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Home Office and National Policing Improvement Agency

Mobile Technology in Policing

Summary

1 Police forces have been using mobile technology to communicate when outside the station for many years, in the form of a radio system and before that the classic blue telephone box. Over the last five years the Home Office (the Department), through the National Policing Improvement Agency (the Agency), has invested in hand-held mobile devices for police forces through two initiatives. The Mobile Information Programme has provided devices such as Blackberrys and personal data assistants, and the MobileID project has provided mobile fingerprint checking devices.

2 The Agency is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Home Office. It is governed through a tripartite Board comprising the Association of Police Authorities, the Association of Chief Police Officers, and the Home Office. The Agency gives a range of support to forces including information services, such as national policing and crime databases, and the Airwave radio system. The Agency does not mandate what Information Communication Technology (ICT) is used by forces, or how, but it provides the tools, support and data to help forces to change.

3 There are 43 police forces in England and Wales. Chief Constables have operational independence and are independent of political direction. Police forces, working with their police authorities, set priorities for local policing and have a large degree of choice over how it is supported, including their ICT infrastructure. Police authorities are being replaced by elected Police and Crime Commissioners in November 2012.

4 The Information Systems Improvement Strategy (ISIS) is an ICT reform programme, agreed by the Department and Police Service in May 2008. This aims to converge police ICT to a smaller number of common systems and nationally available services, delivered through new commercial arrangements. In the longer term, ISIS envisages a common infrastructure and set of business processes across the Police Service to improve service quality and reduce costs.

5 This report examines the Home Office's rationale for investing in mobile technology, the Agency's management of the Mobile Information Programme and MobileID project, and the benefits secured to date. We also draw out potential lessons for implementing ISIS.

Key findings

Rationale for investing in mobile technology

6 Introducing mobile technology in forces has been driven primarily by a government policy initiative to deliver mobile devices to police officers quickly.

In September 2007, the then Government announced it would provide 10,000 mobile devices to police officers within 12 months. Prior to the announcement, mobile devices had been introduced to a small number of forces, including through a trial by the Agency. However, the introduction of mobile technology by the then Government was a policy decision simply to procure and deploy devices. The Agency established the Mobile Information Programme to provide devices, such as Blackberrys and personal data assistants, to meet three objectives: 1) increase police officer visibility to the public; 2) reduce unnecessary bureaucracy; and 3) increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the police service.

7 The business case for the Mobile Information Programme was constructed around the delivery of mobile devices and therefore considered a narrow range of implementation options. It did not consider adequately how forces would use mobile technology, the amount of local expenditure required or the realism of the announced deadlines.

The business case was constrained by announced deadlines, no central resource funding and the assumption that further funding would not be available. Options to deliver the three main objectives including alternative technology or process improvement were not considered. In reality the programme's main aim was delivering devices as quickly as possible. The Agency undertook a high-level assessment of forces' mobile technology requirements but only limited analysis of their capability and capacity to introduce it. Experience from earlier trials showed that it had taken around 30 months to introduce mobile devices effectively in one force. Given the time required to set the programme up and develop a full business case, the Agency asked forces to implement their solutions in around five to nine months.

8 There was no assessment of the number of devices that each force would need to deploy to maximise the benefits or the impact of partially equipping forces. The Programme Board's decision to allow all forces to receive funding meant that the majority did not receive all of the funding they applied for and could not deploy devices as they had planned.

The proportion of devices procured by forces we surveyed ranged from a device available to one per cent of police officers and police community support officers to 151 per cent. Three forces have more devices than officers as they are used by civilian police staff. However, some nineteen forces have sufficient devices available for less than half of their officers. This has restricted how far these forces can reduce bureaucracy through improving processes and subsequently reducing the cost of back-office functions.

9 The Mobile-ID project and the Mobile Information Programme have not yet delivered Mobile Information devices that also check fingerprints. While the Agency recognised that better value for money could be achieved through device integration, they had also identified that a single ‘integrated’ device would be larger and generally unsuitable for many frontline officers’ duties because of its size and bulk, and the capability not being needed all of the time. The Agency has let a contract which can provide different types of fingerprint checking devices but to date has only procured the standalone MobileID device.

10 The Mobile Information Programme met its overriding aim of rolling out devices. The Mobile Information Programme distributed £71 million of central funding to forces which, by March 2011, had rolled out over 41,000 devices to police officers and police community support officers, in addition to around 10,000 already in use, consistently exceeding the milestone targets for delivery. In addition, the Agency used some £9 million to fund central functions and contracts. The programme expanded and accelerated some forces’ existing mobile projects and in other forces, enabled new investment in mobile technology. The national funding provided significant impetus to forces in deploying mobile technology. In addition to the central funding, 23 of the forces we surveyed have invested around £29 million since 2004-05.

11 The Mobile Information Programme has, on average, increased the visibility of police officers to the public. As a result of using mobile devices, officers are spending more time out of the station, although there is considerable variation. Based on measurement across 11 forces, the Agency estimates that through using mobile devices, each police officer can, on average, spend an additional 18 minutes out of the station per shift (plus or minus 11 minutes). The variation of additional officer time resulting from using mobile devices is large, partly as a result of different processes used by forces, and partly because reliable baselines from many of the forces funded in the first phase were not available to measure any improvement. The Agency’s results range from around 116 minutes per officer per shift out of station to around minus 109 minutes per officer per shift (meaning more time spent in station). The majority (20) of the forces we surveyed agreed that mobile devices gave their officers some additional time out of station.

12 Overall costs of procuring and using mobile information devices to date compare reasonably with external comparators. The total spending on procuring and using mobile devices from 2004-05 to 2011-12, for the 23 forces we surveyed, is likely to be around £61 million. This compares reasonably with the non-policing organisations we have examined. Using typical unit costs from these comparator organisations, we have estimated broadly that for a similar roll-out of devices, the equivalent services would cost around £54 million.

13 There has been some measurement of the Mobile Information Programme's objectives to reduce bureaucracy and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Police Service. The Agency's central benefit measurement work partially examined efficiency savings resulting from the programme and the use of electronic forms through process improvement. However, this was stopped in mid-2010 when the programme closed. Forces are finding it difficult, unaided, to quantify and measure directly attributable benefits of mobile technology.

14 There are some good examples of process improvement aligned with the use of mobile technology to improve efficiency and reduce bureaucracy. However, we found limited evidence of process improvement in some forces. Some forces have both integrated their mobile devices with day-to-day operations and taken advantage of improvements to processes enabled by new technology. Examples of improvement include police officers not needing to re-enter data by using their mobile devices to complete and submit crime and intelligence reports, and less time spent obtaining information from control rooms over their radios. Other forces have not sought to achieve the same levels of process improvement or have faced barriers to making changes. Twenty-two forces responding to our survey cited drawbacks with their mobile technology projects including the speed with which forces were asked to roll-out devices, low usage, technical problems or limitations, or lack of senior buy-in to the use of mobile technology. These are barriers to effective process change.

15 While the Mobile Information Programme did not explicitly set out to deliver cashable savings, these should have followed from objectives to reduce bureaucracy, increase efficiency and contribute to better policing. The focus on increasing visibility and supporting front-line officers means that cashable savings to date have been limited. Since the programme was launched, the Police Service has had its central grant cut by some £2 billion or 20 per cent in real terms by 2014-15, increasing the need for forces to find cashable savings. Of the 32 forces which responded to our survey, only ten claimed some form of cashable savings from using mobile technology and these are relatively minor. Some forces are, however, predicting greater savings in the future, for example in reducing control room costs. Reducing the cost of back-room functions has partly been constrained by the proportion of officers equipped with devices, as traditional processes still need to be maintained.

16 The Agency put in place two central framework contracts to encourage the majority of forces to achieve convergence in ICT infrastructure and deliver economies of scale. Forces have, however, selected different suppliers, partly due to failings in these central arrangements. The Programme Board hoped that the majority of forces would use either of the two contracts the Agency offered but these depended on a certain level of device take-up. Faced with low take-up and technical problems with one of the contracts, the Programme Board chose not to mandate the use of central contracts, leaving forces to make their own decisions on suppliers. In addition to adopting different suppliers, forces have chosen to integrate their devices with their day-to-day operations in different ways reflecting their existing processes and IT systems. Therefore, police officers in different forces have varied levels of access to, and interaction with, local and national databases, record management systems and other functions such as cameras, email and diary, via their mobile devices.

Information Systems Improvement Strategy (ISIS) – the future strategy for ICT in policing

17 The experience of implementing mobile technology reinforces the challenge of achieving convergence of ICT. ISIS aims to save the Police Service £180 million annually from 2014-15 onwards. The Department now mandates forces to use central procurement for some standard ICT hardware and off-the-shelf software. The remainder of ISIS relies on forces engaging, and implementing its aims, voluntarily. However, it is unclear how forces will be convinced that they can be better supported, at reduced cost, through using nationally available services and adopting common business processes.

18 The ISIS suite of programmes does not include the Mobile Information Programme or any successor. However, some key projects which are included within ISIS may be delivered in part through mobile devices, for example, the Electronic Witness Statements. Opportunities to converge ICT and business processes through using mobile technology effectively are not being captured or shared. ISIS comprises a series of programmes and projects which have a strong emphasis on infrastructure and business systems. As forces procure new devices or replace their existing devices, there are opportunities to learn from forces that are using their mobile devices in different ways. For example: using cameras to take and submit digital photos as evidence; generating information to deploy resources efficiently; and putting officers more easily in touch with the public. The Emergency Services' Mobile Communication Programme – which is not part of ISIS – aims to develop options for replacing the current emergency services' radio system, known as 'Airwave'. It is not yet clear whether it will seek to bring together all types of mobile devices currently used by the emergency services.

19 The arrangements for future ownership of the strategy are yet to be clearly worked out. ISIS is currently led by the Agency, which is being phased out in 2012. The Government plans to establish a company 'NewCo' by spring 2012, owned and led by the Police Service, to procure and manage ICT services. A programme team is developing the arrangements for NewCo.

Conclusion on value for money

20 The significant impetus provided by the £71 million of national funding given to forces helped them to adopt mobile technology more widely, within the short timescales planned, and at reasonable cost. While there is large variation, many forces report an increase in the time officers spend out of station as a result of using a mobile device. However, as the benefits for most forces do not extend beyond this basic level then value for money has not yet been achieved. To date only a minority of forces, around one in five, have used mobile technology effectively to improve the efficiency of their business and operational processes, and cash savings have been minimal. There is still the opportunity to secure value for money from existing mobile technology if a greater proportion of forces use it to support more efficient processes and secure savings in their back-office activities.

Recommendations

- a There has been considerable variation across forces in the effective use of process improvement and business change using mobile technology and the Mobile Information Programme has closed.** The Department and the Police Service need to recognise that only a minority of forces have been effective in maximising the benefits from the investment. The Department and the Police Service should learn from those forces that have been using mobile technology effectively to improve processes and have integrated their mobile devices with day-to-day operational processes. The Department and the Police Service should provide support to all forces to enable them to gain more benefit from the technology they have now.
- b The rationale for investing in mobile technology was insufficiently developed as it was based on the requirement to deliver devices quickly within a fixed budget and did not consider the impact of partially equipping forces.** The Department and the Police Service should base any future service-wide investment decisions on:
 - robust analysis of police force requirements, costs and their ability to use new technology effectively to optimise benefit;
 - analysis of the trade-offs between supporting all forces, achieving a fuller capability within a smaller number of forces and a staged approach over a period of time based on the capacity and capability of forces; and

- analysis of the thresholds at which equipping a greater proportion of officers with mobile devices would enable back-office processes to be significantly streamlined or removed.
- c The Agency encouraged forces to adopt one of two common mobile technology contracts in pursuit of convergence of ICT infrastructure. Forces have however developed different solutions, which reinforces the challenges of delivering the aims and objectives of ISIS.** In addition to converging ICT under ISIS the Police Service will, in the near future, have to update its mobile technology. The Department in partnership with the Police Service needs to:
- be clearer for future programmes about the degree of convergence sought in technology and how this is to be achieved, working with forces across a spectrum of influence ranging from persuasion to direction. Where the approach depends on forces buying-in voluntarily they need to be persuaded that the investment will benefit officers and the public, the technological and commercial arrangements are robust and forces will be supported to change the way they work;
 - clarify future ownership of ISIS and the extent to which NewCo, or other organisations, has a role in facilitating the Police Service in pursuing wider convergence under ISIS, for example, nationally available services, common business processes and cross Criminal Justice Service reform;
 - use the opportunity presented by future generations of mobile technology, including the proposed replacement of the Airwave radio system, to examine the merits of further convergence of infrastructure and improving business processes; and
 - examine whether there are opportunities for converging with wider government approaches to mobile technology, such as under the Government's ICT and End User Device Strategies.