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Request

Under the Freedom of Information Act please could you supply me with copies of all documents provided to staff in your "call centre" - who answer either 999 emergency or non-emergency calls from the public - which offer guidance or instruction on how to handle calls and deal with callers.

Response

I have set out below an excerpt from a London Fire Brigade policy and procedure – ‘Policy 539: Emergency Call Management’ which is accessible to all staff. Although this is not a training document it forms the basis of procedures to follow by staff working in the London Fire Brigade Control room.

In addition to this is the Fire and Rescue Service Circular 54/2004 found at Department for Communities and Local Government website which provides effective emergency call handling guidance to all Control room staff in the Fire and Rescue Service.
Emergency call management procedures

4.1 Emergency calls are answered promptly by trained control room officers with the appropriate skills.

Salutation

4.2 When receiving an emergency call, the control room officer will answer "FIRE BRIGADE".

Calls through the 999/112 system

4.3 Emergency calls through the 999/112 system are received from British Telecom (BT) and Cable and Wireless (C&W). Running calls from Fire Stations, i.e. where the caller reports direct to the fire station, may also be received through the 999/112 system (if the running call telephone outside the fire station is used).

4.4 When an emergency call is connected to the Brigade through the 999/112 system (including those made from Running Call telephone boxes outside Fire Stations), the caller’s telephone number will be automatically inserted into the mobilising system ‘telephone number’ field by caller line identification (CLI).

4.5 Calls are also received through the 999/112 system from auto-dialler devices which provide voice recordings giving details of the incident and location.

4.6 If the emergency call is made from a ‘fixed’ telephone, the EISEC information for the ‘billing’ address for the telephone will be displayed.

Interpreter service

4.7 English may not be the first language of a person attempting to pass an emergency call.

4.8 Agreements are in place for the use of an interpreter service (Language Line).

Calls from the hard of hearing or speech-impaired members of the public

4.9 Emergency calls from the public who have hearing or speech difficulties (including the use of electronic speech devices) are normally received through the SMS Text Relay service which is a 24 hour nationwide telephone service operated by the Royal National Institute for the Deaf and funded by British Telecom.

4.10 The SMS Text Relay operator will obtain the information from the caller, use the BT 999 service, and ask for the Emergency Service requested by the caller and for the area in which the telephone number is situated.

4.11 When connected with the Emergency Service, the details will be passed by the SMS Text Relay operator.

Calls from other authorities and external agencies

4.12 Calls from some external agencies and authorities, e.g. Metropolitan Police (MPS), London Ambulance Service (LAS), Central Fire Alarm Centres and other Fire and Rescue Service Control Rooms are received on dedicated ex-directory telephone numbers.
Calls received from Authority premises (including Fire Stations) by the internal telephone system

4.13 Emergency calls from Authority premises are received on priority number internal extensions in Brigade Control. In addition to Fire Stations, this may include the Brigade Headquarters Switchboard and the Home Fire Safety Risk Assessment Call centre (HFSRA).

4.14 The R/T operator will receive details of running calls and process in accordance with normal call handling procedures.

Calls from organisations using special risk/automatic fire alarm (SR/AFA) reference numbers

4.15 In order to facilitate the fast, accurate and complete receipt of information for emergency calls, certain external agencies and organisations have been given the facility to use special risk/automatic fire alarm (SR/AFA) reference numbers.

4.16 These SR/AFA reference numbers relate to the address records for the premises of these organisations held on the mobilising system.

4.17 On receipt of an emergency call, the person passing the emergency call will provide a SR/AFA number applicable to the location of the incident and the type of the incident, e.g. “LFB REFERENCE HLUL [LFB reference number]”.

Call handling

4.18 For every emergency call received, the control room officer must:

• Obtain the address of the incident.

• Establish the reason for the Brigade’s attendance.

• Record the key details.

• Decide upon the action to be taken if not already in the plan items.

• Record any additional information that supports safe systems of work for responding operational personnel.

4.19 Policy Number 412- Mobilising policy directs the Brigade’s response to emergency calls and this is mirrored in the mobilising system. Where it is inappropriate for a Brigade attendance, the caller will be referred to a service, authority or external agency that may be able to assist.

Emergency call handling skills

4.20 Quality of emergency call handling in Brigade Control has emerged as an important requirement recognised for its effect on both the public’s perception of the Fire and Rescue Service (customer satisfaction) and on efficiency and effectiveness. How effectively the emergency call is handled in terms of questioning and listening skills, capturing information accurately, creating a caring and professional experience are just some of the critical skills required for control room officers.
4.21 For many members of the public, the making of an emergency call is a major step and can be an unnerving experience for many people.

4.22 The control room officer is the public’s first contact with the Fire and Rescue Service. Good and effective communication skills are essential. This initial point of contact can have a direct bearing upon the manner in which the call is handled and speed of response.

4.23 Control room officers manage emergency calls in a calm, polite and tactful manner using a helpful and empathetic approach. They will vary their style of call handling and questioning skills dependent upon the origin of the call, e.g. member of the public, other emergency service personnel, etc. The skill required of the control room officer is to:

- **Listen** – not to make assumptions.
- **Talk** – to maintain a dialogue.
- **Record** – key the relevant details accurately in the appropriate place on the mobilising system.
- **Think** – what information is/is not being given and/or what information is required.
- **Make decisions** – Is this call appropriate for the Brigade to attend and if so what attendance is required?

4.24 There are a number of basic concepts and principles used when receiving calls from members of the public:

- Be aware that each call could be a real emergency for the caller.
- Question the caller fully using ‘open’ questions.
- Maintain control of the conversation, i.e. take control of the call, control the pace, structure questions accordingly and get the answers needed.
- Be polite and courteous, treating the caller as you would like to be treated.
- Sound positive and interested in what the caller is saying.
- Actively listen and communicate, providing callers with feedback.
- Be firm but polite with abusive or aggressive callers (their situation could be the cause of their behaviour).
- By empathetic and reassuring (especially with distressed callers).
- End the call on a positive note.

**Questioning protocols**

4.25 The type and style of questioning skills used will vary according to the information required. Careful use of questions will normally result in the required information. The use of ‘open’ questions will normally provide the necessary level of information, whereas ‘closed’ questions may (due to the circumstances in which the caller finds themselves) lead to inaccurate or inconclusive information.
4.26 For example:

• **What** - What is the address?
• What road do we come to?
• What road comes off this road?
• What district is it?
• What part of London is this in? (although care may be needed if the incident is located on the periphery of the London area)
• What is the Postal District?
• What is the problem?
• **Where** - Where do we come to?
• **Why** - Why do you need the Fire Brigade?

4.27 Although the task of the control room officer is to gather information concerning details of the incident, a caller will also often seek information. Therefore generic statements such as “the Brigade are on the way”, “the Brigade will arrive shortly/as soon as possible” may be used.

**Completion of call**

4.28 Once complete, the control room officer will repeat back to the caller the address of the call that the Brigade are required to attend and the reason as confirmation that the correct details have been recorded.

**Abusive language**

4.29 Control room officers are aware that callers may use abusive language due to the nature of calls received and the severity of the situation in which the caller may find themselves. However, continual gratuitous use of abusive language should not be tolerated and advice sought from a supervisory control room officer as to whether any further details are required and the action to be taken.

4.30 The Health and Safety Executive’s definition of work-related violence is “any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work”, and this explicitly states it includes verbal abuse.

4.31 The Authority does not expect its staff to be subjected to abusive, obscene or aggressive language. However, this needs to be considered in relation to the circumstances affecting the caller at the time.

4.32 There are no clear criteria as to what constitutes an abusive call as some control officers may feel less threatened than others by callers shouting, swearing and making insulting and aggressive comments. Individuals may also vary over time as to how they cope with these calls and how long it takes them to recover. In these circumstances, following
consultation with a supervisory control officer, it may be appropriate to take a short break or speak to a colleague or supervisory control officer.

4.33 In dealing with calls of this nature, the following advice should be considered:

• Not to panic or terminate the call immediately.

• Not to lose your temper or be tempted to react with a similar response.

• Not to take the remarks personally and try not to become upset.

• Be patient as the abuse may shortly stop.

• If the caller does not calm down or their behaviour does not improve, providing sufficient information has been received to conclude the call, clearly advise them that unless they are able to continue the discussion in a civil manner, the call will be terminated.

• Following the call, arrangements should be made with a supervisory control room officer to listen to an audio-recording of the call as this may identify alternative options in dealing with similar calls in the future.

4.34 Control room officers will not be penalised for terminating calls under the above circumstances, providing they do so in the correct manner and after giving sufficient warning to callers.

**Fire alarm sounders**

4.35 There may be occasions where emergency calls are received where the caller is located adjacent to or in close proximity to the fire alarm sounder. This may cause difficulties to the control room officer receiving the call.

4.36 The headsets issued on a personal basis to control room staff are equipped with limiters that are designed to mitigate any undue increase in volume of extraneous noise near the caller.

4.37 In the event that a control room officer experiences difficulties in obtaining call information under these circumstances, they are to immediately alert a supervisory control room officer.

4.38 On being notified of such an event, the supervisory control room officer will:

• Request a second control room officer to monitor the call and assist in ascertaining the details and process the call accordingly.

• If it still not possible to obtain the details, the control room officer will be instructed to cease the call and either use the EISEC information for the incident location or contact the PTO for the address information and process the call accordingly. The instant replay facility may also be used in an attempt to verify the address.

• Ensure that the CO has not suffered any adverse effects from the alarm sounding and contact Occupation Health, at a convenient time, to provide the officer with a hearing test.

• Impound the CO’s headset for testing at radio workshops.
Report the address of the alarm sounder to the relevant department for investigation.

Validation of emergency call address details

4.39 On obtaining an address, the control room officer will validate the details against the database of address records held on the mobilising system.

4.40 The control room officer will question the caller, making the necessary amendments and carrying out further validations until the correct address has been identified. The aim is to obtain a satisfactory address without unnecessary questioning.

4.41 As a guide, the following sequence indicates the type of information to be sought. It must be remembered that the information required will not always be given in the sequence as contained on the mobilising system. This may include:

- SR/AFA Number (if appropriate).
- Name of the thoroughfare.
- Number and/or name of premises.
- Name of the district and/or the postal district e.g. Pimlico, Romford, W2 or Brixton SW4.
- Name of an adjacent thoroughfare.
- Nearby landmark or prominent building that may assist in identifying the location.

4.42 The caller should always be asked to spell the name of the thoroughfare, as it could be mistaken for a similar sounding name, e.g., Dury/Jury, Karoline/Caroline, Arygll/Argyle, Ingatestone/Gatestone, Gordon/Gauden, Colt Street/Three Colt Street, Belvue/Bellvue.

Aids to mobilising

4.43 As part of the address validation process, control room officer may also utilise the following:

- Geographical Information System (GIS).
- Quick Address System (QAS).
- Enhanced Information Service for Emergency Calls (EISEC).
- Reference Information Files (RIF).
- Information Folders.
- Brigade Atlas

4.44 Any problems experienced with the validation of addresses in connection with emergency calls are to be immediately brought to the attention of a supervisory control room officer.

4.45 If the problem is around the actual address of the premise (database queries), then it will be forwarded on to pre determined attendance (PDA) for resolution.
4.46 If the system fails to offer up the correct address or the problem is system orientated then an Observation Report is to be raised and sent to the IT Bridge Engineers and copied to the Technical Support Group.

Specific risks

4.47 Calls to specific risks, e.g. airports, the River Thames, motorways, may include information not included above, e.g. direction of travel, rendezvous points, etc. This information is to be recorded in accordance with current procedures.

Nature of incident

4.48 The nature of incident being reported, i.e. why the Brigade is required to attend is to be recorded.

4.49 This information will enable the control room officer to despatch the appropriate attendance.

4.50 If during the call, the caller states that there are gas cylinders or other similar hazards present or involved that could constitute a risk to responding operational personnel, the control room officer will include this information as additional Information, e.g. “CYLINDERS STORED INSIDE PREMISES” or “PERSON BELIEVED INVOLVED”.

Duplicate calls

4.51 A duplicate call is an additional call to the same incident.

4.52 The mobilising system is able to display to the control room officer details of other incidents being attended in close proximity to their call.

4.53 The control room officer will decide whether their call is a duplicate based on the following:

- Information received from mobilising system.
- Information received through questioning the caller.
- Information received from other sources e.g. GIS, colleague in control room.
- Confirmation from the incident already being attended.

4.54 If the control room officer determines their call is the same, this call will be processed as a duplicate and the caller informed that an attendance is on way. Any additional information they feel is of use to the incident commander, e.g. a landmark, is to be passed by radio.

Further actions resulting from duplicate calls

4.55 Information received from the caller or by the number of duplicate calls received may require further actions including the mobilisation of additional resources.

Doubtful addresses and incomplete calls
4.56 A doubtful address is where the details supplied by the caller cannot be exactly matched with the information held on the mobilising system.

4.57 An incomplete call is where the caller has cleared the line, replaced the receiver or left the line open before a complete address can be obtained.

4.58 The control officer will record the details that have been received and (if available) use the EISEC information as the incident location.

4.59 If the level of detail is insufficient to make an attendance or is attended, the supervisory control officer will:

- Gather all the facts available.
- Use any CLI information that is available.
- Instruct the control room officer to attempt to re-contact the caller. This will only be providing it can be established the call is not a fire call.
- Instruct the control room officer to contact the PTO for any further information.
- Study the address for the possibility of phonetic and/or spelling error.
- Locate the nearest main/side road or landmark using electronic and/or hard copy facilities, e.g. GIS, QAS, Brigade Atlas, etc.
- Refer to the ICCS recording equipment in order to replay and hear the call (if now terminated).
- Contact the station(s) covering the area (if a locality was stated).

4.60 If the supervisory control officer considers that more than one address could equally well apply, they are to arrange for an attendance to be mobilised accordingly.

4.61 In the absence of any incident description details being provided by a caller the assumption will be made that the incident could be a fire.

**Abandoned calls**

4.62 An abandoned call is where the caller has dialled 999/112, requested to speak to the Brigade but abandons the call before the PTO is able to connect to the Brigade.

4.63 The PTO will advise Brigade Control of all abandoned calls. All calls are to be recorded.

4.64 The response to abandoned calls from fixed, cellular telephones or public call-boxes will be in accordance with Policy Number 412 - Mobilising Policy.

**Late calls**

4.65 A late call is where a fire has occurred, is now completely extinguished and notification has been made to the Brigade.

4.66 Calls are to be recorded including all available information, e.g. when the fire occurred and a response made in accordance with the Authority’s Mobilising Policy.
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