



Achieving PDA buy-in

Crucial to the delivery of any new project is getting all parties on board. In the case of a police force, that means not just the Chief Constable and the IT Director but, most importantly, the end user – police officers at all levels. Special report from West Midlands.

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➤ Martin Taylor,
Business Change
Manager,
West Midlands
Police.

Regular readers of *Bapco Journal* are more than aware of the implications of the Gershon review, the ambitions of the NPIA and the political drive that will continue to push for the adoption of technology in policing. Whilst the public (and politicians) regularly cite the desire for more bobbies on the beat, it is technology that is increasingly facilitating this goal.

A concern of West Midlands Police was that the blind roll-out of new Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) would, at best, be a useful addition to a PC's kit and; at worst, the devices would be left unused in the locker. The approach taken by the force was to trial various devices in different operational areas and officer rank. A fundamental objective was not only to test which applications worked best or what functions proved most valuable, but to gain buy-in for the project from the officers who would use the device.

Pilots began in early 2009 with 64 officers (sergeants, constables and police community support officers) in the Handsworth and Wednesfield neighbourhoods. Whilst the capabilities and usefulness of various devices were assessed, every aspect of how officers related with the device was considered. This included how they chose to wear the device – be it on their jackets or on belts.

West Midlands narrowed the competition as to which devices and software best suited officers' needs and discussed their merits with other police forces. A final trial of two solutions is now underway in the original neighbourhoods and has been extended to include traffic and public protection units. The HTC P6500 device supports both solutions including Arqiva's Police Mobile Data Solution, which provides a private wireless connection with the control room as well as direct access to the Police National Computer (PNC), the electoral roll and internal force intelligence databases. The devices provide functions that have been identified by officers as particularly helpful to their day-to-day work: custody images, camera, command and control logs, stop and

search, internal telephone directory and visual handbook.

The devices have proved both useful and popular, particularly on special operations. Operation Utah is a joint undertaking with Warwickshire Police Force as well as other government agencies including the UK border agency and the DVLA. This successfully assisted officers to process identity checks on vehicles, uncovering illegal activities ranging from stolen cars, out of date tax discs and MOTs as well as invalid insurance.

Officers were pleased by the efficiency the devices provide, as PNC checks can be conducted quickly and avoid the need to queue to communicate directly with the control room. It is this streamlining of processes that has won over many officers. In the words of one acting inspector from Handsworth: "I had many encouraging comments from my own staff using the devices (PDAs) on Operation Utah and the other officers who were seeing them for the first time. One of my officers said that it was the best ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) operation he had worked on because of the devices."

Commenting on this feedback, Peter Harris, head of mobile data at Arqiva Wireless Access, said: "West Midlands' approach of piloting our mobile solution can be a template for other forces keen to empower officers with the confidence to use technology, and to make their time on the beat more effective."

With the West Midlands trials ending in April this year, Martin Taylor, Business Change Manager responsible for their implementation, summarises officers' views: "It's fair to say that we have officers who took to the devices differently; some found it extremely easy to use, whilst others took a while longer to get used to it. Officers have appreciated the consultative approach that we have taken. By deliberately asking for continued feedback from the outset of the trials, this has empowered officers to feel they can truly influence the development of the solution as functionality is added that really helps them perform their role more efficiently."