

INCOMMUNICADO

The development of information technology in the police service has been a piecemeal affair with forces historically procuring separate systems to perform different functions.

This has resulted in the unsatisfactory situation where forces have more than 30 different IT systems to deal separately with case and custody work, command and control, intelligence, crime reporting and so on. All these systems have been procured over time from different technology vendors. While nationally 'approved' systems with built-in compatibility have been available for more than 10 years, many forces have chosen to go their own way because of the cost of some systems and because national systems take so long to roll out.

Fragmented approach

But there is a growing recognition at local level that using a patchwork of systems is inefficient and ineffective, both in serving forces' needs internally and in supporting information sharing between forces.

The added layer of mobile data technology makes this situation worse because officers using personal digital assistants (PDAs) or tablet PCs (portable computers, such as laptops, which can be mounted in vehicles and detached to use elsewhere) will have to get separate access to all the different in-force systems depending on what policing function they require.

Linking this network up to regional or national requirements then becomes complex and resource-intensive.

This problem was recognised in the report *Reducing bureaucracy in policing* by Jan Berry, the Home Office's independent reducing bureaucracy advocate, which was published in December.

'Historically there has been a fragmented approach to IT,' the report said. 'Despite assurances and an apparent desire to deliver joined-up and compatible IT, few national programmes have been successful in terms of delivering a product that is "fit for purpose", on time and within budget.'

The report adds: 'The information systems improvement strategy (ISIS) is developing a set of national standards that IT systems should meet. The standards rightly include single-entry data input and single sign-on, requirements around compatibility and flexibility, and the ability to expand IT systems.'

'All of these will be welcomed by frontline officers, who frequently battle to have use of a computer, get frustrated by having to input the same information on numerous databases and

need to remember numerous passwords, which, for security reasons, need to be changed on a regular basis.'

Joined up

Some forces are already tackling the problem by combining their separate IT systems into one and simplifying access to the systems for officers so that newer technologies, such as mobile data devices, can bring real benefits to the work force. North Wales Police is one such force.

It has consolidated 45 separate IT systems into one records management system and built a mobile computing system around it, incorporating RMS and Blackberry technology. The force says the scheme has made savings of more than £1 million over three years.

North Wales Police has been an active user of mobile technology since 2006, and recently replaced all of its 2,000 frontline officer and staff Blackberry devices with new ones. The new devices are now running on a new, unified technology platform – the RMS system supplied by Niche – and now for the first time provide full-function, web-based mobile access to the force's 'I/CAD' (Intergraph computer aided dispatch) command and control system supplied by Intergraph.

Although officers' must access this system via the web, the application functions as if the user was accessing the system from a desktop computer. Officers can view any incident that a member of the public calls in and that has been created on I/CAD, and telephone the caller directly, accessing their number remotely through I/CAD without having to return to a police station.

Importantly, officers can also now remotely add updates to events on I/CAD. Before this, simple updates from officers out on patrol were radioed in, while more complex updates were often added back at the station by an officer on a computer. Increasingly, this information will be keyed in by mobile officers using their Blackberry, directly and remotely. The use of voice recognition software to speed up the process even more is being looked at as a future option by the project team of North Wales Police.

Sgt Rob Rands, the development and implementation manager for the force's Blackberry project, says: 'I/CAD via Blackberry also gives us something we did not have before, even on desktop computers, which is the ability to view warnings or situation markers that have been placed on an address. Previously, the control room relayed that information via the radio or by calling the officer on the beat. Now, I/CAD allows officers to view the information directly for themselves, rather than have it interpreted

for them by a third party.'

Another benefit of the Blackberry-I/CAD link-up cited by Sgt Rands, is that it allows officers to allocate work to themselves. 'If you are in a particular area you can review what incidents are still waiting to be dealt with there and assign yourself jobs. Rather than waiting for the control room to contact you, you can let them know that you are near an incident and will handle it,' he says.

Sgt Rands adds: 'Officers are able to take the initiative and assign themselves as the person closest to a given event – closer, in fact, than resources the control room might have dispatched.'

Other functions

As officers have mobile device access to the RMS system, they can search remotely for people, vehicles, addresses and other information. Remotely inputted policing intelligence is automatically added to the RMS, which is then integrated with I/CAD. This reduces the problem of officers having to re-key information or access different systems separately to perform the same function.

Officers can use their Blackberry to access online maps and also have access to the usual telephone, desktop-synchronised calendar and email facilities.

BeatBlog, another mobile policing innovation created by North Wales Police, allows North Wales Police officers to use their Blackberrys to contribute to policing topics and exchanging intelligence (including pictures) to help each other.

Sgt Rands says: 'If you have a problem with anti-social behaviour in [for example] Colwyn Bay, you start blogging [about] it, at which point fellow officers may respond with intelligence based on their own experience of the same problem in the same area.'

'This encourages smarter policing by ensuring that people on different shifts do not repeat work, as they can now make themselves aware of what the other shifts have done.'

BeatBlog is also helpful for North Wales global coverage vehicles (force-wide vehicles that are not confined to any geographical area), which can use it to check on local policing activity while they are in a particular area, Sgt Rands says.

'BeatBlog fills a gap,' adds Sgt Rands. 'It is a useful self-briefing tool.' There are plans within the force to integrate BeatBlog into I/CAD so that dispatchers can see blogs for each area.

North Wales Police is also using digital images taken using the camera incorporated in the Blackberry devices – an initiative that has been recognised by the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) as best practice for other forces.

Sgt Rands adds: 'We can use the camera to help us secure prosecutions, thanks to the additional evidence it allows us to gather.'

He says road traffic accidents and domestic incident injuries are two situations where immediate, on-the-spot evidence can be gathered in this way.

The force has also extended the usefulness and security of this mobile policing application by co-developing an application with Blackberry that allows images to be uploaded directly from the Blackberry into digital storage: only the officers involved handle them.

Insp (acting) Aled Eynon says: 'Policing on the street is different from a desk-bound job and to be effective, mobile solutions have to reflect this.'

'Using Blackberry technology, officers in North Wales Police now have access to a wealth of information that helps them to do their job. Our mobile policing strategy is designed to help more officers spend more time on the street and in their community.'

He adds: 'Replacing hundreds of devices in a short period of time while keeping disruption of service to a minimum was a challenge. It quickly became apparent that experience of this type of

exercise on that scale was in short supply worldwide, even in large commercial organisations.'

Seeing results

So what have been the tangible benefits in terms of saving money? According to the force, operational officers saved between 44 to 98 minutes

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per day by using mobile devices, depending on officer rank, and it claims that efficiency savings to date total £1.3 million.

'Qualitative efficiencies' from handheld devices, tracked by force user surveys, include: quicker information flows; more information to inform policing; better time management; improved of-

ficer safety; and greater use of core systems.

According to the force, out of 2,000 frontline Blackberry users who were surveyed, more than nine in 10 North Wales Police officers 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that their mobile device is 'useful for operational policing', while a similar percentage of those surveyed agree that it 'allows me to access more information, operationally'.

The force's success in the area of IT has been recognised in the past when it won a National Business Award, an annual event that recognises UK business achievement and innovation, in 2007. More recently, its iGroup ('information, infrastructure, innovation'), the author of North Wales Police's model for Blackberry-enabled mobile policing was accredited to the National Computing Centre's Standard for IT Departments in 2009. This means it is able to use the National Computing Centre Accredited IT Department marque to demonstrate that best practices are used across the department. ■

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