



## **Devon and Cornwall Police and Crime Panel**

**24<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

### **Public Engagement: improving police contact services**

#### **Context**

This paper provides analysis of Devon and Cornwall Police's contact services performance and the steps that the Police and Crime Commissioner has taken to drive improvements and increase the accessibility of policing services for the public. This paper follows a request by the Panel to be provided with additional performance information relating to contact services after changes to internal processes and therefore reporting and monitoring data.

The delivery of contact services is a responsibility of the Chief Constable of Devon and Cornwall Police who has operational independence in law. The role of the Commissioner is to set the strategic priorities for policing through the Police and Crime Plan and to hold the Chief Constable to account for the delivery of an effective and efficient police service. This paper therefore represents the way in which the Commissioner is monitoring performance and improvement in contact in her regular oversight and scrutiny activities.

The Commissioner has invested significantly in contact services and called on the Chief Constable to put in place a number of mitigations to address poor performance. The key introductions of switchboard triage and a callback function are already delivering improvements, and the force is now focusing on consolidating improvement activity and maximising productivity.

#### **Background**

The Panel last received a full report on contact services in January 2023, followed by interim reporting data in the Police and Crime Panel scorecard in September 2023.

In February 2023 His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services published the 2021/22 PEEL assessment of Devon and Cornwall Police, which found the force to be inadequate in the field of responding to the public. The assessment recommended that "the force should improve the time it takes to answer emergency and non-emergency calls for service and reduce its abandonment rate".

The Chief Constable has recognised and accepted the findings of HMICFRS, and acknowledged that the Force has an enduring issue with the time taken to answer calls from the public. The main causes have been assessed as multi-factorial and include shortages in



staffing numbers as a result of ongoing recruitment challenges and high staff turnover, high sickness absence, associated challenges with facilitating training, limitations of outdated computer systems and lengthy processes and procedures.

In response to these findings, a significant programme of work continues to operate under the leadership of the Chief Constable and Deputy Chief Constable. The focus of this work is to deliver clear and sustainable improvements across contact services and includes a priority focus on improving the speed at which 999 calls are answered. It should be noted, however, that the need for improvement had already been identified before the inspection, and has been monitored by the Commissioner consistently, as demonstrated in her [2020 scrutiny of 101](#) reported to the Panel.

The Commissioner receives regular updates on progress on improving contact services through formal reports to the Policing and Crime Joint Executive Board, attendance by the OPCC Executive Team at Force improvement boards and through her regular bilateral discussions with the Chief Constable.

As reported to the Panel earlier this year, in November 2022 the Commissioner wrote to the Chief Constable to confirm her clear expectations for service improvement in four areas:

- i. 90% of 999 calls should be answered within 10 seconds by the end of 2022
- ii. All 101 calls (P1 and P2) should be triaged by the end of November 2022
- iii. A 101 callback function must be delivered as a top priority
- iv. Re-opening of front desks with a new plan for the next six locations

Although additional work is required to deliver the level of service that the Commissioner expects on behalf of the public, the Chief Constable has demonstrated improvements in all four areas.

90% of 999 calls should be answered within 10 seconds by the end of 2022	<b>Achieved ✓</b>  90% was achieved in December 2022. Progress has been made within 2023 with over 90% achieved since August 2023.
All 101 calls (P1 and P2) should be triaged by the end of November 2022	<b>Achieved ✓</b>  The triage function went live in November 2022.
A 101 callback function of AACCC7 must be delivered as a top priority	<b>Achieved ✓</b>  The call back function went live in September 2023
Re-opening of front desks with a new plan for the next six locations	<b>Achieved ✓</b>  6 front desks were re-opened in 2022/23 and a further 6 are being opened in 2023/2024

## **999**

### **999 national rankings**

National performance rankings for 999 were introduced in October 2022, and are [published on Police.uk](#).

Devon and Cornwall Police were ranked 38<sup>th</sup> out of 44 forces (where 1<sup>st</sup> is best performing) in October 22, and dropped to 41<sup>st</sup> in November 2022. In August 2023 Devon and Cornwall were ranked as the best performing force in the UK with 88% of calls answered within 10 seconds.

<b>National League Position for D&amp;C</b>	
Oct-22	38th
Nov-22	41st
Dec-22	37th
Jan-23	33rd
Feb-23	28th
Mar-23	25th
Apr-23	27th
May-23	28th
Jun-23	10th
Jul-23	15th
Aug-23	1st
Sep-23	28th

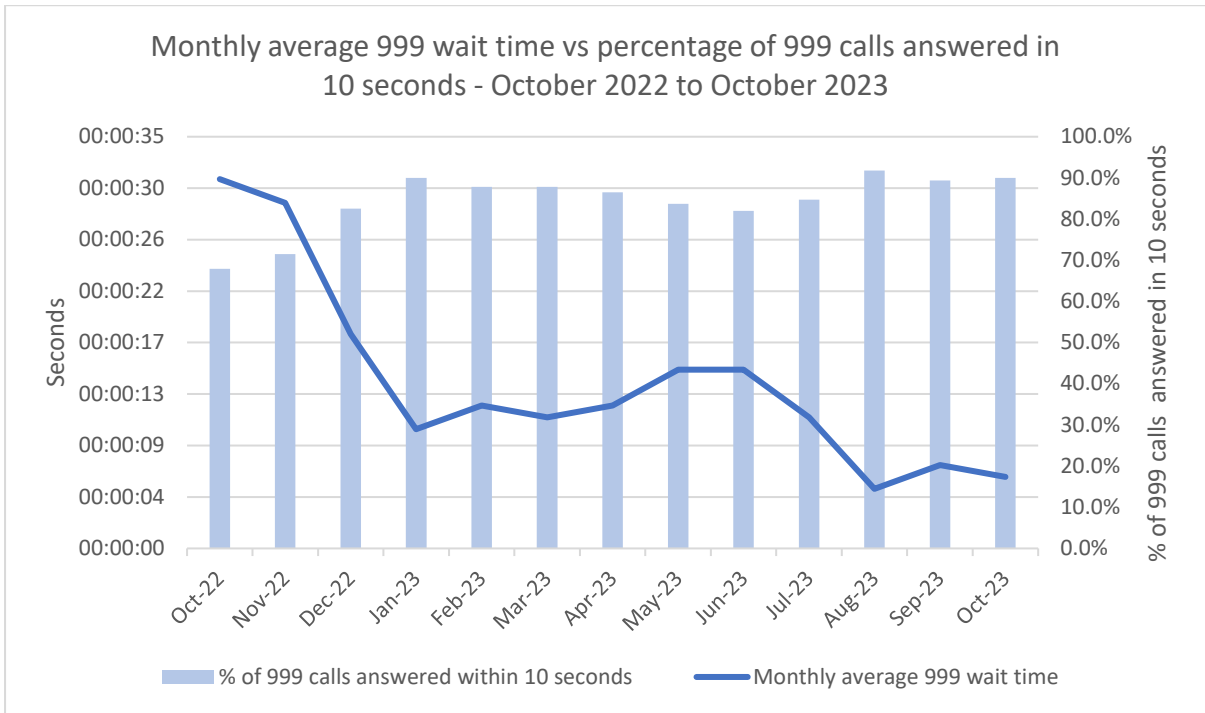
In September 2023 Devon and Cornwall Police dropped to 28<sup>th</sup> position and 76.5% of calls answered within 10 seconds. This was due to a technical IT fault, which means that the automated transferred of data from the BT 99 hub to Devon and Cornwall's contact centre has been disrupted and a verbal handover of the caller details therefore has to take place, taking around 2-5 seconds before the call can be fully transferred to Devon and Cornwall Police and counted as answered. This fault is ongoing with significant work being undertaken to resolve it with the IT supplier.

### **999 average wait time**

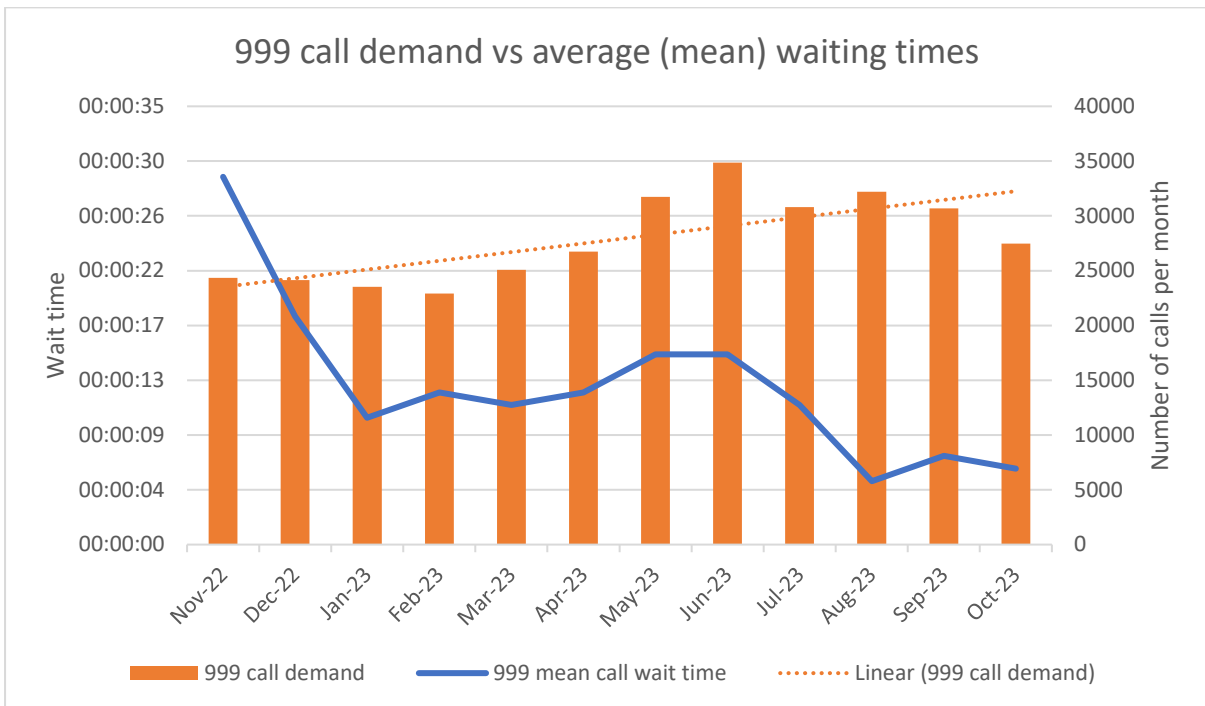
In October 2023 the average (mean) wait time for a 999 call to be answered by Devon and Cornwall Police was 6 seconds<sup>1</sup>. This is a reduction of 25 seconds since a peak at 31 second answering times in October 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> The mean answer time on Police.uk is recorded as 15.19 seconds in September 2023 and 10.01 seconds in August 2023. This is because Police.uk includes the time taken for BT to answer and transfer the call to Devon and Cornwall Police. This time period is not within the control of the Devon and Cornwall Police contact centre and therefore out of scope of the Commissioner's scrutiny.

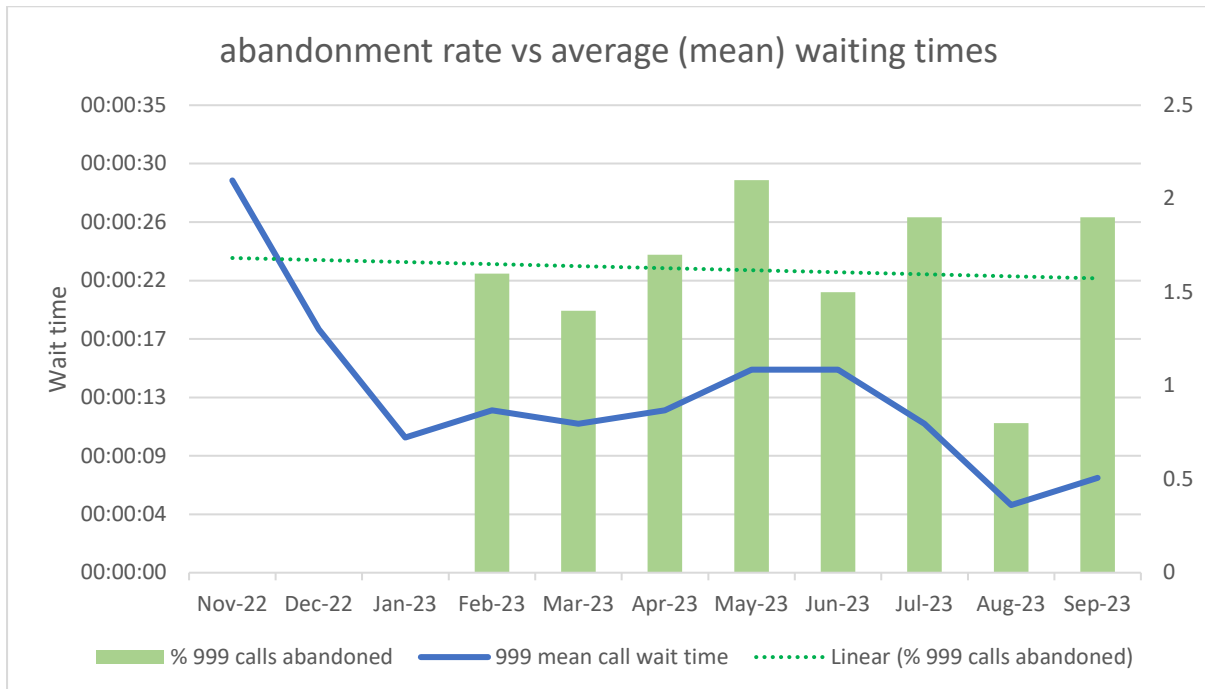


During 2023 the number of 999 calls has increased, with a peak of 34,861 in June 2023. Call handling times have continued to reduce overall, despite this increase.



## 999 abandonment rates

The percentage of 999 calls abandoned has averaged 1.6% in 2023 with a peak of 2.1% in May 2023, and a low 0.8% in August. This has increased to 2.4% in October, which is likely to be linked to the technical fault and verbal handover. There has been no demonstrable correlation between wait times and abandonment rates in 2023.



## 101

### 101 process and system changes

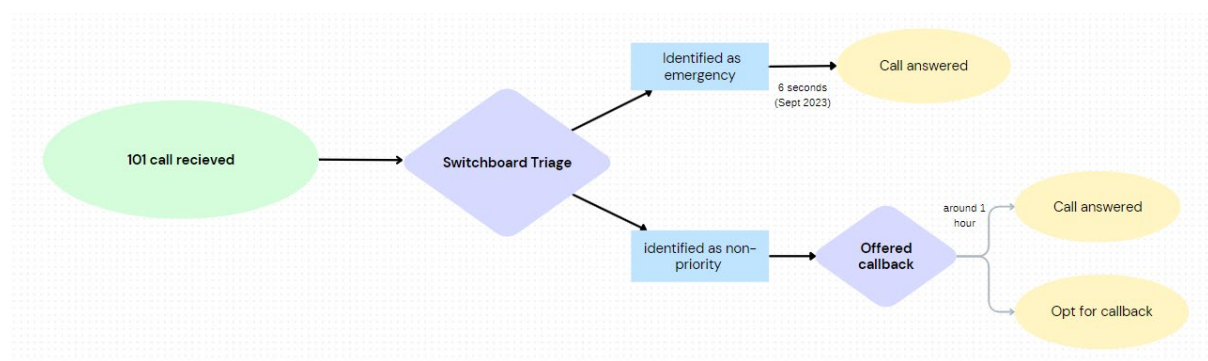
Following prolonged periods of poor performance, as reported to the Police and Crime Panel in the scorecard and performance report, the Commissioner and Chief Constable agreed that significant change was required to improve contact services. In addition to 'back office' changes in process, technology, shift patterns, management and training, two key customer focused changes were agreed:

- i. The introduction of a switchboard 'triage' for 101 calls
- ii. The introduction of a call back function for 101 calls

The new switchboard triage service for 101 calls was implemented for all 101 calls in September 2022 meaning that every caller will speak to an operator. The aim is to answer all switchboard calls within 30 seconds, although the latest average (mean) wait time is currently 1 minute 17 seconds (as at August 2023) with 77% being answered within 30 seconds. The switchboard operator will consider whether the call is an emergency or a vulnerable person and refer these calls to be answered as a priority. In October 2023 these calls were answered in an average of 13 seconds from transfer from switchboard.

In May 2023 the interactive voice response (IVR) menu was simplified to improve the customer experience and simplify the customer journey. Prior to this point the customer would self-identify whether their call met the definition of a priority 1 (P1) or priority 2 (P2) call using an interactive voice response (IVR) menu. Depending on the self-identified

definition the customer would be placed into a P1 or P2 queue, with P1 calls being answered significantly faster than P2.



Since May 2023, following triage all non-emergency calls are placed in a single queue to be answered, with the average (mean) wait time at just under 47 minutes in October 2023. A review is taking place to ensure public satisfaction and effectiveness in demand management.

In addition to the amalgamation of 101 lines, Devon and Cornwall Police updated their telephony platform to a new system called AACC7 in the September 2023. This updated platform provides additional technological solutions that have enabled the option for customers to receive a call back on non-priority 101 calls (rather than waiting in a queue) as well as greater operational control systems to allow for agile management of call volumes.

Call backs are currently offered between 0800 and 1800hrs each day. All callers will be contacted the same day before 2200 and most callers will be contacted within one or two hours.

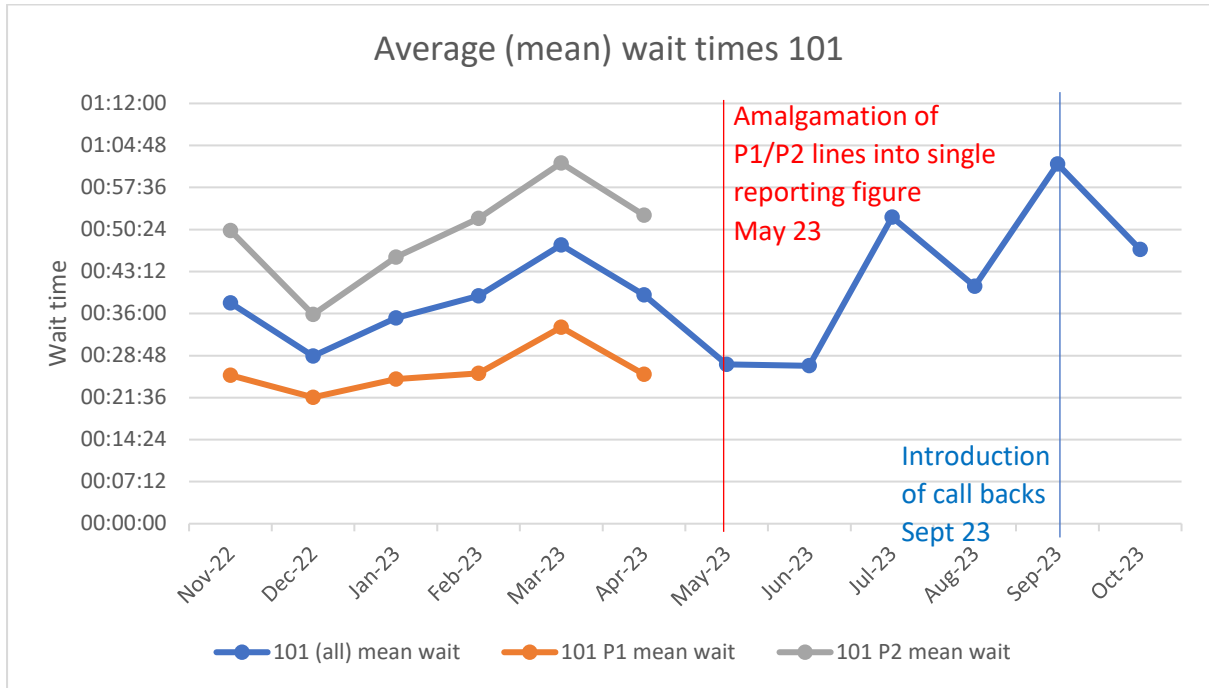
Since callbacks were first implemented 5,082 have been offered. The take up rate has been 99% and in excess of 98% of call backs are successful (i.e. the original caller accepts the return call). Since call backs have been implemented the weekly 101 performance has shown positive indicators with a week on week reduction in abandonment and increase in % calls answered.

### 101 performance: average wait times

Following the amalgamation of P1 and P2 lines into a single 101 answering system the average wait time initially appeared to be similar to the previous P1 wait times, suggesting an improved customer experience overall. However, more recently the average call waiting time has increased to comparable to previous P2 wait times, indicating an overall decrease in customer experience<sup>2</sup>.

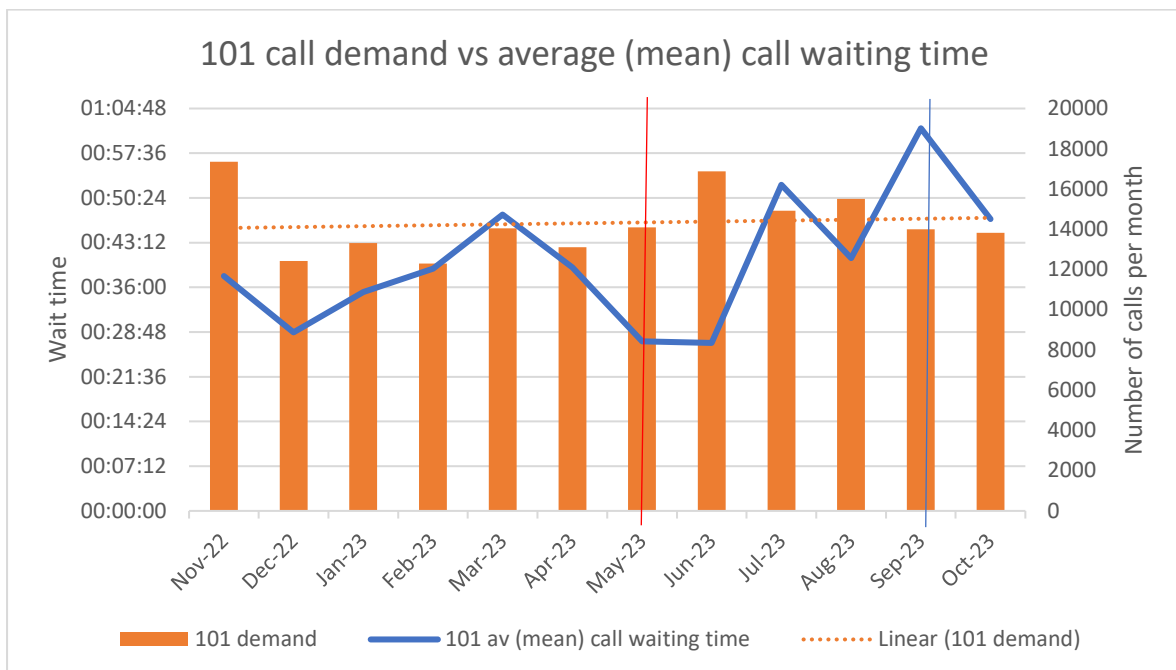
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<sup>2</sup> The average overall 101 times prior to March 2023 have been calculated using the mean call waiting time for P1, P2 and calls identified as emergency. These calculations have not been weighted by P1 and P2 demand and therefore should be treated as an indicative estimate for the purpose of comparison only.

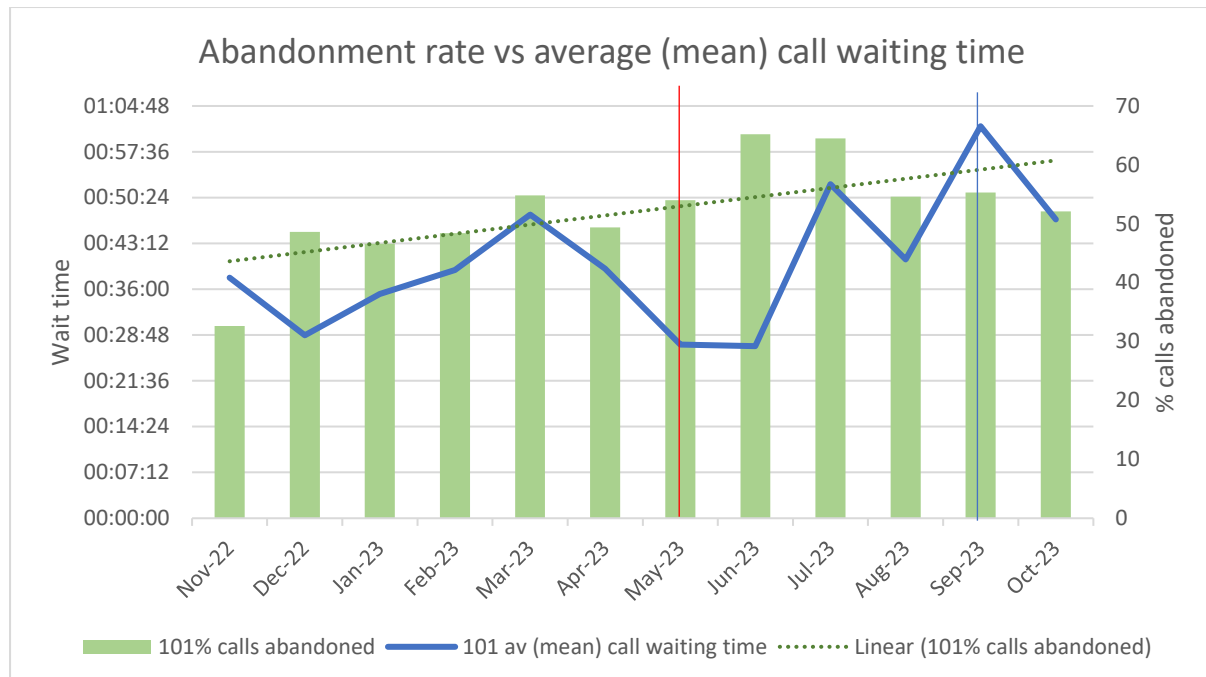


In October 2023 the average (mean) call waiting time was 46 minutes and 59 seconds. However, it should be noted that call handling resource is distributed across both 101 and 999 lines, and call handlers will be transferred to 999 when required in order to prioritise emergency calls and ensure public safety. The increase in average call handling time on 101 coincides with the increased pressure on the 999 from September 2023 due to the technical IT fault.

Call demand for 101 has remained relatively static over the last year. Demand decreased in September despite average wait times increasing significantly. This is likely to be because of call handlers being diverted to support 999.



The rate of abandoned calls has increased over the last year, although a reduction in the number of abandoned calls has been seen since a peak in summer 2023. The % of abandoned calls has broadly risen in line with the increasing call waiting time.



Devon and Cornwall Police is undertaking additional analysis to develop a better understanding and insight into call abandonment and repeat caller behaviours. For example, some abandonments are likely to be positive acts by callers who hear the in-hold messages and opt to use other methods of contact (such as webforms) or are signposted to an alternative service. However, some abandonments and repeat callers remain likely to be due to the time taken to answer 101 calls once in a non-priority queue.

It is not possible to assess the impact of the introduction of call backs on abandonment rates yet, but this will be closely monitored as trends are established.

### Public Enquiry Offices

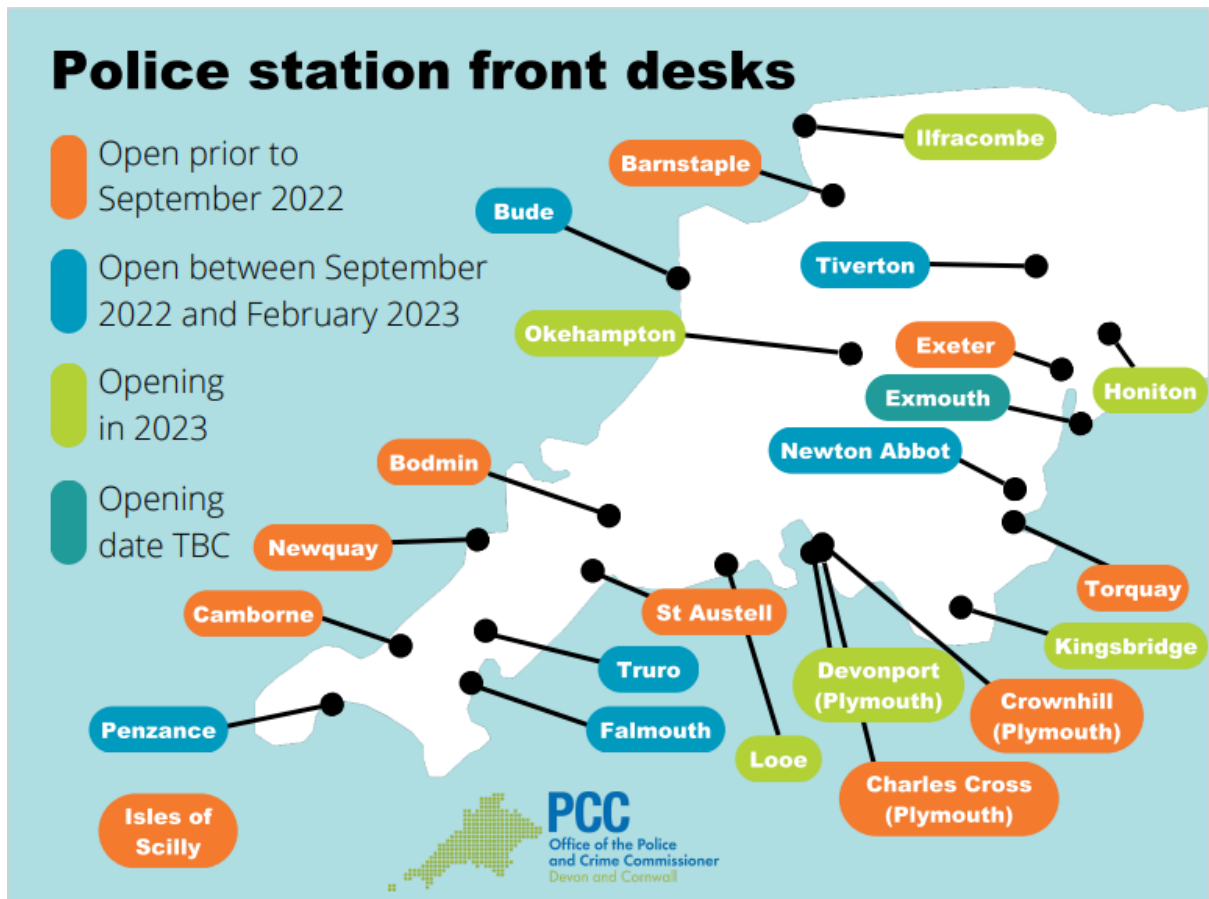
As previously updated to Panel, 6 public enquiry offices (PEOs) were successfully re-opened in 2022/23 in Penzance, Falmouth, Truro, Bude, Newton Abbott and Tiverton.

The next phase the Commissioner's project to reopen police enquiry offices will see stations reopened to the public in Devonport (Plymouth), Looe, Ilfracombe, Honiton, Okehampton and Kingsbridge in the 12 months to April 2024.

The force was among those to close 'front desks' during public sector cuts following the 2009 financial crisis. Across Devon and Cornwall 11 were shut their doors to the public in 2014, although the stations remained in use as operational bases.

A total of 17 front desks are being reopened under the project, taking the total number of PEOs across the force area to 26. So far £1.5m has been earmarked for investment in the project. In addition, Exmouth Police Station in East Devon is being rebuilt and the new stations is to include a functioning front desk.





The Commissioner has made connectivity with the public a cornerstone of her Police and Crime Plans, arguing that face to face contact with the public helps victims and provides a long-term solution to rebuilding confidence in policing.

Twenty-four new police enquiry officer posts have already been created and more staff are now being recruited in the new locations. New technology means that when not dealing with face-to-face enquiries they can reduce demand to the police contact unit by dealing with emails and web enquiries.

A further two PEOs will be opened in 2024/2025, with an additional two the following year. The Commissioner welcomes representations from the Panel to inform the locations of the further 4 PEO sites.

## Conclusion

The Commissioner has access to a range of performance data which is being carefully monitored to understand contact performance and the impact of system changes on customer experience.

The Commissioner welcomes the clear and sustained improvement in 999 call waiting times, and recognises the importance of prioritising 999 emergency calls. The Commissioner is content with the mitigation measures put in place by the Chief Constable to improve 101 performance, and has particularly welcomed the introduction of callbacks alongside the fact that every caller now speaks to a call handler within two minutes. The Commissioner will continue to monitor performance with a focus on consistency in 999 call wait times and the

reduction of 101 abandonment rates following the introduction of callbacks as strategic measures of success, and will provide a further report to the Panel in due course.

**Contact for further information:**

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