In support of mobile data

Interest in the use of mobile data to improve police effectiveness is growing apace – but it's a complex and potentially costly business. You must be sure that you are deploying the right technology in the right way to realise the benefits that mobile data can bring. Simon Eggleton, Head of Mobile Data at Airwave, looks at some of the ways mobile data can reduce the administrative burden.

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The recent release of Sir Ronnie Flanagan's independent review of policing has brought to the forefront one of the main issues facing UK police forces today: how best to bring about efficiencies. It is clear that the ever-growing amount of paperwork officers must complete during the course of the average day is one of the main concerns of modern policing. This not only reduces the time an officer can spend on the beat, it also reduces staff morale and performance as officers can start to feel like "pen pushing" administrators, rather than the upholders of the law.

Sir Ronnie believes this should be addressed head-on, as he stated: "It is vital, given the range of tasks the police service now carries out, that opportunities are found to reduce the needless drain of unnecessary bureaucracy and free up space so that officers and staff can concentrate on the important parts of their jobs."

He proposes that using technology can help rectify the problem, following the efficiencies it has demonstrated in the private sector. To this end, the Home Office is offering a fund of £50 million for forces in England and Wales to spend on mobile data solutions. However, before investing in mobile data, Sir Ronnie has recommended that police mobile data solutions should be approached from a co-ordinated and national "service-wide" basis rather than from a "piecemeal" local force basis.

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The efficiencies that are on offer from streamlining administrative processes are impressive, and now fairly well known. At present, for every officer on duty running a check on the PNC (Police National Computer) a second member of staff needs to work in the control room to process the request. This leads to a duplication of effort, with two people effectively carrying out the work of one. With remote access through mobile data the officer in the field will be able to complete these checks independently and this will dramatically reduce the amount of time control room staff spend assisting with simple information checks.

Mobile data will also allow officers to spend more time in the field by removing the need for them to return to the station regularly. Presently, police officers need to fill out numerous reports and statements by hand, and then return to the station and input details into their online desktop systems. The amount of paperwork required and the time it takes to transfer it to the online system, means that frequently important information is lost or entered incorrectly. The lengthy data-entry process can also render time-sensitive information useless in investigations, severely hampering the effectiveness of the force.

Many police forces also retain large numbers of clerical and administrative police staff in the "back office" to process and input information already gathered by operational officers on paper forms. By enabling front line officers to enter information directly into portable data devices, this can drastically reduce the amount of clerical support required as information is not "double" or "triple" handled.

Similarly, at the start of shifts, officers currently have to remain at the station whilst they receive briefings on their tasks, objectives and priorities for the shift. By using

mobile data "tasking & briefing" systems, many of these activities can be completed whilst out on patrol – thereby increasing police visibility on our streets.

By mobilising these processes, police officers can complete these reports while still on their beat. Not only is travel time reduced, but mobile data makes such reports substantially easier to complete. The mobile data application can cross-reference a Stop & Search form with PNC and other databases, allowing the report to be pre-populated with basic information such as the given addresses of suspects. In this case the benefits to the public are clear: not only do they receive a more visible form of policing, but interactions with the police have a reduced impact on their own time.

Another emerging and exciting development from mobile data is the ability for officers investigating crimes to dynamically search force crime databases to identify crime trends, active suspects and similar patterns of offences – all whilst still at the scene of the crime. This will enable officers to shift their emphasis gradually away from merely "recording the administration" of a crime – and to start to pursuing dynamic lines of investigation – thereby giving increased public re-assurance to victims of crime, but also increasing chances of actually detecting offences. Airwave is currently working with Lancashire Constabulary to deliver such a "dynamic" mobile crime recording and investigation facility.

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The benefits of mobile data are clear, but to be realised any solution must fit the specific requirements of the force. For example mission-critical or confidential data needs secure transmission with a guaranteed service delivery. It is here that Airwave's TETRA network comes into its own. Built specifically for the emergency services, Airwave is the most resilient and reliable option for the police. Unlike commercial networks, it is not subject to the same danger of congestion so officers can be assured that information they are sending or receiving at the scene of a major incident will be processed rapidly.

Coverage is also important. Airwave's TETRA network provides coverage across 99.9 per cent of Britain's metalled roads.

Airwave sees a role for GPRS or 3G in providing non-critical applications that could run alongside TETRA. Airwave's mobile data offering provides customers with a choice of network bearers and devices as the underlying platform and applications are designed to be bearer agnostic: an end to end data solution offering forces the widest variety of choice. If a customer's requirements are best met by utilising a mixture of devices and bearers, Airwave's approach enables a common user experience regardless of the underlying technology

Mobile data is going a long way to help police officers do the job they signed up for, and drop the administrative burden, but this will only happen if police forces make the right strategic decisions on the technology they use to support mobile data.