

# Welcome to the new era of prudent policing

*In May the new chancellor George Osborne announced the much-expected plans for a £6.2bn spending cut. The resulting shockwave is likely to be felt across all public sector organisations for some years to come. However, whilst everyone waits anxiously to find out where the axe will fall, it is important to remember that maintaining and indeed improving service delivery and reduced expenditure are not incompatible bedfellows, writes Jamie Wilson at NICE Systems.*

**W**ith investments that have been made by police forces in recent years, many are well placed to demonstrate to Whitehall that they can deliver better front-line services and streamline back-office processes whilst reducing costs. A prime example of this can be found in the command and control room, where a number of forward thinking and prudent forces have recently proven that speculating to accumulate in the realm of “quality assurance” has reaped significant rewards.

You may not yet be familiar with the term “quality assurance” but it is a fundamental part of the mantra that commercial contact centres adhere to, in the ongoing quest to deliver service excellence against a backdrop of relentless boardroom pressures to minimise operating costs. Essentially, it is recognising the importance, influence, contribution and impact of those taking calls and putting processes in place that motivate them and facilitate continual personal development and consistent performance improvement.

Call takers are rarely trained police officers but they must be highly skilled in their own right. In the majority of cases they are the first port of call for the public in an emergency and how they handle the initial contact is not only paramount in creating a positive first impression, it is vital to how the incident is managed and plays a key role in how much it costs. When call takers get it right, the call is handled swiftly with the right information given and received, the appropriate level of response is dispatched to the right place at the right time, with front-line officers able to arrive at the scene with the information they need to hit the ground running. The result is a swift and efficient process that is completed at the optimum cost. Get it wrong and the costs, whether financial, resource, reputation or in some instances even human life can spiral.

Despite this it seems strange that maintaining quality in the command and control room has yet to be mandated, although many believe that it is only a matter of time and are already putting the right systems and procedures in place. In fact, one force has recently employed a former call centre manager to implement the well-proven processes that are ingrained in the commercial sector, to deliver consistently high standards of service with the smallest amount of unnecessary resource wastage – and it is delivering results.

As I mentioned earlier, many forces have already made significant investments to bring the technology in their command and control centres up-to-date, and crucially the move from tape-based to digital recording has provided a solid bedrock on which a quality assurance programme can be overlaid with ease.

At the heart of every quality assurance initiative is the requirement for call takers to learn and grow from past experience, so therefore having an instantly accessible repository of all calls (digital recording and storage makes this archiving possible) that are tagged by incident reference and call taker ID etc, makes it easy to search and retrieve examples of calls that can be used for ongoing training and coaching programmes.

Team leaders can tailor and monitor an ongoing quality assurance programme to respond to the specific requirements of each call taker. For example, some personnel might need to improve the clarity of instruction that they provide to the caller, others may need to learn how to help calm a person in distress in order to obtain the necessary information, whilst others may need training with regard to following the correct processes to ensure the incident is met with the appropriate response.

Furthermore, call takers do not need to leave their workstation for lengthy training sessions as they can replay and review examples of best and worst practise – from either their own calls or those of their peers – in situ during quiet periods, breaks, or allocated training times. Whilst replaying these examples, call takers can evaluate their own performance with input and coaching from their team leaders.

For team leaders and senior officers, quality assurance can be invaluable in conducting detailed post mortems of how incidents were managed from beginning to end. From looking at the affect the call takers performance had on the subsequent chain of events and thus providing a continual review cycle of performance as well as expenditure.

The return on investment that can be achieved from quality assurance will vary from force to force but be assured that if you are able to present a project proposal that demonstrates a significant cost saving over a two or three year period, that has the potential to improve front-line services, it will be an attractive proposition to those that are holding the purse strings ever tighter.



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