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National Centre for Policing Excellence

CODE OF PRACTICE

The Police National Computer

Takes effect from: 1 January 2005

CENTREX
DEVELOPING POLICING EXCELLENCE

MOD200014327

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Introduction

1. Operational efficiency and data protection legislation necessitate the highest standards of data timeliness and accuracy on the Police National Computer (PNC). PNC records cover many business areas, some of which relate to the commencement and conclusion of process for recordable offences. It is these areas that are the subject of this code.
2. Prior to 15 May 1995, records of persons against whom criminal process had commenced in England and Wales were forwarded by police forces to the National Identification Bureau (NIB) for input onto the PNC. Any subsequent conviction details were entered onto the PNC, stored on microfiche and copied to police forces by post when required. Upon completion of the PNC 'Phoenix' project on 15 May 1995, forces were required to update records locally. When this part of the NIB function ceased,¹ the organisation's name changed to the National Identification Service (NIS).
3. PNC requirements and operating procedures are set out in two Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO) user manuals. Quality and timeliness standards were set out in the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) Compliance Strategy that was adopted as the national standard in 2000. This strategy established challenging timeliness performance criteria for the recording of events on the PNC – commencement of proceedings within 24 hours and finalisation within seven days. These standards for quality and timeliness have not been achieved and this code replaces the timeliness elements of the strategy.
4. The Police Research Group's (PRG's) *Phoenix Data Quality* report² found differing working practices across the police service and variable levels of compliance which adversely affected data quality. The report identified the main weaknesses in the police use of the PNC and suggested that there was an increasing backlog of case results awaiting entry onto the system.
5. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) subsequently produced three reports, the last of which, in December 2002, showed that, while there had been significant improvements in clearing the backlog of case results, few forces were consistently achieving the required performance criteria.
6. Statistical data averaged over 12 months indicates that performance against the required standards is poor. The underlying reasons, highlighted by HMIC inspectors, have been badly designed business processes and under-resourcing. In many forces this was exacerbated by inadequate computerised systems, often implemented piecemeal without strategic vision.
7. Evidence also suggests that, while national performance standards for timeliness were much needed, the timeliness criteria within the strategy set standards that were unachievable. Consistent failure to achieve what may, in the current environment, be unrealistic serves no useful purpose. Indeed, it may be counterproductive. It is for this reason that the performance criteria have been revisited and that demanding yet achievable targets have been proposed.

¹The organisation still retains a limited record-keeping role. Where the offender first came to notice before January 1981, the PNC may show limited information for the period prior to May 1995 (typically name, age, sex, colour, height). Information on any pre-May 1995 arrests and disposals for these individuals may be obtained from the microfiche held by the NIS.

²Police Research Group, *Phoenix Data Quality*, Special Interest Series: Paper 11.

8. Responsibility for the creation and maintenance of PNC records lies with chief officers. However, the origins of the data are often outside their direct control. Data integrity is also dependent upon accurate, timely data from non-police prosecuting agencies (NPPAs) and the courts. While the policy in the longer term is for those who process offenders to record the information on the PNC, for the present the transmission of data between agencies will rely on good interagency cooperation. While forces are encouraged to use existing channels of communication to resolve performance shortfalls, it is recognised that chief officers cannot be held responsible for the actions of organisations outside their control.
9. In addition to timeliness, the quality of PNC data has wide implications both inside and outside the service. The current inconsistent approach across police forces impacts adversely upon any organisation dependent upon the data. The completeness of a PNC record can be assured only after time-consuming and expensive cross-checking with other systems or manual records.
10. The timeliness and quality criteria within this code are based on both current statistical information and the evidence gained from three comprehensive HMIC field studies, during the course of which the PNC business processes of the majority of mainland police forces in England and Wales were inspected.
11. In the longer term, much of the data exchange with the PNC will be by automated processes from national applications. In the police service this will be through the Custody and Case Preparation systems that are currently being rolled out across the country in an ambitious three-year plan. This will be linked by the Criminal Justice System Exchange to allow all criminal justice professionals to share case file information.³
12. The standards in this document address weaknesses identified by the three major HMIC reports on the PNC. They also make reference to the information exchange standards of the Custody and Case Preparation products.
13. These codes will be reviewed one year from the date of commencement.

Scope and status of the code

Systems included

14. The code relates to transactions undertaken by the 43 police forces in England and Wales, the British Transport Police, National Crime Squad (NCS) and National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS).
15. The code only relates to police business processes that require interaction with the PNC Names database⁴ for the purposes of recording the commencement and conclusion of process relating to recordable offences.⁵ Such interaction may be by directly connected terminal, interface with another computerised system or transmission from remote terminals.

³The other systems include those currently used by magistrates' courts (Equis), Youth Offending Teams (YJB and YOT), Crown courts (XHIBIT), the Crown Prosecution Service (COMPASS) and the Probation and Prison Service (OASys). For further information see www.cjit.gov.uk

⁴Often erroneously referred to as 'Phoenix'. The reasons for such interactions are detailed in Appendix 1.

⁵All offences that carry the option of imprisonment and some 50 other, non-imprisonable offences listed in the National Police Records (Recordable Offences) Regulations 2000, as amended.

Systems excluded

16. The code does not relate to any other PNC function, although the good practice principles detailed should also be considered for those applications.
17. The code does not relate to any function designed only for the purposes of maintaining PNC functionality.⁶

Enabling legislation

18. This code is a statutory code of practice within the meaning of section 39A of the Police Act 1996, as introduced by section 2 of the Police Reform Act 2002. It also applies within the framework of law governing the use of data by the police, which forms part of the general law of England and Wales. Use of data by the police must comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998.
19. Nothing in this code alters the existing legal powers or responsibilities of any chief officer of police, the Directors General of NCS and NCIS, any other police officer or police staff.
20. This code of practice is made under:
 - section 39A of the Police Act 1996 (inserted by section 2 of the Police Reform Act 2002), which permits the Secretary of State to issue codes of practice for the purpose of promoting the efficiency and effectiveness of police forces in England and Wales relating to the discharge of their functions by chief officers;
 - section 28A of the Police Act 1997 (inserted by section 8 of and schedule 1 to the Police Reform Act 2002), which permits the Secretary of State to issue codes of practice relating to the discharge by the Director General of the NCIS and the Director General of the NCS of any of their functions; and
 - section 48 of the Railways and Transport Safety Act 2003, which permits the Secretary of State to issue codes of practice for the purpose of promoting the efficiency and effectiveness of the British Transport Police relating to the performance of any of his functions by the chief officer.
21. In accordance with the above-mentioned statutory provisions, chief officers and the Directors General are required, in discharging their functions in respect of the use of the PNC, to have regard to the provisions of this code.
22. This code replaces the requirements set out in the ACPO PNC Codes of Compliance headed 'Timeliness Performance Indicators'.

⁶For example, the procedures relating to re-setting terminals, maintenance of hardware/software and the use of the PNC Helpdesk.

Relationship of the code to other guidance

23. Chief officers of police will make arrangements under this code for the strategy, auditing, training, marketing and system management of the PNC within their force. Guidance in respect of required actions, good practice and operating procedures is set out in detail in the publications detailed below.

Document	Owner	Last reviewed
PNC System Security Policy – Code of Connection Volume One v.2.1	PITO	February 1997
PNC System Security Policy – Code of Connection Volume Two v.2.0	PITO	May 1997
Phoenix Data Quality	PRG	March 1998
PNC Compliance Strategy ⁷	ACPO	February 2000
On the Record	HMIC	July 2000
PNC Data Quality and Timeliness 1	HMIC	December 2001
PNC Data Quality and Timeliness 2	HMIC	August 2002
Code of Practice for Data Protection	ACPO	October 2002
PNC Manual 1	PITO	March 2004
PNC Manual 2	PITO	December 2003
PICTTS ⁸ Operational Training Standards	PICTTS	2003
PNC Inspection Protocol	HMIC	February 2003

Confidentiality of PNC training and usage

24. In laying this code of practice before Parliament, the Home Secretary supports the continuing practice of ACPO that PNC manuals of guidance will be published, with the exception of any material in the manuals whose publication would be against the interests of national security or could prejudice the prevention or detection of crime or the apprehension or prosecution of offenders.

Purpose of the code

25. To set out achievable timeliness and quality criteria in relation to data entered onto the PNC.
26. To promote the national adoption of good business practices to ensure the integrity of PNC data in the future.

⁷ Except the section headed 'Timeliness Performance Indicators'.

⁸ Police Information and Communications Technology Training Services.

Statements of principle and practice

27. The PNC is the only full-time, operational national police computer system routinely supported by data from all police forces. It is the prime source of information in relation to the nominal record of offenders processed by the police, the courts and NPPAs. As few of these agencies have update privilege,⁹ all inputting is undertaken by the police. Prompt updating of process originating outside the police service is dependent upon NPPAs expeditiously alerting the police to the commencement and conclusion of proceedings.
28. Traditionally, a number of selected organisations have been authorised by PITO to view PNC records to support internal business processes, primarily relating to character assessment. In recent times, access to the PNC has been extended more widely via the Criminal Records Bureau, the effective functioning of which is dependent upon the accuracy and timeliness of PNC data.
29. The efficiency of the criminal justice system and the effectiveness of the police are dependent upon the accuracy and timeliness of PNC records.

Timeliness standards

30. **Commencement of process**
At the commencement of process¹⁰ into a recordable offence, 90 per cent of each force's total of recordable offences must be entered onto the PNC within 24 hours of the event and 100 per cent must be recorded within three days of the event.¹¹ An event is when a person is arrested, reported or summonsed.
31. **Discontinuation/conclusion of proceedings**
A minimum of 50 per cent of the total finalisations of each force must be entered onto the PNC within seven days of the information being received by the police. Within six months of the commencement of this code, the total number of finalisations entered will increase to 75 per cent of the force total.¹²

Organisational standards

Leadership

32. Chief officers of police are responsible for identifying the requirements for the successful management of the PNC within the force.
33. Chief officers will establish and maintain a strategic PNC Steering Group within each force. The group will develop and be responsible for a strategic plan covering the development, use and marketing of the PNC and will ensure that strategic initiatives are implemented.

⁹The ability to create and amend data.

¹⁰This is achieved on the PNC by the creation of what is normally referred to as the Arrest/Summons (A/S) report. This has two prime functions: to alert any enquirer that process has commenced and to generate a unique reference (an A/S number) for cross-referencing subsequent fingerprint and DNA records. Details of the data items required for the generation of an A/S report can be seen in Appendix 2.

¹¹The day of the event is counted by the PNC as day zero.

¹²Forces will record the receipt of court results in a form that facilitates statistical presentation.

34. For the purpose of maintaining standards within each force, chief officers will ensure that an officer of at least assistant chief constable rank or equivalent is nominated to lead within the force in relation to operational policy and practice in respect of PNC usage.

Policy and strategy

35. The use and development of national police information systems will be integrated into the appropriate force, territorial area and departmental strategic planning.
36. The chief officer will ensure that the national standards for PNC operation, resourcing and training are fully integrated into local Information Management Strategies (IMS) and are recognised as an important part of operational service delivery.
37. The chief officer will ensure that PNC Steering Group responsibilities are considered when defining the lines of responsibility and reporting for personnel involved in the delivery of any function relating to the PNC. This includes personnel with responsibility for data integrity.¹³
38. The provisions of the PNC Steering Group's marketing strategy will identify the benefits to operational groups of PNC usage based on business requirements. The provisions of the marketing strategy will be proactively executed.

People

39. Chief officers will only utilise personnel trained to the current national standard¹⁴ for the purposes of PNC training.
40. Chief officers will ensure that staff undertaking PNC functions are trained to the appropriate level of competence. Functions requiring a high level of expertise must be adequately resourced to accommodate fluctuations in workloads.

Partnership and resources

41. Forces will not be responsible for the acts or omissions of other organisations.
42. The PNC Steering Group will manage the force's relationship with stakeholders outside the police service to resolve local issues relating to conflict in business processes and to ensure that inter-organisation systems are in place to maximise cooperation to achieve compliance with statutory requirements.
43. Where a force is unable to achieve the required performance criteria due to an act or omission by another force or by an organisation within the wider criminal justice community, it will be the duty of that force to establish the extent and possible cause of such omission. The force will be in a position to evidence any remedy sought by the use of existing local procedures.

¹³This is to ensure that lines of responsibility and reporting in relation to the PNC do not bypass the strategic group. Inspections revealed that decisions impacting upon the use of the PNC were made in forces without consideration of the consequences, indeed without realising that there were consequences for the PNC.

¹⁴The standard will be the responsibility of the Police Skills and Standards Organisation (PSSO) and the Police Licensing Accreditation Board.

Processes

44. Chief officers will ensure that each PNC inputting department develops an audit trail to register the return of substandard Source Input Documents (SIDs) via line supervisors to their originators. The system developed will include a mechanism to ensure the prompt return of SIDs. Forces will also incorporate locally-based audit trails, monitoring the passage of returned SIDs between line supervisors and their originators.
45. Chief officers will develop strategy and guidelines to support the timely and accurate submission of SIDs, compliance with which will be monitored within routine performance data. Appropriate accountability measures will be established to ensure that any identified performance shortfalls are addressed.
46. SID performance statistics will be incorporated in routine force performance information. The statistics will identify omissions and errors in individual fields, in particular descriptive information.
47. Statistics relating to the achievement of compliance with this code will be integrated into the mainstream suite of management information/indicators that inform decisions at force and Basic Command Unit (BCU) levels.¹⁵
48. Chief officers will integrate PNC data quality compliance into their performance review and inspection programmes for BCUs and specialist departments.
49. The work of PNC inputting staff will be regularly checked for quality. The proportion checked will be based upon the individual's experience and performance record. Forces will also consider the benefits of measuring other aspects of their work, including speed of entry and compliance with policies. Performance outcomes will be evidenced in staff Personal Development Reviews (PDRs).
50. Forces will develop risk-assessed PNC audit programmes.

¹⁵ Performance data demonstrating the achievement of technical goals, while important, must not obscure the main business objectives.

Appendix One

Names index

The Names index holds data on persons who fall into one of the four categories below. At least one of these elements must be present for a record to exist:

- Offence Processing;
- Wanted/Missing;
- Disqualified Driver; or
- Firearm Certificate Holder.

A record can be created for a number of reasons, including when a person:

- is the subject of a record originally created and held at the NIS;
- has been arrested, charged or reported for summons for the commission of, or involvement in, a recordable offence;
- has been arrested on suspicion of a recordable offence;
- is wanted for committing a specific offence;
- has failed to appear at a court in answer to a charge made against them;
- has been reported missing or has been found;
- has absconded from, or is subject to recall to, a prison, remand centre, young offender institution, etc;
- has deserted from the Armed Forces;
- is sought for other police purposes, e.g. as a witness to an incident;
- has been disqualified from driving a motor vehicle on a road by a court;
- is the subject of a particular type of Court Order;
- is the subject of judicial process for recordable offences.¹⁶

A record can also be created in relation to:

- a person who is missing in certain circumstances or has otherwise come to notice.

This index can also be searched via QUEST, based on descriptive and other record features.

¹⁶For example, Sex Offenders Registration Order.

Appendix Two

Arrest/Summons data – fields to be completed

There are 11 mandatory fields to complete before an A/S reference number is generated.

The normal input data of Name/Age/Sex/Colour are entered, then the following fields have to be completed:

1. Process Stage
2. Process Stage Date
3. Fingerprints Taken Y/N
4. DNA Details
5. Name Charged
6. Arrest Date of Birth
7. Arresting Officer¹⁷
8. ACPO Offence Code
9. Offence Start Date
10. Offence Location
11. Offence Location Description.

The A/S number is then generated by the PNC.

¹⁷ If the four parts of the Arresting Officer field are counted separately, rather than as a group field, the minimum number of fields is 12, as a minimum of two parts have to be filled in. For this illustration it is counted as one field.