

EXEMPTION NOTICE

Reference: 2328/09

Information Requested:

Direct dial numbers.

Harm

Section 31 (1) (a) (b) (c)

West Midlands Police (WMP) provide a local rate 0845 number for members of the public to contact the police for non-emergencies. Calls to a geographic number would not enter the call handling system. Therefore calls directed at any other number than 0845 may not be processed by the Call Centre. This may result in calls being 'lost' or remaining unanswered, or at best there would be a delay.

There is evidence that the introduction of the 0845 number and related call answering system has dramatically increased the percentage of calls answered and decreased the time taken to answer those calls. This has improved the ability of the public to contact the police and WMP's capacity to answer those calls appropriately and quickly.

Misdirected and failing calls have fallen since the introduction of a single contact point. Again this has improved the accessibility of the police and enhanced the operational effectiveness and efficiency of WMP.

Section 38 (1) (a) (b)

If direct dial numbers for stations were used by the public, there is a danger that there could be some delay to the appropriate police response. People sometimes call their local police station to report things which are really emergencies. However emergencies are best dealt with centrally by staff who are trained in recognising emergencies and who know who is the best person to deal with the call. In addition, while many police stations are not open all day, the central switchboard is staffed 24 hours a day.

Public Interest Test

Issues favouring disclosure:

Choice

If the direct dial numbers were made public, then the public could choose which number they preferred to dial – the direct dial number or the central switchboard.

Issues favouring non-disclosure:

Efficient and effective conduct of the service

The proportion of calls answered has risen from 90 per cent to 99.5 per cent since the introduction of a single contact number. It is self-evident that this means that the WMP is now not only more efficient, but is dealing with the public more effectively.

Public Safety

The ability of WMP to respond to emergencies could be compromised if direct dial numbers were released. If OCUs were flooded with phone calls they may cease to be effective at answering those calls. If individuals are delayed/not able to get through them it is possible that some crimes may go undetected, or even unreported.

Flow of Information to the Service

Where the release of information may deter the public from providing information in the future, then this will inhibit the service's ability to carry out its public functions. An example of this would be someone failing to get through to the police on the phone, leading to the non-reporting of an incident and unwillingness to contact WMP in the future.

Conclusion

For a public interest test, issues that favour release need to be measured against issues that favour non-disclosure. The public interest is not what interests the public, or a particular individual, but what will be the greater good, if released, to the community as a whole.

While we recognise that release of this information may assist in those members of the public who wish to use direct dial numbers, on balance it is considered that the public interest in disclosing these data is outweighed by the potential consequences to the safety of the public. A delay in providing the correct response to an emergency call could endanger the safety of members of the public. As noted by the Information Commissioner, in a Decision Notice regarding the release of NHS Direct geographical numbers "The health and safety of the public must be paramount and it is therefore difficult to envisage public interest arguments so strong that would justify the disclosure of information which would or would be likely to endanger the health and safety of an individual." (ICO Decision Notice FS500108885)

Furthermore release of the information requested would be likely to affect the effective operation of WMP if it were in the public domain. A direct dial number would not enter the same system as the 0845 number. Since the introduction of the 0845 number, the number of misdirected and unanswered calls to WMP has reduced, by as much as 100,000 per month. This represents a significant improvement in the service offered to the majority of the public.

Clear lines of communication between the public and the police are a key element in effective policing. There is clear evidence that the introduction of the new single number has improved WMP's ability to receive and answer calls from the public effectively. If the direct dial numbers were in the public domain it is likely that there would be an increase in misdirected and unanswered calls.

On balance the need for the police to effectively carry out operations and communicate effectively with the public must take precedence over the desire of some people to use direct dial numbers. This means that in this case at this time it would not be in the public interest to release this information. West Midlands Police will not disclose information that could harm individuals, or that could compromise the operational effectiveness of its officers.