

THE MISSING RECORD

Operation Talla, the “Guidance to Not Record” and the Public Account of National Covid Policing

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Introduction

There is a difference between evidence that something happened and evidence explaining why it happened.

There is also a difference between information which was publicly available at the time of an event and information which emerges years later, after repeated requests for disclosure and internal review.

Those distinctions lie at the centre of this paper.

Operation Talla was the nationally coordinated policing response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Its existence is not obscure. Its command structure is known. Its national coordinating function is known. Its relationship with individual police forces is known. Its Independent Ethics Committee is known. Its mechanisms for the publication of information are documented.

Indeed, former NPCC Chair Martin Hewitt subsequently explained to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry that Operation Talla was created because national policing needed to bring together the way in which forces were operating across the United Kingdom. Individual forces replicated Gold, Silver and Bronze command structures and the national operation was able to “feed down” into those forces.

NPoCC itself continues to describe Operation Talla as “the national policing response to the COVID-19 pandemic” and describes its own function as providing central coordination for UK policing.

There is therefore nothing controversial in saying that Operation Talla was a national policing structure capable of producing and disseminating guidance and coordinating operational responses.

The difficulty examined in this paper concerns something considerably more specific.

Primary police records have subsequently emerged referring expressly to:

“the guidance to not record”

and recording that:

“the guidance to not record has been a success”.

Separately, Police Scotland disclosed a January 2022 directive concerning members of the public attempting to report alleged criminality associated with Covid vaccination matters.

Both disclosures are important in their own right.

Their route into the public domain is also important.

The material did not emerge as a conspicuous part of the ordinary public institutional account of Operation Talla.

It emerged following information requests and subsequent internal review.

That creates a legitimate public-interest question.

Not: Was there a conspiracy to conceal this material?

The evidence examined in this paper does not establish that proposition.

The proper question is considerably simpler:

Where is the institutional record explaining the national non-recording approach evidenced by the police documents themselves?

Who devised it? Who authorised it? Who received it? What was its precise scope? What legal and operational advice supported it? Was it scrutinised ethically? How was its effect monitored? And where was it subsequently accounted for?

Those questions arise not from speculation. They arise from the police record itself.

1. OPERATION TALLA - THE NATIONAL STRUCTURE

Operation Talla was established in March 2020 as the coordinated national policing response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Its architecture matters.

This was not merely an informal arrangement through which police forces exchanged ideas.

Martin Hewitt described to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry a national operation in which policing was “guiding and leading and coordinating” the activity of forces.

He explained that individual forces replicated Gold, Silver and Bronze structures and that national Operation Talla could then “feed down” so that activity occurred within individual forces.

That description provides an important evidential framework.

When material originating within national Operation Talla subsequently appears within an individual police force, its presence cannot properly be examined without recognising the national-to-local machinery through which Operation Talla operated.

This becomes particularly important when considering material concerning crime reporting.

2. OPERATION TALLA AND TRANSPARENCY

Operation Talla also possessed an explicit Publication Strategy.

That document deserves considerably greater attention than it has previously received.

The NPCC continues publicly to list the Operation Talla Publication Strategy (COVID-19) amongst its publications.

The strategy demonstrates that publication and transparency were matters consciously considered within Operation Talla.

Of particular significance, the strategy contains a category headed:

“National Decisions”

and contemplates publication concerning national decisions taken in response to demand and/or resourcing challenges.

It also expressly identifies:

“Summary documents (outlining discussions and advice) and dilemmas given by the Operation Talla Independent Ethic Committee”

for publication at the conclusion of Operation Talla and no later than July 2022.

That matters.

It demonstrates that Operation Talla contemplated a documentary public account not merely of statistics and enforcement activity, but of national decisions, discussions, advice and ethical dilemmas.

The existence of that strategy does not establish that every operational decision was required to be published.

Nor does it establish that any failure to publish a particular document was improper.

It establishes something narrower but important:

Operation Talla had expressly considered how significant national decisions and ethical issues should enter the public record.

That provides an evidential benchmark.

Against that benchmark must now be considered a national policing approach described internally in the language of “guidance to not record”.

3. THE INDEPENDENT ETHICS COMMITTEE

Transparency was not the only safeguard built into Operation Talla.

An Independent Ethics Committee was established.

Martin Hewitt subsequently described its purpose to the Covid Inquiry in particularly significant terms.

He explained that unprecedented policing circumstances would inevitably produce difficult ethical decisions and described the Committee as, in effect, the “conscience” of Operation Talla: a challenge point and critical friend against which difficult decisions could be tested.

The Committee was chaired by the Rt Revd David Walker, the Bishop of Manchester.

His contemporaneous parliamentary register recorded him as:

“Chair, Operation Talla Independent Ethics Committee, National Police Coordination Centre”.

Again, none of this establishes that every Operation Talla decision was required to be referred to the Committee.

It establishes that a mechanism existed specifically to provide ethical scrutiny of difficult national policing decisions.

That produces an obvious question once the non-recording evidence is considered:

Was the national approach concerning the recording or non-recording of vaccine-related criminal allegations referred to the Independent Ethics Committee?

If it was, the resulting record is potentially important.

If it was not, the question arises why an approach affecting the treatment of allegations presented by members of the public did not engage that mechanism.

At present, the available evidence does not permit either proposition to be stated as fact.

That absence of an answer is itself one of the documentary questions requiring resolution.

4. JANUARY 2022 - THE PROBLEM EMERGES

By January 2022, police forces were dealing with attempts by members of the public to report allegations of criminality concerning Covid vaccines and associated matters.

One particular report had acquired obvious significance: Metropolitan Police CRN 6029679/21.

It had been created following allegations presented at Hammersmith Police Station on 20 December 2021.

Subsequent documentary evidence demonstrates that the matter entered a wider national policing environment.

The importance of this point is not whether the underlying allegations were ultimately capable of proof.

That is an entirely separate question.

The present issue concerns what policing did with allegations being presented by members of the public and how the national response to those reports was determined.

5. POLICE SCOTLAND - THE DIRECTIVE

One of the most consequential documents subsequently obtained is the Police Scotland material disclosed under FOI reference 25-0673.

The directive, issued in January 2022, concerned attempts by members of the public to report alleged offences associated

with Covid vaccination matters and attempts to serve documentation upon relevant organisations.

Its significance lies not merely in its existence.

The document places Police Scotland's response within a wider policing environment involving national advice and Operation Talla.

The evidential consequence is important.

What might otherwise have been characterised as an isolated Scottish operational decision requires examination against the national Operation Talla structure operating at the time.

More importantly for present purposes, the relevant material was not initially exposed through an obvious public account of national Operation Talla decision-making.

Its emergence required the use of information-access mechanisms and subsequent review.

That fact does not prove concealment.

But it raises a legitimate question about the completeness of the public documentary account.

6. THE SECOND DISCLOSURE - “THE GUIDANCE TO NOT RECORD”

The evidential position becomes substantially more important when the Police Scotland material is considered alongside subsequently disclosed internal policing correspondence.

A communication dated 14 February 2022 records:

“We have not been formally recording numbers of attempts to follow this process across the country.”

It then states:

“Our latest assessment shows that it is still occurring, it would appear that the guidance to not record has been a success as only one additional report has been created.”

Those words should be read carefully.

They should neither be exaggerated nor diluted.

On their ordinary meaning they establish several matters.

There was something described by policing itself as “guidance”.

That guidance concerned whether reports were recorded.

Its effect was capable of being assessed nationally.

An “assessment” had in fact been undertaken.

And the limited creation of additional reports was regarded as evidence that the guidance had been “a success”.

These are substantial propositions.

They come not from an interpretation imposed retrospectively upon the record.

They arise from the language of the contemporaneous police communication itself.

The obvious evidential question therefore becomes:

Where is the guidance?

7. THE MISSING DOCUMENTARY BRIDGE

This is the central problem examined by this paper.

Operation Talla was a national policing structure.

It possessed Gold and Silver command.

It disseminated material nationally.

It possessed an Independent Ethics Committee.

It had an explicit Publication Strategy.

Its strategy contemplated publication concerning national decisions and ethical dilemmas.

Yet we now possess contemporaneous policing material expressly referring to “the guidance to not record” without an immediately apparent corresponding public institutional record explaining who drafted that guidance; when it was created; who authorised it; precisely what categories of reports it covered; which forces received it; whether Chief Constables or Gold Command approved it; what legal advice supported it; whether crime-recording specialists considered it; whether the Independent Ethics Committee scrutinised it; how compliance with it was monitored; what assessment produced the conclusion that it had been successful; and when, if ever, it ceased to operate.

This is the documentary discontinuity.

There is evidence of the outcome.

There is evidence of the terminology.

There is evidence of national assessment.

What remains remarkably difficult to locate publicly is the institutional record explaining the decision itself.

8. THE CHESHIRE DISCLOSURES - HOW NATIONAL MATERIAL REACHED A FORCE

More recent disclosures from Cheshire Constabulary add an important dimension.

They provide a contemporaneous force-level view of how material originating within the national Operation Talla/NPoCC structure travelled into an individual territorial force.

The disclosed material shows national Operation Talla information being circulated internally for review and operational consideration, including consideration within Gold strategy and tactical planning.

That is significant because it provides something previously difficult to observe directly:
the transmission mechanism.

National material did not simply exist at the centre.

It entered individual forces.

It was circulated.

It was considered through command structures.

It could inform strategy and operational activity.

This accords with Hewitt's subsequent description of a national Operation Talla structure capable of feeding activity down into individual forces.

The Cheshire material therefore provides important contextual evidence when examining how any national approach concerning vaccine-related crime reports might have been operationalised.

It does not, by itself, establish that Cheshire implemented the particular “guidance to not record”.

That distinction must be maintained.

What it establishes is the existence of the machinery through which national Operation Talla material could move from centre to force.

9. POLICE SCOTLAND - A PARALLEL WINDOW INTO IMPLEMENTATION

Recent Scottish disclosures provide further context.

The Scottish Police Authority describes Operation Talla as the “UK-wide police coordination effort established in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Further 2026 disclosure has revealed the existence of the Police Scotland Operation TALLA Information, Assurance and Liaison Group - OpTICAL.

The disclosed description records that the group provided analysis and strategic oversight of information, intelligence and data to support Divisional Commanders.

Again, care is necessary.

The existence of OpTICAL does not establish that it participated in, approved or even knew about the particular non-recording guidance examined here.

But it further demonstrates the sophistication of the information, intelligence, assurance and command architecture operating around Operation Talla.

The documentary question consequently becomes more, not less important.

A national policing system capable of generating, disseminating, assessing and assuring information should ordinarily leave a documentary footprint.

The question is where the relevant footprint concerning the non-recording approach resides.

10. THE COVID-19 INQUIRY

The UK Covid-19 Inquiry has provided an extensive public record concerning Operation Talla.

Martin Hewitt's evidence explains its creation, command arrangements, national coordination, local Gold/Silver/Bronze replication and Independent Ethics Committee.

That evidence is important and informative.

But another question follows.

Where, within the publicly accessible Inquiry account, is the national “guidance to not record” explained?

The authors have presently identified no published Inquiry material providing an equivalent account of that guidance,

explaining its creation, identifying its authorisation, recording its ethical consideration or describing its implementation across police forces.

That is a negative research finding.

It is not proof that the Inquiry does not possess relevant material.

It is not proof that no witness referred to the matter in material which is not presently identified.

It is not evidence that anything was deliberately withheld from the Inquiry.

Those distinctions are essential.

The point is narrower.

An issue which appears significant within subsequently disclosed contemporaneous policing records is not presently conspicuous within the publicly accessible institutional account of Operation Talla.

That discrepancy warrants examination.

11. WHY THE INTERNAL REVIEWS MATTER

There is another feature common to the emerging evidence.

Important material did not necessarily emerge at the first point of institutional enquiry.

The Police Scotland material concerning rejection of reports emerged following review.

The NPCC material containing the express reference to “the guidance to not record” likewise emerged through a disclosure process which required further institutional examination.

That procedural history matters.

Again, it does not prove concealment.

Information-access searches fail for numerous legitimate reasons: terminology, custodianship, search parameters, document classification, retention structures and simple human error can all produce incomplete initial results.

But where unusually consequential documents repeatedly emerge only after reconsideration, the adequacy of the original searches and the completeness of the wider documentary account become legitimate matters for scrutiny.

The correct response is not accusation.

It is better retrieval.

Search again.

Identify the custodians.

Identify the decision-makers.

Locate the source document.

Locate the dissemination record.

Locate the legal advice.

Locate the ethical record.

Locate the assessment.

Then allow the documents to establish what occurred.

12. THE PUBLICATION STRATEGY MAKES THE ABSENCE MORE IMPORTANT

This returns the analysis to the Operation Talla Publication Strategy.

Had Operation Talla possessed no express transparency mechanism, the absence of a readily identifiable public record concerning the non-recording approach might be less remarkable.

But it did.

The strategy contemplated the publication of national decisions and ethical material.

Separately, the NPCC's communications strategy described Operation Talla as requiring substantial strategy-setting and coordination and contemplated concluding data publications and other products under the agreed publication scheme.

That does not mean every document should have been published.

It does mean that the following question becomes entirely reasonable:

Was the “guidance to not record” considered a national decision for publication purposes?

If not, why not?

Was it considered operational guidance?

Intelligence guidance?

Crime-recording guidance?

Legal advice?

A tactical response?

An informal instruction?

Or something else entirely?

The answer matters because classification determines accountability.

13. THE ETHICAL QUESTION

There is also an unavoidable ethical dimension.

Policing by consent depends upon the relationship between the police and the public.

A member of the public who attends a police station seeking to report alleged criminality engages one of the most elementary interfaces between citizen and State.

The police may ultimately determine that no crime has occurred.

They may determine that the evidence is insufficient.

They may determine that another force has jurisdiction.

They may determine that allegations are misconceived.

Those are ordinary features of policing.

But a national approach concerning whether allegations should be recorded at all raises a different institutional question.

That is precisely why the scope of the guidance must be established accurately.

What did “not record” actually mean?

Not create a crime record?

Not create an incident?

Not duplicate an existing report?

Not record allegations already nationally assessed?

Redirect material into intelligence systems?

Or something different?

Until the originating guidance is produced, those questions cannot safely be answered merely from the shorthand contained in subsequent correspondence.

That is why the missing source document matters so much.

14. WHAT SHOULD NOW BE DISCLOSED

The documentary problem is capable of resolution.

The relevant policing bodies should identify and, subject to lawful restrictions, disclose or account for:

1. the original document, instruction, communication or decision described contemporaneously as “the guidance to not record”;
2. its author and date;
3. the authority under which it was issued;
4. its intended recipients;

5. its dissemination history;
6. any Gold or Silver command decision relating to it;
7. any legal advice concerning its compatibility with crime-recording obligations;
8. any consideration by the Operation Talla Independent Ethics Committee;
9. any assessment of its implementation across forces;
10. the material underlying the statement that the guidance “has been a success”;
11. any subsequent amendment, withdrawal or replacement;
12. any record explaining how the guidance related to CRN 6029679/21;
13. any record showing whether it was supplied to, identified for or considered by the UK Covid-19 Inquiry; and
14. any record explaining whether it fell within the Operation Talla Publication Strategy and, if not, why not.

These are not questions about whether the underlying vaccine allegations were correct.

They concern police governance.

15. CONCLUSION - THE RECORD MUST ANSWER

There may be an entirely proper documentary explanation.

The guidance may have been formally authorised.

It may have been legally reviewed.

It may have been considered by Gold Command.

It may have been scrutinised by the Independent Ethics Committee.

It may have been disclosed to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry.

Records answering every question raised in this paper may exist.

If so, those records should resolve the matter.

But presently there is an unusual inversion within the public evidential record.

We know that Operation Talla existed.

We know that it operated nationally.

We know that national coordination could feed into individual police forces.

We know that Gold, Silver and Bronze structures existed.

We know that Operation Talla possessed an Independent Ethics Committee.

We know that it possessed an express Publication Strategy.

We know that the strategy contemplated publication concerning national decisions and ethical dilemmas.

And we now possess contemporaneous police evidence referring expressly to “the guidance to not record” and recording that “the guidance to not record has been a success”.

What remains remarkably difficult to find is the institutional record explaining that guidance.

Who decided it.

Who authorised it.

Who scrutinised it.

Who received it.

What precisely it required.

How its success was measured.

And where it was accounted for afterwards.

Those are not allegations.

They are questions created by the police record itself.

Nor should institutional silence be permitted to transform legitimate evidential questions into speculation.

There is a simpler solution.

Produce the record.

If the documents demonstrate that the approach was lawful, properly authorised, appropriately scrutinised and accurately represented to subsequent inquiries, they should establish that.

If they demonstrate something else, that too is a matter for the evidence.

The purpose of forensic investigation is not to select the preferred explanation and then search for material capable of supporting it.

It is to recover the record and follow wherever that record leads.

In this instance, the record is incomplete.

And the missing part is no longer peripheral.

It concerns a national policing approach apparently capable of affecting what happened when members of the public sought to report allegations of criminality.

That requires an answer.

The record should now provide it.