

How we manage demand

The London Ambulance Service (LAS) receives on average in excess of 1.6 million emergency calls per year, which makes us as one of the busiest ambulance services in the world. This equates to approximately 3 calls per minute being answered in our Emergency Operations Centre (EOC). In this situation, it is naturally important to prioritise calls so that vehicles may be dispatched according to the urgency of the patient's clinical need.

In order to achieve this prioritisation of calls the LAS, like many ambulance services worldwide, operates the Medical Priority Dispatch System. This involves a system of structured questions which identifies priority symptoms and thereby the clinical need of the patient. From that, an assigned level of priority is made, in turn historically determining the type of resource that will be allocated to manage the incident. Thus all emergency calls are prioritised according to a scale of 'Red' (immediately life threatening); C1 and C2 (serious but not immediately life threatening) and C3 and C4 (suitable for further enhanced clinical telephone assessment and/or referral to another care provider).

Calls designated at C3 and C4 may be passed to our Clinical Telephone Advice (CTA) service, comprised of specially trained staff who undertake an enhanced assessment to determine whether an ambulance is required or whether advice about attaining an alternative care pathway would be more appropriate. For some C4 calls, 999 call handlers may advise the caller to contact the local 111 service.

Although we do not under-estimate the distress caused by pain, this is a subjective consideration and as such the triage system cannot take that into account.

Repeat 999 calls about the same patient are re-triaged in recognition that a patient's condition can deteriorate whilst an ambulance is being arranged, in this way, the priority level can be changed as may be necessary.

Response targets

Category Red – 75% of calls triaged at the level should receive a response within 8 minutes and 95% to receive an ambulance within 19 minutes

Category C1 – target response of 20 minutes.

Category C2 – target response of 30 minutes.

Category C3 – Telephone assessment commences within 20 minutes or a response arrives within 30 minutes.

Category C4 – Clinical Telephone Assessment (CTA) within 60 minutes or caller advised to contact 111

To help us manage capacity, we have a Demand Management Plan (DMP) which is implemented at times of high demand following consultation with senior colleagues from our Medical Directorate. This is used to ensure we continue to provide a rapid response to the sickest and most seriously injured patients.

For more information, please see: