

PLAYING CATCH UP

Simon Hall *explains why digital policing cannot be delivered until police procurement is properly sorted*

Community policing has changed a lot over the years. Frontline officers have effectively become the front-end of the broad range of social services available to the community. This puts tremendous strain and pressure on officers, often putting them in situations for which they have received little training and have limited outside support. We believe technology can play a big part in helping officers with this, but due to the challenging procurement practices that are common in the public sector, we find that many forces struggle to get the support they need to the frontline as quickly as they should.

For more than 100 years, police forces operated at the very forefront of technology, either as among the earliest adopters or in creating their own ingenious solutions to the very unique challenges they face. A prime example of this is police officers having access to a telephone within just one year of Alexander Graham Bell's first ever phone call, while the police box – now world-famous thanks to a certain time-travelling Doctor – is perhaps the most instantly recognisable and best example of police-led ingenuity. As added context, it is worth remembering that police boxes were deployed across the country before most people even had phones in their homes. A true example of police technological leadership.

DIGITAL POLICING HAS A BIG ROLE TO PLAY TACKLING THE CHALLENGES FACED

In more recent times however, just as the speed of technology innovation has accelerated, policing has all but lost its cutting-edge position. Mobile communications and cloud technology are areas where policing has fallen far behind the general population in recent years, a trend exacerbated by the unprecedented speed at which these industries now innovate.

When officers arrive at the station they effectively put the 21st century in their locker when they put on their uniform; off duty they enjoy a smartphone which is fast, intuitive, and with apps that can do almost anything, from maps with real-time traffic updates, 24/7 news alerts, augmented reality games, secure messaging and video calls, group chats and collaboration, and with email and data synchronised

between all of their devices. But when they arrive at the station, they are effectively handed a radio and a notebook. If they are lucky enough to be in a force which has already deployed some sort of mobile device, the device will typically only perform a handful of very specific tasks (eg taking a statement), cannot work without a live VPN connection to the station (which has a tendency to drop out throughout the day) and will most likely be running on a device which was three years old when it was deployed and runs out of battery halfway through the day. Most striking of all however, the device is often not connected to other police systems so fails to deliver an overall digital police experience.

PROBLEM AREAS

Poor technology in policing poses two problems for police forces: poor public perception and trying to keep up with criminal technology.

Taking each of these issues in turn, the public has become accustomed to the services it engages with being technologically savvy. We can order a pizza from an app, conduct video calls with anyone, and open a bank account in five minutes. While many parts of the public sector have done a good job of embracing technology (gov.uk being a good example), this experience is most often shattered when engaging with the police where most officers still largely use pen-and-paper, they must contend with layers upon layers of command structures and when they do use IT-based systems there is often zero compatibility between them and the devices themselves are years out of date. Combined with the cuts to frontline numbers and a lack of a clear technological strategy for many years, this adds to the public feeling that the police are not as effective as they were or indeed should be.

Police are constantly playing catch up with criminal technology as criminals adopt and exploit new advances far more quickly than they can. This means police are always on the back foot, which has implications for their ability to get a handle of rising types of crime such as fraud.

There is a strong belief among officers of all ranks, and central Government too, that better technology throughout the police force – also known as digital policing – could play a big role in tackling the many challenges that officers face. For example, in the absence of being able to train frontline officers for every possible situation (which simply isn't feasible), technology solutions could help them handle the



There was a time when the UK police force was considered cutting edge. It is in very real danger of this no longer being the case

broader range of services they are now expected to perform, such as guiding them through an operational checklist or connecting them to other digital resources far more quickly.

Another big challenge for officers is collecting and sharing data quickly and easily between themselves, social workers, agencies and other emergency services. This is as true for routine tasks as it is for fast-moving incidents where officers need to respond to changing information in real-time. Like all of us, officers are handling more and more data all the time. They need a more efficient way to access and use it.

The Policing Vision 2025, published by the NPCC in 2015, set out the ambitions for policing over the next decade. It is the clearest and most comprehensive single vision ever defined in its history and included an entire section dedicated to Digital Policing. Goals such as “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” have long been identified as police priorities. So, what's holding it back?

The realisation of the digital policing goal is largely undermined by the way products and services (including technology) are procured across the public sector, including policing. Slow decision making combined with the unprecedented speed at which new technology is now developed, has left police trailing behind. A simpler, more efficient approach to procurement is also required to remove the anti-SME bias. The way in which the police procure the services of external suppliers also needs to be urgently addressed.

Despite the many efforts from central Government to democratise the procurement process, make it more accessible to newcomers and SMEs, and speed up decision making, the majority of contracts are still won by the usual suspects – the same large outsourcers, many of whom routinely fail

to deliver good value to the taxpayer. Nowhere is this problem more apparent than taking a look at the kit used by frontline officers; while it may have been cutting edge when the supplier and the force first began discussions, it is often obsolete by the time it reaches an officer's hands.

There are three main areas of procurement that need to be addressed: The procurement process is too long-winded and with too many tiers of decision-makers, so technologies are out of date by the time a decision has been made and they are finally deployed (as mentioned above, most police smartphones were out-of-date by the time they were delivered). The best solution to this is the introduction of a national police "App Store" for police technology, mirroring the highly successful public sector Digital Marketplace.

MANY FORCES STRUGGLE TO GET THE SUPPORT THEY NEED TO THE FRONTLINE AS FAST AS THEY SHOULD

The procurement process is still largely biased towards larger companies, irrespective of their track record for delivering value for money. There is an inherent bias against technology developed by SMEs, despite their track record for technology innovation. The G-Cloud is supposed to have been the Government's answer to this problem, but still too much business is awarded outside of the scheme, either because public sector buyers find it too cumbersome, they have already chosen their preferred supplier for a job so putting a tender on the G-Cloud would be a waste of everyone's time, or suppliers simply don't have the time and energy to create their G-Cloud listing.

And there are too many national frameworks for policing, leading to confusion for buyers and sellers alike. The Government needs to stay focused and support the right initiatives that will deliver meaningful change. Home Office Programmes like NLEDs and ESN are huge and have gained a lot of media attention, but they have yet to deliver real results. The National Enablement Programme (NEP), by contrast, is a great example of an initiative that has delivered quickly. Its quick work in supporting forces with digital tools during the Coronavirus lockdown is a prime example of what can be achieved when the right infrastructure is combined with fast and decisive decision making. The ProKura framework and the ICT VAR framework are both promising new developments, which launched within the last year. ProKura is a collaboration between the Police ICT Company and Fortrus Limited and the ICT VAR Framework was developed by the East Midlands Strategic Commercial Unit (EMSCU). ProKura has a budget of £1-billion through to 31 October 2022 to deliver digital transformation to policing, while the ICT VAR framework is believed to have access to £5-billion. Like other framework agreements they are designed to deliver funding for relevant projects without the need for extended and costly procurement exercises, however, they risk duplication of effort and add further complication to police procurement.

Without the support of ambitious SMEs that can deliver change quickly, policing risks falling even further behind. By addressing these three points, police procurement will become more efficient and be more open to engaging with SMEs that typically offer more innovation, better value and can deliver results more quickly than the incumbents. A simpler, more efficient approach to procurement is essential to remove the anti-SME bias across the public sector and ultimately to ensure new products and services are delivered to the hands of our officers far more quickly ●

Simon Hall, CEO and co-founder PoliceBox and Coeus Software, is responsible for the company's overall strategy and direction. Under Simon's leadership, PoliceBox has successfully evolved into a leading digital mobile workforce specialist, transforming workplaces with its intelligent and award-winning solutions.

The notebook and pen remain one of the police officer's main tragically out-of-date tools

