TIME FOR CHANGE

Simon Hall *examines the Home Affairs Select Committee findings that police IT is a "complete and utter mess" and wonders what can be done*

In October 2018 the Home Affairs Select Committee published a scathing report into the state of UK policing. The wide-ranging *Policing For The Future* found that forces were struggling to cope in the face of changing and rising crimes due to a sharp decline in staff numbers, outdated technology, capabilities, structures, fragmentation and a failure of Home Office leadership. It urged major changes to the police's response to new and growing crimes and warned that the Home Office cannot continue to stand back while forces struggle. Most alarming of all, the report warned the police risked "irrelevancy" if meaningful change was not made. "In all neighbourhoods, without local engagement, policing is at risk of becoming irrelevant to most people, particularly in the context of low rates of investigation for many crimes."

The chair of the committee, Labour's Yvette Cooper, urged the Government to prioritise policing in the Autumn Budget and the next Comprehensive Spending Review, warning that without additional funding for policing, there will be dire consequences for public safety and criminal justice.

Commenting on the findings of the report, Cooper said: "Crime is up, charges and arrests are down, and the police service is struggling to respond effectively to emerging and growing challenges, such as online fraud and online child abuse. Policing urgently needs more money. The Government must make sure policing is a priority in the budget and spending review, or public safety and communities will pay the price."

TECHNOLOGICAL FAILINGS

The report frequently addressed technological challenges being created by the growth in digital evidence, alongside the police service's inability to keep pace with the increasingly sophisticated methods of online offenders. In addition to this, an entire section of the report was specifically dedicated to police use and adoption of technology (Section 7). It raised concerns around the lack of increasingly necessary digital skills among police officers, the slow adoption of technology, and the lack of data sharing between forces. Summing up, the report stated: "Police forces' investment in and adoption of new technology is, quite frankly, a complete and utter mess."

Scathing indeed. But is this the reality, and if so, what is the cause? From our experience, the report paints an accurate picture of the state of police IT. However, it is unfair to blame individual police forces for this situation. The lack of commonality in the IT strategies of the 43 police forces in England and Wales is a direct result of the intentionally fragmented structure of UK policing. Without a coherent IT strategy direct from the Home Office, fragmented IT is the natural outcome. It can only be expected that policing would be, as stated in the report, "hamstrung" by "numerous different solutions to the same problem being generated across different forces." This approach not only wastes money, but directly impacts on the quality of community policing since police forces are often unable to share intelligence with each other as their IT systems are incompatible.

Many arguments could be made for the benefits of merging the 43 police forces of England and Wales into a single, national police force (such as lower administrative costs, better sharing of resources, consistent strategies to tackle major issues such as cyber crime *etc.*) but this is a political question that will not be resolved any time soon. And in any case,

> ## A CLOUD-FIRST STRATEGY CAN GIVE INDIVIDUAL POLICE FORCES A NEW LEVEL OF AGILITY

each force has very different policing requirements, such as rural compared with urban forces, so an argument will always remain for the appropriateness of this structure. That being said, it is the size and fragmented nature of UK police forces that contributes to the "inability of forces to introduce and implement new technological and communication solutions in an agile and joined-up manner."

Ultimately, when it comes to police IT, a joined-up strategy is required. While a Government-led, national IT transformation project is not the answer, the Home Office could play a more active role in steering individual forces towards common IT goals and common standards. *The Policing Vision 2025*, published by the National Police Chiefs Council in 2016, has already provided forces with a common vision for digital policing. What can the Home Office do to help forces deliver on the vision?

The Policing Vision 2025 set out the ambitions for policing over the next decade. The Vision included an entire section on Digital Policing which included goals on "the use of digital intelligence and evidence," "the transfer of evidence material in a digital format to the criminal justice system" and "making timely information and intelligence available to operational staff on mobile devices."

A COMMON GOAL

In addition to the technology-specific goals, *Policing Vision 2025* included much broader goals that require technology solutions, such as "business support functions will be delivered in a more consistent manner to deliver efficiency and enhance interoperability across the police service." With *The Policing Vision* in place, all police forces should theoretically be working towards the same vision of a digital, interoperable police force built to meet the challenges of 21st-century policing.

There are ways forces can work towards *The Policing Vision 2025* and circumvent the challenges posed by the absence of a national ICT strategy. One major issue is the lack of interoperability between the majority of police IT systems. This is not just an issue between forces, but is just as common within them as well. One quarter of police forces require access to six or more databases just to work on a single case for example. Keeping data in siloes across systems is inefficient

According to recent findings "the police service is struggling to respond effectively to emerging and growing challenges"

and increases the risk of errors, but crucially it is also a big demotivator for the workforce, who may inevitably feel inclined to agree with some of the home affairs committee's harsher comments. This lack of interoperability is exasperated even further when data needs to be shared between forces or with agencies outside of the police: the probation services, courts, social services *etc.* as all use different IT systems. From a practical level, this is a nightmare for everyone involved in serving the public. While the situation sounds dire, there are technical solutions that forces can implement to make their lives a lot easier.

"Tilting to the cloud" was a frequently heard phrase in 2018, and with good reason. Tech teams across sectors have cottoned on to the fact that a cloud-first strategy can give any company a new level of agility. The benefits of cloud-based services over 'traditional' IT is that, once in place, they can be deployed very quickly to deliver cost savings to a force within a matter of weeks (or even less).

At the moment simply taking a witness statement or issuing a ticket for a driving offence requires an officer to process mountains of paperwork and spend more time sat at a desk at the end of their shift. But by leveraging the cloud and deploying mobile apps

to all officers, police forces can give their officers the ability to move quickly, accessing the multiple databases they need to use every day from the palm of their hand. Right now, officers in the UK are dealing with filing paperwork and reports through different systems daily, but with a mobile app they can get paperwork done, digitally, while in or out of the office, with all of the necessary back office processing carried out in real-time.

ACCESS ALL AREAS

Perhaps most importantly for officers, a mobile app can provide a means by which disparate systems can be researched on a federated basis, providing officers with immediate access to all the known facts about a person, object, location or event so they can make informed decisions more quickly. Data can then be collected digitally, updating individual records in real-time.

Since 2012 the public sector has been encouraged to go 'cloud-first' and 'digital-by-default'. But despite this, and the launch of the Government's G-Cloud framework that same year (making it easier for the public sector to procure cloud services), most police forces remain largely paper based. As the report found, when new technology is introduced, it is often implemented in 'piecemeal fashion'. With IT adoption of any kind still lagging behind, it is no surprise to see that the cloud is not yet widely adopted.

Digitisation will save police forces valuable time, as well as an untold amount of money. To better illustrate this point, Avon and Somerset Constabulary calculated it could save £323,943 per year in back office costs just from rolling out digital statements to its officers. That is just one process in one force going digital. Imagine what could be achieved if more forces joined the digital revolution…

Early in 2018 Policing minister Nick Hurd told the House of Commons that the police is "not where they need to be" to take advantage of new technology, which marks the "biggest opportunity in British policing." At the same time the Home Affairs report has stated that the police risked "irrelevancy" if meaningful change was not implemented soon.

While simplifying police IT should be a priority at the national level, there are many steps individual police departments can take to make their

> **WITH A MOBILE APP THE POLICE CAN DIGITALLY GET PAPERWORK DONE WHILE IN OR OUT OF THE OFFICE**

technological processes more coherent, less disparate, and interoperable. Leveraging cloud-based IT like Microsoft Azure-hosted services or mobile apps will save a lot of police hours and help to drive towards greater interoperability and digital evidence.

The time is undoubtedly ripe for change, and with the publication of *The Policing Vision 2025* setting out its ambitions for digital policing, the motivation is clearly already there. Implementing a cloud/mobile approach will help officers do more with less in a relatively short time while protecting the relevance of the police to serve the public ●

Simon Hall is the co-founder and CEO of Coeus Software, provider of cloud-based, mobile workforce solutions. Coeus Software is the company behind PoliceBox, the mobile working platform for the police, and Quvo, the mobile working platform for compliance-based organisations.

Utilising a mobile app on the move should free up police officers from time-consuming paper work

Picture credit: Getty/Coeus Software