



# IT's time to change

While successive reviews of policing turn to new technology for change, **Gary Mason** discovers dissent and confusion when it comes to choosing and implementing new information and intelligence systems

**T**echnology is expensive, does not always provide the benefits the suited marketing men would lead you to believe and can take five years or more to cost, design and implement on a large scale.

Yet almost every Home Office report on policing reform published in the past 10 years up to and including Sir Ronnie Flanagan's latest review, places new technology at the centre of 'the way forward' for the service.

Technological advancement often creates a confusing and frustrating landscape for police forces. Whether it is communications, mobile data or the management of information and intelligence they are tasked with keeping an eye on several balls at once.

They may have old and failing legacy systems that badly need replacing or, in some cases, no system at all. They may wish to adopt technology 'off-the-shelf' which has been used by other police forces successfully, either in the UK or abroad, or decide to develop their own systems with specialist IT partners. Somewhere

over the horizon there may also be a nationally mandated system such as Airwave or the Impact programme which they will also have to buy into and prepare for.

**'Forces have realised they cannot wait for Impact to replace their intelligence systems because they have legacy systems which are 15 years old'**

## National intelligence

Nowhere is this confusion more apparent than in the information management and intelligence market. A national intelligence system

is still years away – contracts for Impact have gone out to tender from the National Police Improvement Agency (NPIA) and consortia of companies are bidding for the business. Yet forces with failing information management and intelligence systems need to do something to address these issues now.

Alastair Luff is managing director of ABM, the company that helped build the Scottish Intelligence Database (SID) which links and shares all criminal intelligence gathered by the eight Scottish forces and the Scottish Crime and Drug Enforcement Agency (SCDEA).

Although primarily a regional system, some English-based forces have now connected to it including Cumbria Constabulary, as have non-Home Office forces with national responsibilities such as the Civil Nuclear Police, MoD Police and the British Transport Police. Other agencies with a link to the database include the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) and the Identity and Passport Service.

Mr Luff says: 'For the first couple of years af-



ter the 2004 publication of the Bichard Inquiry which followed the Soham murders, when I talked to chief officers there seemed to be an impression in their minds that they did not need to replace their intelligence systems right away because Impact was going to do that for them.

'As things went on and there were delays, those forces have realised they cannot wait because they have legacy systems which are 15 years old.'

### Taking action

One such force was Hampshire Constabulary, which invested heavily in a new record management system, the roll-out of which was completed in 2006. Before then, Hampshire had separate legacy systems to run crime and intelligence functions, case and custody management, child protection and firearms registration. According to Ian Readhead, the force's deputy chief constable, who headed up the project to replace these systems, the project cost £18 million and took three years to implement.

While the force was investing heavily in an off-the-shelf system that would fulfil all its information management requirements well into the 21st century, it also came under pressure from the Home Office to adopt the case and custody systems which have been mandated throughout England and Wales and are part of a national roll-out which has gone on for more than 10 years.

According to Mr Readhead, the force did not want to spend more money on more technology in the middle of an expensive ongoing IT project, particularly when it discovered it could manage case and custody data through the system it had already paid for. The Home Office allowed it to opt out on condition that it met a deadline for showing its new records management software could interface with the systems run by the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts.

The project team pulled out all the stops to meet the deadline, but in the end the effort was wasted because the CPS and the courts were unable to do the same thing, Mr Readhead says.

Part of the process included lengthy contract negotiations through a Government procurement system called GCat (Government Catalogue for IT) which is designed to ensure police forces and other public sector bodies get maximum value for money from procuring new technology. Good intentions lay behind the scheme but, according to Mr Readhead, it is far from straightforward.

This resulted in Hampshire Constabulary signing the contract with its supplier the night before the system was due to go live. 'I would not

recommend any force to get themselves in that situation,' he says.

### Red tape

Mr Luff says the procurement process for IT in the police service is over-complicated for both forces and suppliers and the cost of this bureaucracy is being passed on to the customer – police forces – because big IT companies are having to invest millions up front in order to get to the final stages of the tendering process.

He says: 'The procurement process within policing is still quite challenging. The service and its customers will spend an inordinate amount of money going through the process. If a force wants to buy a product from a supplier, it should be able to do that without going through a lengthy bureaucratic process.'

He believes sometimes artificial barriers to the procurement process are put up centrally because individuals have been 'challenged' on making wrong decisions on contracts in the

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past and a lengthy tendering process is a defence mechanism that helps justify any decisions which are later criticised after the deal has been signed.

Mr Luff says: 'People do not want to be challenged on their decisions so they put up as many barriers as possible to stop that taking place. Those barriers cost money and delay the process.'

He says large companies and consortia will put large sums of money into the 'cost of sale' – the money spent in bidding for a contract – to stand a chance of winning the contract.

Mr Luff adds: 'They will spend millions on the cost-of-sale process and there is always a risk attached to that. On a project that size, three companies can end up spending £20 million as a cost of getting to the final stage of the process when there is only going to be one winner.'

For small forces with small budgets, such passed-on expenditure can be crippling. Without large IT departments and support staff to help them through the process, and conscious of keeping costs down, they sometimes opt for

developing in-house systems.

The City of London Police took this approach in developing a new intelligence system for its scientific support department to handle all information gathered from scenes of crime, including fingerprints, DNA and exhibits.

### Do it yourself

Jeff Alpe, a former detective inspector with the City of London Police who led the project as scientific support manager, says he came to the job with no background in IT or procurement. 'It was a change in career for me because I had been working in CID and uniform. I moved to a role which in most forces would be a support staff function performed by a civilian,' he says.

He says the existing intelligence system was 'quite poor' and did not provide enough information for managers to work with or measure the department's performance. Having decided to look for a replacement system, Mr Alpe says he first looked at several off-the-shelf systems but judged them too expensive and not tailor-made for what he wanted. Instead, the force decided to develop its own system from scratch in co-operation with a firm of IT consultants. The system, known as eFex, is now attracting interest from other, much larger forces, he adds.

Mr Alpe says: 'The system is unique and, because it is web-based, much larger forces can easily use the intranet to allow officers who may be hundreds of miles apart to directly input items they want examined rather than having to go to a central office.'

He adds the relatively low cost of the project was one of the biggest benefits for the force. He says: 'What I did not like about the off-the-shelf systems available [and used by other forces] was if a force wanted a product included as part of a package, there had to be a big meeting and that had to be agreed and then everyone would have to pay for it regardless of whether they all wanted that particular element or not.'

'The situation has improved around those sort of contracts, but there is still a degree of unrest about the way it works with some people having to pay for other forces' add-ons that they do not particularly want.'

Mr Alpe also says the advantage of building the system in partnership with an IT consultant is that the force is not tied into expensive upgrades of technology at the whim of a particular supplier. 'The concept with a bespoke system was always "give us what we want rather than what they wanted to give us". We called the shots.'

He estimates going down this route saved the force £50,000 on the cost of the system. 'Off-the-shelf contracts often call for forces to make a large payment up front, but we built our system bit-by-bit, which spread the cost of the project and kept the overall price down,' he says. ■

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