

OBSERVATION AT BROADBURY ROAD ENQUIRY OFFICE

21/01/2011 – 27/01/2011

Follow the non-participant observational study conducted at Broadbury Road Police Station between 21/01/2011 and 27/01/2011, on behalf of Avon and Somerset Police Force Citizen Focus Team, I have compiled the following data. The data will be set out below under various headings which seek to address the specific concerns of the Citizen Focus Team.

1. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- (i) 'Busy periods' tend to arise when one enquiry officer was otherwise engaged with other administrative work (admin).
- (ii) The majority of enquiries could be dealt with by one enquiry officer within approximately one minute (although, some admin may follow).
- (iii) Private consultations cause difficulties for lone enquiry officers.
- (iv) Customers are at times required to queue but not for unreasonable amounts of time, nor do customers leave before being attended to.
- (v) Enquiries or admin requests made by or on behalf of police officers are given priority by enquiry officers, adding weight to their working schedule.
- (vi) Single-crewed enquiry offices seem likely to reduce efficiency and the overall quality of service.
- (vii) A friendly, pleasant, and reasonably hardworking atmosphere seems to be maintained within the enquiry office. Customers are also dealt with politely and efficiently.
- (viii) Considerable amounts of time are spent dealing with what are essentially civil matters, which are of no concern to the police.
- (ix) HORTs take large amounts of time to deal with and caused frustration amongst customers
- (x) 'General or other enquiries' tend to be civil enquiries or social and domestic matters.
- (xi) New shift patterns and opening times, the general health and safety of enquiry officers, quality of service and general efficiency of the office, were all concerns voiced by enquiry officers in relation to single-crewed stations.
- (xii) An inherent lack of awareness on the part of enquiry officers that certain 'enquiries' raised obvious child protection issues.

2. SUMMARY OF RECOMENDATIONS

- (i) Quality of service and general efficiency reduction could be mitigated through an overlap in shifts.
- (ii) A well displayed list of ‘useful’ numbers for civil and domestic matters should be used to direct customers to more appropriate bodies.
- (iii) The lack of awareness regarding child protections issues should be addressed through enhanced staff training.

3. USAGE

How busy is the enquiry office?

Certain periods throughout the observation period, appeared to be busier than others; namely:

- Friday, 21/01/2011, observation period, 7-11am. Busy period - 10-11am. 2 enquiry officers on shift.
- Saturday 22/01/2011, observation period, 11am-3pm. Busy period – 12-1pm and 2-2.30pm. 2 EOs on shift.
- Tuesday 25/01/2011, observation period, 3-7pm. Busy period – 3-7pm. 2 enquiry officers on shift, (1 enquiry officer after 4 pm).
- Wednesday 26/01/2011, observation period, 10am-2pm. Busy period – 10am -2pm. 3 enquiry officers on shift).
- Thursday 27/01/2011, observation period, 7-11pm. Busy period – quiet. 2 enquiry officers on shift.

The various ‘busy periods’ were caused when one enquiry officer was otherwise engaged with admin rather than attending the desk. Twice during the Tuesday shift (25/01/2011) customers were required to wait because the enquiry officer on shift was engaged with a customer in a ‘private consultation’.

Time spend dealing with enquiries

It became quickly apparent that the majority of enquiries could be dealt with by one enquiry officer within approximately one minute which in turn was followed up by admin. The amount of time spent on admin varied, depending on the enquiry (see below).

Do customers typically have to queue to be served?

Customers often had to queue during the busiest periods. However, it was extremely rare for a customer to be waiting for more than five minutes – this happened once or twice during the period of observation. One of the main causes of increased customer waiting time, is

administrative duties of the enquiry officers. At times they are on the telephone chasing up various issues – this leads to a build up of customers in the waiting area. The enquiry officers also seem to give priority to enquiries made by and on behalf of police officers (see below).

It must be noted that much of the ‘waiting around’ by customers seemed to occur after the customer had initially been ‘served’ - usually this was because they were waiting for a police officer to join them from the main part of the station.

Are people leaving before being seen?

No customers left without being seen during the observation period. However, twice customers arrived to find the enquiry desk vacant. On these occasions the enquiry officer was engaged in a private consultation.

4. STAFFING

How often are all staff busy?

Presuming that the term ‘busy’ encompasses work of an administrative nature, then all staff appeared ‘busy’ throughout most of the observation. The only exception was on 26/01/2011 when three enquiry officers were on shift.

At times police officers asked enquiry officers to ‘crime’ certain incidents. This added considerable weight to their working schedule. For example on 26/01/2011 enquiry officer ‘A’ was asked by a police sergeant to ‘crime’ a fraud offence which had been brought to the sergeant’s attention via the enquiry office.

Typically enquiry officers carry out administrative work throughout the day. This seemed to include, inter alia, checking bail book/diary, court checks (re producers – problems with identification and insurance companies etc...) catching up with emails etc... from the shift before, CSD appointments, CJIT appointments, probation appointments, neighbourhood policing team appointments. However, the actual admin work seemed to be fairly simple and could most likely be handled by 1 enquiry officer.

On two occasions customers requested a private consultation. This meant that the enquiry desk had to be left unmanned. At times enquiry officers also had to leave the office in order to chase-up the customer’s query, thus leaving the desk ‘empty’. Typically a customer would arrive at this point and find no enquiry officers manning the main desk. Most waited, although on two occasions I stopped customers from leaving and once dealt with a legal enquiry.

Does it seem feasible that this station could be 'single-crewed' on a regular basis? (if not, why not?)

It seems difficult to conceive how the enquiry office could be single-crewed and continue to operate efficiently and without a reduced quality of service. However, such a service reduction could be mitigated through an overlap in shifts. For example, one enquiry officer on shift from 8am – 4pm and another enquiry officer on shift from 10am/12pm-8pm. This way the enquiry office would be adequately staffed during what appear to be the busiest periods. It is doubtful that more than two enquiry officers would ever be needed to staff the enquiry office.

5. ATMOSPHERE

What is the enquiry office environment like?

Friendly, pleasant, reasonably hardworking atmosphere – reminded me a group of concerned 'dinner ladies'. This is perhaps not the most politically correct way of describing the atmosphere but it is, in my opinion, the most accurate.

At times, particularly whilst the office was at its most busy it seems to represent something of a 'hub' within the station. There was regular (and friendly) interaction with other (police) officers throughout the periods of observation. Sometimes police officers would appear for nothing more than a 'chat'; at other times, officers would be waiting for a 'customer' appointment or asking the enquiry officers to complete some administrative task for them.

Were enquiry officers friendly and helpful?

Enquiry officers appeared at all times to be, friendly, helpful, polite and courteous.

Perception of the customer experience:

There were no complaints during the observation period. One customer became mildly abusive and impatient whilst waiting for a 'CJIT' officer. However, the customer was dealt with respectfully and assertively. This was a reflection of the general atmosphere, where customers are dealt with politely and efficiently.

Relationships appear to have been built up by those who sign bail on daily and the enquiry officers who typically deal with the administrative side of this enquiry. There is little waiting about to be 'served' and the service is generally conducted with good humour.

At times enquiry offices privately expressed concerns about the authenticity of ‘crimes’ being reported. However, the customer who reported these ‘crimes’ were dealt with professionally at all times.

6. EFFICIENCY AND MEETING CUSTOMER NEEDS

Are there ways that you think the business could be done more efficiently?

Much time is spent dealing with what are essentially civil matters, which are of no concern to the police. For example, much time was spent chasing insurance companies for customers whose vehicles had broken down, and discussing a variety of what invariably amounted to trading standards issues. Obviously it is important for enquiry officers attempting to glean the full nature of the customer enquiry (in case it is a matter requiring police attention), and to do so requires some discussion, however, the majority of civil and domestic enquiries must be quickly (but politely) deflected. A well displayed list of ‘useful’ numbers for civil and domestic matters (for example, council offices, local MP office, Trading standards, office of fair trading, Ombudsman etc... should be used to direct customers to more appropriate bodies.

Are there types of queries that cause customers particular frustrations?

Frustrations mainly revolved around civil and non-police matters largely because the police could not be particularly helpful in these circumstances. For example, there were several incidents of false advertising reported. This, it is suggested, is primarily a trading standards issue and again must be quickly, but politely deflected.

HORTs take large amounts of time to deal with and caused frustration amongst customers – who often were not clear on what they were required to ‘produce’. This, on occasion, led to a lot of ‘toing and froing’ from the police station placing a largely unnecessary extra administrative burden upon enquiry officers.

Are there queries that take a long time to deal with?

Incident reports, despite being relatively brief to ‘report’, seem to generate quite a bit of follow-up admin for enquiry officers. As noted above, both HORTs and enquiries of a civil nature appeared to take a long time to deal with.

What is the nature of the general or other enquiries that EO staff are dealing with?

‘General or other enquiries’ tend to be civil enquiries or social and domestic matters. For example, on one occasion a customer complained about what was essentially a trading standards issue (false advertising of a flat online).

On another occasion, an able-bodied man's vehicle had broken down near the police station. A considerable amount of time and energy went into contacting his insurance company for him.

Staff also commented that the use of the term 'general and other enquires' in their footfall reporting could be explained by the fact that the original list of categories was too restricted. In other words the right 'box' was not there to be 'ticked' in all circumstances.

7. OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Throughout the observation period, enquiry officers privately voiced various potential problems as they perceived them. These problems include:

Enquiry officers expressed concerns about new shift patterns and opening times. Officers suggested that alternating shifts and opening times would cause problems for the courts. The example most often provided by officers was the synchronisation of bail conditions and the opening times of Enquiry offices. This, they insisted, would result in individuals not turning up to sign bail. Other concerns relating to general health and safety of enquiry officers, quality of service and general efficiency, were expressed by enquiry officers.

8. CHILD PROTECTION ISSUES

There seemed to be an inherent lack of awareness on the part of enquiry officers that certain 'enquiries' raised obvious child protection issues. This issue should be addressed through enhanced staff training.