

Commissioner's report into alleged failings in Hampshire Control Room after a report of flooding on the A31

Introduction

Between 5.30am and 6.30am on Thursday 22 January 2009, PC James Drew was fatally injured when his car struck a flood and crashed into a fence on the A31, Alresford Road in Winchester. Hampshire Constabulary roads policing unit began an investigation into the collision. It found that a member of the public had called police a few hours earlier to report that he had lost control of his car due to flooding on the same stretch of road.

Referral

When this information came to light, the incident was referred to the IPCC and an assessment of the case was carried out by Deputy Senior Investigator Adrian Tapp. Following the assessment, I decided that the circumstances surrounding the handling of the original call should be independently investigated by the IPCC.

No complaints from members of the public or PC Drew's family have been received about this incident.

Investigation

This investigation considered the nature of the information given to staff at the police control room and any information available from other sources to those members of staff. It also considered whether or not any action taken after the report was received at 1am was appropriate for the circumstances.

The IPCC did not investigate the fatal collision involving PC James Drew - this remained the responsibility of Hampshire Constabulary.

The actions of two specific people were examined during the course of this investigation – a police officer and a member of police staff who were manning the motorway desk when the original call was dealt with.

Chronological summary of events

Just after midnight on 22 January 2009, a member of the public encountered flooding while driving on the A31, Alresford Road, Winchester towards Old Alresford. He lost control of his car and collided with trees. The man drove home and, at approximately 00.50am, he phoned Hampshire Constabulary to report the incident.

A force enquiry officer created a log of the call which included the comment that the man would like an officer to attend the scene as he was “concerned that flooding could lead to further accidents”. He gave the log a grade 2, which has a 30 minute attendance target. He has explained to this investigation that he gave this grading because of the possibility that there was debris at the scene, possible damage to street furniture and possible flooding on the road. He believed that the flooding could increase the risk of other road users hitting debris that may be concealed by the flooding.

The log was electronically sent to the Hampshire Police communications controller at 01.01am but, due to other incidents that night, no local unit was available to attend. A note was made to that effect on the log and it was passed to the motorway desk at 01.02am.

The motorway desk was manned by two people that night: a police officer and a member of police staff. The police officer was acting as the “flyer”, whose responsibilities included talking on the radio, deploying units, clearing units etc. The member of police staff was acting as a “buddy” and his responsibilities included making any telephone calls required, for example to the Highways Agency, garage calls outs or ambulance and fire services, on behalf of the “flyer”. The “buddy” also picks up updates on the log from the radio transmission or updates the log with any checks, such as PNC checks.

The police officer requested a local unit attend the scene but it had been assigned to another incident and could not attend. Seconds later, another officer responded via his radio, offering to attend the scene. This was verbally agreed and at 01.07am, that unit was assigned to the incident.

At 01.09am, the member of police staff called the member of the public who reported the flood. He confirmed he had arrived home safely with his car but that he may have “left a bit of bumper” at the scene. The member of police staff advised the man that a unit was on its way to the scene.

While this conversation took place the police unit, which had originally been asked to attend but had been unable to, radioed through to the motorway desk asking whether they were still required at the incident. The police officer on the desk advised that they were no longer required because another unit was already making its way there. He then radioed through to the unit that was on its way and stood them down, stating “if you want to stand down I think we’re resolving this over the phone.”

At 01.10am, the unit was cleared from the log by the member of police staff and seconds later he closed the log. No further action was taken on the log.

Between 5.30 and 6.30am the same morning, PC James Drew, a serving police officer for Hampshire Constabulary, was driving on the same stretch of road when he lost control of his car, crashed into a fence and was fatally wounded.

Between 18.00pm on 21 January and the RTI involving PC Drew, Hampshire Police’s force control room received no other calls about the relevant stretch of the A31, other than the call that is subject to this investigation.

Conclusion

It is clear from the log of the man’s call that he was concerned about the flood on the A31, which had caused him to lose control of his car.

On receipt of this information, the police officer on the motorway desk quite properly sought to assign a vehicle to the location. He cancelled that unit on the say so of his “buddy”, the member of police staff, and assumed that his “buddy” would notify the local authority of the flooding.

During his conversation with the “buddy”, the member of the public mentioned that he may have left part of his bumper at the scene. This information was not on the log and was not passed onto the police officer on the motorway desk.

The member of police staff accepts that notifying the local authority would have been appropriate in this case and that, in his role as “buddy”, it was his responsibility to do so. It appears he was focused on the road traffic collision element of the report and omitted to take into account the flooding and possibility of debris in the road.

Based on the evidence available, I concluded that the police officer acting in the “flyer” role has not breached the standards of professional behaviour. He has not failed to carry out his duties and responsibilities; the flood should have been reported to the local authority by his “buddy” and he was not aware of the possibility of debris on the road.

I have also concluded that the member of police staff acting in the role of “buddy” has failed in his duty, in so far as he did not notify the local authority of the flood on the A31. He should also have allowed the police unit to attend the scene in view of the possibility of debris on the road. Having taken into consideration the fact he has accepted that informing the local authority was his responsibility and would have been appropriate in this case, and that his failures were errors of judgement rather than malicious, as well as the fact that PC Drew’s family have made it clear that they do not want blame to be placed on any individual for errors made prior to his accident, I have agreed that Hampshire Constabulary should deal with this by giving the employee words of advice.

In terms of organisational learning, the only guidance given to control room staff relating to flooding is the force action plan on flooding. This plan covers major widespread flooding but not smaller isolated incidents.

It appears that the practice of notifying the local authority of flooding is accepted practice rather than despatching a police unit to assess the situation. While this may be appropriate in the majority of cases there are factors which need to be taken into consideration, such as the extent of the flooding, the nature of the road flooded and the speed of the local authority response.

I have therefore recommended that Hampshire Constabulary considers if the guidance and practice for dealing with road floods is sufficient to deal with the various situations which may arise.

I do want to stress that care has to be taken not to directly link this with the fatal collision involving PC Drew. The cause of that RTI has been subject to a separate investigation by Hampshire Constabulary and an inquest delivered a verdict of accidental death.

Commissioner Mike Franklin
November 2009

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