

Deploying effective technology for Mobile Policing

A discussion paper
for UK police forces



Introduction

The use of mobile devices by UK police forces is a trend that will inevitably gather pace over the next few years. The sight of a police officer with a smartphone or tablet in hand will become as commonplace as the radio worn on the shoulder.

What should concern every police force now is the task that lies ahead in finding and implementing the IT solutions required to enable greater use of mobile devices for significant benefits. Without capable solutions, officers will be carrying expensive hardware with very limited ability to achieve anything of real value.

The potential for operational and efficiency benefits

The main benefit of such solutions will be to give officers the ability to perform more tasks out in the field instead of having to wait until they are back at the station. Officers will be able to access a huge amount and variety of data in real time via mobile devices. Those same devices will also be used to submit information such as crime reports.

Efficiency is of course another crucial driver, especially considering the potential for removing the need for a layer of data entry functions within the back office. These won't be required when officers are empowered and technologically enabled to carry out more tasks themselves.

Forces face crucial decisions when choosing suitable systems

This paper discusses the potential benefits of mobile, but is also concerned with raising issues around the solutions themselves and the way they might be implemented.

Two vital decisions are about the very nature of the solution itself (will it be an extension of the main back office system, in the form of a number of several app-style tools, or something else?) and the way that it is rolled out.

These are subjects that Capita have been addressing for some time, and indeed we already have a solution - **SmartWorks**[®] - that is being adopted by a number of UK forces.

Nevertheless, this paper is not intended as a brochure for our solution or a 'how-to' guide to the subject, but rather a genuinely transparent attempt to raise the important issues. It draws on our experience as an established supplier of IT solutions to police forces, as well as ongoing discussions with customers about their experiences with mobile so far and the challenges they are identifying.

We hope that this paper fulfils our objective of raising issues to help forces become better informed when discussing solutions with providers and, ultimately, when sourcing and implementing solutions that will create real improvements in their ability to police effectively and efficiently.



What operational benefits can be achieved with mobile solutions for policing?

A capable mobile solution with good back office system integration can open up a number of opportunities. It is possible to break them down into two main categories that reflect the two-way nature of information exchange through mobile.

Accessing information

Let's start with the way that police officers currently access information. In many cases, it will be through a phone call to support staff, who in turn search for information on their system.

Mobilising access to data has the potential to remove the need for support staff to get involved, bringing the information to the officer in just a few seconds. It will mean that officers will be able to use a single search function to search various data sources. Crime reports, witness statements and so on can all be made accessible in real time.

This highly powerful search capability need not be limited to the individual force's systems or national databases that they may be connected to. What if a police officer could search a system that delivered intelligence information on an individual or a vehicle from a Records Management System shared between multiple forces? What if any updates or additional information that they added to their force records could, almost immediately, be seen by their colleagues from a neighbouring force?

Officers will also be able to see live incident information, tailored to certain locations within the force's area if appropriate. Other information such as neighbourhood briefings will also be accessed via the device out on patrol. Users will also each have his or her own profile, enabling them for example to look back at crime reports that they raised.

Imagine a scenario where officers are alerted to anti-social behaviour at a shopping centre. They could pull up any historical information about similar instances at the shopping centre, pictures of those involved in previous incidents and so on. Having information like this at their fingertips before they arrive at the incident could be very helpful.

Having devices integrated with back office systems also creates collaborative opportunities outside of the police. Information from agencies such as fire and rescue services, ambulance services, highways agencies, social services and health workers can be made available to officers in real time. The same is true in reverse: an officer entering information about an incident is creating data that could be of use to other agencies.

Coming back to the shopping centre scenario above, the local authority might have CCTV footage of the incident available for officers to view, or the force's control room may have access to social media channels that could provide situational awareness.

Data entry by officers

Mobile in the police has so far been very much about searching rather than updating. But capable mobile solutions will also enable officers to perform data entry tasks out on the beat, quickly and accurately. It's not just about filling in the same forms that they used to fill in on paper: it's about integrating that data directly into the supporting systems.

The information that an officer accesses can also be used in the data entry phase. Instead of having to write down the name, age, address and phone number of an individual, new information can be linked to their existing profile if one exists, which of course it will do in many cases.

Officers will be able to create, edit and submit crime reports and intelligence reports while out on the beat, replacing the process of handing information to support staff who then create reports. The efficiency benefits of this are clear, while the operational benefits of getting information onto the system within minutes of incidents are also attractive.

Another feature of a very capable system would be the way that multiple types of data can be submitted. The officer would update the system itself and upload an attachment (such as a picture or video) straight into the right database or other repository. Cross matching between the information and the attachment can be automated and guaranteed.

This is in contrast to one of the current basic solutions that might involve an officer sending an email with an attachment to somebody who opens the email, uses its contents to update a system and saves the attachment into the relevant location.

Another form of data that can be attached to submissions is geo-location metadata. Mobile devices are mapped, so this is very easy to achieve. In addition, the control room can see where officers are with total accuracy in real time. The operational benefits of this are clear, such as for the allocation of resources when responding to incidents.

We understand concerns that data entry in the field might take too long and create quality issues. Recording crime information is not the same as taking an order for double glazing. Officers need to get the task done and get ready for the next response as quickly as possible. They also need to enter accurate information in the right way, for the eventual benefit of society.

Rapid data entry with accuracy is however possible. The crucial factor at play is having a solution and user interface that asks for the right information and that checks quality at each stage of the process.

One more thing to mention is that the greater launch of 4G and the rollout of the Emergency Services Network will be important to maximise network availability and speeds. Applications will of course also work offline and upload as soon as the officer is back in an area with sufficient signal.



Where is the source of the biggest efficiency savings?

The biggest single change through which a mobile solution can increase efficiency is the reduction of any back office keying-in of information. The principle is that officers will enter all the relevant information initially, with no need for re-keying or even quality checking by anyone else.

The removal of back office tasks is what generates significant and tangible savings. It is the same route to efficiency that countless companies in the private sector have taken over many years. For example, a salesperson will nowadays take an order, enter all the information on an iPad, hit 'enter' and the order is ready for processing. For them, the old world of filling in forms for data entry staff to wade through has gone forever.

Some systems with a mobile component have been introduced in police forces that are said to save money but evidence of that is subjective. It may be true that a solution will save 30 minutes of an officer's time each day, but that doesn't necessarily mean that any money is actually saved. In contrast, a mobile solution that removes large amounts of time from back office processes will create measurable savings.

Efficiencies come in many shapes and forms. There are many forces that, over the recent years of austerity, have looked to develop local, regional and national collaborations - sharing best practice, sharing resources, reducing cost. A single, common mobile platform that enables this sharing would ultimately reduce costs, deploy quicker and simplify the support mechanism.

What type of implementation is best suited to a mobile solution?

One of the decisions to make is between trying to implement a mobile solution as an extension of the main back office system, or as a number of several app-style tools.

The 'multiple apps' approach would echo the way that we use technology in our personal lives. An example would be that somebody picks up their iPhone and opens up their NatWest app to do some banking, a Thomas Cook app to book a holiday and an Amazon app to buy some clothes.

It would be better if one app did all three things: the user could book the holiday, organise some foreign currency and order some summer clothes to be delivered to their hotel for the day of arrival. But in reality, that level of sophistication would be very costly and would require collaboration between thousands of businesses. In any case, working with three separate apps for tasks like that works fine.

For police forces however, it would be operationally beneficial to have a single solution that does everything. This would be preferable to having separate apps for separate functions as that could be cumbersome, involving re-keying of data for example.

The problem is that creating and implementing a single all-singing, all-dancing system might take a very long time and could be very costly.

It could be that the answer lies somewhere in the middle: a set of standard templates supporting specific operational processes, integrated with some key sources of data.

Whatever approach is taken, it will of course be important to make essential data available in real time, with retention of the golden nominal central to this.

Will there be a cultural change?

A few years ago people were talking about the fact that officers were happy with pen and paper and wanted things to stay that way. But now the situation is mostly the complete opposite. Most officers have smartphones for personal use and understand their capability. They are used to using apps for everything from booking cinema tickets to paying their gas bill.

The cultural issue now is that officers will expect to use mobile for tasks throughout their shift. In fact, rather than resisting the move to device-based working, they may well be impatient that more tasks aren't possible via a device. The pace of the procurement and implementation of mobile solutions might not match officers' expectations.

One way to address this issue is a phase-by-phase implementation as discussed below. If a force waits to get a solution 100% perfect, implementation may never happen. This 'progress not perfection' approach keeps things moving forward and reassures people of the commitment to change.



How much training will be needed?

With any IT solution, the end results are only as good as the ability of people to use it effectively. In this case, there is a secondary level of challenge: officers will be required to perform tasks that they have never had to perform before.

At the moment, officers often provide information that back office staff use to carry out tasks such as raising a crime report. These back office staff might have had a couple of weeks' training and are skilled at what they do. It will not be feasible to train every officer in a force for two weeks, so the challenge for a force and its solution provider will be to find ways to minimise the amount of time needed for training.

Perhaps the main way to achieve this will be having a mobile solution that in itself reduces the training need by having an intuitive pathway through data entry. Our rule of thumb is that about an hour's introductory training should be enough for systems with excellent user interfaces.

How can implementation be more effective?

One of the lessons from IT roll-outs is that sometimes waiting for a 'perfect' all-singing and all-dancing solution before implementing it is not the right approach. By the time the solution is ready, the environment in which it's needed will have changed.

Instead of that 'big bang' approach to implementation, a more incremental roll-out is more realistic and likely to be more effective. Go for an initial phase that gives users a few functions to get started, possibly with connectivity limited to a couple of essential supporting systems that can be extended as requirements and operations evolve. As each phase is launched, the training required will be less and less, because familiarity with the solution will have grown.

Another option for phase one is that whatever device and solution are chosen, users should be able to access the internet and email for personal use. Some implementation teams have found that this increases adoption rates. There have even been reports that it reduces device breakages, because users come to see the device as an integral part of their working AND personal life.

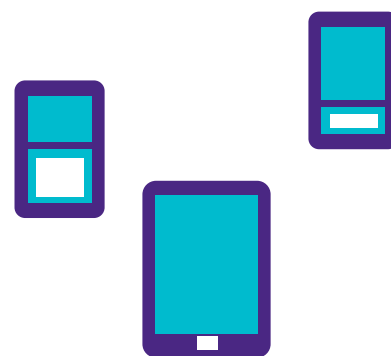
We aren't advocating this approach for everyone (partly because we know that some forces will definitely not want to mix personal and operational usage) but it is worth raising as a point for consideration. Whatever the case, mobile devices can be controlled centrally just as has always been the case with PCs. So internet usage can be restricted, for example with certain sites unavailable if the force wishes.

What about devices?

A force should expect that whatever solution is provided can be accessed and used with just about any device, be it mobile or static. So if an officer uses a smartphone or tablet during a shift (be it Apple, Android or Windows) and then a PC back at the station, the solution should work each time.

In addition, the force should expect genuine future-proofing, with providers able to reconfigure solutions as new technologies come on stream. A good assumption to make is that whatever devices are being used now won't be around in a year's time. That may seem like a pessimistic view, but it's one that will help everyone to avoid complacency.

It almost goes without saying that it is already the case that mobile devices can be secure and encrypted, and that they can be 'killed' remotely in the event of a device going missing.



Summary: the potential of mobile outweighs the challenges

Forces and their IT suppliers face a significant challenge in creating, implementing and using solutions for mobile policing. However, we have no doubt that the potential for operational improvements and efficiency savings justifies the effort and investment required.

As most forces are yet to adopt comprehensive solutions to realise this potential, there exists an opportunity to properly plan each implementation. Lessons from the past can be learned and excellent system integration can be achieved, rather than the inefficient piecemeal approach that is the uninviting alternative.

Sharing best practice on mobile data, as forces do on many other aspects of policing, will also help to standardise operations. It would allow operations to become more collaborative, especially if the supporting data is shared. Officers from partner forces could work together without having to worry about the technology they carry and therefore being able to concentrate on the task - delivering a service to the public.

We are pleased to be involved in this area and are investing considerable resources in mobile solutions. This development will continue to be in cooperation with the police, so we look forward to continuing and expanding our discussions with forces so that the best possible tools for mobile can be put in place.



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