

How a call handler's reassuring voice helps people reporting crime

Published on 17 May 2021 | Written by Janice Stanford-Eyre, Essex Police

Shift in the life of ... there's no such thing as a typical day in the control room

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The alarm goes off at 4am. I don't feel ready for this – it's dark and cold, and I want to sleep! Duty pulls me out of bed and I go about the morning routine in a fog of tiredness. I make the familiar journey to Chelmsford and the control room, and find my desk for the day. I log in and check the emails to see what has occurred in my absence.

It's now 6am. We wait for Essex to wake up, which usually takes a couple of hours. Some people ring in to enquire why they haven't been contacted about the incident they reported last night. One lady calls to say that police attended an incident in her road last night and she's found a police hat on the pavement. There's no name on it but it'll need to be collected, or the officer may have some explaining to do!

Essex starts to wake up. We have a couple of calls from people who have realised they were broken into during the night: 'We never heard a thing, the dog didn't even bark!' It was a shock for them to discover first thing in the morning, and they feel violated and unsafe ('we were in the house!').

As the rush hour begins, so do the RTCs (road traffic collisions). There are two car crashes on the M11 – one car looks like a write-off, but luckily there are no injuries. Our traffic unit is dispatched on an emergency response. It's also been raining heavily in the night and we have further calls about flooding in the road, so we ring Highways to inform them.

I have a little smile to myself as I remember a call in the summer about cars stopping on the M11 because a mother duck and her ducklings were crossing the road.

Lunchtime looms. I'm feeling hungry, but that disappears when I take a call from a 16-year-old male, who tells me that he can't cope any more. He has cut himself with a knife but he doesn't

want to die. His sister has just had a baby. This goes on an emergency straight away, and officers are dispatched within three minutes. I have to talk to him about anything I can to distract him from his misery – luckily, I am good at small talk! Officers arrive and I feel relief as I can hang up the phone.

COVID-19 has really affected Essex this year. People are low and weary. You can hear it in their voices. The number of mental health incidents has gone through the roof, and even the force control room team is quieter. Because of the onset of lockdown restrictions, more calls are coming in from the public reporting their neighbours for flouting the rules: 'We're following the rules, why don't they? What makes them think they are special?'

Gone are the past calls about drunken people leaving the pub. Instead, we have members of the public who are tired of being tied to the house and resentful of those who ignore the restrictions.

After lunch, we receive a flurry of calls. There's a domestic, involving a woman who tells me that 'he didn't mean to hit me, he loves me'. I spend time with this caller. There are three horses in the road. A driver has hit a dog and is upset, so I reassure him it wasn't his fault. It gets busier. Essex is up and running but I am not. I feel tired but this is my job, so I make sure that nobody will hear it in my voice.

Finally, it's time to go home and hang up the headset for another day. I tend not to reflect on my day too much, so I can have some time to myself. There is no typical day in the control room.

- This article was peer reviewed by Nichola Rew, Analyst, City of London Police

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