

Case 2 Issue 41 – Call handling		
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Failure to identify risks to protect a victim of domestic abuse

A call handler failed to appropriately assess a phone call which led to a missed opportunity to protect a victim of domestic abuse, raising issues about:

- *How call handlers assess potential domestic abuse incidents*
- *How target response times are managed in the control room*

This case is relevant to the following areas:

Call handling		Public protection	
Personal safety		Information management	

Overview of incident

Ms A contacted the police and asked to speak to an officer she had dealt with previously. She explained she wanted to “reactivate a court order” against her ex-husband as he had been in contact with her.

In a statement to the IOPC, PC B stated he took the phone call. He said Ms A was asking to speak to an officer who PC B was aware was not in the office at that time. He recalled that Ms A stated her court order had expired in relation to her ex-husband and she wanted to renew it as he had been in contact with her.

PC B emailed the officer to relay the information Ms A told him. He also added no new offences had been disclosed by Ms A. PC B did not receive a response to this email and stated to the IOPC that no further action was taken. He did not believe there was immediate risk to Ms A as no offences were disclosed.

Unbeknown to PC B, the officer he emailed took an unexpected long-term absence from work and did not see the email for a further four months.

A week later, the control room received a 999 call from Ms A. Ms A explained that herself and her ex-husband went through “*a bit of a domestic violence case last year*”. She could hear loud

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banging at the door which she believed was her ex-husband. Call handler C coded the call as 'suspicious circumstances' which had a response time of 60 minutes.

In her interview to the IOPC, call handler C stated she did not recall Ms A mentioning domestic abuse and she believed Ms A was safe behind the door. Call handler C did not update the computer system used by call handlers to document the actions taken with the domestic abuse information provided by Ms A. Ms C further explained to the IOPC she did not flag domestic abuse as Ms A was not sure if it was her ex-husband at the door, and she did not display signs of someone under duress.

Call handler C told the IOPC Ms A's number did not appear to have been used to contact the police for assistance in the last three months. There were no associated police dispatches connected to her number. The call Ms A made a week before the assault was made with the same number. However, because this call was transferred via the switchboard, no further information about this call was available.

College of Policing domestic abuse Authorised Professional Practice (APP): Context and dynamics of domestic abuse

"Seemingly low-level or minor events which may in fact amount to a pattern of behaviour or a course of conduct indicative of stalking or harassment may be misinterpreted as non-crime incidents but to do so has potentially serious consequences. If an incident fits the definition of domestic abuse, it must be recorded as a domestic abuse incident".

More information: <https://www.college.police.uk/app/major-investigation-and-public-protection/domestic-abuse/context-and-dynamics-domestic-abuse>

Furthermore, no intelligence checks were conducted at the time of Ms A's call. Dispatch operators D and E were responsible for dispatching appropriate units to incidents and managing the outstanding incident list. They were working on the day of Ms A's assault. They told the IOPC a support operator connected to the dispatch team would undertake intelligence checks when requested. Dispatch officer D informed the IOPC there were no support operators working in the unit on the day of Ms A's assault. It was identified through the investigation that force policy required two support operators to work on the unit at given time.

Had an intelligence check been conducted, it would have revealed seven intelligence logs in relation to Ms A. This included three police reports regarding the safeguarding of her children, intelligence logs relating to domestic violence disclosure scheme requests, information about a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), and previous crime reports relating to domestic abuse offences where the woman's ex-husband had committed serious assaults against the woman.

Following a previous domestic abuse where Ms A's husband threatened to kill her, a force 'special scheme' form was linked to Ms A's address to alert call takers to the possible risk and information linked to the address. This meant if Ms A called for police assistance from her address, it would be allocated an immediate response time of 15 minutes. This was initially in place for three months. It had expired at the time of the woman's 999 call. It was determined by an officer this could be deleted due to the time passed with no additional incidents and non-compliance by Ms A in the investigation against her ex-husband as she felt safe in her home. Ms A was not contacted about this decision. The IOPC investigation found there was no force

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guidance that states victims should be informed when this scheme is created or deleted. There was also no guidance about when and why it would be appropriate to delete this scheme.

In the control room at the time of the call from Ms A, Mr D only circulated the first line on the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) which was '*someone's buzzing at my door, don't know who it is*'. A unit accepted it. There was no clear description of what the officers were attending.

Within the 60 minute response window allocated to the woman's 999 call, PC F and PC G accepted to go to Ms A's address. While enroute, they volunteered to attend another incident with a higher grading. Dispatch officer D assigned PC F and PC G to the newer call but believed they would attend both calls. PC F and PC G did not tell the control room they were not attending Ms A's call when they accepted the other call. The officers believed the control room were aware they had diverted from Ms A's call as they had relayed their time of arrival to the higher graded call to the control room.

Communications supervisor H was in the control room when Ms A made her call to the police. She had overall responsibility for reviewing the incidents that came into the control room, making sure calls were assigned on time and target response times were met. She explained there were a volume of calls coming in and "*somebody behind closed doors unfortunately didn't take my focus*". This quote does not acknowledge the serious nature of domestic abuse cases.

It was not identified that police had not attended to the woman until two and a half hours later, when the woman made a further call from hospital to the police. The woman's ex-husband had seriously assaulted her, causing deep lacerations to her face.

Dispatch officers D and E were asked by the IOPC why they had not noticed the response time to attend Ms A's address had elapsed. They explained it was difficult to keep track of the target response time because there was no prompt on the CAD system to alert a user if a call was nearing the target time.

Ms A's ex-partner was later convicted of assault occasioning actual bodily harm (ABH) and sentenced to 18 weeks imprisonment suspended for two years.

Type of investigation

IOPC independent investigation

Findings and recommendations

Local recommendations

Finding 1

1. Ms A, who had previously been a victim of domestic abuse and had been included on a special scheme, was removed from the scheme without her knowledge. When she reported a further threat to the police, this information was not considered when the call was graded.

Finding 2

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- Ms A contacted the police to report a person banging on her door that she believed to be her ex-husband. A unit was allocated but diverted to a higher graded call enroute. No other units were allocated to Ms A's address. Approximately two and half hours later, Ms A called the police from hospital, reporting her ex-husband forced entry into the property and assaulted her.

Finding 3

- The original unit tasked to attend Ms A's address was diverted to another incident. No other units attended, and the target response time of 60 minutes was missed.

Local recommendation 1

- To safeguard the victim during domestic abuse investigations, their address can be location marked and included in a special scheme that identifies they are at risk. It is recommended the force should take the necessary steps to make sure a victim is made aware, from the outset, how long this marker is likely to be in place for and that it may be withdrawn following an assessment of risk by the force. It is also recommended that at the time of review, the officer conducting the risk assessment should attempt to contact the victim to inform them of the force's intention to remove the marker so they are aware of this intended action. If contact with the victim is not possible, then all attempts (and the outcome) should be recorded by the officer concerned.

Local recommendation 2

- It is recommended guidance is provided about the steps to be taken by control room staff and officers. This will make sure that if a unit deployed to an incident is diverted, the original incident is still attended.

Local recommendation 3

- It is recommended the force considers developing a countdown or flagging system to highlight when attendance at an incident is delayed.

Response to the recommendations

Local recommendations

Local recommendation 1

- The special scheme policy has been amended. Now once a scheme has been implemented, the officer in charge (OIC) must make contact with the victim concerned and explain what a special scheme is and how long it will be in place for. It must be explained the scheme will be withdrawn after a maximum period of six months if the risk no longer exists. Once the special scheme maximum time has elapsed, the OIC must contact the victim to see if the scheme is extended or withdrawn. All contacts with the victim must be recorded on the appropriate crime report. This is the responsibility of the OIC.

Local recommendations 2 and 3

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2. The force control room has written a standard operating procedure which details the actions to be taken by control room staff and officers. This will make sure if a unit deployed to an incident is diverted, the original incident is still attended. This guidance has received authorisation for publication and will be disseminated and responses recorded when the guidance has been read.

This new procedure includes the following:

- When a dispatch operator re-assigns a unit to an alternative CAD, the original CAD must be tagged with a divert tag.
- The controller is made aware of the re-assignment by the dispatch operator in order to review that the re-assignment is appropriate based on the level of apparent comparative risk with the original incident.
- If the controller assesses that re-assignment is inappropriate, an intervention will take place overriding the re-assignment. The response unit will be informed they have been re-assigned to the original incident. If there is any challenge to this decision, then this must be referred to the control rooms dispatch duty officer.
- If the decision is assessed as appropriate by the controller, the re-assignment must be highlighted on CAD for the attention of the ops room-based inspector. They will review available response units and task dispatch staff to identify an available unit and assign one to the original incident. Results of this action will be recorded on the CAD and overseen by the dispatch controller.
- Should an operational divert take place, the appropriate recording of that action will be made facilitating an effective auditing capacity via the Demand and Resource Information System (DARIS). This provides a set of standard reports, which allows analysis of CAD incidents and Contact Handling System (CHS) demands.
- The Quality Assurance Review Team (QART) will regularly review the DIVERT tag list using the DARIS system.
- QART will also be available to carry out urgent reviews using DARIS system to conduct further investigations.

Outcomes for officers and staff

During the investigation, there was no indication any police officer had behaved in a manner that would justify the bringing of disciplinary proceedings or had committed a criminal offence.

Questions to consider

Questions for policy makers and managers

1. How does your force support officers and staff to identify potential cases of domestic abuse?
2. What process does your force have to make sure victims at high-risk of domestic abuse receive an urgent response from the police when they call?
3. How does your force make sure information from all phone calls are recorded on internal systems?

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4. What steps does your force take to notify victims that support measures are ending, for example the 'special scheme' referenced in this case?

Questions for police officers and police staff

5. What steps do you take to conduct intelligence checks for potential victims of domestic abuse?
6. What steps do you take to track whether target response times for officers to attend an incident are met?