



THE NEW NORMAL

Neil Killick reports on how smart technology can be used to promote safety and security in post-pandemic cities

Since 1950, the percentage of the population living in cities and urban areas has risen by 90 percent and by 2050 this is expected to rise to an additional 2.5-billion. Rapid urbanisation does not come without its problems, such as a lack of affordable housing, a rising number of urban poor, more crime and congestion and lower air quality. Some of these issues may seem to have been exacerbated by the

pandemic, causing the public to lose trust in cities and their infrastructure.

Thankfully, the advancement and adoption of technology in urban areas is accelerating at a comparable rate, giving local authorities the tools to tackle challenges in exciting, forward-thinking ways. The implementation of technology and ongoing transformation into increasingly data-driven smart cities will enhance the performance and quality of services such as energy, connectivity, transportation

Interconnected video technology can monitor a huge variety of elements across a city to promote public safety and security

and utilities, as well as improving safety and security in urban areas, addressing the concerns of many.

Research carried out by Milestone Systems has revealed that 75 percent of Brits have health, safety and security concerns when visiting cities. Attracting people back to urban centres after more than a year of restrictions will be critical to the country's economic rebound, so a need for new security innovations and greater public reassurance is clear.

The ONS reported a total crime reduction of 4 percent in England and Wales in the 12 months ending in June 2020, however, more than a third (37 percent) of the British public are concerned about petty crimes such as mugging and pickpocketing in city settings. This is the UK public's most widespread urban concern.

One in four (25 percent) cited vandalism as a key concern, a similar proportion – 24 percent – are worried about their safety as a pedestrian and 29 percent are put off by high levels of air pollution.

Although the UK's terrorism threat level was downgraded from severe to substantial in February following a "significant reduction" in the momentum of attacks in Europe, terrorist activity remains a fear for almost a fifth (17 percent) of the public.

Interestingly, terrorism is the only concern that is not consistent across age groups and genders. It is markedly less of a concern for those over 65 than to any other age group (8 percent versus an average of 17 percent).

Also among the top public health, safety and security concerns are driver safety (17 percent) and cyclist safety (14 percent). These are not without reason, as figures from the Department for Transport reveal that the vast majority of traffic accidents occur in towns and cities, and 2,881 accidents per 1 million people happen in and around London – higher than any other region.

FIGHTING BACK

Increased bandwidth afforded by the rollout of 5G and the internet of things (IoT) gives local authorities new tools to improve public security services such as crime-fighting. Video technology is rapidly advancing and can be used to tackle every one of the concerns highlighted in the survey, with cities across the world already deploying solutions.

Interconnected video technology can monitor a huge variety of elements across a city. Despite misconceptions that CCTV is its primary function, video monitoring has the potential to serve the public, rather than simply protecting local authorities' assets

With petty crime cited as the number one health, safety and security concern in cities, using video technology to prevent and solve crime will help restore greater public confidence in cities.

Smart technology can also be used to address traffic concerns; using video data and insights in traffic management has a more positive impact on congestion reduction than building new roads.

Intelligent transportation systems can be embedded into transport infrastructure to improve mobility and safety, while cameras and sensors on roads and bridges collect real-time traffic information. When this is then fed back into local government authorities for analysis, long-term traffic trends can be identified to inform decisions on strategic transport plans.

In addition, video technology can plug into electronic signs to manage processes such as the opening, closing,

and merging of lanes or changing speed limits. This protects road users, mitigating concerns around motorist, cyclist, and pedestrian safety.

To address worries surrounding health, sensors can be used to track air quality and record data that can predict air quality for the near future when analysed against weather data and a short-term weather forecast. With air quality concerning 71 percent more people than terrorism, the demand for air quality forecasting is clear and if implemented could make a significant difference to the lives of those who are particularly sensitive to low air quality as they could avoid city centres when it is at its worst.

Health concerns created by the pandemic can also be managed via smart technology. In areas such as shopping centres and transport hubs, skin temperature

TECHNOLOGY ADVANCES ARE GIVING LOCAL AUTHORITIES NEW WAYS TO TACKLE CHALLENGES

detection indicates feverish people, while mask detection and crowd counting will avoid overcrowding and forecast capacity. Digital signage allows for clear communication, heat mapping optimises people flow, and proximity identification enables social distancing.

Despite its potential to improve safety and security in cities, technology's role in making the public feel safer will lack impact if the benefits are not clearly communicated. Currently, there is a lack of understanding surrounding smart cities and the associated technology. When asked if they understand what is meant by 'smart city', only 18 percent said they are familiar with the term, while 28 percent said that they think they have a rough understanding.

Conversely, 20 percent of people had never even heard the term before, 25 percent said that they were not sure and 10 percent either found the concept of smart cities confusing or had heard the term but did not know what it meant.

This means that more than half of the UK's population have either no knowledge or very limited knowledge about smart city technology and how it has been quietly reshaping many urban landscapes around them to ensure they are fit for the future.

Despite this, attitudes towards video and sensor tech among the public are generally very positive. The research sought to establish how comfortable people would be with the technology being used in their nearest city for health, safety and security reasons, based on a scale from 0 (not comfortable at all) to 10 (extremely comfortable).

As much as 84 percent of respondents placed themselves at five or above, with nearly a quarter (22 percent) placing themselves at 10. Only 2 percent said they were not comfortable at all.

With video technology playing a growing role in the management of smart cities, it is important to maintain positive attitudes towards it as it will help to grow public confidence in cities more generally, aiding the post-pandemic recovery.

When asked which measures would improve people's comfort level with video technology in public

spaces, 36 percent wanted stronger regulations and transparency also was a particularly common theme. Two fifths (40 percent) of people said they would like to see clearer signage where video tech is in use and there is high demand for clearer communication around the benefits of smart technology (36 percent) and the mitigation of risks (39 percent).

When this is considered with the chronic lack of public understanding around smart cities, a clear need for more effective communications about smart city technology is established.

TERRORIST ACTIVITY REMAINS A FEAR FOR ALMOST A FIFTH (17 PERCENT) OF THE PUBLIC

Significant changes to an urban area made by local authorities must involve the public as much as possible, as they are the people whose lives will be impacted. At present, only a fifth (21 percent) of people feel that their local authority keeps them up to date with new smart developments and the majority (61 percent) said that they do not feel informed but would like to be.

Insufficient communication surrounding changes to the local area between authorities and the community can have disastrous results, as demonstrated by the recent spate of anti-Low Traffic Neighbourhood

protests taking place across London and in Oxford. Over 65s are the demographic least likely to feel up to date on smart city initiatives (5 percent), however, 64 percent of this demographic and 72 percent of 55-64-year-olds said they would be keen to find out more about developments in their area. This could be explained by current communication, which appears to be heavily digital-focus

Greater efforts to communicate and get the public on board with smart city technology, including those with less digital access, is key to successful rollouts and higher levels of public acceptance. Less than a third (29 percent) of people believe smart city technology can contribute to enhanced public safety and security, so a need for public education is clear.

The ending of pandemic-related restrictions offers a great opportunity for local authorities to assess precisely how they can improve security in cities and make the public using the spaces feel more comfortable than many currently feel. The implementation of smart video will give public authorities greater insight into their urban areas, what is going on within them and where development, change or improvement is needed.

Although this technology can work behind the scenes to improve the city experience for the public, clear and inclusive communication is required to inform how smart technology benefits the public. This will eventually lead to a rebuilding of trust in towns, cities and the infrastructure within them, aiding increased social mobility following the pandemic and the country's economic recovery ●

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