



999 'time wasters': Where do emergency services draw the line?

With **cash strapped and resources tight**, emergency services are trying to cut nonsense 999 calls – but how do they stop some callers wasting their time?

The emergency services often release details of time-wasting calls they receive **in a bid to** urge people to think twice before calling 999. Police Scotland was among a number of forces to do so when a 101 non-emergency number was launched. One caller rang 999 to complain he had been given a regular burger instead of a cheeseburger at a fast-food restaurant.

Other forces to have taken a similar approach include the West Midlands, which revealed one recording of a woman complaining about the sprinkles on her ice cream cone. Greater Manchester Police also revealed 'silly prank calls' including reports of marmalade theft and a chicken walking down the road.

The Metropolitan Police, the largest UK police force, also ran a similar campaign last December. As a result, it said it had received 2,060 fewer misuse or hoax calls in the first six months of this year than the 28,872 such calls it received in the same period last year.

Some of the calls are made by the same people, ringing 999 over and over again. Detective Superintendent Gurdip Singh, from the Met's command and control, said 'The most frequent nuisance callers are looked at each day, with officers focusing on the top 10 in each London borough and making prosecutions where appropriate. Operators are trained to recognise misuse and hoax calls. They are also trained to recognise where callers may suffer from mental health or vulnerability issues. Where mental health issues are the catalyst, work is **undertaken** with the local Safer Neighbourhood Teams and other relevant partner agencies to provide help for the individual and deter them from constantly calling the police.'

Social psychology professor Michael Moore said well-trained listeners, such as operators in 999 call centres, often know how to pick up on the signs of deliberate timewasters. 'There might be someone who is making these calls intentionally to **harass** emergency services because they want to **clog** the lines or whatever. There's a touch of anti-establishment attitude to making fake or hoax calls. It may even be a bored person or someone who has done it as a dare to impress a friend.'

For those few callers who make repeated **bogus** calls, the service says it will pursue prosecutions, as well as 'acceptable behaviour agreements', which normally precede antisocial behaviour orders.

There is still concern that people dialling 999 for minor conditions, including colds and toothache, are putting the lives of genuine emergency patients at risk. But emergency services hope public education initiatives and the release of examples of inappropriate calls will help underline the message – 999 is for emergencies.

Strict rules for young gamers

The government of Kagawa Prefecture in western Japan has passed an ordinance that will limit the amount of time that young people below the age of 20 (the age of majority in Japan) will be able to spend playing video games or online. The regulations **come into force** next April. When they take effect, young people will only be able to use their smartphones for 60 minutes on weekdays and 90 minutes at the weekend and on holidays. According to the new plans, there are also going to be smartphone

curfews after 9 pm for junior high-school students and 10 pm for high-school students. The ordinance calls for parents and guardians to supervise their children and make sure they follow the daily limits. There are no **penalties** or fines to **enforce** the restrictions, but residents are expected to obey the ordinance as a question of social responsibility.

The local government is taking these new measures because they claim that spending too much time online or playing video games is having a negative effect on young people's health and school performance, as well as creating **sleep disorders**. They also believe that gaming is causing young people to spend less time with others, and point out that time spent on video games has become a global issue in the past few years. Indeed, the World Health Organization recently added video-game addiction to its official list of recognised illnesses.

Whilst some people have praised the move, believing that a clear time limit will be helpful for both parents and their children, there have been many criticisms of the new scheme. Although children are allowed to use their smartphones to contact family or for educational purposes, some critics argue that young people in Japan today need to develop their technological skills and, therefore, imposing any limit on new technology is old-fashioned. They argue that the way to reduce time spent on gaming is either through education or on tighter restrictions on the gaming industry, not on individuals.

A 17-year-old high-school student named Wataru and his 42-year-old mother are going further. They are meeting a top lawyer next week to begin a fight against the ordinance at the very highest level. Wataru believes that the smartphone limits go against the national constitutional right to the pursuit of happiness, the right to privacy and the right to self-determination. He believes families should decide for themselves how much gaming is right, especially since, as the national Japanese government itself has admitted, there is no scientific basis concerning time limits for playing games.