



# The role of mobile data in modern policing

*BAPCO Journal reports on a very interesting and thought-provoking roundtable held at the Houses of Parliament and chaired by conservative MP David Davies, a member of the Home Affairs Select Committee.*

*The panel consisted of Jim Hitch, an Inspector from Bedfordshire Constabulary, Keith Gough, Police Mobile Information Manager from Thames Valley Police, Graham Baker from Research in Motion (RIM) and Gary Cairns, Mobile Programme Information Manager from the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA).*

The discussion began with David Davies, who serves as a Special Constable with the British Transport Police, outlining his experiences of using mobile data. He said he found mobile technology very useful and easy to use, and stated that it helps officers with stop and searches, as well as enabling them to input the relevant information there and then, rather than having to return to the station.

Davies then turned to Jim Hitch from Bedfordshire Constabulary, to ask about its BlackBerry smartphone deployment, and if mobile devices were genuinely necessary for police forces. Inspector Hitch replied the BlackBerry devices represented the next step in the evolution of street policing. He explained that where before their deployment officers were spending 46% of their time on shift in the station, today with the introduction of BlackBerry smartphones this had reduced to 36% and was still coming down.

Gary Cairns, from the NPIA, underlined that the use of mobile data devices has become part of the best practice approach for police forces. Keith Gough, the Police Mobile Information Manager from Thames Valley Police said that since the introduction of BlackBerry smartphones to its officers around five years ago, Thames Valley had seen an equivalent of 100 extra officers on the street.

The issue of officer safety in using these devices was discussed, with David Davies asking whether an officer busy tapping a keypad and staring at a screen, could be at risk of being injured or attacked? Inspector Gough replied that it was important that officers were aware at all times, and used their radios to call in PNC checks when the situation wasn't safe enough to use the device keypad. He emphasised that officers were reminded to use their judgment in these situations.

The issue of training – and the acceptance of the devices by officers as a tool to use – was another area touched on, with Inspector Hitch saying that while training was a cost consideration that had to be factored in, it was an important one, and would save time in the long run. With regards to the 10-15% of officers that Bedfordshire have monitored not using their devices,

Inspector Hitch said it was part of the cultural challenge to change attitudes, particularly among those who had been in the force a long time. He said it was important to explain the benefits the mobile device brings, and Inspector Gough agreed, saying that Thames Valley often flagged up success stories regarding the use of BlackBerry smartphones to underline the importance they play in modern policing.

The issue of the security of the devices – both the information sent over the networks, and the devices' inherent security too – was then discussed, with Graham Baker from RIM explaining that currently BlackBerry smartphones were the only mobile data devices that have CESG approval and that if a device is lost or stolen, it can either be automatically "killed" from the central IT point, or if someone attempts to guess the PIN of the device more than 10 times, it will automatically lock itself.

The issues of management of the devices, and the restrictions placed upon them by central IT management was also discussed. Inspector Hitch explained that when his officers are given the device it is then their responsibility to look after them and keep them charged. He also outlined that the devices' internet restrictions are issued under the same decrees as those concerning the networked computer terminals, therefore allowing a reasonable level of access to non-police applications. As was pointed out, news of live football scores could be valuable to the police in an area where a match was taking place, and a late goal could cause an incident.

Before the event ended, Inspector Hitch, keen to take advantage of the opportunity to question a possible future member of the party in government, asked David Davies what a Conservative approach to further investment in mobile data to be. His reply was as follows: "There will almost certainly be cuts on public spending and so if forces can make a business case that a particular device can save money in the long term then it would have a very good chance of being taken up. From my own experience I have seen the benefits of mobile data and it is something I would want to support if there is to be a change of government."