

The future of public services: digital policing

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About this paper

Much has been made of the role technology can play in delivering more efficient, intelligent and citizen-centric public services. Digital services will be crucial to meeting the Prime Minister's vision of a 'smarter state'. To date, however, public services have barely scratched the surface of technology's potential. This paper is the second in a series looking at the transformative role technology will play in the future delivery of public services.

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The policing challenge

Security may be the State's principal function, but police forces in England and Wales face a daunting set of challenges over the coming decade. Crime is changing. The number of offences recorded by the Crime Survey for England and Wales is falling, but high-harm and complex crime is growing while the emergence of cybercrime is placing new demands on forces.¹ At the same time, expectations are rising. Much like their experiences of shopping or banking, citizens now want immediate, online and mobile contact with the police.² These two long-term trends have recently been compounded by a more immediate catalyst: constrained finances. Last November's Spending Review protected police resource funding, but under the Coalition Government, expenditure fell by 25 per cent in real terms.³

Technology can help forces meet this trio of challenges. The efficiencies that often accompany digitisation could help maintain service levels at a time of falling budgets. To tackle cybercrime, the police will need to improve its poor understanding of web offences.⁴ Perhaps most exciting is the prospect of forging a new relationship between citizens and the police through social media and online tools.

To date, however, forces have struggled with digital adoption. As Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) recently noted, police IT capability is "weak and ageing".⁵ The sensitivity of police data is part of the problem, although similar obstacles have been overcome in the finance and defence sectors. A more fundamental issue is the tactical nature of police procurement – too often technology has been viewed as an end in itself, rather than a means to a more effective and efficient policing model. As Tim Godwin, former Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and now a Managing Director of Accenture's global policing business, argues: "Historically, forces specified which pieces of kit to buy rather than procuring outcomes. You separately purchased a command and control system, a briefing system and an intelligence system – that legacy creates an incredibly complex estate."

A new model

Forces are still working through what a modern police service capable of tackling present and future demand will look like, but a reform programme underway in the West Midlands offers some guidance. West Midlands Police (WMP) faced the second largest funding contraction under the Coalition Government. With just 17 per cent of WMP's revenue coming through council tax – as opposed to 30 to 40 per cent for some forces – reductions in the central government grant were acutely felt.⁶ Needing to find £120 million of savings over the Parliament, 12 per cent of police officers, 27 per cent of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) and 20 per cent of police staff were cut.⁷ "We were getting to the stage where we couldn't get any more out of our existing business model," argues Chief Constable of West Midlands Police, Dave Thompson. "We needed to fundamentally rethink how we operated."

The force will meet this challenge through their partnership with Accenture, which was brought in to jointly develop an operating model to meet WMP's objectives for 2020.⁸ The 'WMP 2020' plan – which has been under development since 2014 – will deliver cost reductions in each year of this Parliament, proceeds that will be reinvested in initiatives

1 Office for National Statistics, *Crime in England and Wales: Year Ending September 2015*, 2016.

2 Accenture, 'Majority of U.K Citizens Believe More Digital Tools Can Improve Police Services, according to Accenture Survey,' 2014.

3 HM Treasury, *A Country That Lives within Its Means: Spending Review 2015*, 2015; National Audit Office, *Financial Sustainability of Police Forces in England and Wales*, 2015.

4 Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, *Real Lives, Real Crimes: A Study of Digital Crime and Policy*, 2015.

5 Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary, *State of Policing: The Annual Assessment of Policing in England and Wales*, 2016, 45.

6 National Audit Office, *Financial Sustainability of Police Forces in England and Wales*.

7 House of Commons Library, *Funding for West Midlands Police*, 2015, 8, 20.

8 West Midlands Police, 'WMP 2020: Creating a New Era of Policing,' 2014.

that could deliver net savings of £52 million by 2019-20.⁹ More impressive than these figures is the fact that outcomes have been placed squarely at the heart of the partnership. Accenture's fees are tied to achieving the targets against which WMP are held to account. It is perhaps one of the clearest examples of outcome-based commissioning in the public sector, and both HMIC and the National Audit Office have commented favourably upon the operating model in recent reports.¹⁰

Managing demand

A core aim of WMP 2020 is to reduce the cost of reactive tasks – responding to calls for help, investigating offences and then processing offenders – to free up resources for more proactive work. As *Reform* detailed in 2014, engaging citizens in preventing crime, protecting property and improving the resilience of their communities can lighten the load on forces.¹¹ WMP is putting these ideas into practice. Their social media output offers citizens advice on how to keep safe and is used as a tool to support investigations. With a predominantly young – and therefore digitally engaged – population, the force now has some form of online contact with one in five of its citizens. “The police can still be visible, accessible and familiar online,” argues Godwin. “These tools simply are an extension of neighbourhood policing principles.”

Composition of 101 non-emergency calls, West Midlands Police, 2015

| Call type | Per cent |
|------------------------------------|----------|
| Incident log updates and queries | 44 |
| Advice | 29 |
| Crime reports | 12 |
| Call transfers | 10 |
| Signposting to other organisations | 2 |
| Intelligence | 2 |

Source: Accenture and West Midlands Police.

Note: percentages may not sum to 100 per cent due to rounding

Creating an environment in which crime is less likely to materialise is accompanied by a more direct demand management strategy. Transforming the force's communication with citizens – through resolving queries at the first point of contact, signposting to partner agencies, and recording low-harm crimes over the phone – has already saved the force £5 million. However more could be done. Seventy-six per cent of citizens want more online engagement with the police, yet nearly half of non-emergency calls in WMP's jurisdiction concern existing cases.¹² Making it easier for users to interact with WMP digitally will be a priority over the next three years. An online crime reporting portal will be introduced alongside an app to help citizens track the progress of their case and a web-chat function for those struggling to navigate the force's online materials. In addition to improving citizen satisfaction, these less resource-intensive channels could yield savings. By 2019-20, WMP forecasts a 25 – 35 per cent reduction in demand from current channels worth £1.4 million – £1.7 million annually.

⁹ West Midlands Police, *WMP 2020 Programme of Work*, 2015.

¹⁰ National Audit Office, *Financial Sustainability of Police Forces in England and Wales*; Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, *PEEL: Police Efficiency 2015 - An Inspection of West Midlands Police*, 2015.

¹¹ Clare Fraser et al., *The Expert Citizen (Reform, 2014)*.

¹² Accenture, 'How can digital police solutions better serve citizens' expectations?', 2014.

Improving productivity

Improving productivity is the second area where technology promises to transform the way WMP operates. Only a minority of forces have the IT capability that allows officers and PCSOs to complete tasks without needing to return to a station.¹³ With a suite of apps, WMP is one of them. The force's operational app – which gives officers a map when a job emerges, the relevant intelligence and the ability to resolve the job remotely – has reduced police time spent in transit and proved hugely popular with officers. The pilot is now in its final phase, but its success to date has largely been the result of getting the product design right. Prior to the initial roll-out, the force conducted a user segmentation, recognising response officers will have different needs to those with more managerial responsibilities.

Officers using personal smartphones has long been a common occurrence, so the widespread adoption of policing apps on secure devices is the obvious next step. How far these tools can go will be determined by practical considerations – some data will be too complicated or sensitive to be used on a portable device. “The necessary criteria for an app's success is their ease of use – they shouldn't require training” argues Allan Fairley, Managing Director of UK Police and Justice at Accenture. Having secured officers' buy-in, however, WMP will expand its app capability as the appetite for functionality grows organically.

Preventing crime

By managing demand and using police time more effectively, greater resource can be poured into preventative work. Creating a system that gives analysts access to multiple and differently formatted data sources is WMP's goal. Success could fundamentally change the police's existing approach to data – whereby analysts reactively search for information on a target – to one in which risks are identified in advance and then acted upon. The largest obstacle is the upfront work that is needed – roughly half the time WMP currently spends on analytics involves data cleansing.

Preventative policing initiatives have already been used to good effect elsewhere. HMIC is working with the London School of Economics to predict demand in England and Wales.¹⁴ In London, the Metropolitan Police Service has piloted a predictive analytics tool that merges various crime reporting and intelligence systems to identify individuals at risk of committing violent crimes.¹⁵ Researchers at the University of Chicago have highlighted the link between stressful incidents – such as taking part in suicide or domestic-violence calls – and episodes of adverse officer interactions later in the day. These insights have aided the development of a misconduct warning system.¹⁶ Despite these examples of success, the effective use of data for preventative policing is largely piecemeal. “A core bit of our business,” explains Chief Constable Thompson, “is information management – but if we are really honest, we are not very good at it.”

The future of policing

Inevitably, shifting to a modern, technology-enabled model of policing raises a series of practical questions. How to store, catalogue and maintain the security of data on which preventative policing depends is an immediate problem police forces are already grappling with. A further issue will be the shape of the workforce. A greater emphasis on proactive policing will require resources to be shifted from the frontline to the back and

¹³ Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, *PEEL: Police Efficiency 2015*, 2015.

¹⁴ Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary, *State of Policing: The Annual Assessment of Policing in England and Wales*.

¹⁵ Accenture, 'London Metropolitan Police Service and Accenture Complete Analytics Pilot Program to Fight Gang Crime,' Press release, (2014).

¹⁶ Center for Data Science and Public Policy, 'Developing Predictive Early Warning Systems to Prevent Negative Police-Public Interactions', 2016.

middle office, something which politicians, the public and police unions have historically resisted. Ethical questions will also be raised. Preventative action – particularly if it is targeted at specific individual citizens – brings a new perspective to the long-standing question of how to balance the competing priorities of civil liberties and state security. “Technology is already getting ahead of the way we think about policing ethics,” argues Godwin. In Chicago, for example, a previous misconduct early warning system was shut when police unions raised concerns about how officers deemed ‘at risk’ were then treated.¹⁷

If these obstacles can be negotiated, the scope to expand the role of technology in policing is significant. Overcoming the challenges of data storage would allow information to be shared across forces but also public services. Such a wealth of information would significantly improve the police’s ability to understand risk. Expanding the use of wearable technology is another obvious move – body-worn cameras are already becoming the norm, but this is just the beginning. Health-tracking devices could offer an insight into officers suffering from stress, adding a further layer to misconduct early warning systems and helping to address workforce morale issues.

Ultimately, technology-enabled policing promises to reduce crime, support wellbeing and cut costs.¹⁸ For reform to deliver lasting change, however, it must be business, rather than technology, led. This is the real lesson of WMP – that a plan based on the needs of citizens can also deliver savings for the taxpayer.

¹⁷ FiveThirtyEight, ‘We Now Have Algorithms To Predict Police Misconduct,’ 2016.

¹⁸ Office for National Statistics, *Personal Well-Being and Crime*, 2015.

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