

Vetting better

The UK's Cleveland Police has revealed a 40 per cent improvement in the processing of its Criminal Records Bureau disclosure checks thanks to new technology. **Gary Mason** reports

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The disclosure of criminal records to vet people who are working with the vulnerable is a huge data management task for all UK police forces. Even a relatively small force like Cleveland Police needed to complete more than 36,000 Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks last year.

The CRB is a Home Office agency used to check teachers, school caretakers, healthcare workers and applicants for certain other jobs. In the case of 'enhanced' CRB checks it searches for any Police National Computer record before sending each case to the relevant police forces to check for any pertinent local information that needs to be disclosed.

The local checks assigned to each police force are required because the applicant will potentially be working in an environment with substantial access to children or other vulnerable groups. This process is underpinned by a CRB service level agreement (SLA) to complete the checks on 75 per cent of the applications within 10 days and 100 per cent within 60 days.

As Cleveland Police's information compliance unit manager and the CRB force delivery manager, Norma Stott is familiar with the processes of the Criminal Records Bureau and the changes it has introduced to the vetting process.

'It brought in different levels of certification, which are standard and enhanced,' she says. 'Forces are required to make additional checks in relation to the enhanced applications. It is these checks that are required to identify any risk posed to those vulnerable groups.'

The bureau has made additional changes since its inception in 2002 (see overview) and introduced a quality assurance framework consisting of flow charts and guidelines. This helps to identify the relevance of information required to the position applied for.

Ms Stott explains: 'One of the difficulties experienced in the early days was of constantly double-keying, as well as having to log on and off different systems.'

Positive effect

Cleveland Police's information databases mirror those of other forces. However, these are now legacy systems, used purely as electronic libraries to store historic information. For Cleveland Police's nine-strong disclosure team, the difficulties



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experienced with the old system have been greatly reduced.

The system driving the force's new working environment is I/Disclosure 2 – a new piece of information management technology developed specifically for the purpose by Intergraph, a public safety systems specialist, and its partner Helmdart.

'The acquisition and implementation of the system has had a very positive effect on the staff,' says Ms Stott. 'The repetitive checking processes are considerable, but very necessary to protect these vulnerable groups. Having the I/Disclosure 2 system now eases and speeds the process considerably for my staff and increases the efficiency of the department. It is therefore very welcome.'

Cleveland Police has identified improvements as a result of the introduction of the I/Disclosure 2 system in the new vetting environment. So-called 'general' applications – the simplest form of check, but also the most common – are now automated and can be completed directly (no keying in) with one key click to access the information from the force's unified database.

Other checks in more complex cases are

also now automated in the same way and the team at Cleveland can move with much greater ease between the data sources they access to complete each check.

Meeting targets

Importantly, given its investment, the improvements in Cleveland Police's CRB service have been measurable against service level agreement targets. Based on 'days to clear' (measurement of its processing ability, ie completing all checks and returning a case to the CRB), the force estimates that it has achieved a 40 per cent improvement, as well as improving quality by eliminating any re-keying errors that arise.

Cleveland has also calculated improvements by breaking down the steps in its vetting process and measuring time-to-complete for each. The result? Savings of 3,453 minutes or 57.55 hours per month.

'Other forces have been very interested and the disclosure team at Cleveland has conveyed the advantages and benefits to them,' Ms Stott says. 'A number of them have been to view the new Cleveland working environment. Another force will soon be installing the same Intergraph system.' ■

THE CRIMINAL RECORDS BUREAU: AN OVERVIEW

The Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) was established under Part 5 of the Police Act 1997 and launched in March 2002.

The bureau is an executive agency of the Home Office set up to help organisations make safer recruitment decisions.

Its aim is to help organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors by using its disclosure service to identify candidates who may be unsuitable to work with children or other vulnerable members of society.

It does this by checking applicant details against records on the Police National Computer and other data sources, including locally held police information.

Prior to 2002, access to police checks was mainly confined to organisations in the statutory sector for staff who had 'substantial unsupervised access' to children.

There were many other organisations that could not access these checks and yet had staff with similar access to vulnerable groups. Today, the CRB Disclosure Service provides wider access to criminal record information for public safety purposes.

DISCLOSURE TECHNOLOGY

New technology has been developed to help police forces handle the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) disclosure requirements, working within the agency's quality assurance framework.

What does the technology do?

Systems like that at Cleveland interface with the CRB's own web-based information management environment – automating the local and Police National Computer (PNC) searches that a force needs

to undertake to support the CRB.

The system maintains a local database of disclosure applications dealt with by the force. A full audit trail of the activities carried out on each record is maintained.

What is the day-to-day impact?

Systems of this kind should improve efficiency and speed, resulting in manpower savings. Errors caused by re-keying are eliminated – when creating a record from a CRB web page or for local and PNC

searches, there is no longer any need to re-key information.

Importantly, the new environment tackles the problem of CRB 'conflict' records by detecting that a record has already been created on the local police system. Disputed records are automatically linked to a resubmitted application.

The system's comprehensive audit trail of actions on each disclosure record includes the details of both the PNC and local system searches with no need to re-key or manually copy the information.