and has to make a real-time assessment, often in challenging circumstances, of the information that they have. The caller might be vulnerable, distressed or under the influence of alcohol or drugs. When you put that mix into call handling, you can imagine the nature of the 3.5 million calls that we took back in 2015. We cannot eliminate risk completely.

Our report has sought—as has Police Scotland—to mitigate and minimise risk as much as possible by ensuring that the call handling centre is appropriately staffed, which is the point that the committee has raised today. Call handling must be properly staffed to meet the demand and we have to make sure that the staff are well trained, supervised and supported. We have to make sure that the information, communications and technology systems are stable and can assist the call takers.

Police Scotland has done a lot of hard work around ICT. It has delivered a national command and control system and strengthened its customer relationship management software that records all the calls. It has also built a new network for call handling. A lot of work has been done there.

Robust processes must be in place within the environment. One of the most important things is that there must be a learning culture in the organisation. The staff must be prepared to highlight notable incidents or near misses so that there can be continuous improvement.

Police Scotland needs to have those measures in place, and we have been checking on them to make sure that the risk can be mitigated. As John Finnie said, things will go wrong from time to time; that is just the reality of the volume of calls and the risks within the service centre. It is important that Police Scotland can learn from that, and that when something requires to be investigated, it gets investigated. The Police Investigations and Review Commissioner can investigate incidents independently and identify any learning.

John Finnie: The risk has been assessed and mechanisms have been put in place that will ameliorate those risks that can be ameliorated, but risk is not a static thing. Is risk assessment on-going? You talk about the future and emerging challenges. To what extent will future upgrades play a part in that?

Derek Penman: There are risks in different categories, as Mr Finnie has identified. There is a risk that the ICT systems might not be stable when new ones are brought in. Again, in 2015, we were critical of Police Scotland for systems that had not been properly tested and things that were not properly rolled out. Since then, robust assurance processes have been put in place where individuals are testing things and signing off to say that they have been tested and they are evidenced.

Police Scotland brought an outside force in from England to do some quality assurance before the new command and control system was brought in. The individual risk around things such as ICT systems has been ameliorated by looking at the risk and making sure that proper measures are in place. When the new system was brought in, Police Scotland made additional ICT staff available as floor walkers to support the staff.

That is a good example of a specific risk around ICT change for which Police Scotland put a number of measures in place to ensure that support was available. I know that when calls from Dundee moved into the central belt, a lot of support was provided for staff in Dundee, and exactly the same thing will happen when Aberdeen calls are transferred.

John Finnie: Can you comment on the state of readiness as key milestones appear in the stabilisation programme?

Derek Penman: We have been doing a lot of work with Police Scotland, asking about all the things that they have to demonstrate are in place, and they have shared a detailed plan with us. The plan covers such things as staffing levels, ICT processes and other key things that have to be in place and when they should be there, so we are working with them on that. We are doing some independent testing to ensure not only that the plan is signed off but that those things are actually happening. We also have staff listening in to calls that have been transferred from the north to the virtual service centre, because I want to provide some independent assurance that the calls that are coming in are being dealt with well and are being properly recorded, and that there are no issues around geography, accents and places. A high level of assurance is being provided around those issues.

Earlier, I mentioned the gateway review. As well as doing the work that I have described, we have encouraged Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority to commission a gateway review by professional people who can come in and look at a change programme. Their report has not yet been made public, but I can say that they gave it a green light. They assessed the service's readiness to make the transition, they have confidence in the successful delivery of that service around time, cost and quality, and consider that that is highly likely to be achieved with no major outstanding issues. Again, there is a high degree of confidence around Police Scotland's readiness to move forward into the next stage of change.

That said, we will be involved right up to the last moment. The Scottish Police Authority has also brought in quite robust assurance processes and has set up a sub-committee just to deal with call handling. The SPA will want to be assured, and Police Scotland will demonstrate its readiness to the SPA prior to the final decision being taken. Compared with what was in place in 2015, there is a lot of process and a lot of people signing off to say that things are ready.

John Finnie: Thank you. That is reassuring.

Mairi Evans (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): You talked about the transfer of calls from Dundee and the extra staff who were put in place there, and you said that you had checked on how all that was going. Are you confident that when calls are transferred from Aberdeen, and also from Inverness in the summer, everything will run smoothly and that the system will be effective when it is up and running?

Derek Penman: There is always a risk, when giving assurances, of giving a hostage to fortune. We can assure ourselves about the systems and processes and make sure that the learning points that we picked up from 2015 have been noted and

that the things that ideally should have been done then are indeed being done now. On that basis, we have a degree of confidence that the transfers will go well. I have mentioned the independent gateway assurance a couple of times, and I have also been briefed by the divisional commander, with whom I spent two hours last week. He went through in quite some detail how he proposes to make the change. Even the particular hour in the evening when it will be done has been worked out to ensure that it happens at the optimum time. When the Aberdeen facility closes it will still be fully staffed and the central belt facility will also be fully staffed, so they will be able to unwind it if things do not go to plan or if there are any issues with technology. Many safeguards have been put in place, and Police Scotland is now far better placed than it was with regard to the level of professionalism that has been applied to project assurance and programme management.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I appreciate that you do not want to offer up any hostages to fortune, but your updated report raised continued concerns, particularly around the uncertainty for staff, whose future roles are not clear. You have also noted that there was an unwillingness to sanction transfers to other roles within Police Scotland. From what you have seen of the gateway review, and from your own subsequent work, are you reassured that management is now on top of those issues? Is staff morale in a better place now that there is a greater degree of certainty around what will happen and around the safeguards behind that?

13:30

Derek Penman: I will bring in Christina Yule to talk about how Police Scotland has worked hard on staff engagement, but first let me take an opportunity publicly to pay tribute to the staff in the service centre, a lot of whom have been working under great uncertainty about their futures for many months—in fact, years. The staff are committed to providing a really good service.

Police Scotland has always been aware of the need to keep staff informed, but there have been difficulties to do with getting certainty about when the project will deliver. Because of its robust project management, Police Scotland is now able to give to staff with some certainty the dates when that will take place. We are aware that it has consulted staff—in particular in the north, which is probably the last area to be affected—on what that will mean for them. I think that staff are at least aware that there is a high probability that everything will work out for them and they will be able to leave the organisation as planned.

We have been keen to ensure that, if there are delays, there is no detriment to staff in relation to

early retirement or voluntary redundancy packages. We know that such an approach is in place. Tina might like to give you some background on Police Scotland's engagement with its staff.

Christina Yule (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland): There has been quite a lot of change in the leadership of C3. In the update report, we emphasised that there is a renewed focus on engaging staff and having more productive relationships with staff associations. There has been a strong focus on engagement throughout the period, and particularly in the past 18 months.

Communication is subjective, and I suspect that if staff are asked whether there is enough of it they will probably never agree that it is 100 per cent where they would like it to be. However, the effort that the project team and business as usual management have put into communicating and engaging with staff has been significant, particularly in light of the criticism that we levelled at management in the original report. Communication and engagement have increased significantly.

Liam McArthur referred to the paragraphs in our report in which we talked about staff in Aberdeen in particular. Those staff probably were anxious when deadlines were extended. As Mr Penman said, the senior responsible owner quite rightly reviewed the timescales, but staff in Aberdeen perceived that as another delay for them. They probably feel more confident that transfers will take place, having seen that various milestones have been reached on time.

However, it has been a very difficult two and a half years for those staff, who were told that their centre would close, that potential redeployment opportunities were limited and that voluntary redundancy and early retirement would be on offer. Some staff want to stay with the organisation; others want to move on but have been unable to do so, because Police Scotland has had to maintain staffing levels in the north to maintain the service until transfers take place. All those things affect morale, but we have continued to highlight to C3 management what the risks are and it has taken that on board.

Inverness is a different issue. I think that staff there felt relatively secure that their jobs would remain, albeit in a different type of function, but latterly they have been unsure about exactly what the jobs will look like and what the gradings, supervision and shift arrangements will be. As we said in the report, Police Scotland has tried as far as possible to accelerate the production of the business case for what will happen in Inverness, to give staff certainty. We maintain a focus on staff in the north and their welfare, to ensure that Police

Scotland mitigates the risks as much as possible, through communication and engagement.

Liam McArthur: That is helpful. Notwithstanding your point about how communication can perhaps always be better, is there a recognition among the staff to whom you talk that there has been an improvement?

Against the backdrop that you described, has the impact on morale in Aberdeen, and to a lesser extent in Inverness, translated into effects on performance, absence from work or whatever, or is it manifesting itself in people making clear to you their concern and how they feel?

Christina Yule: There has not been an impact on performance. As Mr Penman said, the staff are incredibly dedicated to the function that they perform, and I suspect that the situation would have to be extreme before performance was affected.

Absence levels have been quite stable. Although there are a couple of long-term absences that affect the figures, we have been impressed that C3 has managed to maintain staffing levels. In the past year, C3's divisional commander has focused on absence management to support staff and to manage down the levels of absence. We have not noticed any negative effects. We have had limited communication directly from staff with concerns, but we always maintain contact with the staff associations, particularly Unison, to ensure that we are on top of what their concerns are and what the members are feeding back to them.

Although the situation is difficult—and we acknowledge that—the associations acknowledge the efforts that the divisional commander and his team have made to engage with staff and try to make the situation better. Previously, the physical visibility of management was not great in those locations, but it is much improved and staff are seeing the leadership, who sit down and talk to them about the issues that they have.

Liam McArthur: You talked about having an overlap when the functions transfer and said that the operation will continue in Aberdeen. You said that staff will be available to draw from if they are needed in Aberdeen. How long is that likely to last? Is there a time frame?

Derek Penman: The overlap is in effect for the hours needed—it will almost be a shift—to ensure that the change is bedded in and to deal with any unexpected operational challenge that might come in. It will provide resilience at the point of handover.

Liam McArthur: It is not likely to last.

Derek Penman: No, it will not last. I was simply trying to demonstrate that Police Scotland has identified the risks at the point of a significant

change and mitigated them by having additional staff available, so that it has the ability to move things around, should it need to do that.

To pick up on the point about morale, call handling is a difficult environment for staff to work in. It is probably the most scrutinised area of police work that there has ever been. That is certainly true in terms of how much time we spend on the issue, because we are with staff from the centres almost all the time.

It would be helpful to recognise that Police Scotland has improved call handling. Every day, staff are in centres doing a good job in difficult circumstances. There is a constant sense that, in some way, police call handling is not working effectively and the headlines that appear in papers talk of a crisis in call handling, or issues with particular centres. That definitely has an impact on staff, who probably will see improvements, will feel that things are better than they were and will feel that they are delivering a good service. We must realise that there will always be risks and things will always happen. Some people fail to accept that, but we need to recognise that improvements have been made and that there is no crisis in police call handling.

Liam McArthur: That is an interesting point, because a lot of the concerns were flagged up by those operating the system. Staff were concerned that they were not getting the support or that the resources were not in place to allow them to manage the risk. As John Finnie said, with three million-plus calls being handled, there is a risk of something going wrong and the concerns were addressed only as a result of staff, as it were, blowing the whistle.

Are there mechanisms in place that would allow for the early identification of problems and thus avoid situations when things do not go according to plan? Things do not need to be emblazoned all over the front pages of the papers or picked up in this committee, for example, if there are internal processes for dealing with those issues far more effectively than has been the case in the past.

Derek Penman: Absolutely. Back in August 2015, we spoke to staff focus groups. Staff were queueing up at our door to tell us about their experiences. That does not happen anymore. As we go around speaking to people, they tell about the improvements that have been made and how things are a lot better. That in itself is a key indicator of how things are going, but your point is valid.

One of our recommendations was for Police Scotland to develop a notable incident process and a culture in its service centre and, indeed, across all Police Scotland, so that staff who think that things might not have been done as well as

they could have been, or who have any concerns about the process, the procedure or the staffing levels—indeed, about any matter that they think is important, because front-line staff pick up the issues first—have a means to flag those concerns up to supervisors in order for them to be recorded and dealt with.

The notable incident process was recently subject to quite a lot of media coverage. The focus was on 95 incidents. Laura Patton did work for us on that issue. It is a really important process to have and Police Scotland should be applauded for taking it on board. It identifies near misses, which can rightly cause concern for the public and others. It is really important that those things are recorded and picked up on and that improvement can be driven. I know for a fact that, when anything is raised, the divisional commander personally takes ownership of it and sees it through to drive improvement. That is a key issue. The ability is needed to create a culture in the organisation in which staff feel supported and supervisors can come down and speak to them directly.

That is a long answer to the question. Staff are in a much better place now than before, and processes are in place for them to raise issues of concern. I would like that culture to be rolled out across Police Scotland in general, in every area of policing.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I fully agree that we need to emphasise the positive work that is being done as well as emphasise the need to continually evaluate concerns.

Further to John Finnie's earlier points, will you elaborate on the exact impact of the instability of ICT systems in C3 on effective call handling? What steps have been taken to improve matters? I know that you have mentioned CRM, but I wonder whether you can elaborate on other steps that have been taken. Will further upgrades to ICT systems in C3 be required?

Derek Penman: That is an excellent question. One of our concerns was about ICT stability. I know that I am sounding very positive today, but what I have said is evidence based, and we have done a lot of work on this. The director of ICT and his team have made call handling a priority and have put a lot of time and resources into that.

Back in 2015, when Police Scotland was coming together, one of the problems was that eight legacy police forces were, in effect, being brought into one police force, and eight legacy ICT systems did not speak to each other to any great extent. Some of that was not particularly well documented. Things worked in their own environments, but they were not particularly well

documented or even understood. Therefore, when things went wrong in those environments, it took a long time to try to work out what the problem was.

There was an element of that in Police Scotland. We had concerns about the network's stability to connect the main three centres: Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Since our early involvement, Police Scotland has invested in a dedicated network, and there is now a lot of bandwidth and resilience to join those centres up. A lot of improvements have been made in that respect.

As I have said, there were at the start of Police Scotland eight legacy command and control systems, none of which spoke to each other. Since our report, Police Scotland has successfully delivered a national command and control system. It still does not take in Aberdeen or Inverness, but it will do so shortly. The fact that the vast majority of calls are being held in a single command and control system means that, for the first time ever, people anywhere in Scotland can see what incidents are happening, and the national force has the ability to manage the resources anywhere and properly deal with things. That is a really significant achievement, and we would expect Police Scotland to have that in a national service. That has been rolled out and is a significant benefit to the national force.

With the customer relationship management software—it is a bit of a mouthful—the system can check the phone number of a person who phones in and bring back their call history. The person who takes the call can therefore see the previous calls, which is really helpful in assessing risk or just dealing with the call. When that system was rolled out nationally, it did not work well. It often stalled, which caused staff to abandon it on some occasions and not use it. Police Scotland has done a lot of work with the supplier of that system, and it now has a stable and refreshed CRM system that works well. When we spoke to staff, we received an assurance about that from them. Those are three tangible examples of where Police Scotland has looked at and brought together its technology.

On the question whether more needs to be done on the technology and whether more investment is needed, Police Scotland's approach was to try to bring everything together into the new national service centre—the three-centre model—with the tested technologies that were available to it at the time, and that is what, in effect, it has done. The plan then was always to consider what call handling would look like in the future, the new ways in which it could be done and the innovations that could take place in that respect. That work was going to happen through an ICT-enabled change, but because of the issues that Police

Scotland has had with the i6 national crime recording system, which the committee will be aware of, it has had to make some difficult decisions on where its investment will go and some of the ICT investment in the future of call handling has been shelved.

What we hope for—probably on the back of Police Scotland's 2026 future strategy, which, as I have said, will be released on Monday—is that the organisation sets out what policing is going to look like going forward. Part of that will be to make it clear how the service centre can use new technologies to make things more effective and efficient and to take away some demand. There are still great opportunities for new technology to be rolled out in the service centre.

13:45

Ben Macpherson: And an evaluation process will need to be carried out on that with regard to the 2026 strategy.

Derek Penman: I would say that—to use a horrible expression—good would look like Police Scotland understanding what it wants from the service centre in the new policing of Scotland that we will have in future. I suspect that that there will be a very strong customer focus, so that those who phone Police Scotland will have a really good customer experience and will get their call dealt with really well. Some of that might be about dealing with calls on the phone and not dispatching police officers. That might lead to demand for officers to do other things in their communities, which might, in turn, require a bit more investment.

I think that more can be done to allow people to report instances of crime in different ways online. That is not new—indeed, it happens in all sorts of sectors—and there could be opportunities in that respect. There could be such an opportunity with regard to the management of call appointments, where a person books an appointment for police officers to go and see them at a time that suits the person. That has happened to some extent in the country, but such a move, too, would require investment.

In response to your question, I think that, once Police Scotland knows where it is, customer contact will play a big part in its strategy. It will then have to work out what it needs, invest in that and, as you have said, evaluate the benefits of it thereafter.

Ben Macpherson: In relation to recommendation 16, can you comment on how the system of numbered notebooks works in practice? Is there any need for the information written down in the course of taking a call to be retained? Should the information that is written in notebooks

by operators be typed up and kept electronically, for example, or is that happening at present?

Derek Penman: This relates to what I think we called "scribble pads". Back in 2015, we were critical of various practices in Police Scotland, including staff jotting down notes on pieces of paper, putting them into Word documents and things like that. Our professional view was that staff need to be able to write on something when a call comes in. As I have said, people who phone in are often distressed and vulnerable, and they do not say, "My name is this, my address is this, and this is why I am calling." It might be someone just shouting out a registration number or something. To our mind, staff need to be able to write things down and capture them at that time; indeed, Police Scotland guidance makes it very clear that that is to be done only to help operators catch such information at the time. Those calls then need to be put into the national systems properly and properly evidenced—the scribble pad is just for taking notes at the time of the call.

We were keen to get some discipline into that process. We asked Police Scotland to issue the notebooks but to ensure that, instead of lots of different things being done, there was one system for recording scribbles, and staff are now being encouraged to go through the scribble pad at the end of their shift or the end of the call, make sure that the things that they have written down have been dealt with and then put a line through those parts of the scribble pad. When the books are finished, they are kept and are subject to audit. There is also a regime, which we have checked, in which supervisors in Police Scotland check that the pages have been scored out and the things on them have been recorded. This was just a safeguard for us. Everything that is in the notebooks must be put onto the system. Our take is that that is achievable, now that the CRM system is working properly. The notebooks are there purely as a back-up for staff to allow them to write things down in extremis.

Ben Macpherson: It is reassuring to learn that those procedures and systems are in place, and that there is diligent record keeping. Thank you.

The Convener: Mr Penman, you say in the report that further work will need to be done to assess the impact of the new risk and vulnerability training package that is being rolled out. Do you have any update on a timetable for that?

Derek Penman: An inspector who has come up from England to do some work for us is listening to some of the calls. I met him last week, and he told me that he is picking up evidence of call takers going through a vulnerability assessment process on what they have just done. We are starting to see some evidence of that coming through.

Police Scotland is whole-heartedly following an approach of trying to manage vulnerability. Again, I understand that more of that will come out when the 2026 strategy is published on Monday, but there is a commitment from Police Scotland to move to a model called THRIVE—the threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement risk management tool—which we have already referred to. We think that that will take place within the call centre as that is the first place that people call, but we also see THRIVE as a model being rolled out right across the whole force, so that front-line officers use the same techniques. THRIVE helps officers and call takers identify those who are most vulnerable and where the greatest threat lies, and it helps them to prioritise.

We are waiting to see what Police Scotland intends to do as part of its new strategy. We think that it will be much bigger than what we had envisaged happening within the service centre, and we really welcome that. Once we have seen the plans and the detail behind them, we will seek to inspect and evaluate them. I am not sure of our timescale yet because we have not yet seen the detail behind the full plans.

The Convener: Are you assured that once all the training is complete, there will be a level of consistency across all call handlers? I understand that no two calls are the same and that people's approach to the calls will never be the same, but are you assured that there will be a level of consistency across the service?

Derek Penman: That is what Police Scotland has to be able to deliver, and it will be done through an investment in training and in the processes that are there. We are not there yet, because Police Scotland is still rolling this out.

As for checks and balances, we will encourage Police Scotland to bring in its own quality assurance mechanisms. As well as the inspections that we carry out, we expect supervisors to listen in to the calls that are coming in to the teams that they manage to assure themselves that there is consistency and to ensure that, where there are development needs, people are getting encouragement and being trained.

We are also keen for Police Scotland to do its own independent quality assurance. That would be done not by the manager and not even necessarily in that environment but by somebody elsewhere. An independent quality assurance unit that is going to be set up in Aberdeen will have the ability to listen to calls anywhere in the country to make sure that there is consistency.

Consistency is absolutely what has to be striven for. The training has to support it and Police Scotland will have to do internal checks. We would

be looking for feedback from that quality assurance process to go to the SPA to ensure that it has visibility on whether that quality standard is starting to be met and, if it is not, how it will be met.

The Convener: That is helpful. Do members have any other questions?

Rona Mackay: Forgive me if I have missed this in your report, but can you give us an idea of the average waiting time when people call in? Are there any statistics for that?

Derek Penman: The reality is that 999 calls have to be answered within 10 seconds. I think that currently 97 per cent—

Laura Paton (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland): I think that the current average is about four seconds.

Derek Penman: The average time to answer is four seconds, yes, but 97 per cent of the calls are being answered within the 10 seconds that they are required to be answered in. In summary, 97 per cent of emergency calls are being answered within 10 seconds, but the average call-handling time is four seconds.

For the 101 calls—the non-emergency calls—the target is 40 seconds, and 98 per cent of those calls are being answered within that time, with the average time to answer being five seconds. Given people's experience of other agencies and commercial practices, that probably demonstrates that the call-handling times—even for the non-emergency calls—are being met.

We were encouraged by the grade of service. However, we need more than that, and we are quite keen for Police Scotland to develop a balanced performance framework that would pick up, say, repeat calls. If people do not get the service that they need, they phone back; if somebody who is not getting a service has to phone back eight times and their call gets answered quickly eight times, that might almost validate the service as a good one. However, it might not be, given that they had to phone eight times to get the service that they needed.

Ben Macpherson: I would emphasise your earlier point about the majority of call handlers doing a fine job, but I also want to highlight two issues that constituents have raised with me. The first relates to your comment about the time gap between the call and officers attending, while the second is about crime trends. Unfortunately, in the area that I represent, certain crime trends are recurring, and some of my constituents get frustrated when they phone up either 101 or 999, state the type of crime and are then asked almost to legitimise or prove it during the call. You talk about "training" and "awareness" in

recommendation 13, but in your experience, is there a sense that call handlers are being informed about particular crime trends in parts of the country to expedite the process?

Derek Penman: That is not something that we have picked up on as part of our assurances. We were keen for Police Scotland to be able to provide real-time information to its staff, and it has put up screens in the service centre that can brief staff. It also has briefings for its staff—particularly the control room staff, before they start—to talk about some of these things.

I think that a maturity is starting to develop in Police Scotland. If we consider what good will look like—to use that expression again—it will involve the service centre being aware of particular crime trends in particular areas, and probably Police Scotland having a view on which types of calls will be attended in which areas depending on the priority that they are given at the time. I suppose that there is a challenge for Police Scotland to be able to do that going forward. It is also important that constituents and others can feed back to Police Scotland on their experiences of call handling, because that will create a virtuous circle whereby Police Scotland can pick up on that and make that improvement.

Ben Macpherson: Thank you for that. The issue might be one for me to pick up with Police Scotland, but I add that your earlier point about call history could help in that respect.

Derek Penman: Yes. Again, you make a valid point. The nature of Scotland is such that one size does not fit all, and things that have an impact on some communities will have less of an impact on others, particularly in the case of minor crime. I think that the point behind your question is that it is important for the service centre to be able to deal with that so that people get the response that the local policing team, the local commander and communities have agreed the local area will get, and there is a need for the service centre to understand that and to be able to support that front-line policing.

Ben Macpherson: Absolutely. Thank you.

Liam McArthur: I very much welcome what you have said, Mr Penman. As you were speaking, it occurred to me not only that individuals can move house, so the association between individuals and phone numbers needs to be handled carefully, but that trends can change over time, so we would not want the system to be locked into particular perspectives on certain postcodes having issues of some type. We would not want a situation where there had been a change but the history that had been logged was difficult to shift. You will need some assurance that the information is being

updated in real time to ensure that it remains as accurate and relevant as possible.

Derek Penman: That is exactly right, and it comes back to my point about the maturity of Police Scotland. As I have said, it has made considerable improvements in moving from where it was to where it is now. It knows where it is going and there is a strong focus on customer service going forward.

The CRM call history is only a guide, and I think that staff are aware that it is there just to inform them and help them make a threat assessment. If the call history shows things such as domestic abuse, the call handler has a heads-up. The call at the time might not be about domestic abuse, but the fact that there is a history in the household can help to inform the call handler about vulnerability, which is really important.

As we move to the future, if local policing teams are delivering a service with local priorities that have been agreed at a really local level, it will be good for the service centre to be aware of that when calls come in so that it can support what is being delivered on the front line. I think that that was my point. However, that is probably a bit further away.

The Convener: We have literally a couple of minutes left, Mr Penman. We have covered a huge number of areas today, but is there anything that we have not covered and which you want to bring to our attention before I bring this session to a close?

Derek Penman: With my usual fast-paced delivery, I think that I have managed to cover most things. [*Laughter.*] I apologise for that. I always enjoy reading the *Official Report*, which makes more sense, I think, than what I actually said at the meeting. [*Laughter.*]

It is important to recognise where we are. HMIC comes along and produces critical reports, but our intention is to add value; we set a path, I think, in relation to improvements. It is similar with stop and search, on which we published another critical report yesterday. We are seeing Police Scotland taking our reports seriously and working hard to deliver improvements, but it is also important that I come back and report to you on the improvements have been made—as long as that is evidenced, which it is in this case.

As Mr Finnie has said, there will always be a degree of risk in call handling; again, the point about a hostage to fortune is relevant here. Things will happen, and that will continue, so the issue is how that risk is mitigated. To me, it is also how others respond when things come through. When things happen, it is important that the PIRC and other people can investigate them independently and that we can learn from that.

It is great for me to get a chance to come along and update the committee. I know that you have an interest in what is happening, and I thank you for this opportunity.

The Convener: Thank you very much for coming along. It has been a very useful session and I am sure that we will return to the subject.

Before we move into private session, I note that our next meeting will be on Thursday 16 March, when we will take evidence from the Auditor General for Scotland on her 2015-16 audit of the Scottish Police Authority.

13:59
Meeting continued in private until 14:11.