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TRANSCRIPT OF "FILE ON 4" – 999 CALLS

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PRODUCER: Sarah Lewthwaite

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ACTUALITY OF POLICE SIREN

CUFFE: Police respond to a 999 call - lives may depend on how fast they get there. But the emergency service is in crisis. Eleven million callers dial 999 each year, and with an explosion in the use of mobile phones, that number is growing. Their calls should be picked up in a matter of seconds, but an official report says in some cases callers are left waiting two minutes or longer, and there are unacceptable delays in getting an officer to the scene.

SPRASON: It's supposed to be an emergency, so you expect it to be answered straightaway, put through to the control centre and something to happen. I just couldn't believe in my wildest dreams that if I ever had to ring 999, that I'd end up with a metallic voice, like you get at the bank when you ring the bank, 'You're in a queue, we'll get to you as soon as possible.' I just couldn't believe what I was hearing, to be honest.

CUFFE: So what's going wrong? Can we always rely on the police to come when we call?

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY OF LOZELLS ROAD RIOT

CUFFE: On Saturday 22nd of October, West Midlands police, with helmets and shields, turned up in force to deal with a riot in Lozells Road, Birmingham. Violence between members of the Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities was sparked off by unsupported rumours about the rape of a fourteen year old girl.

ACTUALITY IN PUB

CUFFE: Two miles away – here in the Uplands pub in Handsworth - locals were enjoying a quiet drink, completely oblivious to what was going on. But, as a bullet hole in the wall beside the bar testifies, they were in for a shock. An Asian man, who is still too frightened to be named, tells me what happened.

MAN: These guys, youths just came in and one just came in first. He had a gun in his left hand. I thought he was just messing about. When he started shooting, that's when I realised it was a real gun. And he tried to shoot someone and the bullet just went straight into the bar. After about a couple of seconds, there was probably about fifteen other guys came in. They were all black youths. They just started smacking pool cues and baseball bats and knives, you know, hitting people, attacking the Asians. It was awful. And that's when the other guy came from behind and he stabbed me three times from behind. One guy got shot in his leg and people were just trying to, you know, they were all shocked and terrified by what went on. Because it was a quiet evening, you see, we didn't expect anything, nothing like that at all.

CUFFE: Several people in the pub called 999 for the police. Then they waited ...and waited.

MAN: We thought they would have been here, but they said, 'Well, we know they've got guns.' They hadn't got armoured police available. They knew about the incident, what was going on, but they couldn't come here.

CUFFE: And when did the police arrive?

MAN: They arrived at least one hour and forty five minutes, and they were still outside, and then they took at least fifteen minutes to come inside the building and have a look what was going on. Some of the customers, they could not wait for the ambulance or the police. They went to hospital, they phoned their friends and relatives.

CUFFE: The police could have rushed in and then you might have had a repeat of the Bradford incident, where a police officer got killed. So, because there were arms involved, they obviously have to be very careful and have to come prepared, don't they?

MAN: They do have to come prepared, but they can carry guns, even on the streets police are allowed to carry guns or whatever, and if they see things like that they should react. These are people's lives at the end of the day, you know, and if the police can't help you, who can? If someone's getting shot, they should come.

CUFFE: Other residents in Handsworth were terrified when youths went up their street, smashing cars and throwing bricks at their windows. They too dialled 999 but had a long wait for a response. Afterwards, an angry group of residents called a public meeting at which they lambasted the local area commander of West Midlands Police, Steve Jordan. He promised to investigate, and before Xmas he'll be back to tell them what he's found. He says he's ready to apologise if there've been failings.

JORDAN: We've geared up our systems extremely well to deal with everyday business. There will always become an event which overwhelms those systems. It's almost impossible to design a system that's geared to everyday work, that will respond in all circumstances.

CUFFE: To wait one and a half hours for a response to their 999 call, would you describe that as acceptable?

JORDAN: No, it's not. But a lot of things took place that night. There was very serious disorder in part of Birmingham, and a very large number of officers were committed to that from across the whole force. We had to move resources as

O'REILLY: I could take up to three hundred calls a day. It depends. For instance, I worked New Year's Eve, we worked through the night, and from one o'clock in the morning till five it was just like, bang, just call after call after call and you just can't keep count, you're just dealing with the calls as they're coming through. If it's weekend, if it's Friday, people just spilling out of the clubs and there's fights and they are generally busy. You just have to stay with the caller, you have to stay calm, instruct the caller that you are trying to get them through.

CUFFE: 70% of all 999 calls aren't emergencies at all – most are either accidental calls from mobile phones, or nuisance calls. This afternoon Kevin has taken a number of calls from pay-phones and heard children giggling in the background. Then, every four seconds on average, there's a call from a mobile phone that's silent – there's no voice at the other end.

O'REILLY: Emergency, which service? Do you need fire, police or ambulance?

CUFFE: There's no answer so he tries again, hoping for some response.

O'REILLY: If you are unable to speak but need an emergency service, please tap the handset screen.

CUFFE: But there's no tapping. The call now goes through to an automated police line, with a voice asking the caller to press 5 on the keypad twice. When there's still no response, the call is terminated.

O'REILLY: You judge the situation. If it's a silent call that comes through, you challenge the caller twice. You listen. If you hear anything that might indicate that there is something going on, you would then put the call through. If you have any doubt – and there are cases where we have doubts – you go straight through to the police, and you then explain to the police that there has been no request, the line has been silent, and then they will take the details and take the call from there.

CUFFE: In theory the procedure should ensure all real emergencies get through. But does it?

ACTUALITY OF MOHAMMED SHAHID WITH CHILD'S PICTURE

SHAHID: On the top of the picture here, there's a picture of my sister and a picture of the house they lived in, and my niece has wrote that her special bit of earth is her mother and her house, and I think that's a very very poignant reminder of my sister.

CUFFE: Two months ago, after dropping her eight year old daughter off at school, Farah Noor Adams went for a walk beside the River Kelvin in the Maryhill district of Glasgow. She was attacked and killed and her murder raises worrying questions about the 999 system.

ACTUALITY ON RIVER BANK

CUFFE: Farah's body was discovered here on the banks of the river. The walkway is popular with joggers and she was a keen power walker. Police haven't released many details but an eighteen year old man has been charged with murder. Shortly after the incident, it emerged that several 999 calls had been made from her mobile phone and were taken by BT operators, but none of them got through to police. Her family is tormented by the thought that she may have been trying to summon help in the moments before she was killed.

SHAHID: We did ask one of the investigating officers, did she use the phone, because she always carried the phone with her, so they did actually tell us that some emergency calls had been made from that mobile. What we don't know is where these calls went, who answered these calls and what they did with that information. What we have been told by the police is that the calls did not go through to their emergency services, and that is what we want to know. Why was nothing done with the information? Why were these calls not passed on to the emergency services? And clearly what registers on the system, the emergency services system, when several calls of this nature are made in a short period of time from the same telephone number, surely there

SHAHID: must be a person or a system which is able to flag this up as a problem or as a concern. And we're wondering, would she still be here if she'd got through that day.

CUFFE: Strathclyde Police say they are aware of a number of calls initiated from Farah's mobile phone, which were not received by the police service, and it's now the subject of an investigation. At BT, John Medland has responsibility for emergency numbers.

MEDLAND: The calls were answered by our operators. Each one was treated as a genuine call and handled in the way that's agreed with the police, and at the police's request we followed their agreed processes. The operators weren't able to get a response from the caller, there wasn't a response to the questions and the operator heard nothing.

CUFFE: When you have the same number, the same mobile phone that is making repeated calls, shouldn't that be picked up by the operator, the fact that there has been more than one of these emergency 999 calls?

MEDLAND: Well, I think that again you have to go right back to why we get these calls, how these calls are generated. We answer 80,000 calls a day. 22,000 of these are accidental calls from mobile phones, and many of those are actually repeated. Mobile phones are carried in pockets and handbags, and even if the keypad is locked, if 999 is pressed inadvertently, the keypad lock is taken off and a call can actually come through. And we get thousands of those calls every day. If people can dial it once, they can dial it twice, and there's a huge raft of evidence that some numbers dial 999 forty-eight, fifty times a day, and they're just inadvertently dialling.

CUFFE: This is one of the most sophisticated and profitable industries of the 21st century. Surely you could have invented some technology that would prevent those misdialled calls and provide protection for those who are genuinely in need?

MEDLAND: I'm a 999 call handler, not the designer of the mobile phones or the designer of the mobile phone standards. I mean, the fact that the keypad lock is overcome with 999 or 112, the European emergency code, is a design

MEDLAND cont: feature that's designed for people's safety, but has ended up causing us a lot more calls than we would otherwise have. And yes, we do have to filter those very carefully.

CUFFE: BT says the introduction of folding mobile phones has already reduced the number of accidental calls, and technological advances should soon make it possible to pin-point the caller's location more exactly. In the meantime, the industry watch-dog, OFCOM, will hold talks in the New Year with ACPO, the Association of Chief Police Officers, to review procedures. ACPO's expert on communications is Ian Readhead, Deputy Chief Constable of Hampshire Police. He thinks it's hard to see how you could deal with silent calls any differently.

READHEAD: What you'd really be saying is that you pour back in all of those tens of thousands of accidental activations every day, you'd pour those back into mainstream policing and then what would you do? Try and send a police response to all of them? If you start handling all of those calls, what's going to happen to all the real emergencies? There is a risk, but I think it's a very minor risk, that you might have an incident where somebody can't press that number, but I'm at a loss to know what we would do anyway in those circumstances, because we don't know who that individual is and we don't know where the phone is.

CUFFE: Here we have a family who are grieving the loss of a young woman. They say she tried to call the police for help and nobody was there to help her.

READHEAD: Any death is always extremely regrettable, and clearly if there are issues about the way in which the call wasn't answered, then I've got no doubt that the Chief Constable in the force concerned will look at that and see if there are lessons to be learnt, or if there's anything that we could have done differently.

CUFFE: It's not surprising that police fear overload. They are struggling to answer the calls they already have. BT transfers emergency calls to the police control room that's nearest the caller and available to take the call.

ACTUALITY IN MANCHESTER CALL ROOM

RENSHAW: Police emergency. Hello, you're through to the police.

CUFFE: On a Friday night, this control room in east Manchester must be one of the busiest in the country.

RENSHAW: So the youths are wearing hoodies? Which way have they made off?

CUFFE: There are six operators on duty taking emergency calls – and they're supposed to answer at least 90% of them within ten seconds of the call being transferred from BT. Christine Renshaw does her best to meet that target, but she's painfully aware that there may be a knock-on effect as other calls, to non-emergency numbers, are left waiting.

RENSHAW: I think one of the busiest nights I've done, I've put in 64 jobs, but probably taken probably about 80 calls, so it can be a busy night, it can keep you going all night, you know till 7 o'clock in the morning. We've got seventeen people waiting at the moment, that's people ringing the non-emergency line who are just stacking up, trying to get through. But because we've got all these dedicated 999ers, we're just waiting for those calls to come through, so obviously within target. Within those calls that are waiting there, there could be a genuine emergency. There could be someone being assaulted, you know, and someone's life could be in danger, but for some reason they've just not decided to dial 999. At one time we did have someone who waited 52 minutes to get answered on a non-emergency line. If it was myself, I would have been extremely upset that you've waited that long.

CUFFE: Tony Sprason isn't a man to rush for help in an emergency. But last year, when he and his wife saw a young man set upon by a group of youths outside their home near Bury, he felt they had to call the police.

SPRASON: We dialled 999. BT said, 'Which service?' We said police, and then we were told we were in a queue. 'You're in a queue, we will answer your call as soon as possible.' When they eventually answered, which was about ten

POTTS: put it in the context of the volume of calls that we get. We have to understand what's caused the situation to arise and ensure that we rectify those problems so that the situation doesn't repeat itself.

CUFFE: The man that I referred to, who had to wait a long time, he says he was eventually put through to Northumberland.

POTTS: I think that would be an error in the technology. Certainly people shouldn't be getting put through to different control rooms. We will take Greater Manchester's calls.

CUFFE: If you're ringing in a matter of life and death, if it's a 999 call, you don't expect to be in a queue at all.

POTTS: Inevitably you are going to be in a queue when we have in excess of 700,000 calls a year. We are looking at how the calls queue in our system. We currently have four area operations rooms, and it's possible for a call to queue and then be passed on to another of the rooms, so you can actually queue a number of times. The way our technology is currently configured, that call actually goes to the bottom of the queue. So the call might have effectively been about to be picked up in call room one, but the call has then been switched into call room two. The call will then queue in call room two, then it may well be that the call is transferred again then into control room three because we haven't picked it up.

CUFFE: Greater Manchester Police has now decided to re-organise the way it responds to both emergency and routine calls. But Her Majesty's inspector, Kate Flannery, warns that it will take a quantum leap to bring failing police forces up to the national target that's been set for handling 999 calls.

FLANNERY: They should be picking it up within ten or fifteen seconds. In some cases it's two minutes or longer, and in a very significant number of cases, the caller is abandoning the call because they've waited so long for it to be answered. If it is a genuine emergency, if someone is outside your house, perhaps in a threatening situation or you have witnessed an accident or a fight, every second that you are on the phone, waiting for it to be answered, probably feels like an hour. And to expect

FLANNERY cont: someone to wait two or three minutes to have their call answered is simply not acceptable. So we're asking forces to try and improve their pick-up times and ensure that they reduce the number of abandoned calls down to the absolute minimum.

CUFFE: And is that calls that are emergency calls that are then abandoned?

FLANNERY: Well, they're calls that are coming through on the treble nine system, so some of them could be emergencies, and until they're actually answered, obviously and the operator assesses the situation, we don't know definitely that it is an emergency. But it is highly likely that some of those will be genuine emergencies. So for it not to be answered within two minutes is quite obviously an abysmal service and there are around a dozen forces which are persistent offenders, if you like, in not picking up all of their calls within two minutes.

CUFFE: The Association of Chief Police Officers takes responsibility for introducing call handling standards, but these are voluntary. Ian Readhead of ACPO admits some forces are under-performing, but says they face a huge challenge, with the number of trivial or repetitive calls.

READHEAD: You, the public, of course, continue to buy mobile phones, and the volume of calls coming into the service increases significantly year upon year. If today I get a swan walking across the M3, I can get sixty calls about the swan in the following one minute, and we have to deal with every one of those calls until we get to the 61st call, which actually isn't about the swan at all, it's about a robbery in Southampton. So call volumes are undoubtedly an issue.

CUFFE: But it's four years since the Inspectorate recommended that call handling should be improved and that this should be a priority, and yet still here we are today and clearly many forces are failing.

READHEAD: It's not by any means an easy matter for the service to actually deal with. But nonetheless, what I think the Inspectorate has quite properly done is said, 'Look, there are some forces which have made no improvements, indeed

READHEAD cont: several have gone backwards,' Now clearly that isn't acceptable. There is no doubt that some forces have made exceptional progress and a high level of investment in order to ensure that we give a very high quality response. Others have not done that. Candidly there are places within England and Wales where you would have to say that significant improvements are going to be necessary.

CUFFE: One such force that's now beginning to tackle the problem is Humberside, which has been rated poor by the HMIC for three years running. After waiting nine hours for police to respond to her 999 call on bonfire night, Kate Moor thinks it's a verdict they richly deserve. She became alarmed when a drunken brawl started in her street in Grimsby.

MOOR: My friend got thrown over a wall and had his head jumped on. And in the middle of all this, I phoned 999 from my mobile, stood in the middle of the street with the fight going on around me, and I was told it would be dispatched there and then. Half an hour later, still nobody had been, so I then rang the 0845 number, explained what had gone on, gave them the log number and they said, 'We'll redispach it if things are still happening.' I said, 'Well, it's dispersing, but one is threatening to come back.' Half an hour or so later, still nothing, so I rang them again, and each time I was getting more and more distressed on the phone, because I've got two children in the house, they were obviously very frightened. My final phone call at about 2.30 on the Sunday morning, I was told that nobody would be ringing, nobody would be responding, the threat was all over and done with, and the only response I did get from them was at 9.30 on the Sunday morning when a police officer rang me from Grimsby Station and said, 'I'm ringing in response to your 999 call.' My faith in the police service has gone right out of the window. Why bother ringing up? If you know that you're not going to get a response, people just aren't going to ring.

CUFFE: Faced with a growing number of complaints from people like Kate Moor, the police in Humberside have introduced a pilot project, transforming the way they deal with calls. A key to good performance is prioritising calls as they come in – a common error is to under-rate or over-rate the need for a quick response. Mark Johanssen, chief inspector of the incident handling unit, says they're experimenting with the kind of triage system you find in GP surgeries. Although the pilot is for non-urgent calls, it has a direct bearing on the emergency service.

JOHANNSEN: We've reduced the call waiting time for members of the public to get a police officer to come by two-thirds, whereas in the past they might have been waiting an hour, they're now only waiting twenty minutes. In terms of responding to incidents, whereas in the past we were trying to deal with everything by sending a police officer, we simply can't do that. There are not the available resources to send a police officer to every incident. So what we're doing is, we're now resolving an awful lot of incidents over the telephone, using experienced police officers, and we're actually finding we're resolving 40% of all incidents over the telephone. And surprisingly, from a recent survey that we've done, the vast majority of members of the public are more than happy for their incidents to be resolved over the telephone. They appreciate that they don't necessarily need to see a police officer, so long as they're getting some information, they are more than happy, because they realise that police officers are scarce on the ground and they should really be dealing with true emergencies.

CUFFE: So by improving that, you are taking pressure off the police when there are real emergencies?

JOHANNSEN: Yes. What we're actually doing is, we haven't reduced the demand. What we are doing is, we are managing that demand in a far more effective and efficient way.

CUFFE: With so many competing demands on police resources, Kate Flannery says it's vital to use them well. And this, she says, is where so many forces are failing.

FLANNERY: The poorer forces, where operators are struggling to cope with the volume of calls, are either losing calls – ie, the person calling hangs up – or in an effort to clear the screen and get onto the next call, the operator is actually asking police officers to attend a situation that, in some instances, will not actually merit police attendance. We then get into a situation where police officers are scurrying about, attending incidents that really don't require a police response. So it's getting that staffing number right in the first place is absolutely critical to delivering a quality service.

BAIN: The nature of the operation means that the call handlers are dealing with serious situations and often situations which are unpredictable. The fact that they are working extremely long shifts with few breaks is not something that's designed to ensure that they are able to carry on without experiencing burn-out. Until the question of staffing levels is seriously addressed, then it's difficult to see any lasting solution to the problems that undoubtedly exist, especially in a period of radical change, such as the service is experiencing at the moment.

CUFFE: John Green is a communications officer, who represents the call-handlers' union, UNISON, in Merseyside Police. He knows the pressures of the job at first hand and says they've got worse as staffing levels have been eroded. His previous job was working as a dispatcher, the person who talks to police officers on a radio channel and sends them out to incidents which need a response.

GREEN: Very often a radio dispatcher would be without what is known as the gopher, that's the chap who sits or the lady who sits on the terminal next to you when you're dispatching, and they would make the phone inquiries that police officers in the street may require, or they would do the call-backs to people to say, 'I'm sorry, but we're quite busy, we haven't got a patrol to dispatch to you,' and that sort of stuff. But then, with the continued depletion of the staff, with going into back room positions, eventually the gophering position has disappeared, so that made life a hell of a lot difficult for everybody. When an operator comes in to a list of forty plus jobs and they don't have a gopher, there's no way in the world you can review all of those jobs, quality assure them that they have been graded correctly, and make all the phone calls back to apologise for police officers not having attended yet. There's no way you can physically do it, because on top of that, you have to take the phone calls that are coming in as well – the performance indicators for it. So it's impossible to do everything when you are sitting on the radio channel alone.

CUFFE: You say that it leads to the situation where mistakes are made. What kind of mistakes?

GREEN: I personally was on a 999 call one day when I didn't have a gopher, and I was on the city centre channel. Whilst I was on, taking a 999 call, a police officer put out a scramble, that means an urgent assistance call, and I missed this. I

GREEN cont: got a rollicking for that, but how can I hear what he was saying when I was on a red light? So that's how difficult it can be and mistakes were going to be made and mistakes have been made.

CUFFE: Merseyside Police say they've improved their service this year by increasing staff levels and that the need for overtime has fallen by 31%. But they point out that, as an emergency service, staff may need to change shifts at short notice or work longer shifts to deal with major incidents. Ian Readhead, who speaks for ACPO, says his own force in Hampshire has learned the benefits of investment in call handling staff, but admits others are lagging behind.

READHEAD: The police authority in Hampshire invested significant amounts of public money on a new commander control centre, on a force inquiry centre to deal with non emergency telephone calls. We migrated from 52 numbers to one number for the Hampshire Constabulary. And the benefit of all that is that, you know, my force has been graded as excellent. Now I know that to sustain that we've got to continue to lead, we have to continue to make investments in order to sustain that level of performance and, you know, others, I think if they want to get to that kind of grading, are going to have to start making determined investment decisions today.

CUFFE: Well, four years ago, the Inspectorate said this should be a priority. Now they're saying it again. How do we know that there's going to be any more progress in the future than there has been over that four years?

READHEAD: I think the answer to that is because there is so much more focus now in the police environment on the way in which we perform, and no force wants to be graded poorly. What I think is important is if you read what Her Majesty's Inspectorate has said, is that look, if we don't see improvements, we will begin to put some of the recommendations that we're making on a statutory level, which means, of course, that Chief Constables can be held legally to account and that the Inspectorate could, with the support of the Home Secretary, intervene in forces and the way in which they were managed. So I have no doubt that those forces who know that they're really not responding effectively in this area of business will now be making those decisions to improve performance, because otherwise intervention will occur.

CUFFE: The Home Office Minister for Policing, Hazel Blears, says all Chief Police Officers should be measured by the way they respond to the public, whether it's an emergency or a routine call. She says there'll be a single, non-emergency number, which will take some pressure off control rooms, but argues that police will need to do more themselves.

BLEARS: We had an inspection by the Inspectorate to look at call handling generally, and I think in some areas, forces have recognised that they've got a lot of improvement to do, and have decided to invest resources in making that happen. Certainly the job of call handlers is complex, it can be difficult, they're in stressful situations, but in fact our latest assessment, we've got three excellent forces, and we didn't have any excellent forces last year.

CUFFE: But the HMIC say that 23 out of 43 forces are fair to poor. Now that's not adequate, is it?

BLEARS: No, exactly, I entirely agree, because it's so crucial to the public's view of the police service and their confidence in the criminal justice as a whole. But as I say, we're going in the right direction, and I genuinely think that the introduction of the national non-emergency number will make a significant difference to the pressure on those call handlers who are dealing with those calls at the moment. Something like half of our emergency calls are actually not emergencies and should be dealt with in a different way.

CUFFE: But you'll still need the staff. And what the HMIC says is that police forces are just not providing the staff needed.

BLEARS: Well, police staff numbers have actually gone up significantly over the last five or six years. And it is true, forces have been having to analyse how they deploy their staff, are they in the most effective way working together, can they bring their call centres together, again to make sure that they get better economy out of the investment that they're making. And every single interaction with the public is a chance for the police to show that they can do the job well. But equally, if it goes wrong, then that will be the impression that the public are left with.

CUFFE: Adding call handling to the list of performance targets may be the last thing Chief Constables want, when technology makes it easier for everyone to reach for the phone. Sixty calls about a swan on the motorway may be a distraction. But if police are to succeed in bringing their forces closer to the community, they have to be there when they're most needed.

SIGNATURE TUNE