London Ambulance Service case study: CommandPoint™ assurance

The London Ambulance Service NHS Trust is the busiest emergency ambulance service in the UK. Operating over 620 square miles across 70 ambulance stations, the Service has been using CommandPoint™ - a computer aided dispatch system - to respond to 999 calls since March 2012.

An initial attempt to launch the software in June 2011 proved problematic and the control room was forced to revert to paper until its old call taking system could be switched back on.

With the home-grown internal system back up and running, the Service called for an investigation to establish the faults and reschedule the go-live.

To gain a full understanding of the problems encountered, and ensure a smooth re-launch, the Service commissioned the Solution Assurance team within the Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) to complete a full assurance review of the CommandPoint™ system.

The primary functions of Solution Assurance, across the NHS and on behalf of its partners, is the assurance of quality and safety of national health and social care IT services, and connectivity to and between them.

John Downard, Service's Assistant Director of IM&T, talked to us about how Tim Bradley of the Solution Assurance team helped the trust to identify the root causes of the difficulties as they worked collaboratively towards a successful go-live.

"Having a subject matter expert on hand, independent of the Service and the supplier, was invaluable because it meant we could re-evaluate every stage of testing in the run up to the go-live from a fresh perspective.

"With Tim's knowledge of non-functional testing of enterprise systems, we were able determine all manner of factors relating to the system's failure and develop a new approach."

The investigation not only assured the subsequent testing of CommandPoint™ Releases 1.2 and 1.3; it also covered supporting elements such as training, configuration management, transition approach and any outstanding risks. By following the recommendations made by the Solution Assurance team the Service was able to avoid the difficulties experienced the first time around and plan a transition that would have minimal impact to service performance.

"The team delivered a report with findings that gave us the level of confidence we needed – assuring us that the system was now robust enough to support a second attempt at deployment to live service.

"From the start of the investigation to the second go-live (March 2012) involved eight months of rigorous testing and planning – which I'm pleased to say culminated in success. Since the switch-over, CommandPoint™ has been live responding to thousands of 999 calls every day. The Solution Assurance team have played a key role in helping us deliver a safe, high quality, and reliable service to the eight million people we serve in the London area."

When asked about the project, HSCIC's Tim Bradley, who led the assurance review said: "The assurance of the London Ambulance Service project was a great opportunity to demonstrate that the benefits of Solution Assurance's experience and skills stretch beyond the boundaries of core programme work. Working outside of national contracts has its challenges but it's a very positive experience when working with a very committed and professional organisation like London Ambulance Service.

"Credit belongs with London Ambulance Service for recognising the need for advice and assistance on non-functional testing.

But also for listening to HSCIC advice around aspects of functional testing, training, supplier management, innovative redefinition of the approach to deploying the system (which added real value and significantly helped re-engage a disaffected user community) and for being open and honest in assessment of the situation. The temptation is always to shut up shop when there are issues with a project but by incorporating us into the team for a considerable period of time the two-way engagement was very positive.

"There are definite mutual benefits to be derived in utilising the breadth of knowledge available from across the wider HSCIC community within a focussed 'local' project or programme. Certain skill sets are an expensive resource to maintain or buy in to a trust but, by effective sharing of knowledge and experience from central teams, trust implementations of patient-affecting clinical and supporting systems can be significantly enhanced.

"From a personal perspective, the time spent on the ground with a tight-knit team working to deliver a positive (and literally life saving) service to patients gives me a clarity of purpose and motivation that is often difficult to achieve through disparate and arms-length programme work. This is something that is reported back time and again whenever we have central resource going out and working with the NHS community at large."

Visit the HSCIC website to find out more about Solution Assurance responsibilities and resources or contact the team by emailing assurance@hscic.gov.uk.

For more information about CommandPoint™, visit www.northropgrumman.com.

For more information about the London Ambulance Service visit www.londonambulance.nhs.uk.