

The police service needs to change and adapt in order to stay ahead in the age of austerity

Nick Gargan reflects on how the police force in the UK must respond to budget cuts and how it can continue to innovate. He argues that they need to behave more prudently in terms of purchases, and that a stronger partnership between the force and the commercial sector is required.



Historians would argue that the first front-runners in the global police technology race were the French, who made some impressive advances in forensics in the 19th Century. But few would dispute that by the end of the 20th Century it was British Policing that was leading the world in technological innovation in policing. The Police National Computer in 1974, the first national DNA database in 1995 and the first national automated fingerprint identification system in 1998, were all examples of technological advance matched by organisational ambition.

This ambition continued into this century and, although imperfect, the roll out of automated number plate recognition technology, the creation of a national ballistic database, the massive investment in the airwave communication system and ultimately the joining up of the intelligence via the Police National Database were all evidence of a continued desire to lead the field.

When the crunch came (and austerity bit) it became unaffordable to maintain previous levels of investment. Moreover, a policy of localism and a strong determination to protect the front line led to a relative weakening of national policing institutions in favour of their local counterparts. We are at the dawn of a new age of police technology where the nascent police ICT Company is preparing to inherit the responsibility of supporting the service: getting a better deal and making the existing (substantial) police spend on ICT go further and deliver more.

The company could not have been born at a more challenging time: in the legendary recession on the 1930s, it took 16 quarters for the economy to regain the heights of the pre recession peak. The current (2008/9) post recession recovery has just passed 16 quarters and the former peak and is still some way off the previous peak – taking us into new territory. The indicative departmental allocation figures in the Chancellor's budget for the two years post spending review signal an assumption of further reductions.

This leads to two conclusions moving forward. Firstly, the police service has to behave more intelligently as a customer. Attempts to “force” police forces to buy IT collaboratively have met with only patchy success and far too often police forces fight shy of making the sort of bold collaborative procurement decisions that will ultimately yield savings. As our Inspectorate shows us, some forces seem to be making much deeper cuts into the front line than others are, to achieve the same levels of savings, we should be rightly challenging to those who make the “wrong type of cuts”.

The second conclusion is that the need for partnership between the police service and commercial sector is more vital than ever if we are to safeguard our history of innovation. Britain has one of the best technology industries in the world and it has capital and skills sitting ready to help in the quest for innovation that will take criminals off the streets and make communities safer. The industry needs



effective engagement with the service to understand its needs and investment priorities and predict where markets will develop in years ahead.

My two key challenges for the newly-configured landscape and specifically for the police ICT Company will be to promote more coherent behaviour on behalf of the police service as a customer and better, more focused investment in innovation from our commercial partners.

In respect of the first of these challenges, a change in behaviour is crucial. The modern history of British policing is littered with examples of proposals that are dependent on coordinated, concerted behaviour on the part of police forces. The need for such behaviour in the field of technological innovation is increasing, yet there is not much really convincing evidence that forces are set to set change their behaviour when key procurement decision points come up in the next couple of years, with the honourable exception of the Eastern region's Athena programme.

In relation to the behaviour of commercial partners there are more grounds for optimism. Trade associations, such as Intellect, have exhibited a willingness to work collaboratively in support of the new police ICT Company. In addition, proposals are emerging for future structures that could provide a test bed for innovation: ranging from Lord Wasserman's proposals for a Police Technology Foundation to work driven by Selex to create "BluelightWorks" – bringing the successful Nightworks partnership that has worked well with the military into the world of policing. With the support of the Inspectorate of Constabulary, this latter idea is slowly, gradually, building momentum.

Fundamental to this challenge of innovation – and the thing which will make it affordable – is the question of orchestration and coordination. There needs to be something at the centre: whether in the Home Office, College of Policing, Police Technology Foundation or Council of Chief Constables. That something needs to be capable of exercising influence, if not direct authority. That something needs a detailed understanding of the market and of policing. And that something needs to be capable of influencing buying behaviour. It needs to coordinate by consent, respecting the potency of the localism agenda — but coordinate it must. An orchestra cannot conduct itself.

This article was originally published by the think tank [Reform](#) to coincide with its major conference on [The future of technology in policing](#), held on Thursday 20 September.

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