

Digital Policing - Grounds for optimism A comment on the Cityforum Police Digital Service series

As the date of the fourth and final event in the Cityforum series “Riding the waves of the digital revolution” nears, we have heard enough to seemingly vindicate the most optimistic and the most pessimistic in the police digital community. On the one hand, Wayne Parkes, Director at the Police Digital Service reflected “I’m coming up to 30 years in policing and it’s often felt like we were drowning. Now we’re getting on top of the wave”. In contrast, recently retired Chief Constable Peter Goodman, undoubtedly mindful of the experience of cyber and fraud, warned delegates “Don’t wait for the crisis to happen”. There is, of course, always going to be some basis for optimism in the national police technology landscape - and always some cause for concern.

Our analysis is that the optimists have more justification for their current position than they have had for some time. Policing cleverly managed to get a very good deal for ICT in the most recent funding settlement and the creation of the Police Digital Service represents a powerful capacity and capability boost after years of under-investment at the centre of policing. There has also been a remarkable improvement in relationships between the leaders of the police technology function and their civil servant counterparts. At lightning speed, the mood has changed from the letter reported in the Times last October in which “Senior police officers have lost confidence in the ability of the Home Office to complete big IT projects” to the “Collaborative and energising dialogue” reported by Mike Hill, Home Office Director, at our April event. The Home Office has clearly decided to engage positively.

Yet veterans of the police tech sector are entitled to a wry smile at the sight of this optimism. We have seen it in this space before. Many times. Whilst there are undoubtedly plenty of positive signs now, there are just as many ongoing, unresolved, challenges. Progress on these will be critical to achieving the level of transformation to which the National Policing Digital Strategy aspires. Let us highlight 3 of the critical ones.

The first, and probably the most challenging, is the relationship between **local and national**. Wayne Parkes acknowledged as much when he told delegates at the April event: “We have a choice - either lean in and get behind the strategy or keep operating independently of each other”. Yet the chief constables we heard from in this and other recent Cityforum conversations have been more eager to discuss local, individual force achievements rather than collective ones. And Superintendent Sam Millar struck a sobering note when she worked through the five ambitions of the Digital Strategy, giving a reality check as to the reality of front-line impact. Few disagree with the proposition that the police service should resemble a single client more closely when it comes to technology – indeed Chief Superintendent Phil Davies commented to delegates in May “Companies shouldn’t try selling to 43 forces”. But the decision on how forces buy is not made by the vendors – and the challenges of achieving more unified ICT have proved almost insurmountable.

Secondly, there is the challenge of **legacy**: Infrastructure, data, standards, interoperability (or a lack thereof). It would probably be easier to scrap the whole thing and start again but that is clearly not an option. The briefest glance at a typical force's ICT strategy (or risk register) quickly reveals just how much resource is consumed dealing with the challenges of legacy – leaving precious little to deliver the promised land of transformation.

And finally, there is the challenge of **skills**. Skilled technology professionals are at a massive premium across our society, a situation only made more acute by the pandemic. In policing, the incentives to stay are important: the sense of mission, of public service and of being part of a great team effort. But the salary pull of other sectors and the relatively high status of the ICT function elsewhere, as well as the levels of investment available, are an undoubted attraction. When this is coupled with short term funding for roles that may disappear next year and a perception that digital skills are less valued than traditional policing competencies, it is not surprising that some talent chooses to walk away. And the digital skills of the police officer workforce are an area of acknowledged weakness, yet no credible mitigation plan has yet emerged beyond a small number of pioneering demonstrator sites.

One of the most telling moments in our series came in the second event, when delegates were asked who was winning at technology – policing or criminality? The answers, however caveated, tended to acknowledge that the police were already behind (but grateful that many criminals were genuinely dim). Watching how that comparison develops will be an interesting metric over the years ahead. The PDS is coming into existence at a time of rapid change, and it is encouraging to see that its leadership is optimistic. But for that optimism to be credible, those leaders need to know that the will is there to back them when it comes to collaboration, skills, and legacy. Chiefs, PCCs, officials and ministers must be prepared to make compromises and give support in these key areas or there is every chance we will be back here in a few years' time.

Nick Gargan, a Cityforum Associate, has prepared this short note with his reflections on the challenges that remain in delivering effective digital policing.